

Dr. Dave Mathewson, Hermeneutics, Lecture 20, Apocalyptic

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Another feature of interpreting and reading New Testament epistolary literature or letters is to realize that the possibility of within the broader category of letter or epistle in the first century, but especially in the New Testament, is the possibility of recognizing subtypes in the same way that even in our own day and age under the broader category of a letter we might have different a letter that one would write to a family member would be very different than a letter of complaint that one might write to a company or a letter a cover letter for a job application. So in the first century there also appears to be a number of subtypes of letters that may correspond to certain New Testament letters as well. For example, just to give you a couple of examples, the Book of Philemon or the Letter to Philemon, the shortest letter written by Paul, seems to correspond fairly closely to a possible subtype of letter known as a letter of recommendation or a letter of introduction.

And usually what that entailed was the author, the writer, would introduce or recommend a certain person to someone else, often asking for a favor and including, intending then, or promising to sort of return the favor to the recipient. In other words, when you read the Letter to Philemon, is Philemon or Paul introduces Onesimus, the other main character, the author is Paul, but Philemon is the main recipient. Paul introduces Onesimus to Philemon because Onesimus, while a slave of Philemon who had run away, now has become a Christian through and has been converted through Paul's ministry.

Now Paul writes a letter of recommendation or introduction to send him back and introduce him to Philemon, the recipient, and also asks Philemon for a favor, promising then to do something for Philemon. So it's almost as if Philemon, reading this letter, would recognize his obligation to respond in the way that Paul has asked.

Or, for example, the Book of Philippians has often been labeled a family letter, corresponding, having certain sections of it that correspond to what is known as a family letter, and some of the language perhaps reflecting that.

A couple of letters may correspond to what is known as a testament, which wasn't so much a letter in the first century, but rather an actual literary genre that is a testament was the sort of the last words of a dying hero, as a person was on his deathbed and had his family and friends surrounding him. It was the final instructions to the followers as the person was about ready to die, which included both exhortation and sometimes eschatological prediction in it. You find at least two books that seem to correspond to possibly to a testament, and one of them is 2 Peter chapter 1 and verses 14 and 15 seem to reflect the language of a testament, that is Peter on his deathbed, in a sense.

Now these are his final instructions as he's about ready to pass from this life. These are his final instructions to his followers, starting with verse 13. I'll back up.

This is chapter 1, 2 Peter verse 13. I think it is right to refresh your memory as long as I live in the tent of this body, because I know that I will soon put it aside as our Lord Jesus Christ has made clear to me, and I make every effort to see that after my departure you will always be able to remember these things. And you find similar language in 2 Timothy as well, so that both of these letters, 2 Peter and 2 Timothy, may take the form of a testament in epistolary form, that is the final instructions to the followers of these individuals right before they die.

In 2 Timothy, Paul is speaking in sort of his final words as he faces execution, and both of them could be classified as testamentary type of letters, the final instructions of a dying hero, or the final instructions of Paul and Peter to their followers right before they pass from the scene. One issue related to epistolary literature is how we

understand authorship. Just very briefly, as kind of a digression, but related to issues of genre, because interestingly, we just talked about testaments.

Most of the testaments that we have in copies of, or I referred earlier to a book by James Charlesworth, the *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, in those volumes you can find reference to a number of testaments, English translations of a number of testamentary type of literature. Most of them are what are known as pseudonymous, that is they're written in the name of someone else. It's a later figure writing in the name of or as if an earlier figure is writing long after their death.

And some therefore have suggested that some of the New Testament letters may also be pseudonymous. Is it possible that a few of the letters in the New Testament, such as 2 Peter or 2 Timothy, were written by a pseudonym? That is, after Paul and Peter had died, could someone, one of their followers, picked up a pen and written a letter in their name? And therefore, no one would have been deceived by this, no one would have been fooled thinking that Peter or Paul actually wrote this, but they would have recognized based on the literary genre that someone else was writing in their name. The question is whether this was an acceptable device, not only in the first century, but would this have been an acceptable device among New Testament authors? And would this have been an acceptable device within the parameters of the New Testament canon? I think, number one, good arguments can probably be made for the authorship of all the letters by the person named, though I would admit 2 Peter is far more difficult, and even some Christian or evangelical scholars have recognized the difficulty, even though while retaining Peter as the author of the letter.

