

Dreams & Images

Exploring the imagination of Revelation

APOCALYPTIC UNVEILED

The word 'apocalyptic' (from the Gk '*apokalypsis*') has the sense of 'to reveal', 'to uncover' or 'to unveil'; it is 'revelation' (cf Rev 1:1). It indicates the disclosing of spiritual secrets or persons, the unfolding of things previously hidden, drawing back the curtain on what has been concealed. Apocalyptic is a term that we now use to describe a whole body of particularly Jewish literature, with a distinctive style and characteristics, writings that particularly flourished from about 200 BCE to 150 CE. Books with titles like:

- 1 & 2 Enoch;
- 2 & 3 Baruch;
- 4 Ezra;
- Apocalypse of Abraham;
- Testament of Abraham;
- Testament of Levi;
- Shepherd of Hermas (Christian)

While little of the apocalyptic writing received canonical status (with the exception of Daniel and Revelation), the scattered and often beleaguered Jewish community, and later the early Christians, were strongly influenced by the movement.

THE OPEN HEAVEN

Apocalyptic has been described as 'the literature of crisis', and it is no wonder that it flourished at a time of political and cultural pressure and religious persecution. We see in it one of the ways in which the human social psyche copes with the challenge of uncertain destiny. We do not know what external influences, mixing with a strong biblical tradition, may have helped to shape Jewish apocalyptic. They might have come from Persia, Egypt or Greece, or from various cosmological myths; we cannot be certain. What we do know is that we have subject matter that is essentially more concerned with:

- The future rather than the present;
- The spiritual rather than the material;
- The purposes of God rather than human actions.

The writing transports the reader out of their immediate existence and circumstance and allows them to stand under an open heaven and share in the mysteries of what God will finally do with the universe. The curtain between the temporal and the eternal is thrown back. The reader is offered a revelation direct from God, which is



neither the result of mere human observation nor the typical exegesis of scripture. There is the clear belief that God has spoken directly to the seer.

IMAGE, IMPACT AND TRUTH

One of the most striking features of much apocalyptic writing are its use of powerful images and graphic language. Added to this there is also the frequent reference to sound and colour. At one level it is as though you are looking through a child's picture book, but at another level it is as though you are walking through a gallery of surrealist paintings. Not all apocalyptic authors use imagery as much as others, but probably the writer to do so most dramatically is John in the book of Revelation.

Jewish apocalyptic imagery rests heavily upon its biblical roots. This is seen quite plainly in Revelation where quotations and themes from the Hebrew scriptures saturate every page. But added to that there is the vivid use of both colour and sound. White, red, gold and azure are mentioned time and again. Things are also often spoken of as dripping with blood. There are the sounds of thunder, hail, earthquake, trumpets, harps, voices like the sound of the sea, there is singing and lion's roaring. There are the cries of 'Allelulia', 'Woe' and 'Come'; and so very much more. All this creates a deep sense of awe and wonder.

The fundamental power of apocalyptic writing, as in Revelation and elsewhere, is probably found in its use of 'archetypal images'. These are deeply rooted emotional symbols that the human mind uses to interpret the world outside itself, and to make sense of its own experiences. These archetypal images are present in the mythology and folklore of peoples the world over. They are simply stated and not described; they are left to make their own deep impact. They paint their own picture and speak for themselves. They are powerful primeval imprints upon our psyche that can open a window beyond ourselves. They are profoundly personal and yet at the same time they seem part of a language of global human unconsciousness. They are vehicles for strong emotional and spiritual understanding; notice how they are present in dreams and can be stimulated by drug induced hallucinations. When we are confronted with these images they appear strangely familiar, we cannot say why because they are buried deeply in our unconscious mind. In Daniel, Revelation and elsewhere they can appear as:

- The Dragon
- The Abyss
- Sea giving up its dead
- Locusts
- The Beast
- City of precious stones
- Book of Life
- Morning Star
- The great banquet
- The Key
- White horse
- Great white throne



- Gog and Magog
- Armageddon
- War in heaven

There is a real challenge in the creative power of apocalyptic as to how we think about communicating truth by the use of symbol and image in a way that strikes an emotional chord. We live in a time when there is a cultural return to primal images for which apocalyptic has perfectly prepared us.

THE BOOK OF REVELATION

Genre

Revelation is unusual in that it combines three genres, all of which must be taken seriously in its interpretation. All three genres are introduced in the first four verses:

