

Dr. Dave Mathewson, Revelation, Lecture 2, Literary Genres

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This is Dr. Dave Mathewson in his course on the book of Revelation. This is session number 2 on the literary genre behind the book of Revelation -- Apocalyptic, Prophetic, and Epistle.

We've been talking a little bit about the historical background of Revelation and the literary background as well, and I suggested that as with any other biblical book, especially a New Testament book, it's important to understand the circumstances and the environment that actually occasion the book.

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. As we've seen, that's nothing new. 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. But I've suggested that as with any other book, we need to stop and first of all, examine the book of Revelation in light of its context, historically and literarily. We've looked a little bit at the literary genre or literary type of Revelation, suggesting that Revelation, as most interpreters agree, consists of at least three literary forms, an apocalypse, a prophecy, and an epistle.

And since especially an apocalypse we're not familiar with and we don't have any very close modern-day analogies, though I'll suggest a couple that might help us make sense of it, it's important that we stop and examine what these literary types are, because I'm convinced all of these literary types would have been well known to John and would have been well known to his first readers. And so, we have to ask, what were these literary types and how would the readers have understood them? And then how does that make a difference in the way we interpret the book of Revelation? So we will start with an apocalypse. Today, as we've said before, today when we think of apocalypse, we think of a catastrophic end to history, some disaster on a worldwide scale, end of the world, a catastrophic, cataclysmic end of the world, and that's what we mean by apocalypse.

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. Again, the word apocalypse is not a literary term that they would have used to refer to a type of literature. It's one that we use, but it actually comes, the term apocalypse comes out of Revelation chapter one and verse one, and scholars have taken this word then and use it to refer to a group of literary works or a group of writings that resemble Revelation very carefully.

So, the point is there seems to exist a group of writings that have distinguishing and unique characteristic features to which Revelation belongs, and scholars have used the word of Revelation or apocalypse, the Greek word *apokalupsis* that occurs in chapter one and verse one to refer to this type of literature. So, Revelation one, verse one begins with the revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave to him to show to his servants. So, we've already looked at this word very briefly, the word apocalypse or revelation, and it refers to an unveiling or an uncovering.

But again, it originally did not refer to a type of literature, but even by using this word, John seems to suggest that he's writing a piece of literature that depends on or will be characterized by an uncovering or an unveiling. And we use it today, again, to refer to a distinct type of writing. This type of writing that we call an apocalypse existed roughly from about, or most of the apocalypses that we have record of existed was a common literary type that flourished from about 200 BC to 200 AD, roughly.

This would have been a well-known recognizable type of literature, and the only two examples that we have in the canon of scripture in our Bibles, of course, is Revelation and then the Old Testament book of Daniel. The book of Ezekiel has sections of it that resemble an apocalypse. So do the books of Isaiah and Zechariah have sections that resemble an apocalypse.

But there are scores of other writings that resemble the books of Revelation and Daniel. So, Revelation and Daniel are only part of a broader group of writings, again, that scholars have come to label an apocalypse. And we'll look at what that is.

If you're interested in reading, and I would encourage you to do so, other apocalypses, the best one can do as far as in written form, in hard copy, one can secure the volumes by James Charlesworth, the *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*. Volume one is a collection of English translations of most of the apocalypses. Written again, roughly between 200 BC and 280.

Otherwise, you can go online anymore and Google most of them and find English translations. Works, you might encounter works such as 1st Enoch, 2nd Enoch, 2nd Baruch, and 4th Ezra and the Apocalypse of Abraham are common apocalypses. The Shepherd of Hermas was an early Christian apocalypse that was written roughly the same time as Revelation, though it was not included in our New Testament canon.

But these are all works that resemble very closely Revelation and Daniel and help us to, I think, understand a little bit more what Revelation is. So, what is an apocalypse? 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.

So, it's a narrative of someone's visionary experience that they have written down and now it is available for others to read and, in a sense, almost re-experience what the seer, the name often applied to the person that had the vision, what the seer saw, now writes that down and communicates that to his readership. The assumption behind an apocalypse is a way of knowing. Often, in the past, apocalypse was associated with a certain view of history where history was basically evil and it required an end to history and the inauguration of a new world, a new era that would bring righteousness and blessing.

