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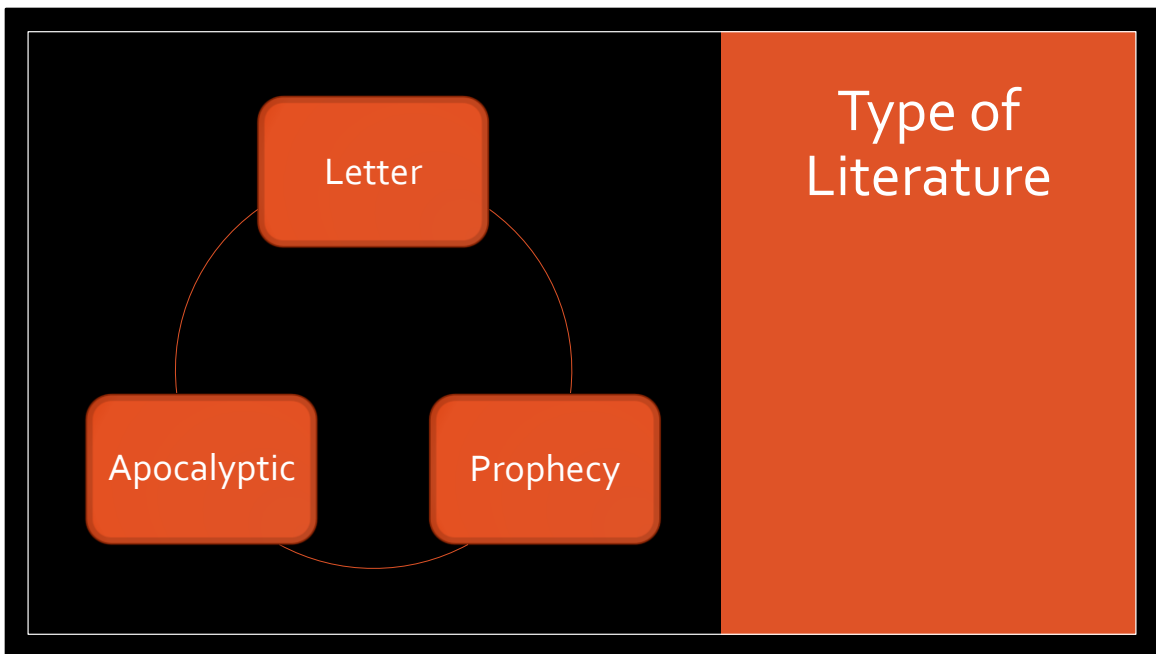
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Revelation Intro 3: What Is Apocalyptic Literature?

This is one of five units introducing the book of Revelation. A closer look at the text, section by section, is to follow.

