(Better) Understanding Apocalyptic Literature

# Intro

This congregation is now at the culmination of a multi-year chapter study of the New Testament. It’s been so long-running, that I had time to move away for a year and a half, and when I came back, we were still in the thick of it! My lesson this afternoon is the first of four preliminary talks covering background material to the *Book of Revelation*. Before we get into the book, we find it necessary to understand the context of its time, where it was written, and in our case this afternoon, the genre of literature used in it. That style of writing is called Apocalyptic Literature, and my title, *Understanding Apocalyptic Literature*, makes a big promise! The promise may be too rich, especially seeing as I, the presenter, do not understand all there is to know about the genre. So, let’s say this, instead: ✠ Our goal by the end of the service is to *Better* Understand Apocalyptic Literature!

Knowing more about Apocalyptic Literature will help us become more familiar with Revelation, a book which is rarely cited from our pulpits. It is full of fairly odd images, has many theories attached to it, and thus more cautious Bible students have feared to tread in it. This reticence is not unique to the modern day, however. ✠ In studying for this lesson, I was looking through the contents of a book of lectures given about Revelation. ✠ There on page 4 is a section called ✠ “Book too frequently neglected,” and this was written in 1886! We shouldn’t think we have this brand new problem; we should get to work rectifying it! To that end, what I have to offer is an introduction to the Book of Revelation through its most challenging aspect: the style in which it was written.

✠ This style is summarized and explored in a few books I found useful: ✠ There is a brief overview of The Apocalyptic Style in A.T. Robertson’s *Word Pictures in the New Testament*. Many of y’all already have this commentary set, and if you don’t, it’s so old one can find it online for free! ✠ *Between the Cross and the Throne* is another great place to start. It’s just under 80 pages, and it can introduce Bible students of all levels to the Book of Revelation. ✠ *Worthy is the Lamb*, the book some of us went through, has a section called “The Nature of Apocalyptic Literature” which I found a useful summary, and most of us have a copy. If you don’t have any of these, I urge you to check the bookshelf in the side room. ✠ Finally, at the exacta of comprehensive and accessible lies *Understanding Apocalyptic Literature* by Mark Roberts. Mike Hernandez gave me a copy of this book a while back, and it set me down the right path. It’s also less than 100 pages, but covers all the bases necessary to get a good grasp on Apocalyptic Literature, from key definitions, to other works in the genre, to how our interpretations can go wrong.

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✠ I’m afraid, though, that I’m going to long and using the term Apocalyptic Literature too often without having yet defined what exactly it means.

## Definitions & Differentiations

Apocalyptic Literature, as a genre, means a few key things: ✠ A work of this style is usually a vision given to the author, who is guided by angels. Figurative imagery and symbolic numbers play a key role, and there is a focus on the end of time, where God will execute His final judgment. The enemies of the audience will suffer defeat, and the righteous will have victory. ✠ Whether or not this is explicitly stated, works of apocalyptic literature present themselves as a divinely inspired narrative. They are not from this world, and they tell a story. ✠ Apocalypses typically feature angelic beings delivering the message or explaining events. ✠ They are “a look behind the curtain of reality,” showing their audience that our world is not all there is. ✠ A work of apocalyptic literature uses this unveiling of otherwise hidden realms to urge its audience to remain faithful and offer encouragement unto the end. ✠ For example, Revelation 3:21.

**Revelation 3:21**  
To him that overcometh will I grant to sit with me in my throne, even as I also overcame, and am set down with my Father in his throne.

The urge to remain faithful to God is found explicitly throughout the second and third chapters of Revelation, and is indirectly expressed in the rest of the book.

✠ That will suffice for a broad outline of Apocalyptic Literature, but I think the word “apocalypse” needs some more clarification. Most people think of an apocalypse as a world-ending event. The Book of Revelation and other examples of Apocalyptic Literature have this element to them, but as we’ve seen, this is not their entirety, and the word itself means something different.

✠ apocalypse = revelation. ✠ Literally, an uncovering, or ✠ (Ἀποκάλυψις = “unveiling”). That’s just it: Revelation *reveals* the hidden things of God! This word is often used interchangeably with the title of the Book of Revelation. Especially in the older commentaries, the scholars will often refer to ✠ “The Apocalypse of (St.) John,” or simply “the apocalypse.” It’s the same term. ✠ What is *not* the same term is the word “apocryphal,” which I feel the need to define just so we don’t get confused sooner or later.

