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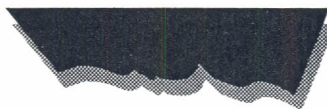
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Revelation and Apocalyptic Tradition



BY RODNEY A. WERLINE

Introduction

Several essays on the topic of apocalyptic literature begin with the famous literary exclamation of Klaus Koch—the title he gave one of his books, which translates from the German as “perplexed by Apocalyptic.”¹ Because the book of Revelation falls into the category of apocalyptic, many ministers and church members can sympathize with the confusion expressed in Koch’s title. Certainly for some people in the church, Revelation seems to be either a text that belongs to a strange fringe of Christianity preoccupied with calculations about the arrival of the end of the world or a book that stands at the center of an impenetrable scholastic debate about past and present dispensations and future events. For others, the book, with all its monsters, mysteries, beasts, plagues, wars, and death, is just plain terrifying.

Though scholarship has certainly not solved all the problems and mysteries associated with Revelation, the last third of the twentieth century witnessed remarkable advancements in the study of apocalyptic literature. Progress came for several reasons. First, as our knowledge of Judaism and early Christianity improved, scholars began to study nonbiblical Jewish and Christian apocalyptic texts, of which there are several, with more seriousness and for their own inherent worth.² They gave special care to trying to understand the texts, why and how the texts reused older traditions, and when and why the texts were written. Second, scholars introduced new methods of interpretation. The methods incorporated contemporary understandings of language in general and religious language in particular and how various types of texts are formed and express their messages. Further, they gave

attention to knowledge gleaned from the social sciences. As a result, this era of study produced a dramatically new understanding of Revelation—its form, its language, its social setting, and its function.

Definitions

A clear definition of apocalyptic helps to avoid problems that have resulted from improper uses of the word. Actually, apocalyptic is an adjective, even though some studies have used it as a noun. The noun form of the word is apocalypse. It refers to a form of literature, or genre. Deriving from the Greek word *apokalypsis*, this term appears at the beginning of Revelation (1:1). In fact, this occurrence of *apokalypsis* in Revelation is the earliest attestation of the word in early Jewish and Christian literature as an apparent reference to a particular genre.³

A group of modern scholars who met as part of the Society of Biblical Literature defined apocalypse as “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.”⁴ In other words, an apocalypse as literature assumes the form of a narrative, a story, about a supernatural world. Typically in Jewish and Christian apocalypses, an angel guides a human on a tour of the supernatural world or interprets dreams or visions of that world. Such knowledge of the supernatural world is available to humans only through revelation; that is, the genre assumes that humans can possess the knowledge

only because God has decided to reveal it them. The definition above also indicates the kind of knowledge that the human acquires. First, the human learns about the salvation that will occur at the end of time. This learning usually includes visions of a final judgment in which God delivers the righteous and punishes the wicked. Second, the visionary learns about the supernatural world and usually recognizes a correspondence between the supernatural and the earthly realms. For example, the struggles of the righteous on earth mirror titanic conflicts between angelic and demonic beings in the supernatural realm. Actually, it is more than a correspondence, for the apocalyptic visionary imagines the two worlds as inextricably intertwined.

Apocalyptic, then, is an adjective that indicates that a text displays characteristics present in the genre apocalypse even if as a body of literature a text cannot be considered an apocalypse. In this way, one can recognize apocalyptic features in a Gospel or Paul's letters, even though those texts are not apocalypses. The term apocalypticism refers to a system of thought or ideology of the movement that stands behind or generates an apocalypse, or a text that contains apocalyptic elements. Thus, despite the limited number of apocalypses that appear among the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Scrolls still provide an example of apocalypticism because they basically share a worldview found in several apocalypses.⁵ Or, some argue that Paul possessed an apocalyptic worldview.

