

Dr. David Mathewson, Revelation, Session 2, Literary Genre—Apocalyptic, Prophetic, Epistle Resources from NotebookLM

1) Abstract, 2) Audio podcast, 3) Study Guide, 4) Briefing Document, and 5) FAQs

1. Abstract of Mathewson, Revelation, Session 2, Literary Genre— Apocalyptic, Prophetic, Epistle, Biblicalelearning.org, BeL

This lecture excerpt from Dr. Dave Mathewson's course on the Book of Revelation explores the book's literary genres: **apocalypse**, **prophecy**, and **epistle**. The lecture defines **apocalypse** as a first-person account of a visionary experience revealing heavenly knowledge through symbolism, not just predicting the future, but offering a new perspective on the present. **Prophecy**, according to the lecture, is not primarily about fortune-telling, but a message from God calling for faithfulness and warning against judgment. Finally, the **epistle** form suggests that Revelation addresses specific historical circumstances and problems faced by its original audience, the seven churches of Asia. The lecture concludes by suggesting that understanding these genres is crucial for proper interpretation.

**2. 15 - minute Audio Podcast Created on the basis of
Dr. Mathewson, Revelation, Session 2 – Double click icon to
play in Windows media player or go to the
Biblicalelearning.org [BeL] Site and click the audio podcast link
there (New Testament → Revelation).**



**Mathewson_Revela
tion_Session02.mp3**

3. Briefing Document

Okay, here is a detailed briefing document summarizing the key themes and ideas from the provided lecture excerpt by Dr. Dave Mathewson on the literary genres of the Book of Revelation:

Briefing Document: Literary Genres of Revelation

Overview: This lecture focuses on understanding the Book of Revelation through its literary genres: Apocalyptic, Prophetic, and Epistle. Dr. Mathewson emphasizes the importance of interpreting the book within its historical and literary context, rather than immediately trying to apply it to modern events. He argues that understanding the literary forms is crucial for accurate interpretation, as these forms would have been well-known to John and his original audience.

Key Themes and Ideas:

1. Context is Paramount:

- Dr. Mathewson stresses that, like any biblical book, Revelation must be understood in its historical and literary context. He criticizes the tendency to jump to modern-day correlations: "Often we neglect that or forget that when it comes to the book of Revelation, and we often are tempted to jump right to our own modern day and try to correlate what's going on in our day with what we find in Revelation."
- Interpreters have historically tried to fit events of their own time to the book, but Mathewson insists on analyzing the book in light of its original context: "Church history literally since the second, third, and fourth century, interpreters of Revelation have done that. They've seen events in their own day and have been convinced that those events were the key to understanding and unlocking Revelation or that Revelation was directly speaking to or predicting those very events."

1. Revelation as a Tri-Genre Work:

- Revelation is presented not as a single genre, but as a combination of three: an apocalypse, a prophecy, and an epistle. He states: "Revelation, as most interpreters agree, consists of at least three literary forms, an apocalypse, a prophecy, and an epistle."

- The lecture then primarily concentrates on understanding the apocalyptic genre, but later moves into prophecy and epistle formats.

1. **Apocalyptic Literature: Not Just About the End of the World:**

- While the modern understanding of "apocalypse" is associated with catastrophic end-times scenarios, the first-century understanding of an "apocalypse" was primarily a literary form: "Yet in the first century, when we talk about an apocalypse in relationship to the first century, I'm not convinced they would have understood that as a reference to the end of the world or some worldwide disaster, but they would have understood it as a literary form."
- The term comes from the Greek word *apokalupsis* meaning "unveiling" or "uncovering".
- Apocalyptic literature flourished roughly from 200 BC to 200 AD and included works like 1 & 2 Enoch, 2 Baruch, and 4 Ezra.

1. **Characteristics of Apocalyptic Literature:**

- **First-Person Visionary Narrative:** It's a narrative account of someone's visionary experience, written in autobiographical form. Mathewson explains: "First of all, an apocalypse, as a literary form, as a type of literature, an apocalypse was basically a first-person narrative account of someone's vision. So, it assumes that someone has had a visionary experience and now writes that down in autobiographical form."
- **Focus on the Heavenly Realm:** Apocalypses are primarily about the heavenly world and God's intentions, not just predictions of the future. He notes: "apocalypses are primarily about the heavenly world and about the future... the apocalypse was meant to disclose the secrets of heaven, to disclose the heavenly world." This is shown in Revelation itself, where chapters 4 and 5 describe the heavenly throne room before moving into end-times events.
- **Symbolic Language and Imagery:** Apocalypses employ highly symbolic language, metaphors, and imagery to communicate heavenly truths, recognizing they transcend literal earthly reality. Mathewson explains: "the information about the heavenly world and the future is communicated through highly symbolic language and imagery. Metaphors and symbolism are the primary modes of communication." He explains the function of symbols: "Also though, symbolism has a way of communicating that is more powerful than straightforward, more

literal means of communication... the symbolism often not only communicates as far as content but does so in a way that evokes emotions."

