PREACHING FROM REVELATION & APOCALYPTIC LITERATURE

Primary Sources: Apocalyptic Texts by Larry Jones and Jerry Sumney. pp. 1-43; Expository Preaching by Harold Bryson, pp. 281-284; Triumph of the Lamb: A Commentary on Revelation by Dennis E. Johnson; “Foundational Principles of Interpretation” in Symposium on Revelation-Book I by Kenneth Strand

Harold Bryson notes: “Of all the literary types found in the Bible books, none differs so drastically as the Book of Revelation. Instead of narratives and letters containing plain statements of fact, the Book of Revelation is filled with angels, seals, trumpets, earthquakes, dragons, beasts, and bottomless pits.” Bryson, p. 281

Larry Jones makes the observation: “Many good and faithful preachers rank preaching on apocalyptic texts alongside handling serpents; they have heard that people do it, but they have no desire to come anywhere near them.” Preaching Apocalyptic Texts, by Larry Jones and Jerry Sumney, p. 1

Most preaching lectionaries go years without referring to an apocalyptic text, and some preachers think that this is too often to face one. Jones, p. 1

John Calvin, the 16th century reformation preacher, wrote commentaries on many books of the Bible, but avoided Revelation because he admitted that he “did not understand it.” Bryson, p. 281

Apocalyptic literature, such as Revelation, often make people nervous. Jones, p. 1

One professor who offered a course on “Preaching Values in the Book of Revelation” made his colleagues in the Bible department so uncomfortable that the Dean came to talk to him about what he was doing with the class. Jones, p. 1

Yet, each Testament of scripture offers an apocalyptic book, and they are clearly a part of the canon. Jones, p. 1

Larry Jones has said: “Much of the disdain over apocalyptic texts results from their misuse and abuse. Some preachers avoid Daniel
and Revelation . . . not only because they experience difficulty in interpreting them but also because they prefer not to counter or correct what others have said about them.” Jones p. 1

There are so many strange and unreasonable interpretations offered from the books of Daniel and Revelation that these books make people very uncomfortable. Jones, p. 1

Bryson notes that “sermons on Revelation abounded in Europe as the year A.D. 1,000 approached, declaring history to be at an end with the millennium.”

The same thing happened, recently, as we moved into the 21st century. There were many speculations about prophecies that were about to be fulfilled.

During WWII, many preachers urgently pushed the idea that 666 was a cryptogram for the name of Mussolini and others. Also they interpreted Russia and Germany as Gog and Magog to show how near Armageddon was.

Even today, some suggest that 666 refers to Bill Gates or Saddam Hussein as the Beast of Revelation 13:18!

“In his best-selling book, The Late Great Planet Earth, Hal Lindsey related many symbols in Revelation to the headlines of the late 1970s.” Bryson, p. 281

And in the recent book and movie, Left Behind, many far-out scenarios are based on Revelation.

Consequently, many churches and preachers are silent about apocalyptic. Yet apocalyptic is a very important part of scripture and must be preached!

THE CHALLENGE OF PREACHING APOCALYPtic TEXTS!
The responsibility of preaching apocalyptic texts brings certain “homiletical concerns to the forefront and challenges preachers to take a stand on them.” Preaching Apocalyptic Texts, Jones p. 2.

First, apocalyptic material challenges preachers to carefully examine the authority with which they speak. Jones, p. 2

-The narrator within apocalyptic texts usually claim to have received a direct revelation from God. And when the preacher cites those texts, he or she believes that they are handling the word of God--and that they speak with the authority of God. They must take a strong, clear stand on questions of revelation and authority. Jones, p. 2

Second, apocalyptic material challenges preachers to reflect on how God relates to and communicates with humanity. Jones, p. 2

-Apocalyptic texts take the spiritual world very seriously and assume the existence of good and bad spiritual beings. Jones, p. 2

-They unabashedly claim that God controls and interacts with human events from heaven and that God genuinely speaks through figures and symbols. Jones, pp. 2-3

-Therefore, the preacher had better believe in these concepts or they will be inauthentic and unfaithful both to God and the people they preach to. Jones, pp. 2-3