So, you sort of had this dualism between the present evil age that was dominated by evil and had largely been abandoned to evil and there was only a hope in some future coming age that would replace it and bring righteousness and blessing. And that could only come exclusively by an act of God to intervene in history and bring history to a close and inaugurate this age to come. So often apocalyptic literature was seen as indicating a type of eschatology.

That is, history was evil, history had been abandoned, and our only hope was for a divine and direct intervention from God into history to bring it to an end and to inaugurate a new world. However, I think that is more fundamental, and in fact, I would argue when you read a lot of the apocalypses, they don't all fit that scenario anyway. A more fundamental assumption behind apocalypses is a way of knowing.

An apocalypse, again a first-person narrative of someone's visionary experience. So there must be a visionary experience and the person now writes it down describing what he saw. The assumption behind this is that the knowledge of the heavenly world, beyond what we see in the earthly world, there is another knowledge, a knowledge of the heavenly world, the knowledge of the universe, knowledge of the future, the secrets of heaven, can only be made known by a divine and a direct revelation to God's people.

This type of knowledge, the knowledge of the heavenly world, the knowledge of the future, the knowledge of the universe, the secrets of heaven, cannot be known by normal modes of communication, but can only come about by a direct revelation, by receiving a direct revelation from God. So, this seems to be the assumption that lies behind an apocalypse, that there is a knowledge of the heavenly world and the future and the secrets of heaven that can only be grasped and known by a direct revelation from God. And that lies behind an apocalypse.

That's why the person must have a vision. This knowledge is communicated through visionary form. The author then receives this vision and then narrates what it was he saw.

Again, you find this already in books like Isaiah chapter six. We'll look at that in connection with other texts in Revelation. Ezekiel chapters one and two and Ezekiel 40 through 48, the last several chapters of Ezekiel being a vision of the final end time temple.

We already mentioned the book of Daniel in the Old Testament. Much of it is a record of Daniel's vision. And then all these other apocalypses share this feature that they communicate knowledge of the heavenly world and knowledge of the future that can only be gained by a direct revelation from God.

One can only pierce the vault of heaven, so to speak, by having God open the heavens. And in fact, that's the common language in these apocalypses, that the heavens were opened because this is the only way that the seer can gain this knowledge, this divine knowledge that God reveals and discloses to him so that he can communicate it to his people. So, that's the first thing.

An apocalypse is a visionary account of a seer's vision or a narrative account, I'm sorry, a narrative account of the vision of a seer, which assumes that there's heavenly knowledge. The secrets of heaven and of the future can only be known to a direct revelation that now the author receives and writes down in narrative form for the benefit of his readers. Again, it's also possible that in doing this, in a sense, the writer was allowing his readers to, in a sense, re-experience the vision and re-experience at some level what the person saw in his visionary experience.

The second thing that, I already hinted at in what we just said, is that apocalypses are primarily about the heavenly world and about the future. Now again, this is important because there used to be this conception that an apocalypse was all about the future, and there is plenty of information about the future, but found in apocalypses. However, there is also much information that discloses the environment of heaven.

In fact, we'll see revelation begins in chapters four and five, not with a vision of the future, but with John going to heaven and seeing the heavenly environs, seeing the throne of God, God seated on the throne and all of heaven surrounding him before he ever talks about anything related to history or the future. So, apocalypses were not only, and probably we should say were not primarily about the future. The burden of the apocalypse was not to predict the future.

But again, the apocalypse was meant to disclose the secrets of heaven, to disclose the heavenly world. Again, things and information that could not be made known or perceived by more rational modes of communication. So, in an apocalypse, we often find the seer ascending to heaven, being taken up to heaven, or sometimes taken to other locations.

Again, you see that in Revelation four and five. Isaiah chapter six, Ezekiel one and two begin with the prophet going up to or having a vision of the heavenly environs with God and his throne and heaven or the angelic being surrounding him. So, not just about the future, although that is included, but also about the heavenly world.

