

The Genre of the book of Revelation

2.6 - The Genre of the book of Revelation

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Expositors of the book of Revelation seem to spend a considerable amount of time discussing the [genre](#) of the book. The American Heritage Dictionary defines *genre* as “A category of artistic composition, as in music or literature, marked by a distinctive style, form, or content.”¹ Many commentators hold that the distinctive style of the book of Revelation is *apocalyptic* or a combination of apocalyptic with other styles.² But as Thomas observes, this tends to confuse matters since precise definitions of *genre* and *apocalyptic* are vague:

No consensus exists as to a precise definition of genre, so discussion attempting to classify portions of the NT, including Revelation, are at best vague. . . . A recent trend among some scholars has been to view Revelation as primarily apocalyptic. This complicates the problem of definition even further because in addition to disagreement about what constitutes genre, uncertainty also prevails regarding a definition of apocalyptic.³

While we would agree that the book of Revelation contains elements which are often understood as apocalyptic (e.g., visions, use of symbols, catastrophic events), we are concerned that many commentators fail to clearly distinguish between the [inspired](#) writing of John and the *uninspired* writings of other apocalyptic works.⁴

2.6.1 - Motivation for Categorizing as Apocalyptic

When commentators emphasize the importance of the [genre](#) of the book of Revelation, it is often with an eye to erasing distinctions between the Apocalypse of John and other uninspired apocalyptic works.⁵ By classifying the book of Revelation as *apocalyptic* it then becomes fashionable to suggest that the same motives, sources, and “after-the-fact prophecy” which characterize the uninspired writings are also at work in John. Here again we see the [anti-supernatural](#) biases of the interpreters at work:⁶ Having categorized John’s work as representative of the *apocalyptic genre*, commentators then make assertions which are contrary to a straight-forward reading of the text:

- The book should not be interpreted literally.⁷
- The prophetic content is motivated by a desire to be optimistic.⁸
- The book likely represents the work of redactors.
- The book is a political document employing [hyperbolic](#) literary forms.
- The book is primarily devotional rather than containing actual facts of history.⁹

We disagree with these conclusions and the artificial comparison of the book of Revelation with uninspired apocalyptic writings. From our point of view, prophecy is prophecy and the normative literal approach to interpretation is not negated simply because a book utilizes symbols and records events of great importance and magnitude. Suggesting that God gives revelation so that present difficulties can be understood as “illusory” is a gross misrepresentation of the inspirational element of His Word and smacks of cults such as Christian Science.

2.6.2 - Different from Apocalyptic Genre

Thomas rightly recognizes that the book is primarily prophetic and that overemphasizing the [genre](#) of apocalyptic will result in a distortion of its message:

In light of Revelation’s self-claims (e.g., Rev. 1:3+; 22:18-19+) and how well it fulfills the qualifications of NT prophecy, the best overall characterization of the literary style of the Apocalypse is to call it prophetic. A blending of genres such as prophetic-apocalyptic or prophetic-apocalyptic-epistolary is not the best answer because it does not allow for the preeminence of the book’s prophetic content.¹⁰

In addition, Mounce mentions a number of dissimilarities between Revelation and apocalyptic literature: the author considers his work to be prophecy; the work is not pseudonymous—John writes in his own name; the writer is not pessimistic but maintains

balance; the present age sets forth the redemptive activity of God in history rather than being a meaningless prelude to the end; the moral urgency of the book; and the lack of esoteric knowledge secretly preserved from antiquity.¹¹ Johnson mentions a number of factors which indicate that the Apocalypse should not be lumped in with non-[canonical](#) writings of apocalyptic genre.¹² He concludes: “the reader would do well to reexamine every method of interpreting Revelation that rests on this assumed similarity. . . . In no case can it be demonstrated that John depends on the assumed knowledge among his readers of the Jewish apocalyptists for clarify of meaning. On the other hand, he is everywhere dependent on the OT canonical books.”¹³ Our advice is to be wary when encountering lengthy treatments on the *apocalyptic genre* of the book as they often lay the groundwork for anti-supernatural assumptions which follow. These assumptions often deny the self-claims of the book and fail to see its place within the larger framework of biblical prophecy running throughout Scripture.¹⁴

Notes

¹ [American Heritage Online Dictionary](#), Ver. 3.0A, 3rd ed (Houghton Mifflin, 1993).

