

#2 THE GENRE OF THE BOOK OF REVELATION

When we open up the mailbox and see a magazine, we know how to read it. There are certain things we do and don't expect. We expect ads to take up 75% of the space. We expect a few articles generally related to the target audience. There will be an address-ready postcard promising deeply discounted rates if we renew our subscription now. We don't expect magazines targeted toward young women to contain sports updates. We don't expect magazines targeted toward young men to offer answers for toddler tantrums. We are familiar with the genre.

Understanding the genre of literature is important because *the vehicle by which a message is communicated is just as crucial to interpretation as the words used or the historical background behind a message*. Imagine you are part of a book club and you are handed a romance novel thinking it is a mystery thriller. You might end up floating some pretty strange theories about how the book may conclude at the next meeting. Or, imagine if you relied on social media for news. It could get ugly.

In the same way, the readers of Revelation had mental shelves for books like Revelation. A great deal of literature similar to and much wilder than Revelation has been uncovered from the 400s BC all the way to the AD 200s. Since we aren't in the same situation, it can take time to develop a mindset that is ready to read and interpret Revelation's literary style. And, because there are so many popular and unhelpful explanations of Revelation (and equally unhelpful reactions), we may have to unlearn much of what we think we know.

As modern readers, it is easy to become frustrated and wonder why God would breathe out texts like Revelation with their wild symbolism, weird numbers, and visionary trips to heaven and the future. Why not flatly and plainly state the message? Asking the question hopefully hints at the answer. Revelation is more like poetry than it is prose.⁸ Revelation doesn't plainly state a logical message because that's not the goal of Revelation (or of much of the Bible — I'm looking at you with your weird narratives, Judges! And you with your erotic songs, Song of Solomon!). It's not that Revelation is illogical or incoherent, it's that Revelation prefers to impart a transcendent vision of reality. Revelation's gift is new glasses by which to see the world. Consider how Michael J. Gorman weaves various interpreters together to explain this.

Similarly, the late New Testament scholar Bruce Metzger wrote that Revelation is "unique [in the Bible] in appealing primarily to our *imagination* — not, however a freewheeling imagination, but a disciplined imagination." (Metzger, *Breaking the Code*, 11). In fact, it would be appropriate to apply the words of Richard Hays, originally regarding Paul, to Revelation: the final book of the Bible is about the "conversion of our imaginations." (I refer here to Hays, *The Conversion of the Imagination*) Its intent is "to purge and to refurbish the Christian imagination." (Bauckham, *Theology*, 159)⁹

So, what is the genre of Revelation? The first few verses reveal that Revelation is a mixture of three different genres into one. Bauckham offers that "Revelation seems to be an apocalyptic prophecy in the form of a circular letter to seven churches in the Roman province of Asia."¹⁰ Revelation utilizes literary aspects of apocalyptic literature, prophecy, and letters, and as such we need to respect each of these genres in order to properly interpret Revelation.

As a **letter**, Revelation was addressed to seven churches in the Roman province of Asia in the second half of the 1st century BC. Revelation is no ordinary letter, but it was written to "shape

⁸ Reddish, *Revelation*, 29, quoted in Gorman, *Reading Revelation Responsibly*, 16-17.

⁹ Gorman, *Reading Revelation Responsibly*, 8, quoting the following: Metzger, *Breaking the Code*, 11; Hays, *The Conversion of the Imagination*; Bauckham, *Theology*, 159.

¹⁰ Bauckham, *Theology*, 2

Christian communities.”¹¹ If we interpret Revelation in a way that causes it to have little relevance to these seven churches, we are not doing justice to this aspect of its genre. Furthermore, if we interpret signs and symbols in Revelation with no understanding of the symbolic world of these 1st century churches, we are ripping Revelation out of the real, first century world to which it was addressed. As one preacher put it, “It cannot mean to us what it did not mean to them.”¹²

Revelation is also **prophecy**. When we think of prophets, we may tend to think of a fortune-teller with a crystal ball foretelling the future.¹³ In fact, many popular preterist and futurist views of Revelation interpret Revelation almost exclusively as if it is a detailed description of history written in advance. While the biblical prophets do some foretelling of the future, Gorman offers that “Prophecy, in the biblical tradition, is not exclusively or even primarily about making pronouncements and predictions concerning the future. Rather, prophecy is speaking words of comfort and/or challenge, on behalf of God, to the people of God in their concrete historical situation.”¹⁴ In that vein, Revelation fits the old adage about prophecy well: comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable. As a prophecy, Revelation calls *the weary and oppressed* to endure, to continue testifying to the truth, to not compromise, and to trust that God will win. Revelation calls out *those who have compromised* with Satan and his empire-and-city-based manifestations and urges them to worship God alone.

John does urge us to read and hear his prophecy because “the time is near.” Revelation does transport us into the future! However, we should still avoid hearing Revelation as primarily a book of specific predictions. We are blessed if we read and obey because Revelation is showing us not specifically what was going to happen, but rather how to think about what would soon happen. The curtain on the reality they think they know is being pulled back so they can return to the real world with the right glasses on. That leads us to the next style of literature.