And one of the more, I think still one of the more significant books, although an older work, if you consider the early 1980s an older work by Christopher Rowland called *The Open Heaven*, where he very helpfully develops this perspective. A long read, but parts of it were very helpful, where he demonstrated that the content of apocalyptic literature was not just the future. The content was varied, but he said the assumption was that there were secrets, heavenly secrets about God's intention for humanity and for the world, and secrets of the heavenly world that could only be made known, could only be divulged by a divine revelation in the form of a vision.

And that's what an apocalypse is. So, first of all, an apocalypse is a narrative account of someone's visionary experience. Number two, it is often about the future, but primarily about the heavenly world as the content of what the person saw.

Again, the assumption is that the secrets of heaven and the secrets of God and his intention for humanity and the world can only be made known by a divine revelation. The third feature of an apocalypse is that usually this 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.

So, a seer has a visionary experience and what he sees is communicated to him in symbolic language and then he writes in symbolic language and symbolism that resembles as closely as possible what he actually saw in the vision. So, you often find writers saying, I saw something as shining like crystal, or I saw someone as a son of man, or I saw something as a throne. The idea is that resembles as closely as possible what the author saw in his vision.

So, I think, and I take it, that the author in his visionary experience sees things that are communicated to him or he sees in symbolic form, and then as he writes them down and narrates them, he narrates them using symbols and images that resemble as closely as possible what he actually saw. We'll come back to that and see why that is important, but perhaps one of the reasons for using symbolism is because the author is disclosing a heavenly reality, a reality that transcends this earthly reality so that symbolic language is suitable, is the most suitable for communicating that

reality, something that is heavenly and transcends the earthly realm. Also though, symbolism has a way of communicating that is more powerful than straightforward, more literal means of communication.

That is, the symbolism often not only communicates as far as content but does so in a way that evokes emotions and involves the entire being, both rationally but also emotionally, perhaps more importantly emotionally, in communicating to the seer and to the readers as well. Also, we'll see that the symbolic language also has a way of focusing more on the theological meaning rather than the precise exact identity of what it was the author saw. So, think about it.

What impacts you more? If you hear someone say, watch out for him because he knows how to be tricky and deceptive, or watch out because he is a snake, calling him a snake, evokes emotions, especially if you have an aversion to snakes like I do. That evokes all kinds of emotions and plays on your emotive response. Calling him a snake is a more powerful way, a metaphorical way of saying that he is tricky and deceptive.

So, symbolism has a way of evoking our imaginations, of evoking our emotions, of bringing about not just a rational but an emotive response to the information that the seer now communicates. So, symbolism is a very important part of the apocalyptic literature. What the author actually saw is not only communicated to him in symbolic form, but now he writes in symbolic and metaphorical language that resembles very, very closely what he actually saw.

So, part of interpreting an apocalypse, as we'll see, is trying to come to grips with what is the meaning of the symbolism. Where did the author get the symbolism? What is it referring to? What is it trying to communicate? We'll look at that later on and as we work through Revelation, of course, we'll have all kinds of opportunities to wrestle with the symbols and images. Another feature of apocalyptic literature, related to some of the things we've already talked about, is it is a vision of heavenly reality and the future. An apocalyptic vision is meant to provide a new perspective on the present, and the present time of the readers.

Again, that is, an apocalypse is not primarily meant to predict the future, especially a future far, far beyond the horizons of the readers. An apocalypse is meant to provide a perspective on the present situation of the readers. Usually, the assumption behind apocalypses is that, although this isn't true of all of them, I think the verdict is still out as far as what exactly caused a writer to have a vision and to write an apocalypse, what sorts of situations.

But one common situation is often when God's people are facing some sort of a crisis, such as living under the oppression of a dominant empire, an apocalypse was meant to help them come to grips with that, to provide a perspective on that.

Remember we said an apocalypse is meant to reveal and divulge or disclose information of the heavenly realms and the heavenly world of God's intention and the secrets of heaven now revealed to a seer that he communicates to humanity or to his readers, to the people of God. 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.

Once they have this information, once they have this knowledge via an apocalyptic vision written down for them, once they now have this information and this new perspective, they are now able to see their situation in a new light and they are able to respond accordingly. A couple of modern-day analogies perhaps to how a vision or an apocalypse functions. One of them, and this is not unique to me, if you read much you'll find many people using this example.