² “It is universally recognized that Revelation is composed of three genres: apocalyptic, prophecy, and letter.”—Grant R. Osborne, [Revelation](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2002), 12.

³ Robert L. Thomas, [Revelation 1-7](#) (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1992), 23-24.

⁴ Woods identifies attributes typical of apocalyptic writings: “Extensive use of symbolism, vision as the major means of revelation, angelic guides, activity of angels and demons, focus on the end of the current age and the inauguration of the age to come, urgent expectation of the end of earthly conditions in the immediate future, the end as a cosmic catastrophe, new salvation that is paradisaic in character, manifestation of the kingdom of God, a mediator with royal functions, dualism with God and Satan as the leaders, spiritual order determining the flow of history, pessimism about man’s ability to change the course of events, periodization and determinism of human history, other worldly journeys, the catchword glory, and a final showdown between good and evil.”—Andy Woods, [What is the Identity of Babylon In Revelation 17-18?](#)

⁵ Bullinger lists representative non-canonical apocalyptic writings: *The Sibylline Oracles* (180 B.C. - 350 A.D.); *The Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs* (130 B.C. - 10 A.D.); *The Psalms of Solomon* (70 - 40 B.C.); *The Book of Jubilees* (40 - 10 B.C.); *The Ascension of Isaiah* (1 - 100 A.D.); *The Assumption of Moses* (14 - 30 A.D.); *The Apocalypse of Baruch* (50 - 90 A.D.); *The Book of Enoch* (200 - 260 A.D.). [E. W. Bullinger, [Commentary On Revelation](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1984, 1935), 121n*] Walvoord mentions the following additional pseudepigrapha : *Letters of Aristeas*, *III and IV Maccabees*, *Psalms of Solomon*, *Secrets of Enoch*, *Sibylline Oracles*, *The Syriac Apocalypse of Baruch*, *The Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs*, *The Apocalypse of Adam*, *The Apocalypse of Elijah*, *The Apocalypse of Zephaniah*, *Testament of Abram, Isaac, and Jacob* as well as Christian apocalyptic works subsequent to the book of Revelation: *Anabaticon and Pauli*, *Revelation of St. Steven and Thomas*, *The Decree of Gelasius*, *The Apocalypse of Peter*, *The Apocalypse of Paul*, *A Spurious Apocalypse of John*, *The Apocalypse of Sedrach*, and *The Apocalypse of the Virgin*. [John F. Walvoord, [The Revelation of Jesus Christ](#) (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1966), 24-25]

⁶ “The apocalyptists followed a common practice of rewriting history as prophecy so as to lend credence to their predictions about that which still lay in the future.”—Robert H. Mounce, [The Book of Revelation](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1977), 18.

⁷ “The main objection is that it interprets Revelation without sufficient sensitivity to its literary form, giving a straightforward, literal reading of the book, rather than using a figurative approach, which would be more appropriate to the book’s symbolic genre.”—Gregory K. Beale, [The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1999), 161.

⁸ “It is impossible to distinguish ultimately between prophecy and apocalyptic, for the latter is an extension of the former . . . certain differences do in part distinguish the two forms: prophecy tends to be oracular and apocalyptic visionary, and prophecy has a certain optimistic overtone (if the nation repents, the judgment prophecies will not occur), while apocalyptic tends to be pessimistic (the only hope lies in the future rather than the present).”—Osborne, [Revelation](#), 13.

⁹ Collins emphasizes the devotional aspect over the factitive: “the visions guide readers into a transcendent reality that takes precedence over the current situation and encourages readers to persevere in the midst of their trials. The visions reverse normal experience by making the heavenly mysteries the real world and depicting the present crisis as a temporary, illusory situation.”—*Ibid.*, 14.

¹⁰ Thomas, [Revelation 1-7](#), 28.

¹¹Mounce, [The Book of Revelation](#), 23-24.

¹²Alan F. Johnson, [Revelation: The Expositor's Bible Commentary](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1966), 5.

¹³*Ibid.*, 6.

¹⁴"There is no *inherent* harm in a literary genre; there is only harm or danger in how a scholar may use such genre against a document."—Bernard Ramm, [Protestant Biblical Interpretation](#), 3rd rev. ed (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1970), 144.

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