

SERMON SERIES ON GENRES OF THE BIBLE

Apocalyptic: How shall we read the Book of Revelation?Jerry Truex; June 22, 2008

A. Introduction**1. Genres**

Today, we continue our series on the different genres of the Bible. A genre refers to a type of literature or a type of writing. The Bible contains many types of genre.

Knowing what kind of genre you are reading is very important.

- What if you read science fiction and thought it was scientific fact?
- What if you read proverbs and interpreted it like biblical law?

One of the most *misinterpreted* types of literature in the Bible is apocalyptic literature—the Book of Daniel, the Book of Revelation, and Mark 13.

2. Apocalyptic

Jewish/Christian apocalyptic writing claims to be revelation from heaven.¹

- It is usually mediated by an angel to a human recipient.
- It's usually a story with lots of symbolism, mysterious numbers, coded language, and strange supernatural beings.
- The story reflects a conflict between good and evil.
- There is a clash between God and Satan.
- And this clash is played out on earth in the affairs of people.

After an intense period of conflict and suffering, God intervenes in history to punish or eliminate the wicked and to reward or vindicate the righteous.

3. A history of failed prophecies

The problem is that apocalyptic literature has been subject to striking and even dangerous misinterpretation. See handout: "The History of Failed Prophecies."

¹ David E. Aune, "Revelation: Introduction," *The Harper Collins Study Bible*. New Revised Standard Version. Gen. Ed. Wayne Meeks (San Francisco, HarperCollins, 1993).

B. Survey of the Book of Revelation

Revelation was probably written during the reign of Emperor Domitian about 95 AD. It was written to seven churches in Asia Minor by a person named John, who claimed he was "in the spirit," probably a trance state.

The Book of Revelation narrates a series of visions. John has visions and he is told to write what he sees (1:19) Fifty-five times, John says, "I saw," then he describes it.² First he has a vision of the Son of Man.

The Son of Man (1:9-8)

Rev. 1:10-11. ¹⁰ I was in the spirit on the Lord's day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet ¹¹ saying, "Write in a book what you see and send it to the seven churches, to Ephesus, to Smyrna, to Pergamum, to Thyatira, to Sardis, to Philadelphia, and to Laodicea." (NRSV)

It's a vision of the Son of Man and the Ancient of Days (God) right out of Daniel 7. The Son of Man tells John that he was the one who was dead, but now is alive. So it is a vision of the Risen Christ.

John turns to see who is speaking to him and he sees the Risen Christ:

Rev. 1:12-16. ¹² Then I turned to see whose voice it was that spoke to me, and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands, ¹³ and in the midst of the lampstands I saw one like the Son of Man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash across his chest. ¹⁴ His head and his hair were white as white wool, white as snow; his eyes were like a flame of fire, ¹⁵ his feet were like burnished bronze, refined as in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of many waters. ¹⁶ In his right hand he held seven stars, and from his mouth came a sharp, two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining with full force. (NRSV)

First Vision: Seven Messages to Seven Churches (2:1-3:22)

First John is told to write to the seven churches in Asia Minor: Ephesus Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea.³

Jesus speaks to each church through the letters that John writes. Each letter is a paragraph or so and generally commends each church for what they are doing well (being faithful, endurance under persecution), what they need to improve on

² Marcus Borg, *Reading the Bible Again for the First Time* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001) 270.

³ The number seven is very prominent. The number seven recurs fifty-seven times. Seven symbolizes the divine pattern of the universe and history. David E. Aune, "Revelation: Introduction," note on pages 2310.

(tolerating false teaching, being lukewarm in loyalty to Jesus), and concludes with a statement about "overcoming" obstacles and adversities; for example:

Rev. 2:7. To everyone who conquers, I will give permission to eat from the tree of life that is in the paradise of God. (NRSV)

Rev. 2:17. To everyone who conquers I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give a white stone, and on the white stone is written a new name that no one knows except the one who receives it. (NRSV)

Second Vision: Throne Room of Heaven (4:1-5:14)

Next, John is taken up into heaven. And the rest of Revelation consists of John's descriptions of what he saw in heaven.

Rev. 4:1. After this I looked, and there in heaven a door stood open! And the first voice, which I had heard speaking to me like a trumpet, said, "Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this." (NRSV)

Immediately, John is ushered into a vision of God enthroned in heaven. In chapter 4, God is surrounded by four cherubim (angelic beings). There is also a sea of glass, the twenty-four elders, and singing that goes non-stop.

In chapter 5, John sees a vision of the Lamb of God, who was slain, but now lives. The Lamb of God is worshiped in almost the same way and with the same language as God... And the Lamb seems to share the throne with God!

Rev. 5:6. Then I saw in middle of the throne ... a Lamb standing ...