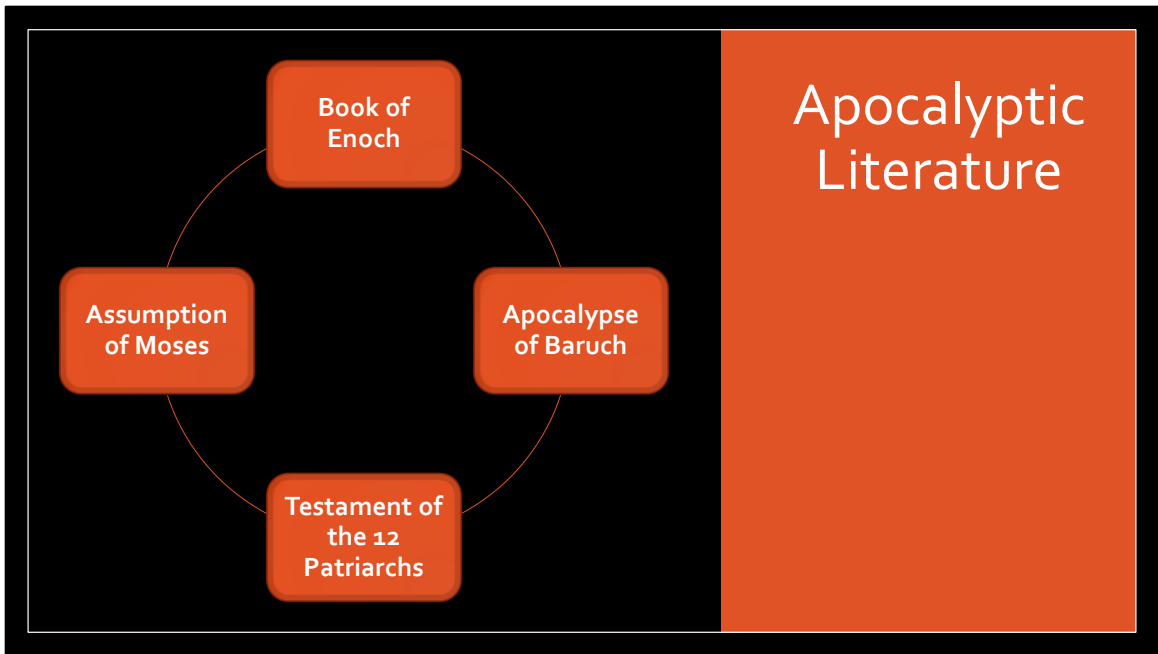
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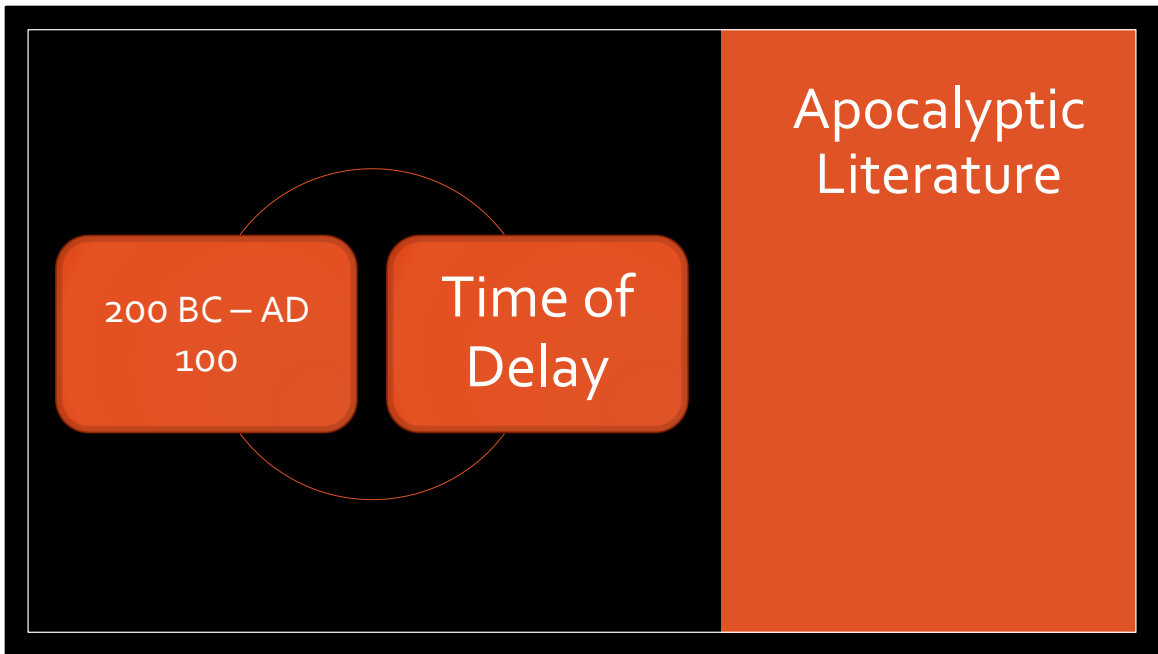


An important question (I skipped it in the previous unit on basic questions) is: what type of literature is the book of Revelation? And it is a little complicated because there is more than one correct answer. First of all, the book looks like a letter, at least in the first chapter. In verses 4 through 6 we have all the elements of a letter that we also know from Paul’s letters, for instance: John, to the seven churches that are in Asia – that is the author and the recipients. Grace to you and peace, a benediction. This is followed by a word of praise. But there it stops. The rest of the book doesn’t look like a letter at all, except for the final verse, which is a concluding benediction.

Now, John himself refers to the book as a prophecy; in 1:3 he speaks of “the words of this prophecy.” And that it certainly also is; it is a prophetic word, a message that comes directly from God. So I think we can say that John received this prophetic word, wrapped it in the form of a letter, and sent it off. But then, the book fits in yet another category. You may have noticed it looks quite similar to the book of Daniel in the Old Testament: similar style, similar form. This group of books we call apocalyptic literature.



