

Revelation, Lecture 2: Literary Genres

Author: Dr. Dave Mathewson | Session 2

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Abstract

Dr. Dave Mathewson's lecture explores the literary background of the book of Revelation, arguing that its interpretation must be grounded in its original first-century historical and literary contexts. He explains that Revelation is comprised of three overlapping genres: apocalypse, prophecy, and epistle, which were well known to its original audience. Understanding these genres helps modern readers avoid projecting contemporary events onto the text, revealing instead its original message of encouragement and warning. By examining the unique characteristics of each genre, Mathewson establishes a foundation for interpreting Revelation's symbolic language and occasional nature.

Outline

I. Introduction to Literary Genre of Revelation

- A. Contextual interpretation over modern projection
 - 1. Danger of correlating modern events with Revelation
 - 2. Historic practice of interpreters since the second, third, and fourth centuries
- B. Dual context: Historical and literary
- C. The three overlapping genres of Revelation
 - 1. Apocalypse
 - 2. Prophecy
 - 3. Epistle (Letter)

II. First Genre: Apocalypse

- A. Origin of the term
 - 1. Derived from Revelation 1:1 (Greek: apokalupsis)
 - 2. Means "an unveiling" or "uncovering"
- B. Historical parameters
 - 1. Flourished from ~200 BC to 200 AD
 - 2. Biblical canon examples: Revelation and Daniel
 - a. Portions of Ezekiel, Isaiah, and Zechariah also resemble apocalypse
 - 3. Non-canonical examples (Pseudepigrapha, James Charlesworth)
 - a. 1 Enoch, 2 Enoch, 2 Baruch, 4 Ezra, Apocalypse of Abraham
 - b. Shepherd of Hermas (early Christian apocalypse not included in New Testament)
- C. Distinctive features of an apocalypse

1. First-person narrative of a visionary experience
 - a. Assumes knowledge of the heavenly world and future can only be known by direct revelation
 - b. Depicts the opening of the heavens to allow the seer to gain divine knowledge
 - c. Allows the reader to re-experience the vision at some level
 2. Content: The heavenly world and the future
 - a. Disclosure of the environment of heaven (e.g., throne room in Rev 4-5) before history or future
 - b. Christopher Rowland's The Open Heaven perspective on heavenly secrets
 3. Highly symbolic language and imagery
 - a. Metaphors and symbols as primary modes (e.g., shining like crystal, son of man)
 - b. Suitable for communicating transcendent heavenly reality
 - c. Evokes emotions and involves the reader's imagination and entire being
 - d. Focuses on theological meaning rather than precise, literal physical identity
 - e. Meaning derived from sources of symbolism and its communication
 4. Provides a transcendent perspective on the present
 - a. Not primarily meant to predict the far future, but to reframe current situations of crisis
 - b. Allows God's people to see their crisis (e.g., living under an empire) in a divine light
 5. Modern analogies of how an apocalypse functions
 - a. Political Cartoon (George Beasley Murray, 1974 commentary)
 - i. Highly symbolic, imaginative, and exaggerated imagery
 - ii. Refers to actual, literal persons, places, and events in history
 - iii. Evokes emotions and emotive responses from readers to see situations in a new light
 - b. Behind-the-scenes Stage Play
 - i. Empirical world is what we see on stage with our physical eyes
 - ii. Apocalypse lifts the curtain to show the heavenly reality behind the scenes
 - iii. Heavenly reality stands behind, influences, and determines physical world history
 - iv. First-century Roman Empire context: Caesar on throne, commercial/religious pressure, temptation to compromise exclusive worship of God
 6. Primary functions: Encouragement and Warning
 - a. Encouragement for suffering, beleaguered Christians under oppressive empires
 - b. Warning of impending judgment for those who compromise or refuse allegiance to God
 7. Prevalence of angelic mediators and beings
 - a. Speaking, dialoguing, guiding the seer, or pouring out judgment
 - b. Contrast to Charles Dickens's Christmas Carol spirits leading Scrooge
- D. Revelation's unique feature: Non-pseudonymous
1. Most historical apocalypses written pseudonymously in the name of past figures (e.g., Enoch, Ezra)

2. John writes as a contemporary brother and companion in suffering (Rev 1:9)

III. Second Genre: Prophecy

A. John's explicit designation

1. Explicitly labels the book as prophecy at the beginning and end (Rev 1:3; 22:7, 10, 18-19)
2. Intended as first-century Christian prophecy in the tradition of Old Testament prophets

B. Traditional alignment with Old Testament prophets

1. Draws directly from Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Jeremiah for images and symbols
2. Uses prophetic actions like eating the scroll (Rev 10)
3. Claims authority of an OT prophet, not an apostle (Richard Bauckham's climax of prophetic tradition)

C. Characteristics of biblical prophecy

1. Covenant enforcement
 - a. Not primarily fortune-telling or predicting the future to satisfy curiosity
 - b. Raised during critical historical moments when Israel strayed from covenant
 - c. Calls people back to covenant faithfulness, repentance, and obedience
2. Rooted in history
 - a. Focuses on God's actions and interventions in history for His people
3. Major themes: Judgment and Salvation
 - a. Promises salvation, vindication, and reward for the faithful
 - b. Warns of impending judgment for compromised believers and godless, wicked nations
4. Primary purposes: Encouragement and Warning
 - a. Places current situations against the backdrop of God's broader, ultimate purposes
 - b. Encourages covenant endurance and warns of judgment on oppressive empires

IV. Third Genre: Epistle (Letter)

A. Letter framework

1. Epistolary introduction (Rev 1:4-8): Salutation, greeting of "grace and peace"
2. Epistolary conclusion (Rev 22:21): Closing benediction
3. Addressed to specific churches (seven churches of Asia Minor in Rev 2-3)

B. Occasional nature of first-century letters

1. Produced in response to specific, concrete historical crises or problems
 - a. Parallel: Galatians addressing the Judaizers crisis
 - b. Parallel: 1 Corinthians addressing patronage, spiritual elitism, and dualism
2. Implications for Revelation: Written to address concrete crises within specific churches

C. Relevance to the original audience

1. Aimed at specific needs and historical circumstances of the first readers
2. Lifts the veil to show Roman Imperial culture (emperor worship, economic/religious compromise) from a heavenly perspective
3. Warning against aligning with Rome and compromising exclusive allegiance to Jesus Christ

V. Conclusion

- A. Synthesis of the three genres: Apocalypse, Prophecy, and Letter
- B. Foundation for hermeneutics (principles of interpretation) to be discussed in the next session