- The very first word in the Greek is *apokalypsis* – Revelation is first and foremost an apocalypse and so all that has been said above is relevant. As such the present experience of the reader is opened up to divine transcendence.
- But it is also *prophecy* (1:3; cf. 22:6-10, 18-19). Revelation is both saturated with allusions to prophecy in the Hebrew scriptures but is also itself prophecy. As such it engages in the twofold task of prophetic energising (bringing hope of a transformed future) and prophetic critique (criticising the structures of this world and calling the church to faithful obedience).
- Finally, it is cast in the form of a *letter* (1:4; cf. 22:21). The letter form is often not taken seriously enough. The letters to the seven churches in chapters 2 and 3 effectively form seven separate introductions to the book. The letter is thus meant to be read from seven perspectives, reflecting the state of the various churches addressed:
 - **Loss of radical discipleship (Ephesus):** for readers in this position the call is to repent and the book offers both hope for a transformed future and criticism of compromise.
 - **Persecution (Smyrna):** for readers in this position the book offers the hope of resurrection.
 - **Idolatry (Pergamum):** for readers in this position the book starkly warns of the dangers of idolatry and points to God's ultimate victory over the powers.
 - **Esoteric knowledge (Thyatira):** for readers in this position the book offers a vision of the truth of the risen Jesus who is available to all the churches. This cuts across all claims to esoteric knowledge which, of course, characterised emerging Gnosticism in the early church.
 - **Loss of witness (Sardis):** for readers in this position the book calls for a return to faithful obedience.



- **Marginalised but faithful (Philadelphia):** for readers in this position the book urges them to remain faithful and offers the vision of the new Jerusalem to give hope.
- **Wealthy and powerful (Laodicea):** for readers in this position the book is uncompromising and calls on such readers to pay attention to its message of judgment on the economic wealth of the nations. True wealth comes from faithful obedience.

Attention to the letter form enables us to see that Revelation is not just written for Christians who are marginalised and persecuted – these represent just two of the seven situations addressed. It is, therefore, as much a call to repentance as an offer of hope. Furthermore, after the letter salutation in 1:4-8 there is a vision of the risen Christ. Interestingly, aspects of this vision are applied to each of the seven churches. It is as though the book begins with ‘the measure of the full stature of Christ’, which Eph 4:13 states as the eschatological goal of the church, and then addresses the extant church in its weakness. So, in simple terms, the overall message of the book is: ‘Here is Jesus in all his glory; here is the church in its weakness, are we as readers going to continue to accept the status quo or will we rise up and conquer, challenging all that opposes the rule of God until the reign of God comes in all its fullness?’ Of course, the church is not called to do this in her own strength but is equipped by the risen Jesus himself to fulfil the task of faithful obedience.

Methods of Interpretation

Four methods have dominated interpretation of the book:

- **Preterist.** This is the prevailing scholarly position which seeks to interpret the book in its first century historical context. The seven seals either represent specific Roman emperors from Tiberius to Titus or Domitian with the sixth seal coinciding with the fall of Jerusalem in 70 CE, or they represent the results of war: conquest, slaughter, economic scarcity, pestilence, martyrdom and the fall of empire. The unholy trinity of the dragon, the beast and the false prophet represent Satan, Rome and the Imperial Cult respectively and 666 refers to Nero. This view still acknowledges that there is a future element from John’s perspective in the final chapters: 18 refers to the eventual fall of Rome; 19 to the Parousia; 20 to judgment and 21-22 to the final eschatological state.
- **Idealist.** The book is a symbolic portrayal of the cosmic conflict between the kingdom of God and the forces of evil. As such it portrays this conflict using vivid imagery which is not to be taken literally or seen as fulfilled in specific historical events.
- **Historicist.** The book covers the entire sweep of history from the incarnation to the Parousia and the end of the age.
- **Futurist.** This is the prevailing popular view. Almost the entire book relates to the future and concerns the events immediately leading up to the Parousia and the end of the world.



The problem with the futurist position concerns how such visions of the distant future would inspire hope and speak to the specific situations of the book's original recipients. This is true, albeit to a lesser extent, of the historicist position. A combination of the preterist and idealist positions appears to make most sense. The book clearly refers to first century events but uses symbolic language in a way which transcends those events. So, for example, undoubtedly 666 referred to Nero; but the very symbolism of the number (especially when contrasted with Jesus = 888)¹ epitomises evil. Thus an idealist stance would recognise its original historical referent but also accept that there have been numerous incarnations of 666 in history.

Structure

The clearest structural markers are the repetition of the phrase 'in the spirit' in 1:10; 4:2; 17:3 and 21:10. The last two set up a clear structural parallelism between Babylon the harlot and the new Jerusalem the bride. The first two form an *inclusio* marking off the vision of the risen Christ and its relevance to the seven churches strengthening the analysis given above under genre. In the main section between 4:2 and 17:3 we have a series of three sevens with two intercalations. This gives an overall structure as follows:

- Prologue (1:1-8)
- Inaugural vision of Christ and its relevance to the seven churches (1:9 – 3:22)
- Inaugural vision of heaven (4:1 – 5:14)
- Seven seals – 4 + 1 + (1 + intercalation) + 1 (6:1 – 8:5)
- Seven trumpets - 4 + 1 + (1 + intercalation) + 1 (8:6 – 11:19)
- God's people in conflict with evil (12:1 – 15:4)
- Seven bowls – 4 + 3 (no intercalation)
- Babylon the harlot (17:1 – 19:10)
- Transition from Babylon to the New Jerusalem (19:11 – 21:8)
- The New Jerusalem the bride (21:9 – 22:9)
- Epilogue (22:6-21)²

Themes

- **Worship.** The book exudes worship but is also set in a liturgical context. It is expected that the book will be read out aloud for maximum impact on its hearers (1:3).

