

## IS REVELATION APOCALYPTIC?

Presented by Patrick J. Griffiths

The following article is in response to the following questions.

- How do we know Revelation is apocalyptic vs. prophetic?
- How do we know when apocalyptic literature isn't being prophetic but rather literal/actual?
- How can Revelation be the only apocalyptic book in the Bible, and how do we know it to be such when all other books in the Bible are aren't?

I do not know the eschatological system the below author holds, but I do believe he does a good job of explaining Revelation as Apocalyptic Writing. I would probably argue the issue of whether or not Revelation is apocalyptic is only argued against by those who are Dispensation in their hermeneutic. Otherwise, Revelation as apocalyptic is commonly maintained.

Submitted by Patrick J. Griffiths

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### THE ARTICLE

<https://www.gci.org/articles/revelation-apocalyptic-writing-and-the-old-testament/>

#### **Revelation: Revelation, Apocalyptic Writing and the Old Testament**

The book of Revelation belongs to a class of chiefly Jewish (and later Christian) literature called "apocalyptic." The word "apocalypse" has been borrowed from the book of Revelation and applied to these other writings.

Apocalyptic refers, in a broad sense, to a group of books written between 200 B.C. and A.D. 100. Two historical markers are usually given for the span during which the Jewish apocalyptic works were written and edited:

1. the persecution of the Jews by the Greco-Syrian king Antiochus Epiphanes (167 B.C.) and
2. the destruction of the Jewish nation by the Roman emperor Hadrian (A.D. 135).

Apocalyptic writings usually had certain characteristics in common. Writers generally claimed that a divine disclosure had been given through an angelic intermediary. God's secret purpose was said to have been revealed through a dream or vision in the heavenly realm. Almost all apocalypses are pseudonymous. Writers of apocalyptic works usually wrote in the name of heroes from Israel's history. There are books ascribed to Enoch, Abraham, the Twelve Patriarchs, Moses, Ezra, Enoch and Elijah, among others.

These apocalyptic writings claimed to reveal God's purpose in history. These writings tried to explain why the Jews, who thought of themselves as God's people, were part of an oppressed nation suffering under ungodly political institutions. In the words of Robert H. Mounce:

A major role of the apocalypse was to explain why the righteous suffered and why the kingdom of God delayed. Prophecy had dealt primarily with the nation's ethical obligations at the time when the prophet wrote. Apocalyptic focused on a period of time yet future when God would intervene to judge the world and establish righteousness. (*The Book of Revelation*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament, p. 19)

Apocalyptic writing is usually dualistic in that two opposing supernatural powers, God and Satan, do battle. The outcome of the conflict is rigidly determined – everything moves forward according to a divinely preordained time schedule and purpose. Writers of apocalyptic speculated that the power of Satan controls this evil age and afflicts the righteous through his human and demonic agents. But he will be defeated by the direct intervention of God, who will create a perfect new world order in which the good will flourish.

The writers of apocalyptic works looked upon their days as the worst of times – filled with suffering and pain for God's people. These writings were what commentators call "tracts for hard times." To save the day, apocalyptic writing included a promise that God would intervene in human history, destroy evil and bring the troubles of his people to an end. This hope often centered on the swift return of the Messiah, who would usher in the end of the age and bring in his kingdom. The end was near, and God was going to judge the world and reward his faithful and suffering people.

These basic threads are woven throughout the fabric of apocalyptic thought. When one studies the book of Revelation, these same issues are also discussed: the meaning of history, the suffering of God's people, the coming of the Messiah and God's kingdom.

### **A sense of urgency**

Apocalyptic writers did not generally speculate about the end-time as coming in some far-off future. This would have held little meaning for the people to whom they wrote. The apocalyptic writers were interested in the here and now. God's Messiah was coming very soon to take away the burdens of the Jewish people, and lift them on high over the gentile nations. Writers of apocalyptic, says M. Eugene Boring,

Addressed their own generation with the urgency of those who cry out for meaning in their struggle and suffering. Their question was not "When will the End come?" but "What is the meaning of our suffering?" It was not speculative calculation but the tenacity of faith which came to expression in their conviction that the End must be near. (*Revelation*, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching, p. 43)

G.B. Caird explains in a clear summary the purpose of those who wrote apocalyptic pieces. Their writings were produced to encourage Jewish resistance to the encroachments of paganism, by showing that the national suffering was foreseen and provided for in the cosmic purpose of God and would issue in ultimate vindication. It is characteristic of these writings that they portray the present crisis...against a background of world history, the present struggle as part of the age-long struggle between the kingdom of light and the kingdom of darkness, and victory over the immediate enemy as the embodiment of the final victory of God. It is also characteristic of

them that they are written in symbolic language. (*A Commentary on the Revelation of St. John the Divine*, 2nd edition, p. 9)

Most first-century Jews were familiar with the apocalyptic literary form. The book of Revelation reflected both the form and content of apocalyptic writings, so the original Christian readers of Revelation – especially those who had come out of a Jewish religious background – would have recognized it as an apocalyptic work. The language, thoughts and symbols would have been familiar.