Often the word eschatology finds its way into discussions and descriptions of apocalyptic texts and movements. This word denotes a much broader category than apocalypse or apocalyptic. Eschatology literally involves the study of last things. In biblical studies, then, it designates the end of an era and the beginning of another.⁶ In some late prophetic texts and New Testament texts, the end of the present era means the end of history and life as presently experienced. Eschatology becomes apocalyptic only when the description of the end borrows in significant ways from apocalypticism as defined above.

Besides using apocalypse as a self-designation, Revelation possesses the crucial features of an apocalypse. First, John has visions of a supernatural realm that influences the earthly realm. Second, an interpreting angel always travels with John and assists him in understanding what he sees. Third, Revelation climaxes with the punishment of demonic forces and the wicked, and the salvation of the righteous.

The Origins of Apocalyptic Literature

Though the book of Revelation is the first to use apoca-

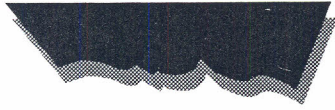
lypse to refer to a literary form, it is not the first apocalypse. In fact, the literary form existed for about four hundred years before John wrote. Written in the early years of the third century B.C.E., the Book of the Watchers and the Astronomical Book, two portions of a text now called 1 Enoch, are the first examples of the literary form apocalypse as defined in this essay.⁷ The period of Antiochus IV's oppression of the Jews (167–164 B.C.E.) witnessed the writing of several more apocalyptic texts.⁸ Can the origins of this literature be uncovered?

Some scholars have sought to trace the origins of apocalyptic literature to Ezekiel and the prophetic writings of the postexilic period—especially Third Isaiah (Isaiah 56–66), Zechariah, Joel, and Isaiah 24–27.⁹ Several features of this literature suggest this possibility. First, some of these texts contain eschatological schemes that seem to climax with a clear end of human history and the dawn of a completely new era that is unlike the present world; there is a vivid break between this age and the future era. At this climactic moment, which authors occasionally term the "Day of the Lord," God's wrath will break loose against the wicked (typically those who oppress the righteous) and the righteous will experience salvation. Second, mythological language occupies a prominent place in the descriptions of the end and the ways in which God will bring the deliverance.

Missing from these prophetic texts, however, are some crucial characteristics of the genre apocalypse. First, prophetic texts are not organized as narratives about otherworldly journeys. Second, the stark dualism highlighted in the above definition of apocalypse is lacking in the postexilic prophetic literature. Therefore, apocalyptic literature does not originate among Israel's prophets. Still, the apocalypses borrow from the prophetic literature—its literary forms, rhetoric, and images. This holds true also for Revelation. The following are just a few examples of John's reliance on prophetic literature: John's words are called "prophecy" (1:3; 22:19); he envisions the measuring of the temple (11:1–13; cf. Ezek 40:3–42:20; Zech 2:1–5); the angel taunts Babylon at its fall (18:1–24; cf. Isaiah 23–24; 47); and the seer concludes with a vision of the new Jerusalem (21:1–22:5; cf. Isa 65:17; 66:22; Ezek 48:30–34).

Jewish apocalypses also share certain features with literature from Babylon,¹⁰ Persia,¹¹ and Greece.¹² Mantic wisdom, or wisdom acquired through divination, is an important element in certain Babylonian texts in which a wise man gains knowledge through the interpretation of dreams. Though mantic wisdom is not an important element in Revelation, Daniel chapters 2, 4, and 7 may borrow from such ideas. From Persian literature come ex-

Revelation does not divide all or a significant portion of human history into periods, although Daniel and portions of 1 Enoch include such features.



amples of the periodization of history and dualism. Revelation does not divide all or a significant portion of human history into periods, although Daniel and portions of 1 Enoch include such features. The dualism that Persia may have contributed to Jewish apocalyptic tradition does influence Revelation, for Revelation envisages a universe divided between the heavenly and earthly realms and between good and evil forces. John did not read Persian literature and borrow directly from it. Rather, Persian ideas had already left their mark on the Jewish apocalyptic traditions that John inherited. Greek literature contained otherworldly journeys (e.g., *Odyssey*), periodizations of history (e.g., Hesiod and Herodotus), and eschatological motifs (e.g., Hesiod). Authors of apocalyptic texts also occasionally alluded to or borrowed from Greek myths. This is true of 1 Enoch 6–11,¹³ and John may have done the same at certain points in Revelation.¹⁴