Rev. 5:6. Καὶ εἶδον ἐν μέσῳ τοῦ θρόνου ... ἀρνίον ἑστῆκός

Third Vision: Seven Seals of the Scroll (6:1-8:5)

In chapter 6, a scroll with seven seals appears and the Lamb is the only one who can open it. When each seal is opened, a divine judgment is poured out:

1. a white horse with a man conquering,
2. a red horse with a man bring war,
3. a black horse with a rider bring economic woes,
4. a pale green horse and rider bring death to one-fourth of the world,
5. a vision of Christian martyrs,
6. great earthquakes and the sky vanishing like a scroll rolling up,
7. an angel with a golden censer representing the prayers of the faithful

In between the sixth and seventh seal, there are two interrupting visions:

- (a) In chapter 7, 144,000 people of Israel are marked as servant of God with a seal on their foreheads.
- (b) In chapter 7, countless multitudes from the nations (Gentiles) are standing before the throne worshiping God.

Fourth Vision: Seven Angels with Seven Trumpets (8:6-11:19)

Next, John sees seven angels with seven trumpets. When each angel blows a trumpet, catastrophes beset the world:

1. Hail and fire, mixed with blood, are hurled to earth—1/3 is burned
2. A great mountain on fire is thrown into the sea—1/3 of sea creatures die
3. A great star falls from heaven, blazing like a touch
4. Darkness comes over 1/3 of the sun, 1/3 of the moon, 1/3 of the stars
5. Locusts come and torture the people who don't have God's seal
6. Plagues are let loose on the earth and 1/3 of humankind is killed
7. Voices in heaven announce that the kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of the Lord ... God's temple in heaven is opened.

In between the sixth and seventh seal, there are two interrupting visions:

- (a) In chapter 10, John eats a little scroll which is sweet to the mouth, but bitter to the stomach.
- (b) In chapter 11, two witnesses (perhaps Moses and Elijah) prophesy, but they are killed by "the beast" (11:7-9), brought back to life, and taken up.

Fifth Vision: Seven Symbolic Visions (12:1-14:20)

1. Chapter 12, a pregnant woman (Israel) gives birth to a child (messiah) and the Great Red Dragon with seven heads and ten horns tries to kill the woman and the child. The Dragon makes war on the children of the woman.
2. Chapter 13, a Beast with seven heads and ten horns arises out of the sea with "blasphemous names" on its head (13:1), makes war against the saints (13:7), and forces people to worship it (13:8).
3. Chapter 13, a second Beast (False Prophet) with two horns forces people to worship the first; mark of the beast (13:17); the number of the beast is 666.
4. Chapter 14, a vision of the Lamb of God and 144,000 standing on Mount Zion.
5. Chapter 14, three angels come down from heaven and make announcements; for example, "Fear God and give him glory, for the hour of his judgment has come" (14:7)

Here we find a narrator's side comment that reveals the purpose of the Book of Revelation:

Rev. 14:12. Here is a call for the endurance of the saints, those who keep the commandments of God and hold fast to the faith of Jesus. (NRSV)

6. Chapter 14, the Son of Man appears seated on a white cloud..
7. Chapter 15, a vision of a great multitude, like a sea of glass, worshiping God.

Sixth Vision: Seven Angels with Seven Plagues (15:5-19:10)

1. First angel pours out a plague on people who have the mark of the beast
2. Second angel pours out a plague on the sea and everything in the sea dies
3. Third angel pours out a plague that turns every river and spring into blood
4. Fourth angel pours his bowl on the sun and the sun scorches people with fire.
5. Fifth angel pours his bowl in the throne of the beast, darkness comes over the land, and people have pain, sores, and gnaw their tongues
6. Sixth angel pours out his bowl on the Euphrates River. The Dragon, the Beast, and the False Prophet (second beast) prepare for war at Armageddon (Rev 16:16).
7. Seventh angel pours his bowl into the air and a voice from the heavenly temple says, "It is done!" Babylon the Great is defeated.

In chapters 17 and 18, there is an elaboration on how Babylon (a.k.a. Rome) is defeated. Rome and the ten horns (client kings of Rome) make war on the Lamb, but the Lamb conquers them (17:14).

Chapter 18 goes into detail about the sins of Babylon—greed, arrogance, blood money—and how Babylon colluded with political powers (18:9), merchants (18:11), the wealthy (18:15), and international commerce (18:17) and that the justice of God brings an end to that.

Seventh Vision: Seven Visions of the Last Things (19:11-22:5)

1. Coming of Christ, the Word of God (19:11-16)
2. Invitation to a great banquet (19:17-18)
3. Beast, false prophet, those with the mark thrown into lake of fire (19:19-21)
4. The Dragon/Devil/Satan bound and thrown into the pit (20:1-3)
5. Millennial reign (20:4-10)
6. Final judgment and the book of life is opened (20:11-15)
7. New Heaven, New Earth, New Jerusalem (21:1 - 22:5)

D. Interpreting Revelation

Every generation has struggled to interpret Revelation. Because the symbolism is elaborate and obscure, it remains open to many possible readings. There are three basic approaches.⁴

1. Futuristic

Revelation tells about the future. It is a transcript of future historical events.

Hal Lindsey's book, *The Late Great Planet Earth* (1970), is an example of this. The events foretold by Revelation are unfolding in our time. For him, the establishment of Israel as a nation-state in 1948 is a key event, because some biblical texts suggest that Israel will live in her own land in the time of the end.

