

## **An Introduction to the Interpretation of Apocalyptic Literature.**

Abstract.

Apocalyptic literature, particularly that which is contained in the Holy Bible, has been the subject of intense interest for centuries. Many different models for interpretation of this unique literary genre have been employed during this time, and have led to different and conflicting conclusions as to the text's meaning. Adamant adherence to some of these conclusions has come to divide the church and lead people astray.

An appropriate exegesis of apocalyptic literature can be attained if the student understands the form and function of the apocalyptic style, the background and purpose for its writing, and the meaning of the imagery understood by ancient readers.

## **An Introduction to the Interpretation of Apocalyptic Literature.**

It was visitation night for our little Baptist church. As the conversation with this "prospect" continued, it took what for me was a very strange turn. "I am here to tell you, sir, that the earth is NOT round, regardless of what you and your scientists say!"<sup>1</sup> As a member of the scientific community and well-grounded in the natural sciences, I was astounded at this earnest statement from a very committed Pentecostal-leaning Christian. Certainly, the images from direct observation of the earth came immediately to mind. I shared my viewpoint that the earth is not only a sphere, but also an incredibly small one when one considers how quickly we navigate around it. He told me, "No, the earth's not round, and I can prove it." Finding this individual to seem somewhat intelligent, my curiosity was long past the point of piqued and I was at the point of trying to figure out

the riddle he was posing to me. He then shared his reason for his adamant position: “The Bible says, ‘I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth.’ Since the Bible is true, the earth is not round. It is a square.” I quickly realized that this conversation had little potential of coming to closure. His quote was accurate, taken from the Revelation of John:

*And after these things I saw four angels standing on the four corners of the earth, holding the four winds of the earth, that the wind should not blow on the earth, nor on the sea, nor on any tree. (Rev, 7:1, KJV.)*

What was the error in this man’s thinking? Certainly, there was nothing wrong with the faith of this man. In fact, the innocent blindness of his faith in scripture seemed superior to mine. His error was in his interpretation of the apocalyptic literature style utilized in the biblical text. Reading symbolic imagery as literal and historical, he came away only with an incorrect description of the physical earth and the location of four angels, substituting it for the deep theological message that the author intended on conveying.

The misunderstanding of the context and form of apocalyptic literature has led to much misinterpretation and doctrinal conflict over the years. “In modern times, apocalyptic studies have fared rather badly. This has been due, in the first place, to the distorted interpretation of books like Daniel and Revelation which is prevalent among certain extreme prophetic groups.”<sup>2</sup> Some groups, by their rabid stance, have given the Bible an authority greater than God.<sup>3</sup> Some groups have made the literal/historical

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<sup>1</sup> This event took place over twenty years ago. Quotes are estimates from vague recollection.

<sup>2</sup> Fritsch, Charles T. p. 359.

<sup>3</sup> Allen, Ronald J. p 120.

interpretation of biblical apocalyptic a litmus test of faith, utilizing its literally-applied eschatology to provide answers for questions concerning the end of the age. Fringe groups have proved exceedingly radical and even dangerous. High-profile examples include *The People's Temple* under James Warren Jones who led 914 of its members to mass murder/suicide in 1978 and the *Branch Davidians* under David Koresh who led 74 of its members to their murder/suicide in 1993.

Most Christians experience a more common response to apocalyptic literature, and that is to give it little attention. Pastors who are not confident with the genre may fail to teach or preach on apocalyptic passages. Christians, in their own study time, may prefer to simply pass over those pages and spend time on texts that do not require as much exegesis. However, apocalyptic literature is an integral part of scripture; hence, it is an integral part of the gospel message. To rule it out of consideration altogether is to distort the biblical message of hope by omitting in advance what is obviously a part, if not the whole, of the biblical perspective.<sup>4</sup> The message of the text is not “hidden,” and it is a mystery only to those who approach the genre with an inappropriate interpretation strategy.