But second, it's not clear to me that pseudonymity would have been an acceptable canonical device, that is, it would have been an acceptable device recognized among New Testament authors, especially as the canon was being recognized and formed,

that those letters that would have been pseudonymous would, it's not clear that they would have been accepted and that would have been an acceptable device. But on the other hand, even if we reject pseudonymity, that is, writing in someone else's name, again, long after the actual author is dead, a follower or disciple would have picked up the pen and written in that person's name, even if we reject that, as we've already seen, it's not necessary to hold that the authors physically wrote every last word found in the Emanuensis. And this could sometimes account perhaps for the difference between the letter.

Some persons feel that Peter could not have written 2 Peter because the theology is different, the language and style is very different. Some have suggested this could be accounted for by utilizing a different Emanuensis, or sometimes an Emanuensis, that is, a scribe or secretary that you dictate a letter to. At times, some of them may have been given slightly more freedom, so that they perhaps would have composed much of the letter, but the author still would have signed off on that letter.

So again, that what is written is exactly what Paul or Peter or whoever wanted to be written and would have signed off on and agreed upon as accurately communicating what they wanted to communicate. We saw this with chapter 16 of Romans and verse 22, where Tertius is mentioned as the author or the probably the scribe or the Emanuensis, who has actually written the letter. We find something else very interesting in a couple of Paul's letters, one example in Galatians in the very last chapter, chapter 5, I'm sorry, chapter 6. And notice what Paul says, I'll start with, start reading with chapter 6 in about verse 11.

He says, see what large letters I use as I write to you with my own hand. It's possible that that refers to the entire letter, but is it possible though, that this reflects something that you sometimes see in other ancient letters? And that is out towards the end of the letter, when an author has dictated the letter to a scribe or

Emanuensis, the author would often take up the pen and sign it in his own name or produce the greeting in his own name. So is it possible that Galatians, when you get to chapter 6 and verse 11, that now Paul takes up the pen himself and writes the final greeting and finishes off the letter? So epistolary literature was produced in a variety of ways, mainly by utilizing an Emanuensis or scribe or something like that, which sometimes might account for some of the differences one finds in the letter.

But I will proceed with the assumption that the New Testament letters have been produced by the persons, have been written by the persons, whose name they bear in the introductions to the letters. One other feature just to mention before we just look at a handful of principles for interpreting epistolary literature, is I've already expressed my cautions and misgivings about rhetorical approaches, that is, identifying letters, especially Paul's letters, as examples of rhetorical speeches, deliberative speeches, or judicial speeches, or epideictic speeches. Not that there aren't some similarities and not that there can't be some value in comparing the function of them to certain sections of Paul's letters, not that Paul never uses rhetorical argumentation or things like that, but it seems to me that it's, I think, questionable to take rhetorical speeches of the first century and impose them on New Testament letters.

Instead, again, when you look at the formal features of the letters, when you look at the clues the author leaves himself, it appears that New Testament authors are writing what is nothing less, however different, they are writing nothing less than a typical first century letter, with the introduction or salutation, the thanksgiving, the body, conclusion and greetings, and using typical devices that indicate that that is indeed what they're doing. So I won't repeat my discussion or arguments for Paul primarily writing first century letters and not rhetorical speeches. Let me end by just drawing this together and highlighting just a handful of principles or guidelines for

reading and interpreting first century letters that rise out of the kind of literature it is.

First of all, it's important in interpreting first century letters to reconstruct the historical setting and occasion. We've already mentioned that New Testament letters are highly occasional, responses to specific problems and issues in the early church. So based on the letter itself and based on any information we can gather about the first century situation, it's important to try to reconstruct what most likely was the problem or issue or situation that Paul is addressing or Peter is addressing or James is addressing, and then how is the letter seen as a response to that.

Second, I think it's also important to follow the argument of the letter to note how the thought develops. Again, even more so the narrative is asking how the sentences and clauses, how does the, at both the sentence level and verse level, but also the paragraph level, to be able to explain how the argument develops, to be able to trace the argument of the letter from section to section. For example, just to give you a very quick example, a text that we'll return to later on, but towards the end of this course, but in Romans chapter 6 and verses 1 through 11, we find a good example of how it's important to trace the argument of the text.