- **New Perspective on the Present:** Apocalyptic visions are meant to provide a new, transcendent perspective on the present situation of the readers, particularly in times of crisis or oppression. "An apocalyptic vision is meant to provide a new perspective on the present, and the present time of the readers... an apocalypse is meant to reveal and divulge or disclose information of the heavenly realms... The intention behind this was to provide a perspective on their situation, to allow them to see it in a new light so that they can respond accordingly."
- **Encouragement and Warning:** The primary function of an apocalypse is not to predict the future, but to encourage the faithful and warn those who compromise.

1. Analogies to Understand Apocalyptic Function:

- **Political Cartoons:** Dr. Mathewson uses political cartoons as an analogy. Like apocalypses, cartoons use symbolic and exaggerated imagery to comment on actual political situations and people. "When you read a political cartoon... you note that the images are sometimes exaggerated... they communicate through symbols and metaphors... They are actually referring to literal persons, events, and places... But apocalypses describe those persons, places, and events like a political cartoon with highly symbolic and imaginative, sometimes even exaggerated images so that you get the point."
- **Watching a Play:** He also compares it to watching a play, where the audience only sees the action on stage, while the backstage workings (which are critical) remain hidden. Apocalypses lift the "curtain" to show the heavenly reality behind the earthly one. He notes: "The play would be similar to simply what you see with your eyes... And what an apocalypse does, is it lifts the curtain so that you can see behind the scenes and behind the stage to see what is actually going on."

1. Revelation as Prophecy:

- John repeatedly refers to his book as a prophecy, indicating a connection to the Old Testament prophetic tradition. He uses language found in the Old Testament prophets. Mathewson states: "John clearly labels his book or intends his book to be read as a prophecy... John clearly writes as if he is writing in the tradition of the Old Testament prophets."

- Prophets were not primarily fortune tellers, but called the people back to their covenant relationship with God. He explains: "A prophet was not a fortune teller simply telling the future for the sake of the people to know what's going to happen in the future... a prophet was meant to call God's people back to the covenant relationship."
- Prophecy is rooted in history and focuses on God's intervention in history.
- Prophecy centers on judgment and salvation for the faithful and unfaithful.
- Prophecy, like apocalypse, serves to encourage and warn God's people.

1. **Revelation as Epistle:**

- Revelation begins and ends like a first-century letter. Mathewson notes: "Revelation begins and ends just like a letter, a first-century letter or epistle... The beginning and the end of the book sound a lot like one of Paul's letters."
- The letters are "occasional," meaning they address specific problems or situations in their audience, the seven churches of Asia. He states: "one of the characteristic features of a letter is what New Testament scholars call, they are occasional... a letter was produced and written in response to very specific circumstances or problems or issues."
- This implies that Revelation was written to communicate relevant information to its first readers, addressing their specific needs and circumstances.

1. **Authorship:**

- The author is identified as John, with debate on whether this is John the Apostle or another John.
- Regardless, the author does not base his authority on his apostleship but on his role as an Old Testament-like prophet. Mathewson states, "John does not claim, even if this is the apostle John, it's interesting, that he does not base his authority on his apostleship. Instead, he claims the authority of an Old Testament prophet."

Significance:

This lecture is crucial for developing a proper hermeneutic (method of interpretation) for Revelation. By recognizing its complex literary structure, one can avoid misinterpretations that arise from isolating the text from its intended meaning within the historical and literary context of the first century.

Next Steps (According to the lecture):

The next section of the course will delve into how these three literary genres (apocalypse, prophecy, epistle) influence the way we should interpret the Book of Revelation. The lecture implies it will move into specific hermeneutical principles derived from these genre distinctions.

4. Mathewson, Revelation, Session 2, Literary Genre— Apocalyptic, Prophetic, Epistle

Revelation Study Guide: Literary Genres

Quiz

1. What are the three primary literary genres that characterize the book of Revelation, according to Dr. Mathewson?
2. In the context of the first century, how would the term "apocalypse" have been understood differently from today's common understanding?
3. What are the two primary purposes of apocalyptic literature according to Mathewson, and how are they connected to the present circumstances of the audience?
4. What is the significance of symbolic language in apocalyptic literature, and what does it evoke beyond literal communication?
5. How does Dr. Mathewson use the analogies of a political cartoon and a play to illustrate the function of an apocalypse?
6. According to the lecture, how does John, the author of Revelation, present himself, and how does this differ from other apocalyptic writers of the time?
7. What is the primary function of a prophet in the Old Testament, and how does this relate to John's intent in writing Revelation?
8. According to the lecture, what is an "occasional" letter, and how does this characteristic affect our understanding of Revelation?
9. How does the author's use of Old Testament language and imagery contribute to the authority of Revelation?
10. What does Mathewson suggest are the literary forms Revelation uses to address its audience's circumstances?

