Chapter Seven

Apocalypse

Introduction

Accounts of cataclysmic events leading to the end of history and of God's final judgment form a distinct genre, called apocalyptic literature. The term “apocalypse” derives from the Greek word for “uncovering, disclosing” and describes the Christian Bible's Revelation of John (sometimes incorrectly called “Revelations”). But the term has been extended to include pre-Christian and non-Christian accounts with similar traits, even if they don’t call themselves apocalypses. Portions of Isaiah, Ezekiel, and some of the apocryphal books of the Bible also belong in this category when they employ visions of other dimensions and times.

Apocalyptic writing emerged during the Hellenistic and Roman periods between 300 BCE and 100 CE. The genre makes use of materials from much earlier traditions and mythologies from Babylon and Persia, in addition to early Hebrew prophecy. Many examples of apocalypses have survived from a variety of religious communities—Jews, Essenes, Gnostics, Christians. Apocalyptic writing often spikes during times of stress and change; in the two millennia since the Bible was compiled, prophets and forecasters frequently rise up at the transitions between centuries or millennia, and during other times of crisis, such as wars or famine or plague. Contemporary dystopian literature and film about nuclear holocaust or climate change could be seen as another version of apocalypse and, indeed, some are called apocalyptic, imagining the world as we know it coming to an end. Unlike these secular stories of looming disaster, however, biblical apocalypses always concern the working of God in the world.

Our understanding of the ancient genre of apocalypse was greatly enhanced in the twentieth century when ancient manuscripts were discovered at Qumran (dated from the second to first centuries BCE) and at Nag Hammadi (dated from the second century CE). For the first time scholars were able to study documents they had previously known only from often derogatory references in other ancient texts. The Qumran scrolls, also known as the "Dead Sea scrolls" for the location in which they were found, have been attributed to the Essene sect, contemporary with the time of Christ; the Nag Hammadi scrolls, discovered in Egypt, derive from a Christian sect. The Nag Hammadi find was particularly important because it allowed access to a period of early Christianity before the canon of “orthodox” (literally ‘straight,’ or ‘right,’ opinion) was established. Further adding to
scholars’ understanding of the genre were caches of prophecies found in the royal archive of Mari (on the Euphrates River), from the eighteenth century BCE, and in Nineveh’s Royal Archive, from the seventh century BCE. These have provided greater understanding of the role of prophets in the ancient Near East, and how their references and symbols influence and compare to Israelite prophecy (Kratz 133); Babylon’s rich divination, astrological, and magical heritage demonstrably connects with biblical apocalyptic imagery, and recent discoveries of Ugaritic-Canaanite texts have also enhanced our understanding of the mythologies apocalyptic writers reference (Collins 25). Figuring epochs as metals of declining value (gold, silver, bronze, iron) echoes Hesiod’s description of the ages of men in Works and Days (ca. 700 BCE); some scholars believe both the author of Daniel and Hesiod drew on a tradition held in common (Collins 98).

Despite the great number of apocalypses produced in the Hellenistic-Roman eras, only two became canonical: the Book of Daniel, last to be added to the Hebrew Bible, and the Revelation of John, which concludes the Christian Bible.

Though apocalypses claim secret understanding of future events rendered in densely symbolic images, they are unquestionably also about the times in which they were written. There’s even a term for prophecy’s relationship to its time: vaticinium ex eventu, or “prophecy from the event.” An example can be found in Daniel 8:7-12. As early as the third century CE, the Neo-Platonic philosopher Porphyry argued that this prophecy could not have been written during the Babylonian exile, but during the terrible persecutions under Antiochus Epiphanes (Collins 94). This apocalyptic portion of Daniel is remarkably specific about the years 167-164 BCE, but quite vague thereafter. Although it describes the rise of Antiochus in recognizable detail as the small horn of Dan. 8:9, it does not depict his fall in 163 BCE. This has led scholars from Porphyry’s time to the present day to conclude the apocalypse was probably composed during the height of the conflict between the Hasmoneans and Antiochus Epiphanes. Even when they cannot pinpoint exactly when a text was written, biblical scholars understand that apocalyptic writers use symbols and signs to reference the political turmoil of their own time in a way that affirms God’s ultimate design.