First of all, chapter 6 of Romans begins with a typical question-answer format that Paul follows. There's more to be said about this that we'll say later, but frequently Paul will raise a question which appears to be a potential objection to something he's just said, and then he'll answer that question. So notice chapter 6 verse 1, what should we say then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? That's the question that he raises.

The first thing to note then is that it's based on something Paul has previously said, and this is probably just a way of Paul perhaps anticipating possible objections that

the readers might have, not necessarily real objections that may have been voiced, although it could, but it's probably just a way of raising possible objections that someone might have, especially that his readers might have, but using it also to advance his own argument. So if you look at chapter 6, this question, shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase, probably grows out of something he said back in chapter 5, in verses 20 and 21, the very last two chapters. He says, the law was added, this is chapter 5 of Romans verse 20, the law was added so that trespass might increase, but where sin increased, grace increased all the more, so that just as sin reigned in death, so also grace might reign through righteousness to bring eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

So a possible objection or possible question that could be raised, well, if 20 is true, if where sin increases, grace increases all the more, should I sin more so that grace may increase all the more? And that's precisely the question Paul raises, shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? The rest of verses, the rest of this chapter, verses 2 through 11, can be seen as a response to that question, as the answer. No, in fact, the answer is in two forms, kind of an initial outburst, by no means, may it never be, followed more by a logical explanation. We cannot go on sinning because we've been united to Christ who has died to sin.

We've died to sin because we've been united to Christ who himself has died to sin and who has raised us to live in newness of life. That makes that question absurd. So it's important to be able to trace the argument, to understand how the argument flows and how it fits.

We'll talk more about that when we look at issues of literary context later on in a subsequent session. So it's important to be able to follow the argument, to trace the argument, not to just summarize the content, but actually to be able to explain how it develops and how the author develops his argument and his point. A third one, a

third important principle in interpreting epistolary literature is to recognize, again, what section you're dealing with.

Are you dealing with, if you're interpreting a text, are you dealing with a text that is part of a thanksgiving or part of the body, part of the exhortational section, and what difference that might make in the way you read it. Again, particularly whether the author has expanded something and is doing something unique. And then fourth, see if your letter perhaps belongs to a sub-genre, such as Philemon perhaps belonging to a genre, sub-genre known as a letter of recommendation, and whether that might make a difference in the way that you interpret the epistle.

The third literary genre, or actually I would say the third, perhaps better, the third book that represents at least two or three genres in the New Testament is the Book of Revelation. The Book of Revelation seems to be able to be identified, although I'm not convinced the first readers would have clearly separated between all three of these, but three literary types that seem to emerge from the text of Revelation is what is known as Apocalypse and Prophecy and a Letter. The author himself, as we'll see, clearly identifies his work as a prophecy, and it actually begins and ends just like one of Paul's letters, and also fits, it seems to have characteristic features, especially in chapters 4 through 22, seems to have characteristic features of an ancient writing that we have labeled an Apocalypse.

We'll look at that in a moment. The difficulty is with at least one of these, there is no precise analogy in our modern day world. In other words, we're familiar with letters, we write and we read letters, but when's the last time you sat down and read an Apocalypse? Or when's the last time you sat down and wrote an Apocalypse to someone? So that genre criticism or an understanding of literary genre is very important here, and helps us, particularly in this book, to avoid misunderstanding.

As we said, literary genre functions mainly as kind of an entry point into the genre to get us off on the right foot, to get us off to the right start in interpreting the book, though it doesn't solve all the interpretive issues, difficulties one still has to follow internally, how the book develops and unfolds, its sort of own internal genre. But usually misunderstandings of the Book of Revelation come by failing to note these three genres of Apocalypse, Prophecy, and Letter, and a failure to recognize them or to misunderstand what they are. Often, a failure to understand all three of these and what kind of book it is, is what gives rise to misunderstandings of Revelation, particularly at the popular level, where Revelation is used to do all kinds of strange things.

