The Book of Revelation

Zanesville, OH | Wednesday PM Bible Study

**Excursus: Apocalyptic Literature**

**Definition:**

The word *“apocalypse”* from which we get apocalypses, apocalyptic, apocalyptist, etc. is derived from the Greek word *“apokalupsis”* which simply means revelation, uncovering or disclosure. The word itself occurs 18 times in the NT and only once in the book of Revelation from which we derive its meaning. The bible states in Rev. 1:1: *“The Revelation of Jesus Christ…”* The book makes plain at the immediate onset its origin is from God.

It is unfortunate, however, that the word or term *“apocalypse”* has come to mean or signify something entirely different than what it was originally intended to mean. The term is used today in a vast array of means and usually it is associated with the catastrophic downfall of a nation, people or entire world. While the book of Revelation may speak of such themes or topics, its overarching meaning is not what most people would have you to believe. We will speak more on this later.

While the term or the word itself comes from the book of Revelation, this genre of literature works is no stranger to the message of the bible. Books such as Isaiah, Ezekiel, Daniel and Zechariah contain vast amounts of apocalyptic messages which provide the audience with a larger insight than what they may have usually grown accustomed to. It is difficult to nail down the exact origin of this type of literature in history but ultimately the faithful disciple rests in the fact that all things emanate from God.

In his commentary of the book of Revelation, G.K. Beale notes that defining apocalyptic literature is not an easy task and it depends on a number of circumstances. He says, *“Though there are many definitions of apocalyptic it is best to understand apocalyptic as an intensification of prophecy”* (G.K. Beale, The Book of Revelation). As seen above, this statement is accurate since the prophets utilized this genre in their messages quite often. This leads us to ask an important question. Does Revelation fall under the genre of prophecy as well?

While apocalyptic literature is indeed an intensification of prophecy, the characteristics associated with the prophetic books of the OT are clearly seen in the Revelation. There is yet another genre which is observed in the book at the very beginning. Rev. 1-3 is neither guaranteed apocalyptic or prophecy. It connotes that of the epistles. As such, one can conclude the book is a mixture of 3 genres, 1 of which is more dominant than the rest (apocalyptic.) As such Beale concludes, *“Revelation is best seen as fitting into the genre of OT prophetic-apocalyptic works…”* (G.K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*).

We have briefly discussed the meaning of apocalyptic literature and its use both outside of the bible (modern cultural settings) and in the bible itself. But what exactly is apocalyptic literature? Is there really a perfect or complete way of describing what it means and what it entails (Note: This is not the same as asking whether the book of Revelation can be understood)? As one can imagine, the book of Revelation along with other apocalyptic works (Daniel, Zechariah, Book of Enoch etc.) has garnered a tremendous amount of attention and criticism since the 1st century. Many have offered their take on the language, structure and nature of this particular genre but for our purposes in this study, we will give attention to the definition given by the Society of Biblical Literature’s Apocalypse Group (SBL).

*“‘Apocalypse’ 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, supernatural world”* (SBL Genres Project, Semeia 14).

While this definition is by no means perfect, it does capture the essence of the literature especially as it is used in the book of Revelation. **Apocalyptic literature is simply a genre presented in the form of a story where God (otherworldly being) gives His message to a human (in this case John) in which that message pertains to both the temporal/earthly and heavenly/eternal realities of what believers of God (Christians) undergo and how God will conquer the evil forces and grant salvation to His people.**

**Occasion:**

This leads us to discuss the occasion of such genre. Why choose this type of literature? That certainly is a question many have battled with for millennia due to its rather difficult nature. When compared with each other, the books of the bible that contain this genre of literature all deal with more or less the same idea: **The cosmic battle between the forces of evil and good and the persecution of God’s people.**

I cannot begin to claim to know the mind of God but evident within the literature itself is the likelihood that God chose to convey His message to His people during this particular medium so they can get a picture of what takes place “backstage” if you will. He wants them (and by extension us) to know and trust that circumstances which we undergo are not limited to this earth alone but transcend human realms to the spiritual realms where He remains in control of everything.

**Content:**

Perhaps what garners the most attention of the book of Revelation is its content. Herein, lies the sad mistake many make with this book and this literature. Apocalyptic literature is abundant in visions, dreams, symbols, numbers and rich metaphors. One who is familiar with poetry and works that are filled with symbolic literary devices, understand that its message is not to be taken literally word for word. Neither should the details of such be overly pressed or become the source of obsession.

Longman rightly says, *“Metaphors and similes teach by analogy. They throw light on difficult concepts and things by relating them to something we know from common experience. As such, images speak truly and accurately, but not precisely. We often do not know where the analogy stops. In this way, images preserve mystery about ideas that are ultimately beyond our comprehension.* ***It is a travesty, then, to interpret apocalyptic images too finely, to press them in their details.*** *As we will see, this mistake is common among biblical interpreters of apocalyptic and has led to all kinds of fanciful interpretations and outlandish claims. Caution and reserve are virtues in the interpretation of apocalyptic”* (Longman, *Daniel*).

It is here many suggest that one just cannot understand the message of Revelation. Both John and Daniel, the recipients of God’s revelation via visions, learned that the details of this literature were not to be pressed more than it required. As is so often the case with the human tendency to be curious and the need to acquire all the answers, Daniel wanted to know more about the visions he received. God’s response was: *“But as for you, go your way to the end; then you will enter into rest and rise again for your allotted portion at the end of the age”* (Dan. 12:13).