**Defining the Apocalyptic Genre**

In 1979, the Society of Biblical Literature Genres Project agreed upon a definition of the apocalyptic genre. According to this body, it 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 another, supernatural world. (qtd. Collins 14)

To unpack this dense definition, let’s start with the first clause. This literature reveals a truth, and that truth is offered in the form of a narrative. This story of visions and otherworldly journeys discloses realities not perceivable by the human senses or understanding, so otherworldly mediation is required, usually an angelic or divine presence.

The “human recipient” is usually pseudepigraphic, that is, attributed to another, typically ancient and legendary, person. For example, the earliest apocalypses available are attributed to Enoch, named in Genesis as so beloved of God that he did not die, but “was seen no more, because God had taken him away” (Gen. 5:24). The apocalyptic Book of Enoch dates to the early third century BCE, and it is considered canonical by the Ethiopic Orthodox Church. Apocalyptic narratives are eschatological: they reveal the end—seen as a destination, a culmination—of human history. They envision this end as a series of cataclysmic events and a period of divine judgment wherein God will reward the faithful and punish the wicked. The genre also posits the existence of a world beyond this material world we can see and touch, a spiritual world not subject to the laws and vicissitudes of nature, and it depicts journeys through that world under the guidance of an angelic or otherworldly mentor.

The powerful imaginative density of the symbolic and allegorical elements of apocalypses have made them attractive and inspiring to mystics and poets such as Dante Alighieri in the thirteenth century CE, William Blake in the late eighteenth century, and William Butler Yeats in the early twentieth.

The apocalyptic genre typically exhibits the following traits:

- **Pseudepigrapha.** Writers of apocalyptic literature attributed their visions to earlier prophets, patriarchs, saints, and even angels. Apocalypses attributed to Enoch, Abraham, and many other notables including Adam exist. Even the apocalyptic writings eventually included in the Bible are thought by modern Bible scholars to be pseudepigrapha, that is: Daniel did not write the book of Daniel, and the
apostle John probably did not write Revelation (though it may have been written by another man named John).

- **Universalism.** In contrast with earlier Hebrew prophets whose messages were concerned only with the people of Israel, apocalyptic writers understood their message to be universal, affecting all humankind.

- **Dualism.** Apocalyptic discourse is profoundly dualistic: it sees everything in starkly binary terms: light and dark, good and evil, etc. The cosmos is a site of struggle between benevolent and malevolent principles. Giving evil an independent existence outside of human action and choice is a later development in Jewish thought. Jewish and early Christian writers increasingly identified the malevolent cosmic force with Satan, a figure who became more fully narrativized and theorized during this period (see Pagels, *Origin of Satan*, 38ff.). Not only is the universe divided between the forces of good and evil, so is time. Time is divided into the wicked present, to be succeeded by a blessed future. Apocalyptic thinkers despair of the current state of things, and posit a period of destruction after which a “new heaven and a new earth” will be established.

  - A corollary of this dualistic world view is the conviction that pious people must stringently observe religious tenets and scrupulously maintain their purity and boundaries against contamination by others. There is little toleration of differing points of view.

  - Another corollary is an image of God as angry and vengeful: because the cosmos is starkly divided, those who fail to conform to the Good must expect punishment. Apocalyptic writing emphasizes divine power and wrath; recalling the punishments meted to Sodom and Gomorrah, to Egypt, and to the Caananites. Apocalypses frequently describe catastrophic natural and supernatural disasters initiated and countenanced by God.

Christians, following Marcion (see p. 24), often distinguish the angry, vengeful God of the Old Testament from the loving, forgiving God of the New, but these tenets are held by Jewish and Christian apocalyptic writers alike.

- **Eschatological preoccupations.** Apocalyptic writers introduce the idea of life after death, judgment at death, with the godly being rewarded and the ungodly being punished. References to Sheol depict a place of darkness where all go, evil and
good (Isa. 14:9, Job 26:6). Belief in an afterlife was not widely accepted before this period (200 BCE -200 CE), and such a belief may indicate Hellenistic influence (Collins 37).

- **Predestinarianism.** Apocalyptic writings assume that the future is set; that no action on humans’ part can change the outcome. This particular trait contrasts strongly with the calls issued by earlier Hebrew prophets, especially those of the Deuteronomistic tradition, who offer the possibility of the future changing based on the choices people now make.