But what we want to do is briefly, as kind of an entry point into the Book of Revelation, is briefly describe these three literary types, these three literary genres. Again, Revelation clearly intends to be read as an epistle or as a letter. In fact, when you read the very beginning, the very first chapter, at least starting with verse 4, it sounds like you're in a sense reading one of Paul's letters.

Notice how verse 4, John, there's the identification of the writer, to the seven churches in the province of Asia, there's the identification of the readers, grace and peace to you. Sounds just like one of Paul's letters. But notice how this gets expanded.

Again, so I would want, I would set up and pay attention to this. The grace and peace, the greeting part gets expanded. Grace and peace to you from him who is and who was and who is to come and from the seven spirits before the throne and from Jesus Christ who is the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead and the ruler of the kings of the earth.

To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood and has made us to be a kingdom of priests, to serve his God and Father, to him be glory forever and ever, glory and power forever and ever. Amen. So that's your epistolary introduction, the salutation.

And notice also Revelation ends like a typical letter. It ends verses 20 and especially 21. Amen, come Lord Jesus.

Verse 21, the grace of the Lord Jesus be with God's people. Amen. Which is a common way of finding New Testament letters ended.

So Revelation clearly intends to be read as a letter. And I don't think this is inconsequential. I think it's illegitimate to overlook that and ignore it.

But second, notice that the author clearly intends to or clearly indicates that he's intending to write a prophecy. Notice the first couple verses of this book, especially verse three. Blessed is the one who reads the words of this prophecy and blessed are those who hear it and take it to heart what is written in it because the time is near.

In chapter 22 again, he will identify the very end of the book, kind of the bookends, very end of the book, he will identify his work as a prophecy and warn those who hear the words of this prophecy not to ignore them and disobey them. And also in another place in chapter 22, clearly identifies this as a prophecy. So the book of the letter, the book of Revelation has the beginning and ending features of the letter.

It indicates John's intention to write a letter to these seven churches in Asia Minor. He clearly identifies his work as a prophecy as well. But chapter one in verse one also indicates John's intention to record another type of literature, that is he begins by saying the revelation or apocalypse of Jesus Christ, the word revelation here comes

from the Greek word Apocalypse or apocalypse, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place.

Now it's from this verse that we get the label for a literary genre apocalypse. I doubt that John is using a revelation or apocalypse here as a label of a genre of a literary type of that came much later. But at the same time, by calling this a revelation of Jesus Christ, which he shows to the prophets and to John, is clearly John intends this book to belong to a literary genre of revelatory literature.

It's to be taken as a revelation, a divine revelation of God to John. But as you read the rest of the book of Revelation, especially chapters 4 through 22, we'll see in just a moment that it actually contains most of the features typical to a group of writings that we now label as apocalypse or apocalyptic literature. And we'll start with that one.

We'll start to examine the literary genre apocalypse. Again, apocalypse is the term that we use to describe this group of writings that share similar features to which Revelation appears to belong and which derives its name actually from Revelation chapter 1 verse 1, the apocalypse or the revelation of Jesus Christ. But just so you know, apocalypse is a modern label.

It's not necessarily one that was used by John and the earliest writers to label their works. Yet at the same time, there clearly seems to be a group of writings that have recognizable similarities and similar features, and we'll talk about what they are. So the first literary type is what is known as an apocalypse that Revelation seems to belong to.

Again, apocalypse is a term that we use to describe a group of writings that were produced roughly during the period of 200 BC to 200 AD. Works such as Daniel, the

book of Daniel in the Old Testament, and the book of Revelation in the New Testament. And by the way, much of what I'm going to say would apply to Daniel as well as the book of Revelation since they seem to share the same literary features and belong to the same literary genre.

But there were other Jewish and Christian apocalypses produced during this time of roughly 200 BC to 200 AD that are not included in the Old New Testament. As I've already mentioned before, you can find English translations of most of these documents collected in two-volume work by James Charlesworth called the Old Testament Pseudepigrapha. Volume number one contains English translation by a variety of scholars of most of these apocalypses, or an easier way if you want to google them, type in the name of the apocalypse and you can find English translations online.

But what these are is apocalypses are basically narrative accounts, first-person narrative accounts, of the visionary experience or of the revelatory experience of a human being. And having had that revelatory experience, now they give a narrative account or a report of what it was they saw. Sometimes this visionary experience is in the form of a dream.