I've been able to trace it back to 1974 and a commentary by a scholar named George Beasley Murray, an early commentary he wrote in Revelation, which is still very helpful, but he used the analogy of a political cartoon. It might go back before that, but he's, without searching, he's the earliest I've found to use that analogy and many others have picked it up to the modern day. I think it's a helpful one.

Think about how a political cartoon works. When you read a political cartoon, there's two things that are important. Number one is a political cartoon that communicates through highly symbolic and exaggerated imagery.

So, you read a political cartoon, if you're familiar with the image and if you're familiar with the political situation, you're able to identify those images and what they mean and what they're suggesting and what they're communicating about the political situation. A writer could just sit down and write a straightforward prose paragraph about his view of what's going on politically, but a cartoon, a political cartoon is a highly imaginative and evocative way of commenting on or even critiquing what's going on politically. And when you read a political cartoon, again, you note that the images are sometimes exaggerated.

Sometimes you can identify the president of the United States or the president or leader of another country by exaggerated features, such as their head or something else so that you can't miss the identification. Often animals function as indications or symbols of different political parties in the United States of America. The elephant functions as a symbol for a political party.

The donkey functions as a symbol for a certain political party. The eagle functions as a symbol for the United States of America and other images that are stock images that we have become attuned to associating with certain things. So, the writer of a political cartoon will use images and symbols that we are familiar with and almost

exaggerate them to communicate something about the political situation in a way that does more than just communicate straightforward information.

It plays on your emotions. It evokes a response. It plays in your imagination and emotions so that you respond in a way and see the situation in the way that the author of the cartoon wants you to.

So, the first thing about political cartoons is their symbolic nature. They communicate through symbols and metaphors, exaggerated imaginative constructions of political leaders and countries, and situations and things like that. This brings me to the second feature political cartoons refer to actual persons and events.

They are not fictional. They are not just a fairy tale language or images or science fiction. They are actually referring to literal persons, events, and places.

Yet those persons, events, and places are depicted in highly symbolic and metaphorical language. The same is true of an apocalypse. An apocalypse, I think, refers to actual persons, places, and events in history and in the future.

Apocalypses do refer to the future though not exclusively so. So, an apocalypse refers to actual persons, events, and places in history in the time of the readers and in the future. 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.

So that you look at the situation in a new way. So that you see the author's perspective in a new way. And then again you are enabled to see your situation in a new light.

So, for example, if you are God's people living under an oppressive regime, an empire, an apocalypse might help you to reinterpret that situation and see it in a brand new light. So political cartoons can, for example, help us to understand how an apocalypse works. Yes, it refers to actual literal events and situations and persons and places but it depicts them in highly symbolic, imaginative, and sometimes even exaggerated language so that you get the point.

And so that you see the situation in a new light. Another analogy that I like to use in describing an apocalypse, it's a little bit like watching a play. If you are sitting in an auditorium watching a play going on stage, all you see is what is taking place in that stage.

What you don't see is what goes on behind the curtain, behind the stage that actually makes the play work. If you could lift the curtain and look behind it, you

would see the stage manager, you would see all the people responsible for the lighting perhaps, you would see all the people responsible for the props and for the clothing, you would see people scurrying about and doing all kinds of things that actually make the play work. But you don't see that when you are just watching the play.

That's sort of what revelation is like or what an apocalypse is like. The play would be similar to simply what you see with your eyes. Empirically, what is going on around me? 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, to see a whole new reality that actually influences and impinges upon the reality that I see with my eyes.

And again, the whole point of an apocalypse, that knowledge of the reality behind what I see is only available through an unveiling, a lifting of the curtain of heaven so that you can see behind this physical world, there is more than meets the eye. When I look out at the empirical world that I can taste and touch and feel with my senses and see, an apocalypse reminds me there is more to reality than that. There is a whole new reality, a heavenly world, a heavenly reality, and also a future that can only be disclosed and made known through this revelation and through this vision.

And that reality influences and determines what is going on in my world. Somehow it stands behind it. And by seeing this reality, I see the play in a whole new light.

And I am able now to respond to it in a different light. So, for example, again, with revelation, just initially, perhaps now you can start to see how revelation might work. And why we spend a little bit of time talking about the historical background.