-Theological integrity and honesty is especially important when one preaches from books such as Daniel and Revelation. Jones, p. 3

Third, apocalyptic literature challenges preachers to declare who or what lays the greatest claim on their lives. Jones, p. 3

-Apocalyptic thought insists that God lays an ultimate claim on our lives and calls for a “RADICAL FAITH” faith based on it. Jones, p. 3
Fourth, apocalyptic literature challenges preachers to contemplate the relationship between the Bible and preaching. Jones, p. 4

-Most apocalyptic texts respond to crisis situations and employ powerful imagery, vivid symbols and attention-grabbing metaphors. Jones, p. 4

-How much of the historical situation must preachers identify and understand in order to have integrity when preaching a sermon based on such a text? Jones, p. 4

-Where can and should the “facts” about the images and metaphors used recede into the background while preachers employ them to point toward a reality in the world? Jones, p. 4

-Preachers must stand willing to explain both how and why they employ biblical texts. Jones, p. 4

COMMON CHARACTERISTICS OF APOCALYPTIC LITERATURE:
[Strand, pp. 12-14; Bryson, p. 283; Jones, pp. 11-12]

Uses symbols that only insiders can understand!
-It contains visions and dreams and its language is cryptic (having hidden meanings) and symbolic

Reveals secrets about the future!
-Describes the fall of Rome and the coming of God’s reign

Presents this world from the perspective of heaven!
-The author views earthly events from the viewpoint of a heavenly being

Offers striking contrasts!
-God’s forces vs. satan’s forces, rewards vs. punishments, seal of God and mark of Beast, serpent vs. seed of the woman, virgin of Rev. 12 vs. harlot of Rev. 17

Predicts the imminent climax of history!
-Describes many bad things happening just before the end of time.

**Depicts the ultimate victory of God’s forces in the battle between good and evil!**

**Highlights the idea of judgment and the coming of a great judgment day when the righteous will be vindicated and evildoers will be punished!**

**Speaks with a cosmic sweep!**
- Issues deal with the whole span of human history and pre-Fall universe (Dan. 2 & Dan. 7 outlines rise and fall of world empires; Revelation scans major historical developments from John’s day to the coming of Christ.)

**Features an “eschatological” emphasis!**
- While it treats history down through the stream of time, it focuses on end-time events.

**Originates in times of distress and perplexity!**
- Biblical apocalyptic such as Daniel and Revelation arose in times of hardship and persecution.

**Is based on visions and dreams!**
- Compared to “classical” prophecy and other biblical literature, apocalyptic is characterized by more frequent reference to visions and dreams than is true of any other kind of literature found in the bible. Also, it is typical to have “angels” involved in interpreting these visions and dreams. (See Strand, “Foundational Principles,” p. 13)

**Employs extensive use of symbolism!**
- Although general, classical prophecy also uses symbolism to some degree, apocalyptic is permeated and distinguished by it. Revelation’s imagery, for example, is particularly rich. (Strand, p. 13)

**Origins of Apocalyptic Thought**
Most interpreters agree that the primary source for apocalyptic is 
**Hebrew prophecy.** Jones, p. 12

- The faith of the Hebrew prophets always had an eschatological orientation. Jones, p. 12

- They believe in a God who worked in the world and who would bring about God’s own purposes, including the establishing of his rule on the earth. Jones, p. 12

**CHARACTERISTICS OF AN APOCALYPTIC PREACHER**

*Apocalyptic preachers know the hazards of attempting to interpret apocalyptic texts.* Jones, p. 25

- They know that many feel that apocalyptic writings and images seem bizarre and unreal, and that many preachers have abused them and, therefore, frightened people and driven them to be prejudiced against them. Jones, p. 25

- But they insist that apocalyptic texts deserve to be heard.