Lindsey decodes Revelation so that it refers to events in modern time. For example:

1. The beast referred to the Soviet Union, which promoted hard-line Cold War politics in the name of Christianity.
2. The ten-horned beast from the sea (Rev 13) refers to a ten-nation confederacy—the European Economic Community.
3. The "stars falling to earth" refers to thermonuclear exchange (Rev 6:12-17)
4. The sky rolling up like a scroll refers to what the sky looks like after a nuclear bomb detonates (Rev 6:14)
5. The earth plunged into darkness refers to nuclear winter (Rev 6:12; 16:10).
6. Locusts that looked like horses equipped for battle, with human faces, hair like women's hair, lions' teeth, iron breastplates, noise like wings and many chariots, with tails like scorpions with the power to harm people refer to "attack helicopters".
7. The horn that received a mortal wound, but then recovers, is a future Hitler (Rev 13:3).
8. Two hundred million soldiers (Rev 9:16) must refer to China's military gearing up for Armageddon (Rev 9:16).
9. Of course, Lindsey believed that all Christians would be "raptured" (1 Thes 4:15-17) before the tribulation (Rev 6:1ff; cf. 6:14) and would not have to endure any of the plagues, wars, or disasters mentioned in Revelation.

The problem with the futurist approach is that Christians in every century have thought that Revelation referred to events in their own time. In different centuries, the beast has been identified as the pope, Napoleon, Hitler, Gorbachev, and Saddam Hussein.

2. Past-Historical

A second way to interpret Revelation is to place it in its historical context. In this view, Revelation tells us what the author believed would happen in his time.

⁴ See Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1996) 170ff. and Marcus Borg, *Reading the Bible Again*, 273ff.

Since Revelation was written to seven churches that existed in the first century, we need to read Revelation as a message written to them, not to people thousands of years later.

To decode the symbolism of Revelation, we need to find *events* and *persons* in the first-century during the time of Emperor Domitian (95 AD). Such a reading recognizes that the Beat of Revelation 13 symbolizes the Roman Empire, Babylon the Great (17:5) symbolizes the city of Rome, which was seated on seven mountains (17:9, 18). The number of the Beast is 666, which, using *gematria*, decodes into "Caesar Nero." In other words, Revelation was a political allegory.

If Revelation was written about events in the twentieth or twenty-first century, then the readers in the first century, wouldn't have understood Revelation at all. If Revelation was about nuclear war, attack helicopters, and the Soviet Union, the message would have had no significance to first-century readers.

3. Theopoetic

Another possible way to read Revelation is theopoetically, as a theological and poetic representation of the spiritual and political environment that every Christian finds him or herself living and struggling.⁵

In this view, Revelation uses imagery that every person in every culture in every era is familiar with. It is perennial (occurs in every culture). Revelation has power. It can evoke our imagination about how we ought to live in our political and social environment. It can call forth our commitment to Christ and loyalty to God over against the harmful powers that dominate our world. It affirms another reality that transcends the visible world and points us toward God.

Revelation also uses an archetypal story that is common among all peoples called the "ancient cosmic combat myth."⁶

"The archetypal plot is a story of cosmic conflict between good and evil. In the ancient world, the conflict was between a god (or gods) of light, order and life against an evil power of darkness, disorder, and death. Commonly the evil power was imaged as a dragon or sea monster or primeval serpent."⁷

We find the combat myth in some of our deepest dreams, in movies (like Star Wars), and in books (like C. S. Lewis' *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*).

⁵ Paraphrasing Hays, *Moral Vision*, 173.

⁶ Borg, *Reading the Bible Again*, 281; Walter Wink, *The Powers That Be* (New York: Doubleday, 1998) 42-62.

⁷ Borg, *Reading the Bible Again*, 282.

“Thus, in Revelation, we have an elaborate imaginative vision for the church as an alternative community pitted in conflict with the powers that be.” Revelation confronts all earthly powers that do not conform to the power of the Lamb.

E. A Tale of Two Lordships

In Revelation, Christ’s lordship stands in antithesis to Caesar’s. The central conflict in Revelation is between two competing lordships: Christ’s and Caesar’s.

Ever since Emperor Augustus (31-14 BC), the emperors of Rome had been given divine status and titles. They were known as “son of god” (*filius dues*), “lord” (*dominus*), and even “god” (*dues*). Throughout the Roman Empire, the Emperor was worshipped in temples of the imperial cult.

Against this, Revelation proclaims that exclusive lordship belongs to God and “the Lamb”—God known in Jesus.⁸ Throughout Revelation, the worship and honor demanded by the Dragon, the Beast, the False Prophet, and the Great Harlot—symbols of Roman power and hubris—is overthrown by God and the Lamb. And in place of Rome and Caesar, God and the Lamb receive all allegiance and worship. Jesus is Lord; Caesar is not.

God overcomes the world not through a show of force, but through the suffering and death of Jesus, “the Lamb that was slaughtered” (Rev 5:6; used 28 times in Revelation). Rome rules by violence, but the one who is the true King and Lord rules by virtue of submission to death (*martus*; Rev 1:5).

⁸ Paraphrasing Borg, *Reading the Bible Again*, 280.