✠ apocryphal = 1. Of questionable authorship or authenticity. ✠ 2. Erroneous; fictitious  
✠ ἀπόκρυφος = “hidden, obscure”, thus “(books) of unknown authorship.”

✠ Sometimes, you may hear a Catholic, or a High Church Anglican (for example) quote from Old Testament books ✠ like *Judith*, *Tobit*, or *Macabees*. These names are strange, to us. We haven’t heard of them. That’s because these are books from The Apochrypha (capital T, capital A), books that are not accepted as the inspired canon of religious writings; they are not the Word of God. This goes back to why we call them *apocryphal*: their authorship and authenticity are questionable or unknown. It is not so with the other books of the Old Testament, and even the New. You may also hear about so-called “lost gospels,” or “books that were edited out of the Bible,” ✠ like *The Gospel of Mary*, or *Thomas*, or *Peter*. These are examples of the New Testament Apocrypha. Again, books of questionable authorship and authenticity. Remember that “apocryphal” is also synonymous with “erroneous or fictitious.” For example, this term can also apply to good-natured legends like ✠ George Washington chopping down the cherry tree. That is an *apocryphal* story. Probably not true. There aren’t good records for it. Another example, and I’ll quit belaboring this point: I’ve used the term “apocryphal” to describe that old Paul Harvey monologue, where he says, “On the seventh day, God rested, but on the eighth day, God created a farmer.” ✠ We all know Harvey is embellishing the creation narrative to praise the dedication of farmers and the necessity of their work. –By the way, don’t call that speech “apocryphal” to anyone who comes from a farming background! They are a proud people, and they love that old monologue, and it won’t get you very far to point out that it’s not actually in the Book of Genesis, but we’ll leave that be…

✠ Though there is overlap between apocalyptic works and apocryphal writings, they aren’t necessarily the same. I know it can be easy to confuse the terms. There is a long list of apocalypses other than the *Book of Revelation*, but I think only a few of them are in The Apocrypha, that set of books some denominations include in their bibles, but neither we in the Church of Christ nor did the Jews consider Scripture. Some apocryphal books are apocalyptic, but not many of them. Above all else, remember that Revelation is apocalyptic, but NOT apocryphal!

✠ Another important comparison of terms is the relation between “apocalyptic” and “prophetic.” I don’t want to stray too far into Methods of Interpretation, but one of those methods hang much of their interpretive scheme on apocalyptic being 100% prophecy. ✠ A.T. Robertson, in his *Word Pictures in the New Testament* calls apocalypse “a prophecy of a special type.” In apocalypse, there is the predictive element of prophecy, but it is broader than prophecy. For example, the prophets spoke of certain events and judgments concerning Israel, but Revelation has the entire world in view. A major distinction regarding the predictions both make is why they make them in the first place. In prophetic works, the predictions are given to the prophet by God to get the people to heed his warnings. In apocalyptic writings, the predictions in the narrative are the main event. John does not use his vision to urge his audience to repentance like the OT prophets. ✠ A prime example is Revelation 22:11.

**Revelation 22:11**  
He that is unjust, let him be unjust still: and he which is filthy, let him be filthy still: and he that is righteous, let him be righteous still: and he that is holy, let him be holy still.

Apocalyptic Literature is also the source of important doctrines about the end of the world and the afterlife. Matters of a much larger scope than the prophecies of national Israel. Finally, the visions in Revelation are described in vivid detail, where most prophetic visions are merely implied, or at least not much time is spent recounting them as happens in apocalypses.

✠ Just before we move on, I want to throw in a couple more definitions for free, because I’ve come across them a few times, and I have a feeling those of you who will be giving lessons on Revelation are about to see them a little more than one normally would! Also, for the rest of y’all, they’re just good to know. I would see them in a book or hear some seminarian use them, and wasn’t sure until I looked them up. ✠ Real quick, they are “eschatology,” “eschaton,” and “pseudepigrapha.” Some of y’all are making the face I made when I first came across that last one, but y’acht to be thankful, because I just read it in a book. You get to hear someone pronounce it correctly for the first time, where I couldn’t figure out which end to hold it by! (Again, that was “pseudepigrapha.”)