*The apocalyptic preacher strives to make the members of the community of faith feel the oppression caused by the prevailing norms, culture, and power structures of the time.* Jones, p. 26

- Apocalyptic literature seeks to make its readers aware of the very real crisis surrounding them. Jones, p. 26

- Apocalyptic preachers know that being a people of faith means daring to be identifiably different from others in the society—and that being different results at least in opposition, and often in persecution and oppression. Jones, p. 26
-As a result of this oppression, the people of God draw together for mutual support and encouragement. Jones, p. 26

-The Apocalyptic preacher states emphatically that the surrounding culture not only is not Christian, but is hostile to Christianity. Jones, p. 26

-The preacher makes it clear that obedience to God results in struggle and suffering. *(Dan. 3-Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego)* Jones, p. 28

*“The apocalyptic preacher works to convince hearers that God notices and cares for the community of faith and for the individual.”* Jones, p. 28

-God keeps a watchful eye on his people. Jones, p. 27

-The Apocalyptic preacher does not make light of the tribulations of the faithful, but will not allow the faithful to blame God for them. Jones, p. 29

*The apocalyptic preacher believes and attempts to help others to believe that “this is not all there is,” and that there is power, goodness, and justice beyond what is seen and experienced in this present world.”* Jones, p. 32

-This belief reflects not a naive notion that everything will work out for the best in the end, but an unshakable certainty that nothing can rival the sovereignty of a good and great God—whose plans transcend the limits of human experience and imagination. *(Rev. 8-11)* Jones, p. 29

-In apocalyptic thought, when the bastions of goodness seem to have crumbled beyond recognition or repair, God bring about a “cosmic renewal” and a “golden age” will arrive—or the earth will somehow be transformed into a paradise. Jones, p. 30
“The apocalyptic preacher believes and attempts to help others to believe that what we believe about God should influence, form, and shape what we do and think.” Jones, p. 30

-Faith is never a matter of simply waiting for an end or even for “The End.” Jones, p. 32

-Faith is a matter of responding to God by living a lifestyle that conforms to faith and reflects once trust in God. Jones, p. 32

“The apocalyptic preacher insists that we must measure ourselves by something ultimate.” Jones, p. 33

-While at any given time the faithful can and will lack the ability to thwart injustice, oppression, and hatred. We can, however, believe in, be shaped by, and work for God’s vision of justice, liberation, and love. Jones, p. 33

-God’s people know that they are not capable of establishing God’s realm and completing the ministry of Jesus by themselves. They will trust God to do what they cannot do. Jones, p. 33

“The Christian, apocalyptic preacher proclaims the crucified, resurrected, and enthroned Jesus.” (Rev. 5) Jones, p. 34

-Many things in Revelation may not be clear, but this is: the Lamb was slain and crucified. And the fact that the Lamb now stands in heaven makes it obvious that he was resurrected as well. Jones, 35

-And the rest of Revelation makes it equally clear that God entrusts the control of history to this Lamb. Jones, p. 35

“The apocalyptic Christian preacher relates the figure and the ministry of Jesus as Lord to the ultimate and eternal purposes of God.” Jones, p. 36
-Apocalyptic thought unabashedly claims that Jesus is LORD, with all the demands that come along with that title and role. Jones, p. 36

-We need this reminder because we sometimes become too comfortable with Jesus and treat him as too common and familiar. (Remember how Jesus is represented in Rev. 1:13-16) Jones, p. 36

-Apocalyptic literature does not limit its shocking pictures to portrayals of Jesus. It features many shocking and unsettling images. Jones, p. 37

“The apocalyptic preacher employs startling and compelling metaphors and symbols that risk offending for the sake of awakening interest (or revealing truth).” (Rev. 19:15-18, etc. vividly portrays the conquest of God’s enemies) Jones, p. 37

-The apocalyptic preacher operates on the conviction that things cannot and will not continue as they are. Jones, p. 37

-The preacher must speak out against that which opposes God’s people and God’s plan for the earth—and identify what puts people in danger of eternal loss and destruction. Jones, p. 37

-The preacher cannot, dare not, hold back interpreting and proclaiming the meaning behind apocalyptic symbols and images, simply because someone might be offended or made angry; the full, unadulterated truth must be made known. Jones, p. 37