Here are a few more examples of this type of book. We have the book of Enoch, the Apocalypse of Baruch (Baruch was the secretary of the prophet Jeremiah), the Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs, that is, the 12 sons of Jacob, and the Assumption of Moses. As you can tell, one thing these four books have in common is that they are all ascribed to a character we know from the Old Testament. There are many more books of this type. Some have been preserved and others have been lost, but we know they existed because they are mentioned somewhere or quoted in one of the church fathers.



Virtually all these books were written in the period from roughly 200 BC down to AD 100. How come? For the Jews, this was a period of delay. They had experienced a partial fulfilment of the prophetic promise: they had returned from exile, they had been able to rebuild Jerusalem and the temple, and now there were for the most part more or less living faithfully according to the covenant – and yet God did not act. They were still suffering under foreign oppression and the promise was not being fulfilled further. This called for an explanation: why was this so? These books seem to set out – many of them anyway – an explanation for the perceived delay in the fulfilment of God’s prophetic promise: it was not because of Israel’s unfaithfulness; it was because of a cosmic battle that was taking place, a conflict with evil that first had to run its course.



NOT A WAITING ROOM

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The book of Revelation is slightly different on this point. It is not written to explain a delay; it is written to explain the mission and the role of the church in this intermediate time. In other words, in the view of the book of Revelation, history is not a waiting room...

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... but rather, history is the arena; it is the battlefield, it is where the church takes part and participates in God's battle, God's war against evil, and has a share in bringing about the ultimate victory.



"APOCALYPTIC"

Before I say more about the characteristics of apocalyptic literature, I should say something about the word *apocalyptic*. It is used in English and many other languages, often in the context of news not related to the Bible. But in this modern use, it tends to have a different meaning, different from the original and different from what it means in the term *apocalyptic literature*. In modern use, *apocalyptic* refers to a disaster or catastrophe that is really really big, even the end of the world or its destruction. The zombie apocalypse. The word *post-apocalyptic* is used for the world after the apocalypse, which may be a nuclear war, an epidemic that has wiped out most of humanity, or a meteorite that has hit the earth and destroyed life as we know it. That is a different sense of the word than the meaning it has in *apocalyptic literature*.



APOCALYPTIC

Ἀποκάλυψις

Here on the right is the original Greek word, *apokálypsis*. It does not mean destruction or disaster at all. It means revelation, the unveiling of something that was hidden so that it can be seen, so that it becomes known. This is the very first word in the book of Revelation. It starts with: “The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place.”



APOCALYPTIC LANGUAGE?

To be fair, I do admit that apocalyptic literature often uses language that can be described in the modern sense of the word as apocalyptic: it speaks of destruction and plagues and disasters, cosmic upheaval, stars falling out of heaven, the sun turning dark, and so forth. The question, however, is to what extent such language should be interpreted literally. It could also be that it serves to underline the significance and magnitude of the change that is taking place.

That is certainly how the language is used in the Old Testament prophets, for instance in Isaiah 13 and other passages, when it is about the destruction of Babylon or the fall of Jerusalem. The historical fulfilment of such prophecies was not accompanied by cataclysmic and cosmic upheaval. At any rate, apocalyptic literature tends to be more interested in, well, yes, the destruction of evil, but beyond that, not so much in the destruction of the earth as in its restoration and renewal.

Characteristics

Pretended authorship

Unveiling

Visions

Angelic guide

Age to come

Conflict

Symbolism

What are the characteristics of apocalyptic literature? We have already seen that many of these books come with pretended authorship: they carry the name of an Old Testament celebrity, even though the book is far more recent than the Old Testament and the person who supposedly wrote it. Notice that the book of Revelation is an exception to this. It is not ascribed to someone from the Old Testament; John writes in his own name, without pretence.

All of these books unveil something. They are in the original sense of the word apocalyptic: they are a revelation, they show things behind the screen, they enable a peek into the spiritual or invisible world, the heavenly realm so that they show that there is more to the world than what can be seen by the eye. There is a whole other dimension that is influential and important. The way this is communicated is in the form of visions seen by the author or pretended author. Usually, there are angelic or heavenly guides that explain things to the visionary. That of course we also find in the book of Revelation.

Many of these books are interested in the age to come, and how God is going to usher in a better world. This process is marked by conflict on a cosmic scale, a battle

between good and evil, between light and darkness that is the real explanation for whatever happens on earth.

And then all of these books are also characterized by the use of symbolism. They use highly symbolic language. Symbolism will therefore be one thing we need to talk about and pay attention to if we want to understand the book of Revelation because it is full of symbols.