We find that going on in Daniel. Sometimes it's an actual visionary transport. The person has an experience where it's almost as if they're almost an out-of-body type experience where they are transported by God's Spirit to certain locations to see different things.

So common behind all of these is some type of visionary experience where they see things and now they record them for these visions for the benefit of their audience. The visions usually are visions of the heavenly world. Sometimes they have visions of heaven or hell, the place of judgment.

Often these are visions of eschatological end-time events as well. Probably the most popular definition that I've come, one of the more helpful ones I've come across, but I find it repeated in almost every book, almost every book that deals with apocalyptic literature quotes this definition or at least uses it as a starting point. This was a definition by a scholar named John Collins who has done a lot of work on apocalyptic literature and he defined an apocalypse as this.

He says, an apocalypse is a genre of revelatory literature within a narrative framework in which a revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being, usually an angel, to a human recipient disclosing a transcendent reality which is both temporal insofar as it envisions eschatological salvation and which is spatial insofar as it involves another supernatural world. Now let me unpack this definition again. Let me say it one more time since most of you are listening to this.

An apocalypse is a genre of revelatory literature, literature that communicates a revelation within a narrative framework in which a revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being, an angelic being, to a human recipient disclosing a transcendent reality which is both temporal insofar as it envisions eschatological salvation and is spatial insofar as it involves another supernatural world. So let me just briefly unpack this definition. Number one is it's important to understand in this definition that an apocalypse is a record of a revelation to a human recipient.

So the human recipient would be, in our case, John, but would be the author of the apocalypse who has a revelatory experience primarily through means of vision and now records that. Number two, notice that it's a narrative of that account. So apocalyptic literature can in a sense be treated like narrative literature.

It's a narration of something that the author has experienced and seen through this revelation, this revelatory experience. A third part of this definition that is important is that this revelation is primarily about a transcendent perspective. What that means is it's primarily a revelation about something that transcends the present visible earthly world.

So it's kind of an out-of-this-world experience. Now we'll see that does not mean that the author doesn't, that this world is unimportant and it's kind of an escape to a heavenly reality and heavenly existence. It's not quite that, but it is a revelation of a world and a reality that transcends the physical world that can be seen by the human eye.

And so the only appropriate way for someone to know this transcendent reality is to have it revealed to him or her. So apocalypse is about a transcendent reality. It provides a transcendent perspective by opening up the reader, the seer, this human recipient, by opening him or her up to this transcendent reality that, as we'll see, is meant to cast a new perspective on the physical earthly reality that they live in.

So it's not meant to be a means of escape, but it's meant to open their physical world up to be understood in light of this transcendent reality, this transcendent perspective that can only be known through a direct revelation. Apart from a revelation and this visionary experience through this other supernatural being, this other worldly being, human recipients simply couldn't know it. There's two features of this transcendent perspective.

Number one, in this definition, it's often temporal. That is, it refers to eschatology or the end of the world. In other words, a vision that transcends time.

It goes beyond their time to include temporally the eschatological end, but it's also spatial in that the fifth thing is it's spatial. That is, the vision, the transcendent perspective, is usually of a heavenly world. It introduces them to a heavenly reality, a heavenly world, again, one that could not be seen merely by human perception.

So again, what this means is the fact that it's both temporal and spatial is apocalypses are not just about the future. Often we've read books like Revelation or Daniel just about future events, but it's also to reveal a different reality, a different perspective, a heavenly world, a different perspective on reality and life. We'll talk more about that, but two other things I want to add to this definition of apocalyptic literature is, first of all, is this transcendent reality that's about temporally, about the future, but also spatially, about the heavenly world, is communicated and couched in highly symbolic language.

If one of the things you know when reading the apocalypses is how they communicate through very graphic imagery. Oftentimes they'll use animal imagery. Often they'll use imagery that sometimes is a combination of animals and human things and other things that reveal rather bizarre, at times, symbols.

And Revelation as well primarily communicates, perhaps even one of the features that some think is even more prevalent in Revelation than other apocalypses, is the amount of symbolism that one finds in it. For example, this is Revelation chapter 9 and chapters 8 and 9 are an account in Revelation of the author's vision of the pouring out of seven bowls and as each bowl is poured out in the earth, something happens. And notice in chapter 9, notice what the author sees in the kind of the strange, this is the fifth bowl that's poured out, or I'm sorry, the fifth trumpet.