People may tend to be less than comfortable when reading the Apocalypse, but there is no shortage of interest in the subject of eschatology. Recent best-seller sales of the “Left Behind”<sup>5</sup> apocalyptic novel series highlight the intense curiosity people have in the subject. These novels are a loose, literal interpretation of biblical apocalyptic passages, most taken from the Revelation of John. The success of these novels has

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<sup>4</sup> Fritsch, Charles T. p 357.

<sup>5</sup> Novel series by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins.

sparked other television and movie entries into this genre. “Whatever we may think of the ‘pop-apocalypsis’ of ones like LaHaye and Lindsay<sup>6</sup> it is clearly impacting the faith of our church members”<sup>7</sup> and raising curiosity and interest among the unchurched. The time is ripe for Christians to become more capable of dealing with this very important genre of biblical text.

The Bible contains several important segments of apocalyptic literature that include Isaiah 56-66 and Ezekiel 37-48 (both referred to as “proto apocalyptic”), Daniel 7-12, and Revelation 4-22. Any attempt at a correct understanding of these important passages necessitates some understanding of the nature of apocalyptic literature and how it should be interpreted.

### **Apocalyptic literature.**

Apocalyptic literature “is a genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework in which a revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient, disclosing a transcendent reality which is both temporal, insofar as it envisages eschatological salvation, and spatial, insofar as it involves another, supernatural world.”<sup>8</sup>

More study has taken place in the subject of apocalyptic literature in the past 40 years than has taken place in the last three hundred.<sup>9</sup> This is particularly true as applied to biblical prophesy and apocalyptic genre. “Prophecy was written to people in need of

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<sup>6</sup> Lindsay, Hal. () The Late, Great, Planet Earth.

<sup>7</sup> McSween, Jr. Allen C. p 41.

<sup>8</sup> Collins, Adela Yarbro. (1979). p 62.

<sup>9</sup> Wolf, Arnold Jacob. p 102.

repentance. Apocalyptic literature was written to people in need of reassurance.”<sup>10</sup>

Apocalyptic literature is a style, or genre, of writing that was common from about 200 B.C. through 200 A.D. It was a form usually utilized to communicate the content of a prophetic vision or dream. “In form, an apocalypse is an autobiographical prose narrative reporting revelatory visions experienced by the author and structured to emphasize the central revelatory message.”<sup>11</sup> Derived from the Greek word *apokalupsis* (Rev. 1:1), meaning to “reveal” or “uncover” something that has been hidden, apocalypse has come to refer to prophesies of the end times, whether biblical, apocryphal, or secular. The genre seems to have grown out of a culture of religious desperation, seeking to bring assurance and comfort to those who were experiencing doubts or persecution. George Eldon Ladd notes three cultural factors that promoted the form. First, the text would come from a “religious remnant” that considered themselves to be a righteous minority immersed in an unrighteous world. Second, the genre usually addresses issues of good and evil, assuring the remnant of their righteous status as the text describes the doom of evil.

Third, the remnant experienced a “cessation of prophesy,” a period when the people are longing to hear from God.<sup>12</sup> “When Israel accepted the belief that prophetic oracles had ceased after the tier of Ezra (about 400 B.C.), apocalyptic visions of the future, typically written in the name of a famous figure of the past, met a need for the

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<sup>10</sup> Hall, Kevin. p 7.

<sup>11</sup> Aune, David E. p 65.

<sup>12</sup> George Eldon Ladd. (1960).

people's continued communication with their God."<sup>13</sup> Overwhelmed by the destruction of their kingdom and their domination by foreign nations (Babylon, Greece, and then Rome), the Jews were searching for an end to the conflict. "Apocalyptic thought flourished during a time of intense suffering, the historical climax of which came during the reign of the half-mad Seleucid ruler, self-styled as "The Splendid," Antiochus Epiphanes. With his insane zeal for furthering Hellenism, he dedicated himself to the total extinction of Judaism. He butchered pigs on Solomon's altar. He proscribed the reading of the Law. If a Jewish male infant was circumcised, the entire family and the officiating priest were slaughtered. It was in this atmosphere of persecution that apocalyptic was born."<sup>14</sup> Consequently, the conflict theme is common to the Jewish apocalyptic literature of the inter-testamental period. Conflict appears as "rebellion against God or warfare between the forces loyal to God and opposing forces led by a fallen angel, evil spirit, or wicked emperor."<sup>15</sup>