All this is to say that many key elements of apocalypses were present in the literature and culture of societies before and at the same time that Jews, and then later, Christians, were writing. These ideas were part of the Jews' and Christians' larger world, and they surely influenced their culture. Just how and in what way this happened is anything but clear. Whatever material may have influenced Jewish apocalyptic traditions, Jewish authors thoroughly integrated it with their own traditions, especially biblical traditions. Christian authors did the same. Nevertheless, both Jews and Christians shared similar interests about the world with their ancient neighbors, and to some extent talked about reality in ways that resembled those neighbors. So John received the Jewish apocalyptic traditions and, thus, was working with already rich, textured, and highly developed sets of apocalyptic traditions when he wrote Revelation.

Understanding Apocalyptic Language

Apocalyptic language has suffered at the hands of both critical scholars and interpreters in the church. A good

example of the former comes in the work of R. H. Charles. Charles was a pioneer in collecting and translating what was for his time in the early twentieth century strange and obscure Jewish and Christian texts. In his treatment of apocalypses, Charles expected consistency and logic from the text. If the apocalypse failed in this regard, Charles immediately decided that someone had added material to the narrative or that an editor had touched up the text. Charles' work resulted in apocalypses that he claimed contained significant additions and editing.¹⁵ Some interpreters in the church setting approached the book of Revelation with the notion that it contained a map for all eras of human history, especially if it was combined with the speculations of Daniel, portions of Ezekiel, parts of the Gospels, and Romans 9–11. The products were systems labeled premillennialism, dispensational premillennialism, amillennialism, and postmillennialism.

Peculiarly, both the critical scholars, represented by Charles, and the church interpreters suffered from the same fundamental error—they misunderstood the nature of apocalyptic language. They approached apocalyptic language, with its symbols, numbers, and visionary details, as propositional, descriptive, referential, denotative language. For them the language in the apocalypses, including Daniel 7–12 and Revelation, functioned like a code that the interpreter needed to crack. Almost every aspect of Revelation equaled something in this realm. In the case of a scholar like R. H. Charles, most symbols referred to events and persons prior to or contemporaneous with the author's own time, with a projection of the future just beyond the author's own time. For the church interpreters, Daniel 7–12 and Revelation contained an encoded message that revealed all the ages of humanity, but especially the ages of the church and the place of the millennium, the thousand-year reign of Christ. The biblical apocalyptic material became, in a fashion, an extended allegory of past and future historical events.

But the language of Daniel 7–12 and Revelation is not primarily propositional, discursive, referential, descriptive, and denotative. Rather, apocalyptic language, including that in the Bible, is imaginative, evocative, connotative, metaphorical, pictorial, and mythic. It pictures a supernatural, transcendent realm, a reality beyond words, even though, of course, the author of Revelation had only words to speak of this transcendent world. Because the book offers, in words, pictures of that which words cannot adequately describe, interpreters need not try to harmonize all its visions, even when pictures obviously conflict. Revelation does not contain consistent, objectivist, and systematic theology (as R. H. Charles improperly

thought about apocalypses). Further, the interpreter should not expect each detail of a vision to have a specific referent from either the author's own time or the future (which is usually in the interpreter's own time). As Boring argues, for example, the interpreter should not look for referents for all the details that describe the dragon in Rev 12:3–4. According to Boring, "The vivid details serve as stage-setting, round out the picture, and enliven the total vision, but each detail is not allegorically important in itself."¹⁶ To say that details of visions in Revelation never have referents would be to overstate the matter. For example, references to Rome certainly occur (e.g., 17:9, 18). Revelation's language, though, does not contain the church's encoded guide to the future.