✠ The eschaton is the end of the world. That’s the Greek word folks *should* be saying when they talk about the apocalypse. ✠ It follows, then, that eschatology is the study of the end times. Books about interpretive methods of Revelation are usually found in the “eschatology” section of religious book stores. ✠ Pseudepigrapha are writings falsely ascribed to biblical characters to lend them greater legitimacy. For quick reference, I think just about all of the Apocrypha are “Pseudepigrapha,” writings with false authorship.

# Striking Characteristics of the Apocalyptic Genre

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## the Nature of Apocalyptic Literature

✠ Why does the *Book of Revelation* use the apocalyptic style, though? There is an historical reason. I believe the Historical Background of the book will be the subject of another of these preparatory lessons. I look forward to hearing it with the congregation, but I don’t think it will be a spoiler to point out a common theme in Revelation that clues us into the nature of Apocalyptic Literature. I have four verses from the miniature epistles: ✠ In Revelation 2:3, Christ says to the church of Ephesus, “you have persevered and have patience, and have labored for My name’s sake and have not become weary.” ✠ In Revelation 2:10, He counsels the congregation of Smyrna, “Do not fear any of those things which you are about to suffer. Indeed, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison…” ✠ In Revelation 2:13, Jesus praises the church of Pergamos: “I know your works, and where you dwell, where Satan’s throne is. And you hold fast to My name, and did not deny My faith even in the days in which Antipas was My faithful martyr, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells.” ✠ Finally, in Revelation 3:9, Christ promises the saints in Philadelphia, “Indeed I will make those of the synagogue of Satan, who say they are Jews and are not, but lie—indeed I will make them come and worship before your feet, and to know that I have loved you. Because you have kept My command to persevere…”

The churches of Asia Minor are in a crucible reminiscent of the ones the Jews found themselves in during the Inter-Testamental Period. Perhaps we wouldn’t be exaggerating or pitying ourselves too much to see our own age in these verses of distress, if faintly. ✠ Henry Barclay Swete comments,

Relief from the pressure of heathen domination or from the distasteful presence of heathen surroundings was henceforth sought in efforts to pierce the veil of the future, and to discover behind it the coming triumphs of the righteous.

Let me ask you something: Do you find the presence of our heathen surroundings distasteful? I know I do, and we’re a far cry from “the pressure of heathen domination”! The Book of Revelation was the relief God supplied to those first century Christians. ✠ Apocalyptic Literature is an answer to a time of crisis. This is why so many examples of it we still have today come from the Jews a few centuries before Christ. Contented, unmolested, successful people don’t write fantasies where God comes down to kill all their enemies for them in divine judgment. “The apocalyptic literary genre does not happen by accident; it erupts under specific social and religious conditions.”

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## Outstanding Characteristics of Apocalyptic Literature

✠ Suffice it to say this specific time and background produced a unique type of story; one we don’t really find in any other period of history. The other books of this genre were in circulation starting at about 150 years before the Book of Revelation, itself. This is not to mention the substantial sections of Isaiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, and Zechariah that were written as Apocalyptic Literature. You can tell these sections apart from prophetic or narrative sections by a few calling cards.

✠ Apocalyptic Literature deals with the end of the world, the coming judgment, and all the events associated with that. Whether its biblical or apocryphal, the books of this genre will be trying to clue the reader into why things are happening down here on Earth in light of what is happening in the heavenly realm. Their aim is to “pierce the veil” using visions of strange imagery over plain language, and we can study why Revelation was written this way as we go. One last outstanding characteristic of the genre is the employment of angelic beings to guide the author and help him interpret all the fantastic things he is seeing.

Other authors through the ages have used this same technique, where an angel or other otherworldly spirit has come to guide the main character on his quest. ✠ For example, in *The Divine Comedy*, the author, Dante, has the long-dead poet Homer to advise him as he progresses through Inferno, Purgatory, and Paradise. If you’ve come across a work of fiction like this, then you know it has been influenced in some way by the Book of Revelation.

✠ In Revelation 1, John is counseled by Christ, Himself. Later in the book, angels help him understand what he is seeing at various times throughout his vision. Revelation 5 has two examples of this in the first paragraph: ✠ If you look at verse 2, an angel is proclaiming that famous cry, “Who is worthy to open the seals of the sacred scroll?” Skipping down to verse 5, one of the elders assembled near the throne of God comforts John, explaining that Christ will come to open the scroll.