Some of the characteristics that are common in apocalyptic literature include:

1. The writer tends to choose some great man of the past (i.e. Enoch or Moses) and make him the hero of the book.
2. The hero often takes a journey, accompanied by a celestial guide who shows him interesting sights and comments on them.
3. Information is often communicated through visions.
4. The visions often make use of strange, even enigmatic, symbolism.
5. The visions often are pessimistic with regard to the possibility that human intervention will ameliorate the present situation.
6. The visions usually end with God's bringing the present state of affairs to a cataclysmic end and establishing a better situation.
7. The apocalyptic writer often uses a pseudonym, claiming to write in the name

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<sup>13</sup> Harris, Stephen L. p 179.

<sup>14</sup> Callas, James. p 69.

<sup>15</sup> Collins, Adela Yarbro. (1999). p 123.

of his chosen hero.

8. The writer often takes past history and rewrites it as if it were prophecy.
9. The focus of apocalyptic is on comforting and sustaining the “righteous remnant.”<sup>16</sup>

### **Methods of Interpretation**

Apocalyptic literature has been studied for centuries, and many of those who utilize a systematic method of interpretation fall into one of several dominant groups:

1. **Preterist method.** This method presupposes that all of the events that are recorded in the text took place within the period of time that is contemporary to the writer. The preterist method of interpreting the Revelation of John places all of the events in the first century as it symbolically chronicles the conflict between the church and Rome. Preterists deny any content of prophecy in the text, assuming that any eschatology it contains has already been realized.
2. **Futurist method.** This method presupposes that all of the recorded events in the text have yet to take place. The symbolism and imagery that is used may be interpreted as literal or symbolic, or a combination of both. Futurists may also argue that the symbolism is an attempt by the author to describe images and events that cannot be described in known vocabulary.
3. **Historicist method.** Historicists hold that the events described in the text are directly related to world events that can range from the time of the writer to the end of the age. Those who hold to the historicist method must work to equate the images and symbols in apocalyptic literature to specific world

events.

4. **Idealist method.** The idealist does not tie the events of apocalyptic literature to either historical or future events, but rather to spiritual truths. The text is not about swords and dragons, but about God's word and Satan, it is not about rainbows and green fields, but about God's promises and His mercy. The idealist searches for the spiritual meaning that the author intends upon conveying in the symbolism.
5. **Genre apocalypse.** This method seeks to determine the literal meaning of the images in apocalyptic literature through the comparison of a text with all other texts of the Genre. Such a method ignores the historical, futurist, and idealist methodologies, and becomes bogged down in the determination of what literature to include in the comparison.<sup>17</sup>

Most students of the Bible would agree that correct biblical interpretation is attainable when one is able to ascertain the content of the message intended by the authors. When we look at the above methods of interpretation, we find their theses to be somewhat mutually exclusive. Each process will come to a set of conclusions that is dramatically different from the others, and may not be even close to the author's original intent. Seeking the true meaning of the scripture may require that one draw from the advantages of each interpretation methodology, depending upon the context of the text for process selection. Ladd states, "The easiest approach to the Revelation is to follow one's

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<sup>16</sup> Morris, Leon. p 34-61. Quoted in Verkler p 192.

<sup>17</sup> Collins, Adela Yarbro. (1986). p 235.

own particular tradition as the true view and ignore all others; but intelligent interpreters must familiarize themselves with the various methods of interpretation that they may criticize and purify their own views.<sup>18</sup>

### **Interpretation guidelines.**

As an example of interpretation methodology, let us examine some passages from the Revelation of John. While reading John's Apocalypse we should keep in mind that,

(1) it was written to Christians who had been undergoing long-term persecution (at least two-generations) with no hope for change;

(2) it was written to give the author's readers encouragement and purpose during this difficult time;

(3) it uses symbolism (containing a lot of common idioms and metaphors) to describe the attributes of the person/place/thing being described rather than simply naming the person/place/thing described.