I have the trumpet and bowls. The bowls come later. This is the trumpets.

As the fifth trumpet is sounded in chapter 9, something happens and these locusts come out and I want you to note how he describes these locusts. We might talk about these later, but right now I'm just interested in you seeing the symbolism and the kind of the graphic nature of the imagery and how the symbols sometimes are put together in ways, at least to us, that are kind of strange, though they may not have been so strange to the first readers. But chapter 9, the fifth angel sounded his trumpet and I saw a star that had fallen from the sky to the earth.

The star was given a key to the shaft of the abyss. When he opened the abyss, smoke came out of it, like smoke from a gigantic furnace. The sun and skies were darkened by the smoke from the abyss and out of the smoke locusts came down upon the earth and were given power like that of scorpions of the earth.

They were told not to harm the grass of the earth or any plant or tree, but only those people who did not have the seal of God on their foreheads. They were not given power to kill them, but only torture them for five months, which was, five months was, was probably the common lifestyle of a locust in, during that time in the first century. And the agony they suffered was like the sting of a scorpion.

So these are locusts that can harm people and sting them in the same way that a scorpion can. Let me skip down to starting with verse seven, where they begin to be described. The locusts look like horses prepared for battle.

Now you have these locusts that kind of look like horses. On their heads they wore something like crowns of gold and their faces were like human faces. Their hair was like a woman's hair.

Their teeth were like a lion's teeth. They had breastplates like breastplates of iron and the sound of their wings was like the sound of many horses and chariots rushing

into battle. They had tails that stung like scorpions and in their tails they had the power to torment people for five months.

And they had a king over them, which was the angel of the abyss. So here you have John, John seeing a vision of these locusts, but they're certainly more than locusts. They have tails like scorpions that can sting and cause harm.

They have human-like heads with crowns on them and a face like a man, but hair like a woman and teeth like a lion. I mean, what in the world is this thing that John is looking at? What is this that he sees in his vision? But my point at this stage in our discussion is simply to note that the graphic symbolism and the description of the symbols and what John sees in his vision. So you have the earth, this transcendent reality of the eschatological future, temporally, and also the heavenly world is communicated in highly symbolic language.

The second thing I would add to this definition is an emphasis on the function. The function of apocalypses seems to be to both console and exhort God's people based on this transcendent perspective. So by providing a transcendent perspective on reality, an apocalypse is able to motivate the readers to obedience to God and his word.

It functions to console those who are suffering, but also to exhort God's readers to bring them in line with how God desires his people to live. So in other words, apocalypses, again, are not just there for speculation about the future and about heaven, although sometimes some other apocalypses might engage in some of that, but primarily they function to exhort and console God's people. They have a hortatory purpose.

When it comes to understanding, then, apocalypses, to look a little bit more at this idea of a transcendent perspective and what an apocalypse like Revelation does, basically what it does is it then functions to open up the present to this new and transcendent perspective. That is, Revelation and other apocalypses are not meant to just be fantasy literature. Again, it's not meant to provide an escape.

It's not just a way of escaping this world by providing this heavenly alternative kind of fantasy world that the readers can escape to. But instead, it's meant to help the readers see their present world in a new light. As they look out, as many apocalypses did, and as many apocalypses presupposed, as the readers looked out at their empirical world, where they were often in situations of foreign domination, where some of them may be oppressed by the foreign domination, or maybe some of them were elites and compromising with and participating in the foreign influence and foreign rule, what an apocalypse did is it cast a different perspective on their empirical world.

As they looked out on it, what an apocalypse said is, things aren't all that they appear to be. What you see with the eye in the physical world, under foreign rulership, etc., everything that's going on in their situation, what you see is only part of the story. That's not all that there is.

What an apocalypse is, is there is a reality that lies beyond what you see, but that is related to it and influences it, and will help you see it and respond to it and live in it in a new light. A revelation that can only be known, or I'm sorry, a reality, a perspective that can only be known through a divine revelation. So again, an apocalypse then reveals a transcendent reality about the future and about the heavenly world that shapes how the author or how the readers should look at their present world.