Given the situation of many of the readers in the first century, the seven churches from Revelation 2 and 3, living in the Roman Empire, where Caesar was on his throne, and where they were confronted with all kinds of images and reminders of the debt of gratitude they owed to Caesar and even the other gods and the Roman Empire for their prosperity, their peace, and the temptation to compromise exclusive worship and allegiance to God with being involved in the culture and the commerce and the religion of the Roman Empire and its politics, which were all meshed together and carefully and closely intertwined. The book of Revelation then, as an apocalypse, says what you see when you look around and look out at the Roman Empire and what is going on, what you see in the empirical world is not all there is. There is more than meets the eye.

As an apocalypse, Revelation then lifts the curtain or lifts the veil so that they can see behind the stage of history. And they can actually see the heavenly world and they can see the future that then allows them to see their situation in a new light. Now Rome does not look like it did before.

Now they see their situation in a new light and they understand how they need to respond. As an apocalypse, it provides a whole different perspective by using symbols, images, and metaphors that depict exactly what is going on in their world. So don't associate with Rome.

Be careful of throwing in your lot with Rome. And be careful not to violate the exclusive allegiance to Jesus Christ and to God, the worship that only they deserve. So first of all, we said Revelation was a narrative account of someone's visionary experience.

Second, that visionary experience communicated a heavenly transcendent reality. Third, it is communicated through highly symbolic language. It refers to actual persons, places, and events in history.

But it does so symbolically and metaphorically. Fourth, Revelation as an apocalypse is a vision, as a vision of the heavenly world and heavenly reality, provides a different perspective on their present world. It allows them to see things in a new light.

And then finally, the function of an apocalypse, again, is not to predict the future. The primary function of an apocalypse is encouragement and warning. It's to encourage those beleaguered Christians or people of God who are suffering at the hands of an oppressive empire or society, for example.

But it also is meant to warn of impending judgment for those who compromise or for those who refuse to demonstrate their allegiance to God alone. As you look at Revelation, then, Revelation shares all of these features that characteristically belong to this type of literature called an apocalypse. So, Revelation can be, in my opinion, categorized as an apocalypse.

A first-person narrative account of someone's vision, a visionary experience of the heavenly world and of the future, communicated in a highly symbolic language that provides a transcendent, heavenly perspective on their situation for the purpose of both encouragement and warning. In that Revelation fits those features, it could be labeled an apocalypse. Now, there are other features that sometimes you find in apocalypses that Revelation has that I've bypassed.

One of them is the prevalence of angelic beings. You often find angels in apocalypses either speaking and dialoguing with the person having the vision or leading the person, sort of like the three spirits in Charles Dickens's Christmas Carol that led Ebenezer Scrooge on a kind of a visionary journey. Sometimes you find angels performing that role and a variety of other roles pouring out judgment on the earth.

Revelation too, from the very start, is littered with references to angelic beings, maybe not as extensive as some other apocalypses are, but still you find angelic

beings throughout the book of Revelation. So, Revelation clearly can be categorized, I think, as an apocalypse. However unique it is, however different it is from other apocalypses, Revelation can still be characterized as an apocalypse.

One feature that does distinguish Revelation clearly is most apocalypses written between about 200 B.C. to 200 A.D. were what scholars call pseudonymous, usually written in someone else's name. That is, the person who claims to have the vision is not really that person. Someone might claim to have a vision in the spirit of Enoch or Ezra.

In other words, the books entitled 1 Enoch and 2 Enoch were not really written by that person, historically. They were clearly written by someone else in the name of Enoch. It may be that this person is actually writing in the spirit of Enoch, taking the mantle of Enoch on him and having this vision.

Others suggest, no, it's just someone trying to gain authority or gain a hearing so they write in the name of someone well-known like Enoch or Ezra or someone like that. Revelation is not written in the name of someone else. John identifies himself as a contemporary with his readers.

He claims, especially in chapter 1 and verse 9, he says, I, John, your brother and companion in the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus Christ. John writes, not in the name of some historical figure in the past like Enoch or Ezra or Abraham or Daniel or someone like that. John writes as a contemporary of his own readers.

He identifies with them in their suffering and in the kingdom of God. Now he writes as their contemporary to address their direct situation. Revelation is an apocalypse.