¹ In both Hebrew and Greek letters were used to refer to numbers. So every name had a numerical equivalent. The Greek letters for Jesus add up to 888.

² For further details see Richard Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1993), 1-22.



- **The centrality of the Lamb.**
 - Victory is non-violent
 - Lion who has conquered is the Lamb who was slain (5:5-6)
 - War is won by the sacrificial death of:
 - the Lamb (5:6-9)
 - followers (7:14; 12:11)
 - Final victory at the Parousia:
 - Word of God (19:13)
 - Sword from his mouth (19:15 cf. Isa 11:4; 49:2; Heb 4:12)
 - Those who worshipped the beast 'killed' by this sword = Word! (19:21)
- **The role of the Spirit.**
 - Spirit of vision (1:10; 4:2; 17:3; 21:10)
 - Spirit of prophecy (2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22; 14:13; 19:10; 22:17)
 - Seven spirits (1:4; 3:1; 4:5; 5:6)
 - Linked with God (4:5)
 - Linked with the Lamb (5:6)
 - Trinitarian formulation (1:4-5)
- **Eschatological victory.**
 - Conquering Messiah (5:5-6)
 - Messianic 'army' (7:2-14; 14:1-5)
 - Victory is established through testimony
 - Martyrs conquer by faithful witness (6:9; 12:11)
 - Two witnesses (11:1-14)
 - Final victory (19:1 – 20:10)
- **Conversion of the nations.**
 - Nations aligned with evil (11:2, 18; 14:8; 18:3, 23; 20:3)
 - But will worship God (15:4; 21:24-26; 22:2)
 - Remnant destroyed but the rest worship God (11:13-15)
 - Harvesting the earth (14:14-16)
 - The New Jerusalem (21:3-4)
- **Economic critique (17-18).**
- **The New Jerusalem.**
 - Garden of Eden becomes a garden-city (22:1-2)
 - 12 tribes of Israel and 12 apostles (21:12-14)
 - No sea (21:1)
 - symbolic of the chaos of uncreation (cf. Isa 57:20; Ps 107:25-28; Ezek 28:8; Isa 27:1; Rev 13:1)
 - Links to the Flood narrative
 - 4:3 cf. Gen 9:8-17
 - 11:15-18 cf. Gen 6:11-13, 17
 - River of the water of life (22:1)
 - Tree of life (22:2)
 - Healing of the nations (process) (22:2)

INTERTEXTUALITY

Surprisingly, there are no explicit citations in Revelation. But the book teems with allusions to the Hebrew scriptures. It is generally acknowledged that Revelation contains more references to the Hebrew scriptures than any other New Testament book. More than half the references come from Isaiah, Ezekiel, Daniel and Psalms (in that order) with Daniel providing the greatest number in proportion to its length.

Clusters of allusions can be found particularly in these passages:

- Description of the risen Christ (1:12-20)
- God on the throne (4:1-11)
- Beast (13:1-8)

Example – Rev 4:2-9

- 4:2 = Isa 6:1; 2 Kings 22:19
- 4:3-4 = Ezek 1:28
- 4:5a = Ezek 1:13; Exod 19:16
- 4:5b = Ezek 1:13; Zech 4:2, 6
- 4:6a = Ezek 1:22
- 4:6b = Ezek 1:5, 18
- 4:7 = Ezek 1:10
- 4:8a = Isa 6:2
- 4:8b = Isa 6:3
- 4:9 = Isa 6:1

Revelation alludes to the Pentateuch, Judges, 1 & 2 Samuel, 1 & 2 Kings, Psalms, Proverbs, Song of Songs, Job, Daniel and the major and minor prophets. There is hardly a book in the Hebrew scriptures that does not find its way into the last book of the bible. Revelation is thus a fitting end to the biblical canon, not only for its eschatological vision but also for its literary allusions.

QUESTIONS

1. Why do you think it is important for Christians to understand the significance of apocalyptic writing? What practical benefits would there be?
2. How would you use the book of Revelation to encourage Christians in their faith today, taking special account of its message and style of writing?
3. What can we learn, both about truth and its communication, from the way writers used apocalyptic imagery?
4. Biblical apocalyptic writers use many powerful primal images like: a dragon, an abyss, a great white throne, a book of life, a plague of locusts, the morning star – and so many more. These would be instinctively understood in most cultures of the world. Why do you think they used this language? How does it connect with the truth? How might contemporary cinema and theatre be a medium to use similar ideas to explore meaning and truth today?



READING & RESOURCES

- David E. Aune, *Revelation 1-5* (Word Biblical Commentary 52A; Dallas: Word, 1997)
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- Joseph L. Trafton, *Reading Revelation: A Literary and Theological Commentary* (Revised Edition; Macon: Smyth & Helwys, 2005)