This latter point becomes important as we look at the text. As one encounters images, think about what the symbolism might mean as applied to attributes of that which is described. Try to avoid attaching the symbols directly to the description. This is what makes the Revelation more of a challenge to read. We are not that familiar with how ancient Christians understood many of these symbols, though many are obvious. We are often left with the context of symbolic usage to formulate an explanation.

Not all symbolism is lost to us. For example, numerology is used extensively in the Revelation to describe attributes. When numbers are encountered, try to ascertain the

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<sup>18</sup> Ladd, George Eldon (1974). p 670.

symbolism that was used for these numbers in their time. Some common applications of numerology include:

3 ½:	Half of 7, half of perfection, profound sin, incompleteness.
6:	Short of perfection, sin.
666:	Sin, repeated three times. Complete and pure sin. No evidence of good. Complete depravity.
7:	Perfection, completion of God's task.
12:	Complete, complete assembly of God's design. (12 tribes, 12 disciples.)
40:	Sufficient period of time for God to work His purpose for man.
144:	12 times 12, ultimate completion
1000:	Largest known number. Used to signify an unimaginably large amount.

144,000: 144 times 1000. A vast and complete/sufficient number. All. Colors and literal objects are also used to symbolize attributes. For example:

White:	Purity
Clear:	Purity
Red:	God's redeeming act, Jesus' blood.
Crown:	Authority over a domain or kingdom
Green:	Mercy, hope.
Trumpet:	A clear message.
Throne:	A position of power.
Rainbow:	God's covenant.
Jerusalem:	The Church, the Bride of Christ
New Jerusalem:	The post-rapture, glorified Church
Cubit:	A measure by man's standard. <sup>19</sup>

We should also be reminded that scripture never contradicts scripture. When we see what appears to be a contradiction we are not applying the message of the scripture

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<sup>19</sup> Carter, John W. (2000)

accurately. For example, Rev. 21:22 reveals that there is no temple in heaven, yet there are numerous references to the temple throughout the book.

Finally, we should be reminded that John was given an opportunity to look into an environment that no words in his language could describe. If someone from the future brought us an object that nobody had ever seen before, we would have to describe it based upon our current words that are not sufficient to describe it accurately. Consequently, we are pushed back into the necessity of using symbols and metaphors to describe the attributes of these heretofore-unseen things.

**Interpretation example.**

*And immediately I was in the spirit: and, behold, a throne was set in heaven, and one sat on the throne. (Rev. 4:2, KJV).*

Though there are apocalyptic overtones in the first three chapters of the book of Revelation, John introduces us to the genre gently, and does not fully embrace the literary form until Chapter 4. It is here that John lays the foundation upon which the remainder of the book stands, and he does so with the imagery of a throne that is set in heaven. Visions of God and His throne are not new. We find common references to the throne in Jewish tradition, (e.g. Ex. 24:9-18; 1 Kings 22:19-22; Jer. 23:16-22; and most important to this study are Isa. 6:1-13; Ezek. 1:1-28; 10:1-22; and Dan. 7:9-10.) Note it was the act of usurping the throne over Israel with human kings that precipitated the nation's demise. The Jews were very familiar with the throne motif, and consequently the first-century Christian community was also.

A throne is a position of authority. John looked into heaven, and he first saw the authority that was there. This may be contrasted with the authorities of this world that are listed in Ephesians 6:12.

*For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places. (Ephesians 6:12, KJV).*

The authority of this world is exercised by worldly men. We are immersed in a world that is saturated with evil, requiring faith in God for any semblance of purity or truth. That is God's purpose for allowing sin in the world. Without sin, there is no need for faith. Without the impact of sin in our lives, we will never see a need for God. It is God's purpose that we learn who He is and respond to Him by faith. So, when John looked into heaven, rather than a place where sin was the authority, he saw a place where Jesus was the authority (verses 5, 8, and 11 identify Jesus as sitting on the throne.) It is easy to understand how a Christian, particularly one going through a conflict with this evil world, would find these words comforting. This throne motif is a central theme that continues through the remainder of the Revelation.<sup>20</sup>