Later on, we'll look at what differences that make and the way we read it. The second literary genre or literary type that Revelation clearly belongs to is that of prophecy. In fact, John himself several times throughout the book, at the beginning and especially the end, refers to his book as a prophecy.

So, for example, in chapter 1 and verse 3, he said, Blessed is the one who reads the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and who keep it. Chapter 22 and verse 7, Behold, I am coming soon. Blessed is he who keeps the words of the prophecy of this book.

And verse 10 as well. Then he told me, Do not seal up the words of the prophecy of this book. And verses 18 and 19, I warn anyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book.

And 19, and if anyone takes words away from this book of prophecy. So, John clearly labels his book or intends his book to be read as a prophecy. And as we'll see, I think it's significant that he does it at the beginning and the end of the book.

As we'll see, I'm convinced John by writing and labeling as a prophecy, yes, he intends it to be understood as a type of first-century Christian prophecy. But at the same time, John clearly writes as if he is writing in the tradition of the Old Testament prophets. He's writing something that he wants to be taken with the same authority and seriousness with which they would take an Isaiah or an Ezekiel.

And this can be seen from the fact that over and over, John draws from the language of Old Testament prophets. Where does John get a lot of his images and symbols? Most of them come right out of Old Testament prophetic text. Even more, than that, John uses language such as in chapter 10, he'll use the language of eating a scroll.

Or he'll use the language of commissioning or certain scenes that come right out of prophetic books. So John intends his book to be basically a prophecy and a prophecy in line with and in the tradition of the Old Testament prophets, such as especially Ezekiel and Isaiah and other prophets as well, Jeremiah, et cetera. It's doubtful, therefore, that John... I'm not convinced John would have distinguished an apocalypse from a prophecy.

Most likely, again, we distinguish the two, but probably John would have seen them as very similar or identical. In fact, as we've seen already in Isaiah 6 and Ezekiel 1 and 2, you have the prophets having visionary experiences that look much like John's in Revelation. In fact, John will draw on those passages to describe his own visionary experience.

But John clearly intends his book to be read as an Old Testament prophet or writing in the tradition of the great Old Testament prophets of the past. Let me say just something briefly about authorship. I don't want to belabor this point and I don't want to spend much time trying to argue for the exact identity of the author.

The author identifies himself as John, but throughout church history and even reading the New Testament, you find that there are a couple of Johns that could be potentially the author of Revelation. Reading church history, you find a number of Johns that could be the author of the book of Revelation. It's interesting, though, that many have understood the author John in Revelation as the same author as the fourth gospel and the same author as 1st, 2nd, and 3rd John, that is the apostle John, one of Jesus' disciples, one of Jesus' apostles.

He was the one who had this vision. Others have doubted that for various reasons and said that the same John could not have written this. So, they look for other Johns

that are mentioned in the literature and church history as the possible author for the book of Revelation.

Perhaps it was some other well-known John in the 1st century who was a prophet and who was well-known to these churches, so he didn't have to spend time identifying himself, for example. Although I think a good case can be made for John the apostle as the author of the book of Revelation, when you read the book of Revelation itself, it's interesting that the author does not claim the authority of an apostle. That's especially interesting since the author does write in letter form as well, as we'll see.

Unlike Paul, who begins almost all his letters with a reference to his apostolic authority, and in certain books like 1 Corinthians, over and over he claims his authority as an apostle to address his readers, John doesn't do that. 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.

As Richard Bauckham says, John writes at the climax of the Old Testament prophetic tradition. John will demonstrate how these Old Testament prophecies reach their climax and fulfillment in the person of Jesus Christ. But otherwise, John clearly claims the authority of an Old Testament prophet.

He writes in the tradition of the Old Testament prophets, showing now how they reach their climax and fulfillment in the person of Jesus Christ. So, more specifically, what is a prophecy that will help us to understand what's going on in Revelation? Basically, a prophet was simply one who proclaimed a message of God to the people. When you read the Old Testament carefully, you begin to see that the prophets, historically, were called upon by God during specific times in Israel's history.