Above all, Revelation fits well into an ancient category of Jewish and Christian literature that is now known as **apocalyptic literature**. While very similar to prophecy, apocalyptic literature has distinctiveness. You may be surprised to discover that there are many other Jewish writings like Revelation. Portions of Daniel fit into this category along with 1 Enoch (quoted by Jude), 2 and 3 Baruch, 4 Ezra, the Apocalypse of Abraham, and so on. This kind of writing “was quite common among Jews and Christians for several centuries before and after Christ.”¹⁵ Revelation is unique so we shouldn’t force it to function in the exact same ways other apocalyptic literature does, but familiarity with this literary category is tremendously helpful.

After much research into apocalyptic literature, the Society for Biblical Literature emerged with a dense but helpful definition of apocalyptic literature.

“A genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework, in which a revelation is mediated by an other worldly 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.” Later, they added, “intended to interpret present earthly circumstances in light of the supernatural world of the future, and to influence both the understanding and the behavior of the audience by means of divine authority.”¹⁶

¹¹ Gorman, *Reading Revelation Responsibly*, 25.

¹² Chandler, Matt. “Introduction.” The Village Church, Feb, 2021, <www.tvcreources.net/resource-library/sermons/introduction-3/>

¹³ BibleProject, How to Read Biblical Poetry: The Prophets, <www.youtube.com/watch?v=edcqUu_BtNO>

¹⁴ Gorman, *Reading Revelation Responsibly*, 23.

¹⁵ Gorman, *Reading Revelation Responsibly*, 14.

¹⁶ Roberts, *Understanding Apocalyptic Literature*, 22. He quotes John J. Collins first and J. Ramsey Michaels second.

This is a dense definition, but it is quite helpful when we break it down. **First**, it is *revelatory literature*. That means it is from God, not from man. **Second**, it has a *narrative framework*. Unlike Proverbs or Ephesians (which may *contain* story-like aspects) it tells a story. **Third**, it is *mediated by an other worldly being to a human recipient*. In apocalyptic literature, there are always angels sent by God to tell relay an urgent message and to answer questions. Often times, they serve as a bit of a tour guide telling you what things mean. **Fourth**, apocalyptic offers a *transcendent reality*. Apocalyptic helps you see everything differently. This happens by taking you to a different time (temporal) and place (spatial). Temporal — readers are transported to witness eschatological (end times) salvation. This helps readers see the present in light of how all history will play out. Spatial — readers are transported to another place, often heaven, to see the current or soon to be reality from a heavenly dimension. The goal of all of this is **not** to offer a detailed account of history in advance, it is intended to *influence both the understanding and the behavior of the audience*.¹⁷

But the way apocalyptic literature influences its readers is by means of highly symbolic language. This is the most challenging aspect of reading apocalyptic literature and Revelation today. We often sit down to read the Bible expecting it to impart information, but that's not what apocalyptic literature primarily intends to do. Speaking about Revelation, Mitchell Reddish offers:

“The language of the book is primarily pictorial, symbolic language. It is not the language of science or logic. Rather, it is evocative, powerful, emotive language, at times *more akin to poetry than prose*. Like the language of poetry, the language of Revelation sometimes is mysterious and slippery, teasing its reader to make connections and see possibilities that one has never made or seen before. The language of Revelation “works” *not by imparting information*, but by helping the reading to experience what John experienced.”¹⁸

Gorman uses Peterson to summarize the impact of these symbols and images well.

“Poetry is not the language of objective explanation, but the language of imagination. It makes an image of reality in such a way as to invite our participation in it.”¹⁹ “Like a good political cartoon or poem, an apocalypse appeals to the imagination... . As Peterson suggests: The task of apocalyptic imagination is to provide images that show us what is going on in our lives. ‘If there are mysterious powers around,’ a character in a Saul Bellow novel says, ‘only exaggeration can help us see them. ... Flannery O’Conner, in answer to a question about why she created such bizarre characters in her stories, replied that for the near-blind you have to draw very large, simple caricatures.”²⁰

Revelation awakens and trains our imagination so we can see the world from the divine perspective. Everything seems scattered and random, but apocalyptic helps us see order — both good and evil — behind what is happening.²¹

¹⁷ On this fourth point, see Bauckham, *Theology*, 7-8.

¹⁸ Reddish, *Revelation*, 29, quoted in Gorman, *Reading Revelation Responsibly*, 16-17 — emphasis is Gorman's.

¹⁹ Peterson, *Reversed Thunder*, 3, quoted in Gorman, *Reading Revelation Responsibly*, 28.

²⁰ Gorman, *Reading Revelation Responsibly*, 21; Gorman quotes Peterson, *Reversed Thunder*, 145-146.

²¹ Alluding to Wendell Berry *Standing by Words* (San Francisco: North Point, 1983), 90, quoted in Peterson, *Reversed Thunder*, xii, quoted in Gorman, *Reading Revelation Responsibly*, 21.