  (list adapted from Harris 252)

Apocalyptic writing seems to have emerged in response to the persecution of Jewish and Christian communities during the Hellenistic and Roman periods, though it makes use of earlier materials. Apocalyptic writers offered hope in the face of persecution and turmoil.

**Daniel**

Although in the Christian Old Testament, the book of Daniel is placed among the prophets, the Hebrew Bible assigns it to the more miscellaneous “Ketuvim,” the “writings,” which include poetry (Psalms, Song of Songs), proverbs, short stories (Ruth, Esther), and history (Ezra-Nehemiah and 1 and 2 Chronicles) (see Chapter Six). Daniel may be the namesake of a much earlier wise man, Danel, who is referenced in an ancient Ugaritic source as an important judge of the widow and the fatherless, a motif continued in the apocryphal Daniel story of Susanna (Collins 94). In Jubilees, an ancient Hebrew midrash on Genesis found at Qumran, this Danel is said to have married the daughter of Enoch. According to biblical scholar John J. Collins, the allusion to “Danel” in Ezekiel 14:14 appears to refer to this earlier figure, as he is classed with Noah, another pre-Abrahamic patriarch (Collins 94).

For the Hebrew compilers of the work, prophecy was not concerned so much with predicting the future as with calling listeners to account. As we have seen in the Torah, the compilers of Daniel underscore thematic continuities by showing parallels between Daniel and earlier seers and prophets. Like Joseph, he is in exile in another king’s court; like Joseph, he is an interpreter of dreams.

Some of the more interesting features of Daniel include the following:
• It is a bilingual text. Dan. 1-2:4 and 7-end is composed in Hebrew, but 2:4-7 is in Aramaic. Aramaic was the common language of the Near East during the Persian and early Hellenistic periods (Levine 1233). The only other Aramaic in the Hebrew Bible is 4 chapters found in Ezra [Alter xiv]). Based on the stylistic and literary qualities of each language, Alter notes that the Aramaic sections rely a good deal on “formulaic language and mechanical repetitions,” so do not exhibit the stylistic sophistication of other books in the Hebrew Bible. Moreover, the book’s Hebrew is evidently composed by someone who is not completely comfortable with it, but uses Hebrew as the language appropriate to prophecy (Alter xiv-xv).

• There’s a strong separation between the folkloric, third-person narration of the first part of the book and the first-person expression of Daniel’s vision, starting in chapter 7.

• The first part of Daniel exhibits a folkloric unconcern for character development or historical accuracy. For example, no historical record exists of a seven-year gap in Nebuchadnezzar’s rule; however, a later Babylonian king, Nabodinus, did leave the realm in the hands of his son for seven years.

• The Nebuchadnezzar episodes don’t build on one another so much as they offer theme and variations.

• Nebuchadnezzar’s visions reflect the situation of and concerns of the Maccabean period, such as a divided kingdom (iron and clay) that breaks apart, and the demand—reminiscent of Antiochus Epiphanes— to worship foreign gods or be martyred (the fiery furnace).

• Daniel is noteworthy for its unambiguous promise of life after death, especially for martyrs. This is a new development in the Hebrew canon, and parallels similar hopes in 2 Maccabees, a book canonized by Christians but not by the Hebrew Bible. (For more about the Maccabees, see Chapter Eight.)

Revelation

In Greek, Revelation is called “The Apocalypse of John,” as “apocalypse” is the Greek word for “revelation.” This text has lent its name to the genre. According to biblical scholar Jean-Pierre Ruiz, there was some controversy in the early church about whether this book ought to be included in the New Testament canon at all (Ruiz 2153). Traditionally, the
book has been ascribed to John of son of Zebedee; and internal evidence suggests that the
author was a Palestinian Jew who was familiar with the Temple and its rituals as well as
being highly knowledgeable about Hebrew scripture. Ruiz notes that of the 405 verses in
Revelation, 275 allude to the Hebrew Bible or to the Septuagint (LXX). Scholars are
unsure about how to date the book, but most place it between the destruction of the
second Temple in 70 CE and the reign of the Roman emperor Domitian, 81-96 CE.

Like Daniel, the book of Revelation has inspired strong interest for its powerful images
and suggestive symbolic systems. Some take it to be a literal prophecy of the end times,
and those readers may develop elaborate interpretations of its symbolic hints to pinpoint
the day and the hour of the end of time, despite Jesus’ caution in Matt. 24:36 against
doing so. In the two millennia since the book was written, many have convinced
themselves and, often, others that they can predict the future and name the date of Jesus’
return.