Usually when they were straying from their covenant relationship with God, usually when they were going after idols and into idolatry. Often when they were in danger of being carted off into exile and captivity for their sinfulness. When they needed words of comfort and encouragement or warning, God would call on a prophet and raise up a prophet with a message to address the people in those situations.

In fact, one author said that a prophet was a covenant enforcer. One who would enforce and remind Israel of its covenant relationship with God that it was in danger of violating or had violated. So, a prophet was meant to call the people back to their covenant relationship with God and to faithfulness to the covenant.

So, the point of this is a prophet is not primarily a predictor of the future. I think we often read prophets like someone who is a fortune teller who gazes into a crystal ball just to tell your future or a tarot card reader or a palm reader just to satisfy your

curiosity or to calm your apprehension and to give you a sense of control over what's going to happen in the future by simply predicting what's going to happen. That's not what a prophet did.

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, again, was one who proclaimed a message of God in certain periods of Israel's history to call them back to faithfulness to the covenant relationship with God. Again, by promising salvation but also by warning them of impending judgment if they refuse to respond in repentance and obedience.

So, a prophet called the people back to a relationship with their God. A prophet proclaimed a message. They did predict the future at times.

There is plenty of anticipation of future salvation and judgment, but that wasn't their primary purpose. Even that was meant to inspire faithfulness in God's people and to call them back to repentance and a relationship with God. At times we often see the prophets providing a critique of the ungodly nations and empires around them.

Not only did they speak a message to the people of God about their own spiritual situation, but they also revealed and critiqued the godless, oppressive empires of the day demonstrating that that would result in their judgment and their removal. So, prophets were not primarily predictors of the future, but they were meant to call God's people back to the covenant relationship. Prophets did predict the future, but what they often did is they would place the present situation against the backdrop of God's broader purposes for the world and humanity.

So, sometimes you'll find prophets speaking as if they're describing events in the reader's own day or near future on the very horizons of their own existence and their own world, and then very quickly move to describe events that depict the wrap-up or the conclusion of the end of the world and the end of history. Again, what the prophets were often doing is simply demonstrating how the present situation of the readers would eventually issue in and are to be understood in light of God's broader intentions and purposes for all of history. A second feature of prophetic literature is the prophets or prophetic literature or prophecy was rooted in history.

Prophecy, again, was not just predicting the future or was not just a fantasy type of literature. Prophecy was clearly rooted in history. It was about God acting in history.

It was about God's intervention in history. It was about God's plans and desires for his people living in history. So, we should expect that as a prophecy, a book like Revelation will be about actual events and persons and places in history.

It'll be about God acting in history in the midst of and on behalf of his people. A third feature of prophecy is not only is it just a proclamation of a message of God to his people, especially to call them back to faithfulness, to warn them about compromise and idolatry, and in doing so also to provide a critique of godless, wicked empires and nations. Second, not only is it rooted in history, it depicts God's acts in history.

Third, prophecy is primarily one of the primary messages about judgment and salvation for both the faithful and the unfaithful. For God's faithful people, God promises salvation and vindication and rewards them with their salvation. For those who compromise and refuse to repent, and for wicked empires and nations that oppress God's people, God promises judgment.

And finally, much like an apocalypse, a prophecy was primarily written for the purpose of encouragement and warning. Again, a prophet was not primarily on the scene to predict the future and line up all the Israelites look into a crystal ball, and tell them about their future. A prophet was primarily there to encourage and to warn God's people, to encourage them to remain faithful in their covenant relationship with God, to warn them of the consequences of straying from that, and again to warn of judgment, impending judgment on godless, wicked nations and empires.

Again, in that revelation is characterized by all these features. Not to mention the fact that John clearly depicts his work as a prophecy and even calls it that. At the very beginning and end of his book, it's appropriate then to label revelation and to read it as a prophecy.

The third thing, or the third literary type that revelation clearly belongs to, is an epistle or a letter. It's interesting, we often overlook this for numbers one and two. We get enamored with the fact that revelation is an apocalypse.

And when you read, especially chapters four through twenty-two, that's basically what's going on. Very little of four through twenty-two resembles a letter. It's clearly an apocalypse or an apocalyptic prophecy and that's where you find all the visions and the strange images.