The Social Setting of Apocalypses and Revelation

An inquiry into social settings typically attempts to understand a group of people. The focus might be, among other things, on the inner workings of a group or on a group's relationship to other groups from the same period and the same basic geographical location. Though apocalyptic texts can come from groups in many different kinds of social settings, several originate among people who are suffering, oppressed, or facing a crisis.¹⁷ Revelation falls into this category of apocalypses. What is the situation that the book's author and readers were facing?

Careful readings of Revelation have concluded that the author and the readers of Revelation may not have been experiencing intense persecution. Rather, the situation may have been like that reflected in the letters of Pliny to Trajan. Pliny was a Roman provincial governor in Asia Minor at the beginning of the second century C.E. who wrote to the Roman emperor, Trajan. Among the many things that the letters discuss is what Pliny should do about a group called "Christians." The final directions to the governor indicate that Rome did not carry out a thorough, widespread, systematic persecution of Christians at that time in the provinces, but that Christians might have encountered problems if for some reason they came to the attention of local Roman administrators.¹⁸ Historical and social evidence also suggests that Christians struggled with increasing social pressure from the people in the communities in which they lived, especially as their lives came into conflict with participation in pagan rituals and feasts and the practice of emperor worship. John knew these conflicts and took a firm stand against participation in pagan culture. Such conditions and responses to them resulted in sporadic persecution.

Revelation fits this setting, then, in that John wrote about two decades before Pliny governed; the book has

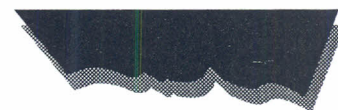
obvious connections to the cities of Asia Minor (all the churches addressed in the letters were in Asia Minor); and it seems to reflect a setting in which the church was not presently under persecution but had faced it in the past, was living with the threat, and was expecting problems in the near future (see, e.g., 2:3; 2:13; 3:8–10; 7:14; 17:6; 20:4).

In addition to these problems with the state, relations between Jews and Christians were tense in the late first and second centuries C.E. Revelation reflects this problem (see, e.g., 2:9; 3:9). The tension may have compounded the troubles that the church had with Rome and pagan culture. As the differences between Jews and Christians became more apparent—sociologically, ethnically, and religiously—Romans viewed Christians as a radical, fanatical, and renegade cult.

The Goal of Revelation as Apocalyptic Literature

Given that this was John and the churches' social context, what was the message or purpose of Revelation? An apocalypse is a construction of reality; it is the expression of the worldview of the author. Typically, then, the author intends to offer a view of the world that competes with or

Because the book offers, in words, pictures of that which words cannot adequately describe, interpreters need not try to harmonize all its visions, even when pictures obviously conflict.



clashes with other views. According to Adela Yarbro Collins, this is what was happening in Revelation. The text is part of a clash of cultures—the church over against Judaism, paganism, and the Roman empire.¹⁹ John demanded that his readers recognize the demonic nature of the opposing culture. Given the dynamics of life in Roman Asia Minor, John expected that assuming such an uncompromising position would lead to suffering for Christians. In light of this, John encouraged and exhorted his readers to stand firm and be patient in what troubles might come their way. The Lamb of God would, in the end, be victorious over all the forces that opposed God

and the righteous (chapter 19), and the righteous would reside in the new Jerusalem in complete peace and praise (chapters 21–22). Those who suffered on the margins of Roman society would become victors (21:7).

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Notes

¹ K. Koch, *Ratslov vor der Apokalyptic* (Gutersloh: Mohn, 1970). The English translation of the book appeared as *The Rediscovery of Apocalyptic* (Naperville, Ill.: Allenson, 1972).

² The literature is now vast. For introductions to this literature, see, e.g., G. W. E. Nickelsburg, *Jewish Literature between the Bible and the Mishnah: A Historical and Literary Introduction* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981); J. J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction to Jewish Apocalyptic Literature*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).