And this was his dream: Noises and confusion, thunders and earthquake, tumult on the earth! Then two great dragons came forward, both ready to fight, and they roared terribly. At their roaring every nation prepared for war, to fight against the righteous nation. It was a day of darkness and gloom, of tribulation and distress, affliction and great tumult on the earth! And the whole righteous nation was troubled; they feared the evils that threatened them, and were ready to perish. Then they cried out to God; and at their outcry, as though from a tiny spring, there came a great river, with abundant water; light came, and the sun rose, and the lowly were exalted and devoured those held in honor.

To illustrate how apocalyptic writing works, I have an apocalyptic fragment here. This is a real passage, an old one, that retells a familiar Old Testament story in apocalyptic form. So let's read it and see if you can recognize the story:

And this was his dream: Noises and confusion, thunders and earthquake [so there we have this cosmic upheaval], tumult on the earth! Then two great dragons came forward, both ready to fight, and they roared terribly. At their roaring every nation prepared for war, to fight against the righteous nation. [Now, this much at least is easy to interpret; it must be a reference to Israel.] It was a day of darkness and gloom, of tribulation and distress, affliction and great tumult on the earth! And the whole righteous nation was troubled; they feared the evils that threatened them, and were ready to perish. Then they cried out to God; and at their outcry, as though from a tiny spring, there came a great river, with abundant water; light came, and the sun rose, and the lowly were exalted and devoured those held in honour.

What Old Testament story is this? It is not David and Goliath, and it is not the Assyrians against Jerusalem or some other attack that is described in the Old

Testament. No, this is an addition to the book of Esther that we have in the Greek translation of the Old Testament. And so the two dragons are Mordecai and Haman. The event in the background is the attempt to exterminate the Jewish people at that time. The tiny spring is Esther, through whom God brought salvation.

Greek OT, Esther 11:4b-11. The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version., 1989. (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers)

Paradigm

Apocalyptic literature describes relatively ordinary events in extraordinary ways, in order to bring out their theological or spiritual significance. The earthly reality that is described may look a lot less spectacular than its apocalyptic rendition.

This discussion of the nature and characteristics of apocalyptic literature takes us back to the question of paradigm, the question of our overall approach to the book, the question of how we read and interpret Revelation. The fragment illustrates how apocalyptic literature works and therefore this should be part of our paradigm: apocalyptic literature describes relatively ordinary events in extraordinary ways, to bring out their theological or spiritual significance. The earthly reality that is described may look a lot less spectacular than its apocalyptic rendition.

Notice all the tumult and upheaval that is used to describe the relatively quiet affair that is described in the book of Esther.

And this was his dream: Noises and confusion, thunders and earthquake, tumult on the earth! Then two great dragons came forward, both ready to fight, and they roared terribly. At their roaring every nation prepared for war, to fight against the righteous nation. It was a day of darkness and gloom, of tribulation and distress, affliction and great tumult on the earth! And the whole righteous nation was troubled; they feared the evils that threatened them, and were ready to perish. Then they cried out to God; and at their outcry, as though from a tiny spring, there came a great river, with abundant water; light came, and the sun rose, and the lowly were exalted and devoured those held in honor.

During the actual events described in the book of Esther, there was no earthquake, noise, or literal darkness at all. But spiritually, of course, there was; it truly was a spiritual earthquake that took place.

Greek OT, Esther 11:4b-11. The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version., 1989. (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers)

Paradigm

It is important that one does not project this literary device onto the one-dimensional plane of historical sequence. The visions are intended to confront readers with vivid portrayals of eschatological truth rather than to supply them with data for a precise chronology of the consummation. (Mounce 1998:282)

Therefore, in the words of Robert Mounce:

It is important that one does not project this literary device [that is, apocalyptic literature] onto the one-dimensional plane of historical sequence. The visions are intended to confront readers with vivid portrayals of eschatological truth rather than to supply them with data for a precise chronology of the consummation. (Mounce 1998: 282)

Mounce, Robert H. 1998. *The Book of Revelation*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans)



Paradigm

It is a work of art, imagery that conveys truth – not information

So don't read it like a roadmap or timetable for the future

In other words, the book of Revelation is a work of art, imagery that conveys truth – not information. So we should not read it like a roadmap or a timetable for the future.