By opening up their present world that they see empirically and experience empirically, by opening it up to a transcendent perspective, a heavenly reality that lies behind it, but influences it, and a future that reader then is able to see their present in a new light. I often compare this to watching a play. If you ever have been to watch a play or performance, whether at a school or more professionally done, usually all you see is what's going on in the stage.

You see the actors performing and interacting with each other, and you watch the story all the way to the conclusion. Sometimes what you don't see is what goes on behind the curtain that makes the play work. You don't see the manager and the stage directors, you don't see the technicians making the lighting work, and you don't see the prop people and the costume people all at work to make this play work.

All you see is the play. If you were to lift the curtain so you could see backstage behind the scenes, you might find everything that makes that work and everything that helps make sense of that play. The play can be made sense of its own, but you'll see the workings that make it work and have brought it about.

Apocalypse does that in a sense. It lifts the curtain behind history and earthly reality to expose you to a heavenly reality and to a future that makes sense of what's going on in the present. In light of this knowledge of the heavenly world and the future that is made available only through a divine revelation, the readers are now able to see their situation in a new light.

Again, empirically, what they see in their world is not all there is. There's another reality that lies behind it that helps them to see it in new light. Both Daniel and Revelation are written in the context of struggle to live life out in a pagan environment and under a pagan empire, where some in fact are being objects of

oppression and are suffering, but others are compromising and willing to participate in that pagan domination and pagan empire and system.

What Daniel and Revelation does then, what they do, is present a transcendent perspective, open up the reader's perception to see a heavenly reality and a future that should determine the way they respond to their situation in the present. So that's sort of what an Apocalypse does. Again, Revelation, then I take it, is trying to help the readers living in a first century, as I'll demonstrate later, living in this first century Roman empire dominated by Rome.

When they look out empirically, they see the emperor seated on the throne, they see Roman domination, they see all the good things Rome has done for the world, but John in Revelation says, let me show you another perspective. Let me provide a heavenly and eschatological perspective on what it is you are seeing so that you will be able to respond to it and live in it in a new light. As a prophecy, the second literary feature of Revelation that we won't talk about a lot, we've discussed prophetic literature in relationship to Old Testament prophecy, but as a prophecy, Revelation then, in line with Old Testament prophets, and when you read Revelation carefully, John does claim to write in the tradition of and in line with Old Testament prophecies of the past, such as Isaiah and Ezekiel and Jeremiah.

He takes up much of their writings and now utilizes them and integrates them into his own work. So, Revelation as a prophecy, like Old Testament prophetic texts, primarily, I take it, is foretelling, or forth telling, and not just, or not primarily foretelling. That is, the book of Revelation as a prophecy is the proclamation of a message to the modern readers that will help them deal with their situation.

It's a call for people to take seriously their relationship to Jesus Christ and a call for readers to follow Jesus Christ no matter what the consequences, not just a prediction

of events to take place in the future. Any approach to Revelation that starts with that perspective that this is a prediction of future events has misunderstood its literary type. It's a prophecy.

That is, it's the proclamation of a message from God, from Jesus Christ to his people, to get them to follow Jesus Christ in obedience no matter what the consequences. So, it's a message for their situation. But also, like Old Testament prophets, it's a message rooted in history.

Again, this is not fantasy literature, but it's however much it is rooted in symbolic language in this heavenly perspective, it's still about the reader's situation in a given historical context and historical situation. So, we should expect Revelation to be referring to actual events, actual persons, actual places in the first century, but also in the future as well, however symbolically and however metaphorically those might be described. And finally, we've already said that the book of Revelation is also a letter.

It clearly begins like a letter. It clearly ends just like one of Paul's letters. It's even entirely possible, perhaps the author, given the importance of Paul's letters in Asia Minor and the Greco-Roman world of the first century, given the importance of Paul's letters in the first century churches, perhaps the author is in a sense imitating Paul in his letter format because of the importance that played.