I even have an extrabiblical example: ✠ This comes from I Enoch 90:2, “I Enoch, according to that which appeared to me in the heavenly vision, and which I know from the words of the holy angels and understand from the tablets of heaven…” The writer uses a claim of angelic mediation to bolster his credibility. (That, and the mention of heavenly tablets, reminds me of Joseph Smith claiming to be visited by the angel Meroni, who gave him the Book of Mormon.)

# Noncanonical Apocalypses

✠ What are we to make of these noncanonical apocalypses, exactly. I’ve just presented three examples: John visited by Christ and speaking with heavenly beings, Enoch claiming to have a heavenly vision, and even Joseph Smith meeting Meroni. Some are likely to say all three are delusional, or more likely, liars. When we compare the Book of Revelation to these other examples of Apocalyptic Literature, are we lumping in the Word of God with writings that are most certainly invented by their authors? ✠ There is a long list of other apocalypses (with some pretty cool names):

*II Baruch*

*II Enoch*

the *Apocalypse of Abraham*

the *War Scroll*

*IV Ezra*

the *Apocalypse of Weeks*

the *Testament of Abraham(, Isaac, and Jacob)*

the *Animal Apocalypse*

*Book of the Watchers*

the *Book of Jubilees*

the *Assumption of Moses*

the *Psalms of Solomon*

the *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*

the *Sibylline Oracles*

*The Book of the Secrets of Enoch* (*II Enoch*?)

*The Apocalypse of Baruch* (*II Baruch*?)

the *Martyrdom/Ascension of Isaiah*

the *Apocalypse of Adam*

the *Apocalypse of Elijah*

the *Apocalypse of Zephaniah*

✠ Are we cheapening the Bible by comparing it to these books which are falsely attributed (pseudepigrapha), and whose authenticity is in question (apocrypha)? What can we say to the skeptic in defense of the Revelation of Jesus Christ according to John? Well, I have a few points of comparison that ought to set our minds at ease, and the first deals with this matter of authorship:

1. ✠ The authors of the other apocalypses are unknown, whereas we know that John wrote Revelation. How can we say this with any certainty? Well, looking back through history and commentaries, we find that people frequently list these other apocalypses as “books falsely entitled.” They knew the score. However, there is no such doubt when it comes to Revelation. The book claims to be from John in the text, and it was always generally accepted as true.  
   <A haze of uncertainty about these matters has only arisen in the past few hundred years. That’s a long time to a man, but not long in terms of biblical scholarship. Every generation thinks it’s smarter than the last, and in the 1800s, a generation of German theologians thought itself more sophisticated than those who had come before. They were the origin of much of the skepticism we hear about the authenticity of the bible, today. When someone casts doubt on the authorship of Revelation compared to apocryphal works, mention how the Jews never counted these books in their canon, and how early Christian commentators generally accepted the New Testament as we have it, and rejected the other books that were floating around. A word of warning: “don’t think yourself less naïve than those who have come before you!”>
2. ✠ The works of Apocalyptic Literature which have Jewish origin do not also have Jewish recognition. In fact, if we had only Jewish sources of information, we would know little or perhaps nothing about them! Unlike the Old Testament and even the Jewish traditional writings (the Talmud), the religious leaders did not preserve them nor study them.
3. ✠ A third point of comparison is that the non-biblical works are imitations of Bible books, and inferior imitations, at that. If you’re interested, I encourage you to peruse them, some time- the texts are online. Especially after reading Daniel and Revelation, you can tell these writings are just trying to recreate that feeling of divine catastrophe. ✠ T.W. Crafer (Gore’s New Commentary) remarks,

Ours remains the Apocalypse still, because no other existing specimen, Jewish or Christian, is worthy to be compared to it.