Quiz Answer Key

1. According to Dr. Mathewson, the three primary literary genres that characterize the book of Revelation are an apocalypse, a prophecy, and an epistle (or letter).
2. In the first century, the term "apocalypse" would have been understood as a literary form, a type of writing with specific characteristics, rather than as a

reference to the end of the world or some global catastrophe, as it is commonly understood today.

3. The primary purposes of apocalyptic literature are to provide encouragement to God's people facing oppression and to warn those who compromise their faith. These purposes are directly connected to the present circumstances of the audience, helping them to see their situations in a new light and to respond accordingly.
4. Symbolic language in apocalyptic literature is used to communicate heavenly realities, evoke emotions, and involve the reader's entire being. It emphasizes the theological meaning rather than the precise, literal identity of what was seen and also enhances the power of the message.
5. Dr. Mathewson uses the analogy of a political cartoon to show that apocalypses use symbolic and exaggerated imagery to communicate about actual persons and events. He uses the analogy of a play to illustrate how apocalypses reveal a hidden, heavenly reality that influences the visible world.
6. John presents himself as a contemporary and fellow sufferer with his readers, unlike most apocalyptic authors of the time who wrote pseudonymously under the names of figures from the past. John claims authority in the tradition of Old Testament prophets, rather than as an apostle.
7. The primary function of a prophet in the Old Testament was to proclaim a message from God, calling the people back to their covenant relationship and faithfulness, warning them of the consequences of disobedience. John intends for Revelation to be read with the authority of the Old Testament prophets.
8. An "occasional" letter is one written in response to specific circumstances, problems, or issues faced by the readers, not just something written at random. This means that Revelation should be interpreted as a response to real issues in the first-century churches it addresses.
9. The author's use of Old Testament language and imagery establishes a connection to the prophetic tradition, granting the book authority and demonstrating that Old Testament prophecies reach their climax in Jesus Christ.
10. Revelation uses the literary forms of an apocalypse, prophecy, and epistle to address its audience's circumstances by providing a unique vision of reality, encouraging them towards faithfulness, warning against compromise, and framing it all within an intentional historical context.

Essay Questions

1. Discuss the interplay between the apocalyptic, prophetic, and epistolary genres in Revelation. How does each genre contribute to the overall message and purpose of the book, and how do they interact to create a unique literary work?
2. Analyze the use of symbolism in Revelation, exploring its purpose and effectiveness. Consider specific examples and explain how the symbolic language contributes to the meaning and impact of the book.
3. Compare and contrast the characteristics of apocalyptic literature as described in the lecture with other ancient apocalypses like 1 Enoch or 4 Ezra. How does Revelation both conform to and diverge from the established conventions of the genre?
4. Evaluate the argument that Revelation should be understood as a response to the specific historical and social context of its original audience. How does understanding the historical background of the seven churches in Asia Minor impact our interpretation of the book?
5. Based on the material provided, how might you begin interpreting the symbolic language of Revelation in relation to its historical, literary, and theological context?

Glossary of Key Terms

- **Apocalypse:** A literary genre characterized by a first-person narrative account of someone's visionary experience revealing heavenly secrets or future events. The purpose is to provide encouragement or warning for a specific community in crisis.
- **Prophecy:** A message from God delivered by a prophet, often calling people back to faithfulness to their covenant and warning of the consequences of disobedience. Old Testament prophecy was not just for predicting the future, but also included critiques of ungodly nations and empires.
- **Epistle:** A letter written in response to specific circumstances or issues. First-century letters often had a defined structure and were meant to communicate with authority to specific readers, addressing their needs and concerns.
- **Symbolism:** The use of symbolic language and imagery to communicate deeper meanings and evoke emotions. In apocalyptic literature, symbolism is often used to represent transcendent or heavenly realities that are difficult to express literally.
- **Pseudonymous:** A characteristic of some ancient apocalypses in which the author writes under the name of a famous historical figure.
- **Occasional:** A term used to describe a letter written in response to specific circumstances, crises, or issues, rather than as a general or timeless communication.
- **Seer:** The person who has a vision in an apocalyptic text. The seer often relates this vision in the first person.
- **Eschatology:** The part of theology concerned with death, judgment, and the final destiny of the soul and of humankind.
- **Hermeneutical Principles:** The rules and methods used for interpreting texts, which are influenced by genre, context, and authorial intent.