The thought and content of apocalyptic was based on themes in the Hebrew Scriptures, the Old Testament. The church as a whole had contacts with the Jewish community and was well aware of what the Hebrew Scriptures said. Christians probably felt familiar with apocalyptic literary style.

Even non-Jewish Christians with no prior contact with Judaism would have recognized the apocalyptic form, because it was used among other peoples as well. Robert W. Wall concludes: “When John began his composition as an apocalypse, he was in effect locating it within a familiar literary tradition known to his readers who were able to make meaning of what he wrote” (*Revelation*, *New International Biblical Commentary*, p. 12).

John helped his readers understand what to expect by calling his work, “The *revelation* of Jesus Christ...” (1:1). The first word of the book identifies its general purpose and content: The book will reveal the purpose of God in history for his people and explain their situation in the world, as well as their glorious future.

For readers today, however, such cues are not so readily apparent. We live in a world different from the one John and his churches lived in. As we read and study Revelation, we must try to think of ourselves as John’s parishioners. This will require some imaginative thinking. In the words of J. Ramsey Michaels:

To make sense of the Book of Revelation the student must try to understand, and even cultivate, the apocalyptic frame of mind. This means putting away certain twentieth-century biases and reserving judgment about the religious experiences that underlie this book and the images with which it is filled. (*Interpreting the Book of Revelation*, p. 15)

For us, Revelation may seem strange because (with parts of Daniel) it is the only apocalyptic piece of literature we have read. However, if we read other first-century apocalyptic works, we would come to see the book in a new light. M. Eugene Boring says, “Revelation will never look the same once one has seen even a small sample of the category of thought to which it belongs” (p. 39).

For those interested, a typical apocalyptic work is Second Esdras (or Fourth Ezra). It is readily available in editions of the Bible that include the Apocrypha or Deutero-canonical books (available at <http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=2+Esdras+1&version=NRSV>). A good scholarly work on apocalyptic writings is *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, edited by

James H. Charlesworth. Another apocalyptic work is the so-called book of Enoch, available in Charlesworth's book or online in an older translation at [http://www.ccel.org/c/charles/otpseudepig/enoch/ENOCH\\_1.HTM](http://www.ccel.org/c/charles/otpseudepig/enoch/ENOCH_1.HTM).

### **A new view of old prophecies**

While there are great similarities between apocalyptic writings and Revelation, we should also note some important differences. Revelation interprets the Old Testament in a way that is almost contradictory to the Jewish apocalyptic writings. In a sense, we can view those writings as a challenge to the church – and Revelation as the rebuttal.

Revelation, for example, transforms the nation of Israel into the church. Revelation claims the Old Testament prophecies about the salvation of Israel, the peace of Jerusalem and restoration of the temple do not refer to Jews as an ethnic group – but to a church perfected and glorified. The people of God is not composed of a remnant of Israel but people from all nations who have put their faith in Christ. The true Exodus is the spiritual and eternal salvation of the faithful church. In the words of Robert W. Wall:

John's constant allusions to biblical stories suggest that he composes his book of visions in conversation with the Old Testament.... His message corresponds to the prophetic promise of the triumph of God's reign within history. For him, the new Israel has experienced a new exodus from sin and death and has set out on a journey for a new Jerusalem. (17)

Revelation challenged the claims of the apocalyptic writers, their ideas of history, where God was working, who the people of God were and the nature of the end-time. These challenges were set down in the apocalyptic format – and they turned the Jewish apocalyptic writings on their head.

The various apocalyptic writings depended on the Old Testament prophecies, visions, examples and types. The Jews took God's promises of the liberation of Israel and his intervention in human affairs, and applied them to themselves, as well as their time and circumstances.

Revelation radically reinterpreted the Jewish explanation of the Old Testament. That is perhaps the book's most important feature and is an important contrast with apocalyptic writings. Says G. B. Caird: "We shall expect, then, to find that John's symbols do not mean exactly what they would have meant to a Jewish writer. We shall expect what Farrar has called 'a rebirth of image'" (11).

Another vital difference between Jewish apocalyptic and Revelation is what we might call the key to history. To the Jews, the return of the Messiah and his intervention in human affairs was the fulcrum point of history. Revelation, however, fixes the crux of history in another place – on the cross of Christ. That is why Revelation 5, the vision of the Lamb opening the scroll, is the pivot point of the book.

The Messiah's return will be vital to God's working out of history. Revelation looks to this event with anticipation as well. But Revelation says Christians need not depend on some saving event in the future. God has already acted decisively in history through Jesus, the Word made human.

## **A pastoral letter**

Revelation is different from Jewish apocalyptic writings in several other ways. Apocalypses were pseudonymous; John writes in his own name. Apocalypses were written in the name of a dead hero of ancient Israel; John wrote in the name of the living Christ.