1. ✠ The writers of these books had no standing as teachers in either the Jewish or Christian religious communities. They were not prophets like Daniel, Ezekiel, or Isaiah. They were not the doctors of the law who wrote the Rabbinic traditions (although we don’t recognize them, either). They were not the apostles and evangelists who wrote the New Testament. Otherwise, they would have been able to use their own names, and we would be familiar with their books, today.  
   <I’m not trying to use circular reasoning, here, by saying, “they aren’t worthy because they aren’t in our copies of the Bible,” but I’m taking a step back. There is a lot of hay made by publishers and the media whenever a book or article comes out about another apocalypse, or a “lost” gospel, or other apocalyptic work. However, we need to think: “Were there good or bad reasons for not including these books in the canon? Why were the books we have kept in, and the others kept out?” It becomes less hazy and doubtful as we consider these points.>
2. ✠ Finally, as a result of these contentions against the other apocalypses of antiquity, none of them are quoted in the New Testament. The Christian apostles and evangelists often quote from the law and prophets, but references to apocryphal Apocalyptic Literature aren’t there. There are one or two occasions where similarity leads a Bible student to conclude the New Testament is quoting one of these apocalypses, but this can be chalked up to discussion of the same subject matter.

All in all, becoming familiar with some of these other works of Apocalyptic Literature was interesting, and I recommend it to anyone who would like a bit more exposure to the themes we find in the Book of Revelation. ✠ However, I had to laugh when I came across this line in Albertus Pieters’ book:

On the whole, it seems to me that we may easily overestimate the importance of these apocalypses in relation to the interpretation of the Revelation of St. John.

# The Christian Apocalypse is Supreme

✠ That being said, let’s conclude this afternoon’s study with the book in question: the Revelation (or Apocalypse) of Jesus Christ, given to John. It is the foremost example of Apocalyptic Literature, especially to Christians. As we study through it in the coming months, we’ll see a book of its time and out of time. By that, I mean we will uncover some of the apocalyptic themes of this genre, we will notice its strong ties to the writings of the Old Testament, and we’ll notice how it gives away the time of persecution in which it was written. However, it is obviously not just a story concocted to give distressed believers confidence in their Creator, though it does that capably. It is a narrative that has meaning yesterday, today, and forever.

I also hope we’ll see that while John doesn’t invent a new type of literature, he is not just imitating previous apocalyptic writing. He does use an established genre, but does not draw inspiration from all those existing works. Some theologians, who like to downplay divine inspiration may try to surprise that Revelation is a rehash of the Book of Enoch and some other sources. <They try to do the same with the Pentateuch and the Gospels, by the way.> However, the Apocalypse of John is a distinctly Christian departure from the genre: We’ve just covered how we can be much more confident about the authorship of Revelation. Even more significant is the hope of Revelation over the apocryphal literature. All apocalypses have a central hope, but it’s usually an earthly, almost selfish hope, usually centered around the Nation of Israel coming back to power with the help of God. Revelation has little interest in this, harmonizing with the Messiahship of Jesus, who defied expectations of what the Christ should be when He came.

Finally, the two subjects that most distinguish Revelation from other examples of Apocalyptic Literature are the two areas of interest that must surely have been most important to the first century Christians: Is Christ really ruling and reigning at the right hand of God, and if He is truly exalted in Heaven, then why is His church not exalted on Earth? Why does it feel like we are losing to the world, especially the Wicked Kingdom that wars against us? This is why the first chapter of Revelation emphasizes Christ’s power and glory, why chapters 12 & 13 figure the Church and the powers which struggle against it, and chapter 22 concludes with exhortation and promise.

# Conclusion

As we embark on our study of Revelation, I encourage you to read through the whole book, from beginning to end (in that order!) in one sitting, as the first century Christians would have. Recognize the genre of apocalyptic, its similarities to other biblical styles, like parables and prophecy, but also how it differs from them. Notice the narrative framework of the book, how it tells a story using recapitulation (a.k.a. “Parallelism”), regularly aided by angels wo explain events both to John and to us. Appreciate the “look behind the curtain” to the heavenly realm and the ultimate message of how God is in control, even in dark times. Count on the promises of “the Root and the Offspring of David, the Bright and Morning Star” (Revelation 22:16).

This man is naturally the focus of the New Testament, and no lesson from a Christian pulpit would be complete without the call to Believe in Him as we are instructed in John 8:24 & Matthew 16:16. If you believe in Jesus, heed His admonition of Repentance in Luke 13:3, and Confess His name as the Son of God ( Matthew 10:32&33, Romans 10:9&10 ). Give your life to Christ today by obeying the command of Matthew 28:19 & Acts 2:38, being baptized for the remission of your sins. If you are subject to the gospel call, we invite you come while we stand and sing…