

APOCALYPTIC GENRE (Andreas Köstenberger)

The very word "apocalypse" conjures up a myriad of images. Scholars typically distinguish between (1) "apocalypse"; (2) "apocalyptic"; and (3) "apocalypticism." "Apocalypse" refers to a particular genre of literature written between approximately 20 BC. and AD. 203. The adjective "apocalyptic" is used when describing either the literary genre or the worldview. "Apocalypticism," finally, denotes a worldview, ideology, or theology merging the eschatological aims of particular groups into a cosmic and political arena. The development of the definition for the apocalyptic genre has a long complex history. Early studies identified formal features such as pseudonymity, visionary accounts, and historical reviews as well as exhibiting a content expressing a doctrine of two ages, pessimism and hope, universalism, and imminent expectation of the end.

In 1979, John J. Collins, in conjunction with a group of scholars, developed the following classic definition:

"Apocalypse" 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."

This definition emphasized the form as a narrative framework involving an otherworldly mediator and the content as containing both temporal (eschatological salvation) and spatial (supernatural world) elements. The definition, however, lacked any reference to the function of an apocalypse. For this reason, a subsequent study group, led by Adela Yarbro Collins, David Hellholm, and David E. Aune, added an amendment in 1986 which stated that an apocalypse is

"intended to interpret present, earthly circumstances in light of the supernatural world and of the future, and to influence the understanding and behavior of the audience by means of divine authority."

This amended definition of the apocalyptic genre, then, pertains to its form, content, and function. The apocalyptic genre exhibits several formal features including visionary accounts, otherworldly mediators, and symbolic language. The apocalyptic genre also expresses content depicting temporal and spatial realities as a way to emphasize the heavenly realities and devalue earthly circumstances. Finally, the apocalyptic genre functions to encourage piety and faithfulness in the midst of suffering or during times of crisis (whether real or perceived).

These definitions broadly encompass all canonical, extrabiblical, rabbinical, and sectarian examples of apocalyptic literature. Not all apocalyptic writings necessarily exhibit every genre characteristic discussed in the above definition. This warrants the need to posit a scaled-down assessment of essential elements attributed to the apocalyptic genre.

The first essential element is that *an apocalypse comprises a visionary or revelatory means of communication*. Apocalyptic literature must reveal some



heavenly or spiritual reality through the agency of a seer or prophet. Usually, the vision is autobiographical and expressed in a narrative framework. In addition, apocalyptic communication frequently employs the use of divine or angelic intermediaries as guides and interpreters. Embedded within this revelatory communication are prophetic exhortations for desired behaviors, choices, and responses from the recipients. Non-essential elements include pseudonymity and historical reviews (written in predictive form).

Second, *apocalyptic literature is saturated with symbolic, figurative, and metaphorical language*. Symbols and other figures constitute the common stock of apocalyptic writing. Human and angelic beings and even animals serve as symbolic representations of spiritual truths. Symbolic imagery may express historical, contemporary, or future events in cosmic terms. By using metaphors when describing cosmic scenarios, the author invests both current and anticipated earthly events with symbolic meaning.

A final element essential to the apocalyptic genre is the *dualism between earthly and heavenly realities, usually steeped in eschatological significance*. Earthly situations are depicted as temporary and transitory in light of the eternal realities of the spiritual world. This heavenly perspective dramatically contrasts the worldly scenarios facing the recipients. Although some scholars downplay the eschatological nature of the visions, apocalyptic literature provides a provocative and effective vehicle for communicating end time expectations. The belief that God is sovereign over history permeates most apocalyptic writings, including the idea that he will radically intervene in the near future to consummate his plans for all creation.