Paradigm

The images and symbolism are conceptual, not visual



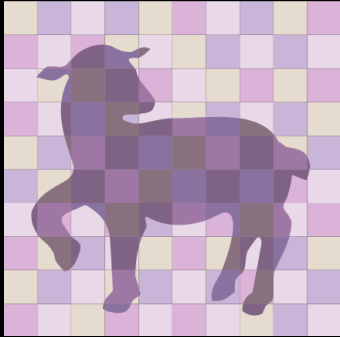
The images and symbolism of Revelation are conceptual, not visual. We are not given photograph-like pictures of what heaven or the future is like. We are not expected to visualise the scenes but rather to understand the point each scene is seeking to make. If we don't get this, we may end up with some strange interpretations.

For instance, in Revelation 4 and 5 we find ourselves in the heavenly throne room. Four living creatures cry out with a loud voice 24 hours a day:



Holy
Holy
Holy

“Holy Holy Holy is the Lord God the Almighty.” So is that what heaven is going to be like: for all eternity, we will be singing the same worship chorus over and over and over and over again? I can understand that some people are a little apprehensive about heaven. In reality, though, I think heaven is going to be richer, more diverse, and with more variation than what we have known on earth. This is not a videotape of heaven; it is a scene that wants to show us heaven as a place of worship, where God’s supremacy is unquestioned – that’s what is about.



Paradigm

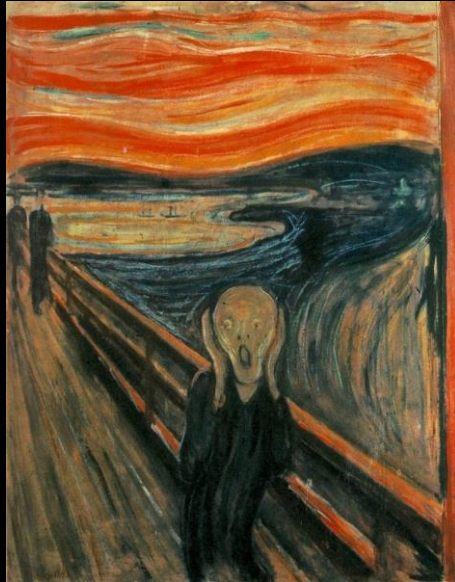
The images and symbolism
are conceptual, not visual

Another example. Also in chapter 5, John is told about the lion of Judah. When he looks, he sees not a lion but a lamb. So how can that be, a lion that is a lamb? The lamb then takes the scroll and starts breaking the seven seals. How does a lamb do that? Of course, in reality, Jesus doesn't look like a lamb walking around in heaven; the images and symbolism are conceptual, not visual. They tell us something about Jesus.



Earlier in the book, in chapter 1, John sees Jesus in the midst of the seven lampstands with seven stars in his right hand. Next thing that happens: John drops down, and Jesus puts his right hand on John.

So what has happened to the seven stars? Did he drop them? No, of course not. Jesus doesn't literally walk through heaven with seven stars in his right hand. This is an image that conveys intimacy and security. It is not a visual reality in heaven. This is art, not photography. In the same way, Jesus doesn't literally have a sword that comes out of his mouth. The sword is an image that represents the word of God. Perhaps the best illustration or parallel that I can come up with for all of this is expressionist art and how it communicates. Let's look at two examples.



This is a painting by Edvard Munch, a Norwegian artist, and it is called “The Scream.” Now, that’s a daring subject for a painting because normally a scream is something you hear, but it is not something that can be seen. The artist has made the scream visible, especially through the use of colour: strong dramatic colour in the background, dark and red. It is especially the dark, the shape of the sea in the background, that brings out the scream. Notice also that there is not much photographic detail in this picture. Especially the face hardly looks like a face at all. We wouldn’t be able to recognize this person from the painting. But that is beside the point because accurate portrayal is not the aim of the painting. It visually expresses a scream.

https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Datei:The_Scream.jpg



This is a painting by the same artist titled “Separation”. And again we don’t have much in terms of photographic information. The woman on the right doesn’t even have a face. But what we do have is the powerful use of colour and contrast: the woman in white is moving out of the picture; on the left are all the dark colours. Presumably, the artist himself is on the left, surrounded by dark clouds. There is also the red in the bush and the hand, suggesting fire and blood: pain. The hand is on his heart, expressing the pain that this separation brings. It is a very expressive painting – of a broken relationship.

In a somewhat similar way, John uses symbolic imagery and contrast to convey his message to us; he is not giving us chronological information about the last days, but an impression of what life on earth in the in-between time is like.

https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Datei:Edvard_Munch_-_Separation_-_Google_Art_Project.jpg

Credits

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Mounce, Robert H. (1997), The Book of Revelation, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans)

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