*And he that sat was to look upon like a jasper and a sardine stone: and there was a rainbow round about the throne, in sight like unto an emerald. (Rev. 4:3, KJV).*

The writer's description of God's throne is very similar to descriptions of it in Jewish apocalyptic literature, except for the anthropomorphic imagery.<sup>21</sup> Biblical apocalyptic literature is unique in that its "eschatology is marked off by all other eschatological thought precisely by its Christocentric emphasis."<sup>22</sup> The biblical texts all agree that it is Jesus who sits on the throne. Here we see Jesus described with the appearance of Jasper. We do not use the word Jasper to describe the gem that many

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<sup>20</sup> Boring, M. Eugene. p 259.

<sup>21</sup> Hjrdao, L.W. P 111.

<sup>22</sup> Beasley-Murry, George R. p 317.

American engaged or married women wear on the ring finger of their left hand. We refer to this stone as a diamond. When you think of a diamond, even with all of the other materials that have been discovered or made in the last 2000 years, what do you think of? Purity? Clarity? Permanence? Immutability? It is still considered one of the most amazing materials in all of creation, and thanks to market controls, it is also considered one of the most valuable.

Carnelian (note its similarity to the word, carnal) was a stone that was plentiful of the region around Sardis. This stone was blood-red in color, and would bring the thought of blood to one who found it. Again, the use of symbolism is obvious, since something cannot be crystal clear and blood-red at the same time. The color red, or crimson, represents the atoning blood of Christ in Christian apocalyptic literature. We see in the diamond and carnelian both the purity, permanence and atoning purpose of Christ, quite alien to the worldly authority they are subject to.

John also saw a rainbow surrounding the throne, an allusion to the throne vision in Ezek 1:27-28. If the throne is the authority that rules heaven, what is the significance of a rainbow surrounding it? The rainbow is a symbol of God's covenant with man.<sup>23</sup> The basis for the God's authority in heaven is His covenant with man and God has not forgotten his promises. Usually we think of a rainbow as a spectrum of all colors, but this rainbow resembled the green of an emerald. Green symbolizes God's mercy and His purpose of hope. Consider the green of the spring season. It is a renewing of life, by God's mercy, and an indicator of hope of better days. This covenant is one that is a product of God's mercy and brings hope to all who will receive Him.

This is a very encouraging message to the persecuted saints. According to these three verses, a better place awaits them. They will be taken to a place where sin will no longer have power over us. Instead, it will be a place where all recognized authority will be that of Jesus Christ by virtue of the price that He paid on the cross to atone for our sins, and in response to the covenant that God made with man, a covenant that God will be faithful to fulfill, one that is product of His mercy, one that brings us hope. Evil may reign now, but it will not last forever.

Note that this interpretation example does not fit into any of the five methods listed above, but draws from some of the best features of several. From the preterist model we recognize the plight of first-century Christians and how their circumstances provides the context for the passage. Israel has not been self-governing since the nation was overrun by Babylon, and no hope for independence exists. Christians suffer the additional indignity of rejection by both the Jews and many Gentiles. They see the authority in the world resting in the hands of the Romans. John's message of Jesus' authority is encouraging.

From the futurist viewpoint, we note that the throne is in heaven. The authority of Jesus Christ is in complete power in the kingdom of God. Many will interpret heaven to be a future place, assuring the reader that the authorities of this evil world will not last forever. From the idealist method, we observe that John is speaking about Jesus and His authority, realized in the surety of God's promises because of His mercy and grace.

When we approach the interpretation of apocalyptic literature in this manner, we come away with an entirely different image than the historical literalist will have. The

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<sup>23</sup> Aune, David E. p 286.

literalist simply sees a throne that holds someone looking like gemstones, surrounded by a green rainbow. This may make for a pretty painting, but holds no message for the reader. However, when one applies an appropriate processes employed in the interpretation of apocalyptic style, one comes away with a profound spiritual truth that is both instructive and encouraging.