5. FAQs on Mathewson, Revelation, Session 2, Literary Genre—Apocalyptic, Prophetic, Epistle, Biblicalelearning.org (BeL)

Frequently Asked Questions about the Book of Revelation

- **What are the primary literary genres that characterize the Book of Revelation, and why is it important to understand them?**
- The Book of Revelation is primarily characterized by three literary genres: apocalypse, prophecy, and epistle. Understanding these genres is crucial because they would have been well-known to John and his first readers, shaping how they understood the book's message. Recognizing these genres helps us interpret the book in its original historical and literary context, rather than imposing modern interpretations that might miss its intended meaning.
- **What is an apocalypse, and how does it function as a literary genre in Revelation?**
- An apocalypse, as a literary genre, is a first-person narrative of a seer's visionary experience. It assumes that heavenly knowledge, the secrets of the universe, and future events can only be revealed through direct divine revelation. In Revelation, the apocalyptic genre is evident in John's vivid visions, symbolic language, and his descriptions of the heavenly realm. The goal of the apocalypse in Revelation is not solely to predict the future but to provide a divine perspective on the present situation of the readers, offering both encouragement and warning. It's about unveiling the heavenly reality that influences and impinges upon earthly reality.

- **How does the symbolic language and imagery used in Revelation contribute to its message, and why is it important to interpret it carefully?**
- The symbolic language and imagery in Revelation are not meant to be taken literally but are the primary modes of communicating heavenly realities and transcendent truths. The author uses metaphors and symbols, many of which are rooted in the Old Testament, to evoke emotions, engage the imagination, and communicate theological meanings that go beyond straightforward literal language. Interpreting these symbols requires us to understand their historical and literary context, recognizing that they often point to deeper theological truths rather than precise factual identities. For example, the symbolic language often focuses on the theological meaning rather than the precise, exact identity of what the author saw.
- **In what ways does Revelation function as a prophecy, and what is the purpose of prophecy in the biblical context?**
- Revelation functions as a prophecy by proclaiming a message from God to his people, calling them back to faithfulness. It is in line with the tradition of the Old Testament prophets, using their language and imagery. A prophet, in the biblical context, is not primarily a predictor of the future but a covenant enforcer who calls people back to their relationship with God. While prophecy does include future elements, its purpose is primarily to encourage the faithful, warn against compromise, and reveal God's plans for his people within history. Revelation uses its prophetic element to provide a critique of godless empires and warn of impending judgment for those who compromise.
- **How does Revelation's nature as an epistle shape its interpretation, and what does it mean for a New Testament letter to be "occasional"?**
- Revelation's form as an epistle indicates that it was written to address specific circumstances or crises in the first-century churches. An "occasional" letter means that it is a response to specific problems, not a general treatise. This aspect of Revelation means that the messages and warnings are directly relevant to the original readers' historical context. While Revelation is apocalyptic and prophetic, the letter format tells us the original message was intended to communicate something that the readers could understand and that would address their situation. The message was not given in a vacuum.

- **Is the primary focus of Revelation predicting future events, or is there a different purpose?**
- While Revelation does contain elements of future events, its primary focus is not solely on predicting the future. The book serves to offer a transcendent perspective on the present situations of its readers. It encourages faithful endurance and warns against compromise by unveiling the heavenly reality that underlies their experiences. Revelation gives readers the understanding that there's more than meets the eye and that there is a heavenly reality that influences their earthly one. The message is less about anticipating a specific timeline of future events and more about empowering its audience to respond to their current reality in light of God's overarching purposes.
- **How do modern-day analogies like political cartoons and watching a play help us understand how apocalypses work?**
- Political cartoons help us grasp how an apocalypse uses symbolic and exaggerated imagery to comment on real situations, using imagery and symbols familiar to its audience. This analogy highlights the non-literal communication and the way that apocalypses depict reality and actual events with heightened imagery to evoke an emotional and imaginative response. The analogy of watching a play highlights the idea that an apocalypse lifts the curtain to reveal the heavenly reality behind what we see empirically. This gives us a "behind-the-scenes" look at the forces that influence and determine our world which provides a new perspective on the present reality.
- **What is the main function of Revelation, according to its literary genres, and how does this impact its message?**
- The main function of Revelation, considering its three literary genres, is to encourage believers amidst suffering and to warn against compromise, all while revealing a transcendent reality. As an apocalypse, it unveils heavenly realities. As a prophecy, it calls for faithfulness and offers critique of ungodly forces. And as a letter, it addresses the specific challenges of its first-century audience. Thus, Revelation is primarily about how believers should see and respond to their current circumstances, empowered by their knowledge of God's sovereignty, not just predicting the future. This shapes the book's message of hope, warning, and enduring faithfulness, offering a divine perspective on the earthly and the heavenly realities.