John's work is also a prophecy as well as a revelation (1:3; 22:7, 10, 18-19). He even calls his book a prophetic work and tells us the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy (19:10). Thus, it is the word of God – given through John – to the church.

Besides being prophecy and revelation, John's work is grounded in current history. Revelation is a pastoral letter written to the church at large – to real people then living (1:4, 11). Since Revelation was at least part letter, it was meant to be read in the churches (Colossians 4:16). We know this from the book's introduction (1:3) and conclusion (22:6), as well as chapters 2 and 3, which are written to individual churches.

Revelation, then, is a unique kind of writing. It is a combination and blend of three literary types – apocalypse, prophecy, and letter. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza says:

The author clearly indicates that he intends to write a public pastoral letter to seven churches in Asia Minor and that he understands this letter as the "words of prophecy." Nevertheless, Revelation does not read like a letter or homily. It is difficult to identify which complex literary type the author had in mind in writing the book. Did he intend to create a liturgy or a drama, a cosmic myth, a prophetic book, or an apocalypse? Or did he use all of these genres to fill out the epistolary framework which reflects his true literary intention? (*The Book of Revelation: Justice and Judgment*, 166).

Our understanding of Revelation is complicated by the fact that the apocalypse as a literary form does not exist in our time. John's original readers knew how to understand such a writing, but we have more difficulty with it because it is outside of our experience.

However, if we cultivate a knowledge of the Old Testament and gain some understanding of the culture in which Revelation was written, our ability to understand the book will be greatly enhanced. The most important thing is to approach Revelation on its own terms, as a writing of its time which was well understood by its original readers – and had a vital message for them.

Paul Kroll

## **Prophecy, Apocalypse and You**

B. Palmer

Terrifying beasts and heads, horns and dragons fill the books of Daniel and Revelation, making them some of the most controversial and least understood books in the Bible. Unfortunately, many students of the Bible read their own ideas into these symbols and images. In light of this

confusion, it is vital for Christians to understand the genre, or literary style, of these portions of Scripture.

Although Daniel and Revelation are sometimes designated as “prophecy,” the two books are more accurately labeled apocalyptic literature, a specific type of prophetic writing. However, neither book is entirely apocalyptic. The early chapters of Daniel are historical, and Revelation includes letters to seven churches in Asia Minor.

**One distinction** between apocalyptic and prophetic literature lies in the history of their development. Prophetic literature dates from the eighth century B.C. to the fifth century B.C. Apocalyptic literature, on the other hand, was popular among Jews living from the second century B.C. until the second century A.D. (This is not to say that apocalyptic was unknown before the second century B.C. Conservative scholars date the book of Daniel much earlier.)

The historical distinction between prophecy and apocalyptic is important. Most of the Old Testament prophetic messages went to Israel or Judah while the nations still retained some sovereignty. Apocalyptic writings, however, flourished when Israel was no longer a sovereign nation. The Jews had spread throughout the known world, and those among them who produced apocalyptic writings were struggling to maintain their relationship with God while living under Greco-Roman rule.

**A second distinction** lies in the types of revelation on which the two different genres of prophecy and apocalyptic draw. Apocalyptic is a revelation, usually experienced through dream and vision. The book of Revelation reflects this facet of apocalyptic literature. God inspired John to show that an angel revealed visions to him: “The revelation of Jesus Christ”; he would “make it known by sending his angel to his servant John” (Revelation 1:1). This supernatural revelation given to John is filled with symbols and imagery.

Although prophecy comes from God and is a type of revelation, it is most often expressed as the word of God rather than as a vision. That is why the phrase “Thus says the Lord” appears in prophecy so often.

**Another difference** between apocalyptic and prophecy is the type of imagery used. Prophetic imagery most often includes easily recognized symbols, like plants, animals and farm tools. Apocalyptic imagery is often strange and unknown. In *The Hermeneutical Spiral*, Grant R. Osborne comments that “the purpose of esoteric symbols in apocalyptic is to turn readers from the actual event to its theological meaning. In other words, readers are expected to see the hand of God in the future but are not supposed to know the exact sequence of events.”

Prophecy and apocalyptic both stir hearers to repentance and both encourage believers. Even so, the primary purpose of prophecy is to bring people to repentance, while the principal aim of apocalyptic literature is to encourage.

With these distinctions in mind, it is clear that prophecy and apocalyptic share a common goal – to point people to God. By condemning the nation’s sins and seeking Israel’s repentance, prophecy pointed the Israelites to their God, just as it continues to point us to God. Likewise,

apocalyptic books pointed persecuted believers to God through an encouraging symbolic description of the triumphant, end-time return of Christ. Those same visions point us to God today.

For Christians, the most important message of Revelation and Daniel is not precise symbolic meaning and definitions of dragons and horns. The urgent message is that Jesus has not forgotten his elect and will, in due time, intervene in world history.

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