This tremendous message of hope came from only two apocalyptic verses that are a small part of the bulk of the Revelation of John. It takes a little bit of time to research the context of the imagery used in apocalyptic passages, but the time is worth it.

It might be interesting to note that John gradually moves into the apocalyptic imagery in this book. In fact, he makes use of some initial images that would have not been in the “vocabulary” of the ancients. For example in 1:20, John explains the interpretation of the images of the stars and candlesticks. If one combines what we know about ancient imagery with John’s explanation of some of those images he utilizes, we can come away from the apocalyptic text finding that there is no mystery at all. The mystery of the apocalyptic genre is solved in the same way that the content of any biblical text is determined: through a comprehensive exegesis of the text.

Biblical apocalyptic literature is not something to be avoided. In fact, the Revelation was written to be read (Rev. 1:3) and those who read it are blessed. The central element in apocalyptic literature, common to all biblical prose, is the “glorious second coming of Jesus Christ, who will raise the dead, judge persons and usher in the glories of the Age to Come.”<sup>24</sup> We find this theme whether we read from Isaiah 11 (a king from the line of Jesse), or in Daniel 7 (the Ancient of Days, the Son of Man.)

Apocalyptic literature was not written for some great-learned scholar to analyze, but for everyday people who were experiencing extreme persecution. “Each book, at the time of its writing, helped those who were hungry for truth to catch a glimpse of the ultimate victory of God. These apocalyptic books have provided that same glimpse of victory for readers through the centuries – and continue to do so even today.”<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Ladd, George Eldon. (1981). p 205.

<sup>25</sup> Hall, Kevin. p 11.

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## Appendix.

### Christian, Hebrew and Jewish Apocalyptic Literature Examples<sup>26, 27, 28</sup>

Document	Comments	Approx. Date
3 Isaiah *	Isaiah, chapters 56-66 Proto-apocalyptic	
Ezekiel *	Chapters 37-48 Proto-apocalyptic	580 B.C.
Book of Heavenly Luminaries	1 Enoch 72-82	250 B. C.
1 Enoch 1-36	Ethiopic Enoch	175 B.C.
1 Enoch 83-90	Dream Visions or Animal Apocalypse	164-160 B. C.
1 Enoch	5 sections of compositions, some of which show Christian reworking	225 B. C.
Daniel	Daniel 7-12	165 B. C.
Book of Jubilees	Jubilees 23	150-100 B. C.
Sibylline Oracles	Book III	150 B. C.
· Testament of Levi	Testament of XII Patriarchs	137-107 B.C.
Apocalypse of Zephaniah		100 B. C.-70 B. C.
Psalms of Solomon		48 B. C
1 Enoch 37-71	Similitudes of Enoch	50 B. C.-50 A. D.
Testament of Moses	based on earlier 2nd cent. B. C. text.	6-36 A. D.
Martyrdom of Isaiah		1-100 A. D.
Dead Sea Scrolls	(selections, e.g., "The War Scroll")	100 to 69A.D.
Apocalypse of Moses		70 A. D
Testament of Abraham		1-100 A. D.
II Enoch	Slavonic Enoch	1-100 A. D.
Later Jewish and Christian Apocalypses		
Sibylline Oracles	(Jewish) Book IV	80 A. D.
II Edras IV Ezra)	(chs. 3-14) later + (chs. 1-2, 15) Ezra Apocalypse	100-120 A. D.
II Baruch	Syriac Baruch	100-120 B. C.
Testament of Abraham		75-125 B. C.
Apocalypse of Abraham		70-100 A. D.
Apocalypse of John *	Chapters 1-22, Biblical	90-95 A. D.
III Baruch	Greek Baruch	200 A. D.
Sibylline Oracles	Book V. (Jewish & Christian)	200 A. D.
Apocalypse of Peter	(Christian)	100-200 A. D.
The Shepherd of Hermas	(Christian)	100-200 A. D

\*Biblical Texts

<sup>26</sup> Collins, John J. (1979).

<sup>27</sup> Gottwald, Norman K. (1985).

<sup>28</sup> White, Michael L. (2005).