³ M. Smith, "On the History of Apokalypso and Apokalypsis," in *Apocalypticism in the Mediterranean World and the Near East: Proceeding of the International Colloquium on Apocalypticism*, Uppsala, August 12–17, 1979, ed. D. Hellhom (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1983), 5–20.

⁴ J. J. Collins, "Introduction: Towards the Morphology of a Genre," *Semeia* 14 (1979): 9; J. J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination*, 5.

⁵ F. G. Martinez, "Apocalypticism in the Dead Sea Scrolls," in *The Encyclopedia of Apocalypticism*, ed. J. J. Collins (New York: Continuum, 1998), 164–65. Martinez goes further than simply saying that the Dead Sea Scrolls fit under the umbrella of apocalypticism as a worldview. The Scrolls represent a specific, distinct, and genuine apocalyptic tradition (166).

⁶ For more on the problem of defining eschatology, see G. W. E. Nickelsburg, "Eschatology (Early Jewish)," in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. D. N. Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 2:579–94.

⁷ 1 Enoch consists of several books that were written from the early third century B.C.E. to the early first century C.E. Material from this tradition influenced other Jewish texts written during this time (e.g., Jubilees and several of the Dead Sea Scrolls) and early Christian traditions. The Book of the Watchers consists of 1 Enoch 1–36; the Astronomical Book, chapters 72–82.

⁸ E.g., the Testament of Moses, Daniel 7–12, the Animal

Apocalypse in 1 Enoch 85–90, and Jubilees 23.

⁹ See especially P. D. Hanson, *The Dawn of Apocalyptic* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975) and S. L. Cook, *Prophecy and Apocalypticism: The Postexilic Social Setting* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995); J. J. Collins, "From Prophecy to Apocalypticism: The Expectation of the End," in *The Encyclopedia of Apocalypticism* (New York: Continuum, 1998), 129–61.

¹⁰ See R. J. Clifford, "The Roots of Apocalypticism in Near Eastern Myth," in *The Encyclopedia of Apocalypticism*, ed. J. J. Collins (New York: Continuum, 1998), 3–38.

¹¹ A. Hultgard, "Persian Apocalypticism," in *The Encyclopedia of Apocalypticism*, J. J. Collins, ed. (New York: Continuum, 1998), 39–83.

¹² H. Cancik, "The End of the World, of History, and of the Individual in Greek and Roman Antiquity," in *The Encyclopedia of Apocalypticism*, ed. J. J. Collins (New York: Continuum, 1998), 84–125.

¹³ See G. W. E. Nickelsburg, "Apocalyptic Myth in 1 Enoch 6–11," *JBL* 96 (1977): 383–405.

¹⁴ See A. Yarbro Collins, "The Book of Revelation," in *The Encyclopedia of Apocalypticism*, ed. J. J. Collins (New York: Continuum, 1998), 394, 400.

¹⁵ For a summary of this problem in Charles' work and its effect on understanding Revelation, see A. Yarbro Collins, "The Book of Revelation," 389. For this problem generally in Charles, see J. J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination*, 14–16.

¹⁶ M. E. Boring, *Revelation, Interpretation* (Louisville: John Knox, 1989), 56.

¹⁷ As a caveat, not every apocalypse is a response to persecution. For example, some sections of 1 Enoch, namely the Book of the Watchers and the Astronomical Book, do not indicate that the authors were facing persecution. 2 Enoch is strikingly mystical and contains no signs that the author is facing an historical crisis. The Testament of Abraham explores, in a humorous way, humanity's fear of death by creating a story about Abraham's death. Again, the work does not address an immediate historical crisis or persecution but a threat common to all. 2 Baruch and 4 Ezra reflect on a recent past disaster—Rome's destruction of the Jerusalem temple.

¹⁸ For an analysis of the letters of Pliny to Trajan and what they indicate about the relationship between the empire and Christians in Asia Minor, see R. L. Wilken, *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), 1–30.

¹⁹ A. Yarbro Collins, *Crisis and Catharsis: The Power of the Apocalypse* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984).