APOCALYPTIC MOTIFS IN THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW: CONTINUITY AND DISCONTINUITY

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Both apocalyptic and the Gospel of Matthew are currently subjects of renewed interest in the scholarly world,¹ and it therefore seems timely to take a fresh look at the presence and function of apocalyptic in Matthew.² One of the newer emphases in the study of apocalyptic is its socio-logical basis, and thus in this paper we must make some initial, brief attempt to understand the life-setting of the community to which the Gospel is addressed. We shall then in turn look at the place apocalyptic holds in Matthew, at the innovative perspective of the evangelist as a representa-tive of the primitive Christian community, and then finally at the function of apocalyptic in Mt.

Mt is by no means isolated in his apocalyptic perspec-tive; it is shared by the other evangelists. In Mt, however, the apocalyptic perspective holds a much more prominent place than in any of the other Gospels. Most of the material we will focus upon is unique to this Gospel. And although we cannot here do detailed redactional analysis of Mt’s use of Mk and Q, it is often the case that in parallel passages Mt heightens the apocalyptic language.³ Nor is it our purpose here to trace possible literary allusions or parallels to the apocalyptic literature.⁴ Rather, our purpose is to consider the Gospel as a whole, and in a biblical-theological way. For this reason we will move from the specific to the more general problem presented by Mt’s perspective. By the conclusion of the paper the similarities and differences
between Mt and the contemporary apocalyptic perspectives should be apparent. Here, as so often in NT theology, we will finally be confronted not only by continuity with the past, but by that inevitable discontinuity that results from the newness brought by Christ.

But to begin with, since the definition of "apocalyptic" has been discussed extensively in recent times, every writer or speaker who uses the word is under obligation to make clear what he or she understands by it. Accordingly, to this we now turn.

I. DEFINING THE APOCALYPTIC VIEWPOINT

M. E. Stone was not exaggerating when some years ago he wrote that "a great deal of the current discussion of apocalypticism and of the apocalypses is being carried on in the midst of a semantic confusion of the first order." The confusion stemmed primarily from the failure to distinguish between apocalypse and apocalypticism, with the result that questions of literary genre and conceptual content were easily mixed together. It was common practice to draw up lists of traits that characterized "apocalyptic," traits derived indiscriminately from a variety of sources including apocalypses, apocalypse-like writings, and other writings thought to reflect the outlook of apocalyptic. But the use of terminology was vague and confusing and unresolved questions remained. Was one to define "apocalyptic" on the basis of actual apocalypses — and if so, in terms of form or content, or both? — or on the basis of writings containing an apocalyptic perspective? How specific or general was a definition of apocalyptic to be? Was it to specify enough to apply to the actual apocalypses, yet broad enough to include all of them? Or did it need to be comprehensive enough to include apocalyptic thought, wherever it might be found?