“The apocalyptic preacher forces a collision between the world that is and the world she or he anticipates, by faith.” Jones, p. 39

-In some places, the apocalyptic preacher provides an exaggerated picture of a heinously wicked world and forces the hearer to decide whether or not things have truly become that bad (see Dan. 7:7-21 with its 4th beast with iron teeth and its
crushing feet, and making war on the “holy ones” and prevailing; finally God intervened and conquers the beast."
Jones, p. 39

-In other places, the preacher attempts to inspire and comfort the hearers with an idealistic picture of what the world will become. Jones, p. 39

-But in both cases, the preacher insists that the hearer make a decision. Jones, p. 39

-The preacher directs God’s people to look beyond the historical possibilities and to decide to base their hopes and actions on the world of the Bible’s vision! Jones, pp. 39-40

“The apocalyptic preacher cares deeply about the individual, but insists on addressing corporate and communal good and evil.”
Jones, p. 40

-Apocalyptic preachers nurture, console, and chastise the church—and hold it accountable. Jones, pp. 39-40

-They challenge the church to comfort and encourage the faithful, to resist the influence of evil men and women, and to bear witness to the promises and presence of God that transcend historical circumstances. Jones, p.40

-Although each of as individuals stand accountable to God, we are neither faithful nor apostate alone. Jones, p. 40

-The apocalyptic preacher views the evils faced by the faithful as “systemic”—as well as personal. Jones, p. 40

-Social structures, as well as individuals, ignore God’s ways, threaten the lives of the faithful, and challenge God’s sovereignty. Jones, p. 40
Evil is so powerful that only God can defeat it; but while anticipating that victory, the faithful must prepare and respond together as partners with God. Jones, p. 40

“The apocalyptic preacher does not attempt to convince hearers that he or she is right, as much as the preacher seeks to include the hearer in the unfolding drama of what God is doing in the world.” Jones, p. 40

-The preacher has a more pressing objective than proving the message he proclaims; the Holy Spirit must, after all, do the convincing! Jones, pp. 40-41

-The focus is rather on people’s response! Jones, p. 41

-People can either have faith or refuse to have faith. Jones, p. 41

-Others make take up apologetics; the apocalyptic preacher bears witness and evokes response. Jones, p. 41

-As the visions of Revelation unfold the prophet (from Rev. 1:1-3 and onward) describes, envisions, exhorts, warns, and advises—but does not try to prove. Jones, p. 41

“The apocalyptic preacher takes sin and its consequences seriously but regularly breaks forth in praise of God.” Jones, p. 41

-The apocalyptic preacher lives not only with the nagging certainty that something must be done, but also the absolute conviction that something will be done. God will prevail. Jones, p. 42

-Revelation opens with the letters to the 7 Churches, letters that make the crisis confronting the faithful known. Then, in the 4th chapter, before any trumpets blare or seals are opened, before any descriptions of beasts and dragons, before any account of what has been or what will be, a door in heaven opens and a
service of worship begins. And the inhabitants of earth are shown singing eternally: “Holy, holy, holy the Lord God the Almighty who was and is and is to come. You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created.” (Rev. 4:8, 11) Jones, p. 42

- The apocalyptic preacher will not allow us to forget that only God matters, ultimately, and that there is always reasons to PRAISE HIM! Jones, p. 43

WHAT MODERN PREACHERS NEED TO KNOW ABOUT REVELATION:

1. **It must be interpreted in light of its original historical context.**
   - It was written by the disciple John during the persecution of the church by the Roman emperor, Domitian, sometime between A.D. 90-96.
   - John wrote while a prisoner on the isle of Patmos for his faith in Jesus

2. **It must be interpreted and preached in light of other apocalyptic literature—especially the O.T. book of Daniel.** (also the Psalms, Isaiah and Ezekiel—but the most-quoted book is Daniel – Richard Lehmann, “Revelation’s Allusions to Daniel” in Symposium on Revelation – Book II p. 139.)

3. **It must be interpreted in light of the contemporary setting!**
   - Preacher’s must know where they are in history and what is going on around them, as it relates to the church and secular society.