These two men, the recipients of some of the most prolific and powerful messages in the scriptures, trusted in God first and understood that they needed to look at the big picture. With apocalyptic literature being so vivid and lively with things we may deem to be impossible to understand, we need to be cautious and look at the overarching message of what God is conveying. We must not get bogged down by the means through which He conveys these things but rather we must appreciate the beauty of the vehicles which deliver a timeless message needed for the believers of God.

With regard to that, it could be said that apocalyptic literature carries similar characteristics to the parables of Jesus (parabolic literature). Jesus spoke in parables to make various analogies and applications. While some were literal, most were not, and they pointed to a greater message. The parables of Jesus also held a concealing/revealing nature. Those who were not willing to listen would not understand the message but those who inclined their minds to the Christ would receive His revelation (cf. Mk. 4:21-23, 33-34).

It is true that the entire bible can be classified under this umbrella (parabolic nature) since many people don’t feel the need to listen to Jesus and thus the message is lost on such ones. Nevertheless, the fact remains that this is especially true of language rich with metaphors, images, analogies and other literary devices. As such we begin to grasp why God chose to convey His message using this particular medium.

McGuiggan says of this: *“Apocalyptic speech is vivid and easily remembered. It appeals to our imagination. It is the language of conflict and victory.”* Elsewhere he adds, *“You must remember you are seeing a portrait and just as one does not examine every brush stroke but stands back and examines the whole so must you look for the overall import of the vision”* (McGuiggan, *The Book of Revelation*).

The above is indeed a picture of the fine line that exists between the need to obsess over the images and symbols in the book and the reality that we must look at the whole instead of the fine details. We must seek to see what God is telling us. This is not the first time God uses a medium (apocalyptic literature in this case) to brand on the minds of His audience the message He wants them to remember. In the OT there are various examples of this including repetition, acrostic patterns and many more.

Having said that, we now must answer what is the overarching theme or message of this book. What do these numbers, symbols and terrifying images seek to convey? We have alluded to it above, but the point of the Revelation is clear as noted by Robert Mounce: ***“Although there will be an outbreak of Satanic activity in the last days, history remains under the sovereign control of God. Redemption has already been won by the Lamb, who conquered through death [and resurrection] (Rev. 5:9) and whose great act in history provides victory over Satan for the faithful (Rev. 12:10-11). While the prospect of suffering is realistically set forth, a genuine optimism permeates the entire work”*** (Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*).

God will conquer evil and, in the end, He will win! Those who are on His side have nothing to fear for He has conquered death on their behalf. This is seen in the occurrence of the Greek word *“nikao”* which occurs 17 times (61% of NT) in the book and denotes God’s victory over the forces of evil and the victory for His beloved children.

**Functions:**

Apocalyptic literature tends to have specific functions is seeks to carry out. While most of these functions are seen in most books filled with this genre, each book may have its unique features. As such we will provide the functions of apocalyptic literature with respect to the book of Revelation. By functions we mean the purpose/role the literature communicates. We have alluded to this in the paragraphs above, but special notes will be made in the section below.

1. **Provides a heavenly perspective to believers with a dominating focus on the source of the revelation** (God, See: Rev. 4-5). Believers are given a peek of what actually takes place in the spiritual realm and they can in fact be encouraged that God is on the throne and He is in control!
2. The reality of a realm beyond ours. Apocalyptic literature purports that there is a major conflict between good and evil (God and Satan). **There are also two different realms. The temporal/evil and the eternal/perfect. This function always ends with God’s effortless victory over the enemy.**
3. **Apocalyptic literature is always eschatological**. It concerns itself with death, judgment and the destiny of the soul of man. Mounce says, *“It treats a period of time yet future when God will break into this world of time and space to bring the entire system to a final reckoning”* (Mounce, **The Book of Revelation**).
4. Perhaps the most important function of this literature is that it seeks to **provide a sense of comfort and peace to the people of God during times of crises including severe persecution**. The above 3 functions all combine to point to this one. God gives His people a heavenly perspective so they can understand He is in control which means He will conquer the enemy and He has the final say on what happens to His people.

The existence of another realm beyond the temporary and physical provides an exhortation to the saints that they should continue to persevere and endure regardless of what they experience. Because Jesus will judge everyone and there is an eternal destiny which awaits the soul, disciples of God can rest assured that if they persevere righteously setting their minds on the goal then He will grant them everlasting peace and the reward which cannot be compared the any amount of suffering we experience in this world (Rom. 8:18).

These functions seek to alter the behavior of the disciples in the sense that they should rejoice that God fights for them and He will win. They should endure to end even when faced with death (Rev. 2:10). They must hold Him in high esteem in the face of all their enemies and seek to shine their lights as brightly and boldly as they can. They must look to Jesus and the cross and follow Him.

**Summary:**

Most of the book of Revelation falls under the genre of apocalyptic literature but it also contains genres of prophecy and epistle. It contains images, various literary devices, symbols and numbers which point to a greater message. To understand this type of literature we must approach it with humility and caution. We must seek to view the whole and not become obsessed with the minute details. The main message of this genre is that God will win and conquer His enemies and the enemies of His people. The disciples of God must stay faithful and He will reward them.

**Sources:**

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