But what is intriguing is, that 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. So, for example, starting in chapter one in verses four through eight, listen to this, John, to the seven churches in the province of Asia, grace and peace to the seven churches to you, from him who is, and who was, and who is to come, and from the seven spirits before his throne, and from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, and the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth, to him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, and has made us to be a kingdom and priest, to serve his God and Father, to him be glory and power forever and ever.

Amen. I'll stop there, I won't read seven and eight at this point, though they belong to those verses. But notice how it begins, an identification of the author, John, and then the readers to the seven churches, and then a greeting or a blessing, a grace and peace section, much like what you find in some of Paul's letters.

And then finally, in chapter 22 and verse 21, the very last verse of Revelation, the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with God's people, amen. Ending much like one of Paul's letters. So, Revelation clearly intends to be a letter that will communicate something to the first readers, the seven churches, in chapters two and three.

The significance of labeling Revelation as a letter, or better yet, the significance of John writing in the form of a letter, taking his, in other words, he's had this visionary prophecy, this apocalyptic prophecy, a message from God in the form of an apocalyptic vision, that he now writes down for the benefit of his readers, by putting that within the framework of a first-century letter or epistle. What is significant about that? What is important to understand, and is well known by most scholars, most interpreters, and scholars of first-century New Testament literature, is that one of the characteristic features of a letter is what New Testament scholars call, they are occasional. And what that means is not that they're written on occasion, but occasional means that a letter was produced and written in response to very specific circumstances or problems or issues.

That is, like Paul's letters, Revelation was written in response to specific problems and crises, much like Galatians we saw, we talked about earlier, Galatians was written in response to a very specific crisis of so-called Judaizers trying to get the readers to submit to the Mosaic law. The book of 1 Corinthians addresses a number of issues related to problems in the Corinthian church, related to the patronage system, and related to spiritual elitism and dualism, and other issues that had infiltrated the church. As a letter, then, we should expect that Revelation will be no less occasioned by a specific problem or crisis in the church.

What this means, too, is a letter was written to communicate information that would be relevant and understood by the first readers. Letters must communicate something that the readers can understand that will address their situation. A letter was aimed at the specific needs and specific historical circumstances of the readers.

So, Revelation, then, at least its beginning and end, resemble very closely and have the format of a letter, though in between, Revelation doesn't develop like one of Paul's letters necessarily. It was true that in the first century, you could communicate just about anything in the form of a letter. And so, I find it significant that John has chosen to write down his apocalypse, to record his apocalyptic visionary experience, his prophetic message to the churches in the form and in the framework of a letter, a literary form that was meant to address specific circumstances, specific problems

with information that would be understood and grasped by the readers that would meet their needs and their situation.

And so, Revelation, then, seems to participate in and seems to be characterized by features of an apocalypse. It's a narrative account of a vision providing a transcendent perspective in highly symbolic language. It's a prophecy.

It's a proclamation, a message from God meant to warn and also to encourage God's people. It does include information about the future, but it's primarily relevant to the modern situation and the modern-day readers. And then, finally, it's couched in the form of a letter.

A letter was meant, was highly occasional. It was meant to address the specific situation of the readers in a way that would enable them to understand their situation in a new light. So, Revelation, then, is a book that communicates in literary forms, however strange to us, and hopefully these last few minutes we've been able to unstrange it, I know that's not a word or kind of disambiguate Revelation, and its literary genres by describing the genres that John chose to write in and genres that would have been familiar to the first-century readers, an apocalypse, a prophecy, and a letter.

Now, what I want to do next, then, is ask, given these three types of literature, how should we read Revelation? Given the fact that Revelation belongs to these three literary genres, an apocalypse, a prophecy, and a letter, what are the principles that must govern the way we read Revelation? What are the hermeneutical principles that must determine or influence the way we interpret the book? What difference, it's not enough to simply categorize Revelation as an apocalypse, a prophecy, and a letter. What difference does that make in the way we actually read it? So, in the next section, we'll spend a little bit of time unpacking the principles of interpreting the book of Revelation that I think come out of and arise from these three unique literary types that Revelation participates in.

This is Dr. Dave Mathewson in his course on the book of Revelation. This is session number 2 on the literary genre behind the book of Revelation -- Apocalyptic, Prophetic, and Epistle.