But having said that, at the least, what this means as a letter, if we take this seriously as a letter, and I think we should, that means that Revelation is just as occasional as any of Paul's letters. That is, we must understand Revelation in light of the historical context and the historical cultural background that caused this letter to be written, this apocalypse to be recorded for the readers. We must read it in light of the specific problems that it was addressing, and we must see Revelation as a response to very

specific situations and circumstances and problems in the first century, just as much as Paul's letters were, just as much as Peter's letters, or just as much as the letter of James was.

Unfortunately, most ignore this feature of the book of Revelation that roots it in its original historical context, but I would argue we need to take it seriously. Now, what does this mean for interpretation of the book of Revelation? And I just want to highlight a handful of what I think are principles that arise out of the literary genre that should guide us in reading it, and much of what I'm going to say also applies to the only other canonical apocalypse, and that is the book of Daniel. And by the way, just as sort of an aside again, I know I have a lot of these throughout the lectures, but as another aside, it's important to realize that while there may be other books in the New and Old Testament that include apocalyptic type language, actually Daniel and Revelation are the only true apocalypses that is that record an actual visionary experience of a reader.

Other places like Matthew 24 and 25, or other texts that are called apocalyptic, in a sense aren't, because they don't really record the visionary experience of an author, although they might include eschatological language or apocalyptic type language. Ezekiel is the other text that probably I think most clearly resembles an apocalypse, especially chapters 40 through 48 that do clearly record a visionary experience of an author. In John himself draws heavily on Ezekiel, probably for that reason.

But much of what I'm going to say could apply to Daniel also, but it will be primarily focused on interpreting the book of Revelation. But the first thing to note that I think clearly emerges from the type of literature that Revelation is as an apocalypse, is that we must be alert to the symbolism of Revelation. Now, Revelation does, and Daniel does as well, but Revelation refers, as we've said, to actual events and actual persons.

It describes actual events, I would argue, in the first century. Again, Revelation is trying to make sense of the reader's own situation. But it also refers to actual events that will transpire in the future, especially in the eschatological future, the wrap-up of history.

But in describing actual events, it describes them through metaphorical and symbolic language. It does not describe them literally. Reading Revelation is not like watching a CNN news documentary or a BBC documentary on some world event.

But instead, it's more like looking at a painting or an artistic impression. Revelation, again, communicates symbolically. It refers to actual events, but it refers to those events through symbols and images, not literally.

Probably the closest analogy, modern-day analogy, to Revelation, and again, this is not original with me, I found it in several works, but I found it helpful, that is to compare Revelation to a political cartoon. A political cartoon, if you've ever read one, a political cartoon is a commentary on and is referring to actual historical events, political events and persons. But when you read a political cartoon, you'll notice that it uses graphic symbols and images, and sometimes it uses exaggeration and caricature to get across its point.

Instead of just a paragraph of prose, narration of what's going on politically, a straightforward description, a political cartoon is a more effective way to get across a certain perspective on the political situation. And sometimes the images are even, at times, the images are sometimes stock images that we know what they mean. So at least in the United States, context of the United States of America and their political system, if you're reading a political cartoon and you see an eagle, you know that that symbolizes the United States of America.

If you see a donkey or an elephant, those aren't referring to literal animals, they're symbolic of two political parties, the Republicans and the Democrats. So, and even when physical persons are portrayed in the political cartoon, they're often exaggerated and caricatured, so that you kind of get the point and you can identify who they are. So the point about political cartoons is while they refer to actual historical events, things happening in history and in time, the author describes them in highly graphic and symbolic language, so that you will get the point and you'll see it in a new light.

That's what revelation does. A revelation, like a political cartoon, is a commentary on historical events, things going on in the reader's day and things that will transpire in the future, but depicting them in highly graphic, symbolic language, so that the readers will get the point, to sort of cast a new light on the situation, to affect their, not just intellectually, but aesthetically and emotionally, so that they'll respond in a different way. I was raised, so revelation communicates symbolically, that's very important.

I was raised in the context that said, you need to interpret revelation literally, unless there's really good reason not to. That should be turned on its head, and in light of the kind of literature revelation is, I think better is, we should interpret revelation symbolically, unless there's really good reason not to. So, first of all, is the need to come to grips with the symbolism.

In our next session, we'll look a little bit more detail at that and give some examples and illustrations of how interpreting revelation symbolically would work, and how symbols function, and what they do, and how we should read them.