Chapter Title: How Do We Read Apocalyptic Literature?

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Chapter 16

How Do We Read Apocalyptic Literature?

Apocalypse Then and Now

The words *apocalypse* and *apocalyptic* are strikingly common in our culture. Groups claiming the imminent end of the world rise (and fall) all the time. Do a Google Images search of these terms, and you will find a stunning array of pictures depicting mayhem, dystopia, and of course zombies. Lots and lots of zombies. Evidence of the dawning age of the undead can be found on everything from video games to ammunition boxes.

The Bible has apocalyptic ideas too. They are found in Daniel 7–12 and Revelation, most notably. So how do modern understandings of the apocalypse compare to the ancient understandings found in the Bible?

Let's begin with a few definitions. First, when biblical scholars refer to “apocalypse,” they are not talking about a grim and gloomy event of global destruction but rather a particular literary genre. For scholars, an “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.

Admittedly, this definition is just about as dense and mysterious as the visions it tries to describe. So let's do a bit of unpacking.
To say that apocalypses are revelatory is to say that they unveil mysteries, truths, and realities in the "spiritual realm." In fact, the term *apocalypse* in Greek means unveiling, disclosure, or revelation (cf. Rev. 1:1). Apocalypses assume that the cosmos is made up of two realities: the "empirical" world that can be perceived through the senses and the unseen world of God, angels, and other hidden forces. These two worlds interact with one another in a variety of ways, and one function of apocalypses is to reveal how, when, and where those interactions take place. That is, apocalyptic literature narrates or tells a story about the encounter of the otherworldly we can't see and the worldly we can. In that interaction, God and/or God's agents disclose some profound truth we would have otherwise not been able to know.

Daniel 7 is an excellent example of an apocalypse. It begins in the same way many other narratives do—with a chronological notice: "In the first year of King Belshazzar of Babylon, Daniel had a dream and visions of his head as he lay in bed" (Dan. 7:1). What Daniel sees in the night is bizarre and troubling, not only to us but also to him (Dan. 7:15). The chapter begins by narrating what Daniel saw (Dan. 7:1–14), followed by an interpretation of these strange dreams (Dan. 7:15–28). The effect of the chapter's structure is that we the readers, like Daniel, are left to ponder the meaning of these visions until Daniel finally approaches one of YHWH's attendants to ask for an interpretation (Dan. 7:16–18).

We learn in verses 16 through 18 that the four beasts represent "four kings" who "shall arise out of the earth." Despite their terrible might, "the holy ones of the Most High shall receive the kingdom and possess the kingdom forever—forever and ever" (Dan. 7:18). Like other apocalypses, Daniel 7 is fundamentally political; it is about power. But the hidden power that allows these kings to exist and persist is the enthroned "Ancient of Days." For the book of Daniel, *all* earthly power is granted and revoked by God alone (vv. 11–12; cf. Dan. 2:20–23). Even the most terrifying and boastful earthly powers are finally subject to the king over all kings.

The closing book of the Bible, Revelation, is also clearly apocalyptic. It narrates how John finds himself transported into the heavenly throne room of God while he is exiled on the island of Patmos. In this heavenly journey, he catches glimpses of dragons and beasts and warfare and deliverance. Also, John narrates how the faithful will be delivered from powers represented by those dragons and monsters. In the end, he sees a new Jerusalem.
descending from the heavens and planted on a re-created earth. That city becomes the home of the faithful, shielded from death and oppression and constantly accompanied by God's presence. Revelation, like Daniel, is full of symbolic language because the genre of the apocalyptic demands it but more importantly because the truths are such that only powerful symbols can capture them. Symbolic language may be one way to critique safely the current powers of John's time (in his case, the Roman Empire); if a Roman official found Revelation, would he realize that the text is calling for or envisioning the empire's downfall? But more than that, symbolic language may capture truths so profound that mere descriptive language cannot contain them.