As with the book of Daniel, modern Bible scholars focus on internal clues to historical
context as a way of understanding Revelation’s symbols and structure. The persecution of
the early Christians and the destruction of the second temple in Jerusalem clearly are of
great concern, and the book makes other specific historical references as well. Amidst
tumult and precarity of Christians across the Roman world, these scholars point out,
John’s apocalypse offers a message of hope of justice to come.

Other readers use the book as a “lens” for thinking more broadly and analogically about
the situation of the Christian in a fallen world (Gorman 17). Scholar Michael J. Gorman
notes that although Revelation has frequently inspired “dangerous and delusionary
systems,” leading some to call it “arguably the most dangerous book in the history of
Christendom,” it has also “produced some of the most sublime music and some of the
most penetrating visual art in human history. It has also expressed the quest for answers
to some of humanity’s most profound questions about God, the future, and the nature of
evil” (Gorman 12).

Jean-Pierre Ruiz remarks that Revelation is a “work of extremes,” expressing the dualistic
world view typical of apocalypse in its gruesome and sublime imagery. He lists the many
Church Fathers who expressed mystification as to how to interpret it; St. Jerome, the
translator of the Vulgate wrote that it “contains as many mysteries as it contains words”
(Ruiz 2155). Yet this intense symbolism with its many interpretive possibilities has
demonstrably offered fertile ground for imaginative engagement with ultimate things.
Gorman identifies five dimensions of Revelation that result in its hyperbolic signifying power: 1) its potent and visceral symbols, drawn from millennia of Near-Eastern mythologies; 2) its hybrid genre, made up of apocalypse, prophecy (in the calling-to-account tradition of the old prophets), and epistle. This hybridity, says Gorman, gives the work “a kind of creative, generative force” (19); 3) its intertextuality, its obsessive recapitulation and citation of scripture so that the allusions generate new meanings because of their new contexts; 4) its “symbiosis of otherworldly and this-worldly phenomena” (20), connecting human and supernatural spheres; 5) its position at the end of the New Testament, which grants it extraordinary significance as “the last act of the canonical drama, the drama of salvation” (Gorman 18-20; 20).

As with Daniel, the book of Revelation offers us maps and images for describing the heights and depths of human aspiration toward the divine, humanity’s capacity for evil, and the hope that in the future a better world is possible. It is no wonder that apocalyptic imagery is used to talk about not only Christian and Jewish faiths, but other kinds of cataclysm, such as the French and Russian Revolutions, nuclear holocaust, and global climate change. Apocalypses promise that in the end the righteous will be rewarded, and the evil will be punished. They promise a clean slate, but they also insist that we witness the violence, pain, and suffering that will precede the establishment of a new earth.

**Questions for Further Exploration and Discussion**

1. Compare and contrast Daniel and Joseph’s stories, their status as dreamers and interpreters of dreams. How are they similar? What do their differences suggest about the different purposes of each story?

2. Compare and contrast the treatment of the believer’s relationship to political authority in Daniel’s narrative sections and in the prophetic sections. Are political authorities seen as more or less legitimate? Ought believers to accommodate or serve non-believing Kings?

3. In what way does Daniel or Revelation exemplify the primary features of the apocalypse genre? Do you see or notice any departures from this genre?

4. The Nebuchadnezzar episodes don’t build on one another so much as they offer theme and variations. What themes do you see emerging from the sequence? What do their variations communicate about the situation of exile and of faithfulness?

5. Why isn’t Daniel two separate books?

6. Find an artist’s rendering of a scene from Daniel or Joseph. How does this artist interpret the scene?

7. What is the relationship of these books to the idea, theme, or fact of suffering or persecution? In what ways are these books about suffering?

8. Why is Revelation so fascinating and appealing to some readers and so off-putting and bewildering to others? What is the appeal of Revelation? Why would early Christians be drawn to it? Why would this text matter to us now?
9. Why might Revelation scare a reader? How might it comfort a reader?

10. The great French philosopher Jacques Derrida commented that ethics must emerge from a structure of anticipation. For him, ethics demands that we always imagine a better future, a more just world to come. How might the book of Revelation, particularly its last invocation “Come, Lord Jesus!” contribute such an ethics?

**Works Cited and Further Reading**