These two texts in particular have inspired a great deal of speculation about their meaning. From movies to books and conspiratorial websites, some have sought to unlock the mysteries of these texts. Such readings have treated these texts like puzzles that need to be solved, codes that with the right cypher will show us precisely what the future holds. This is a profound misreading of such literature. Let's focus on a few basics.

1. First, apocalyptic literature is not abstract reflection about some unseen future but a word of encouragement or a word of warning to the communities they address. That is, when we imagine the authors of Daniel and Revelation, we ought not picture a psychic gazing into a cloudy orb to read our futures. These are not just hazy visions about some distant future but concrete declarations about the character of God in profoundly troubling times.

2. Second then, these texts were probably decipherable to their first audiences. The symbols and referents of these books might be confounding to us, but this may have more to do with our cultural and historical distance from these events rather than the obscurity of these texts. After all, why would these texts have been written, interpreted, shared, and transmitted throughout time if they were not significant to those who read and found in them God's word? That is, the author of these texts wrote not to confound but to comfort and confront.

3. Third, these texts are about the present as much as they are about the future. Apocalyptic texts are ways to imagine a faithful way of life in the midst of challenging moments. When the world seems to be collapsing, when all hope is lost, can we trust God's promises? Apocalyptic
literature says yes by pointing to God's promised future so that we can lean into that future with hope even as it seems distant.

4. So, fourth, apocalyptic literature is about faith and hope in the end, not fear or anxiety. These texts sought to empower their readers with faith, not paralyze them with anxiety. These texts declare that judgment is coming, that we too might be caught up in that judgment. And yet we can be sure of God's faithfulness, even in the midst of suffering. We can be certain that God will deliver us. Because of that hope, we need not see the world with fear but with a hope that is infused with God's promises.

**Apocalyptic Literature Matters for Theology**

We might be tempted to treat apocalyptic literature as a sedative in the midst of trouble, as escapist literature. Don't worry about the future. God will be victorious in the end! But these texts ought not function as a mere opiate for the masses. These texts do not provide us with an excuse to sit on our hands as we await the end. These texts can help us think about what is ultimately important. They can sharpen our vision, fill out our hopes, express our deepest fears, and finally affect how we live toward our neighbors in the present.

Here, the apostle Paul is most helpful. Now, Paul's letters aren't the first place many of us think about when we imagine apocalyptic literature, but his letters are tinged at important moments with an apocalyptic imagination, an imagination about what is possible in God's ultimate fulfilling of all of God's promises. Paul emphasizes repeatedly how important the community of faith is, how vital life lived together as sisters and brothers is. For Paul, then, musings on the end are not esoteric or merely otherworldly; instead, his thoughts on the end clarify what life *today* looks like. The future is in service of the present, not the other way around.

In the midst of a discussion about resurrection and God's deliverance of the faithful from death, Paul twice calls for these communities to "encourage one another" with the apocalyptic hopes he outlines (see 1 Thess. 4:18; 5:11). Paul here is explicit about the purpose of eschatological reflection. These theological reflections are not meant to sedate us in the midst of great tribulations. Nor are they meant to lead us to lives of passivity, wherein we
twiddle our thumbs as we await the coming of Jesus. Instead, Paul twice makes clear that these words are meant for mutual encouragement.

Paul says, "Encourage one another with these words." Not inspire fear in one another. Not draw attention to your ability to pinpoint the very day of Christ's return. Not bludgeon one another with these words. Not neglect this teaching. But encourage one another!

In a sense, for Paul, these reflections on the end are about the present day. These reflections teach us not how to live then but how to live now. An apocalyptic imagination can therefore help us think about what is ultimately important.

For too long, too many Christians have ceded theological ground to fanciful eschatological dreamers who treat the living word of God as a mere puzzle to be solved, a complex cypher only the purportedly enlightened can decode. But apocalyptic literature is not about providing a road map to the end of days. Instead, these texts can be a radical way to shape how we relate to God and one another today. They outline a posture of trust in God and God's work. So these texts are not about bold predictions about days yet to come. They are about seeing the work of God in seemingly ordinary, unremarkable moments.

Notes
