

# Revelation as an apocalypse: Critical considerations on the literary genre apocalypse



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In popular discourse, Revelation is frequently characterised as an apocalyptic text concerned with the cataclysmic end of the world. This article offers a critical overview of historically informed scholarly attempts to define and reconstruct the literary genre of apocalypse and its application to Revelation. A correct understanding of genre bears not only classificatory but also epistemological significance: the manner in which the genre of a text is identified profoundly shapes its reading and interpretation. Key developments in the definition of apocalypse as a literary genre will be examined, beginning prior to the genre-decade and continuing through its course. The influence of this decade's research is clearly reflected in recent representative historical-critical studies of Revelation. In conclusion, the article notes both the contributions these genre studies have made towards a more responsible and culturally sensitive reading of Revelation, as well as topics that require further investigation. This article is intended as a foundational study for a series of further investigations into Revelation.

**Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications:** By promoting a more precise, historically conscious and culturally sensitive understanding of the genre apocalypse, this article enables readers to engage with Revelation more responsibly. The study also identifies key areas for further scholarly investigation.

**Keywords:** Revelation; genre; apocalyptic; literary criticism; apocalypticism.

## Introduction

This article provides a discussion on the scholarly (re)construction of the literary genre apocalypse. Firstly, the hermeneutical importance of identifying a text's genre will be noted. Secondly, a discussion of pivotal moments in the (re)construction of an apocalypse as a literary genre will be examined. This discussion will begin prior to the so-called genre-decade (1979–1989), followed by a discussion on pivotal studies in this decade. Turning to the genre of Revelation as an apocalyptic writing, the influence of the genre-decade will be highlighted. Thirdly, an evaluation of the usefulness and further topics for exploration will be noted. However, before addressing these topics, a word on the focus and limitations of this article is necessary.

This article is the beginning of a broader research project that will be developed in a series of forthcoming publications. In subsequent articles, Revelation's genre will be considered from a social-scientific perspective (Malina 1994, 1995; Malina & Pilch 2000); what contributions can a comparison between science fiction (SF) apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic narratives make, if any, to understanding Revelation (DiTommaso 2014, 2020; Hezser 2013) and violence in Revelation (Barr 2003a). These topics will be mentioned but not elaborated on in this article.

## Hermeneutics and genre

Literary (Mendlesohn 2003; Stableford 2003) and biblical scholars (Barr 2006; Henning 2020; Linton 2006; Mathewson 1992; Osborne 2004; Reddish 2020) agree on the hermeneutical importance of determining a text's genre. It enables readers to classify one text with similar ones, and in so doing mediates the interpretation process (Osborne 2004:474). Even texts that defy genre classification become more sensible through this process of classification. For example, Mendlesohn (2003:1) notes that SF is 'less a genre – a body of writing from which one can expect certain plot elements and specific tropes – than an ongoing discussion'. Regardless, readers of SF still bring certain expectations to the genre. These include, among others, a 'sense of wonder' (Mendlesohn 2003:3); consideration of 'what if?' or unintended consequences because of scientific advances and discoveries (Mendlesohn 2003:4); the 'idea' or an object, like a spaceship or planet, represented as the hero of the narrative (Mendlesohn 2003:4, 8–9); the grotesque mixed with a sense of wonder (Mendlesohn 2003:4; cf. also, Csicsery-Ronay 2002); and the so called 'info-dump'

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(Mendlesohn 2003:5). Individually, these elements do not classify a novel as SF, but taken together and presented in a certain conglomeration, they would constitute SF as a literary genre (Mendlesohn 2003; cf. also, Wolfe 2016, Lecture 1).

If, however, a reader misconstrues a text's genre or is unaware of its implicit rules, misunderstanding is inevitable (Collins 1998:8). The SF genre is illustrative of the role such implicit rules play in determining how a genre functions. Having never read SF, a person would be baffled by how romantic fiction is employed in SF. In SF romance, the focus is not on 'the intricacies of inter-human relationships' but rather 'about our relationship to the world and the universe' (Mendlesohn 2003:9). It is a 'romance of the universe [...] SF protagonists fall in love with the macrocosm' (Mendlesohn 2003:9). Such misunderstanding can usually be remedied by either immersing oneself in the literature, comparing, contrasting and extrapolating the specific genre rules. Or a more systematic approach can be taken to postulate a genre based on reading and analysing SF texts. The same holds for Revelation's genre, which is usually taken as an apocalypse. The pivotal moments discussed next all aimed to address, in some way, the confusion and misunderstanding surrounding the genre of apocalypse.

## The literary genre of apocalypse

### Pre-genre decade

Lücke (1852) introduced *apokalyptische Litteratur* and the label *Apokalyptik* into scholarly discussion. The methodology used by Lücke would be followed and refined in the future. According to Lücke (1852:61), Daniel was related to the prophetic literature but stood outside the canonical corpus of prophets. Lücke (1852:63) sees Daniel as the primary model for later apocalyptic writings, such as Enoch and Ezra. The conclusion drawn from this is that apocalyptic writings are to be distinguished from prophetic ones (Lücke 1852). Lücke continues to argue that Revelation is 'not like other prophetic works' but resembles other ancient apocalypses (Barr 2006:74). However, this distinction is not presented in such a way as to suggest a complete break with prophetic literature. Rather, while Christian apocalyptic writings represent a development beyond the prophetic tradition, they are seen as its fulfilment rather than its abandonment (Lücke 1852:213). Lücke's work (1852) established important boundaries for subsequent research into apocalyptic literature.

Koch (1972) exemplifies a second trend in defining apocalyptic literature before the genre-decade. He structures his discussion into two parts (Koch 1972:23–33): the first explores apocalypse as a literary genre, while the second examines it as a historical movement.

Regarding the first, Koch (1972:24–28) identifies six features of apocalyptic:

- There are 'discourse cycles', either visionary or auditory, between the receiver of the message and heavenly beings.
- These otherworldly encounters cause 'spiritual turmoil'.

- The spiritual turmoil, in turn, are alleviated, enabling the seer to present 'paraenetic discourses' with an eschatological ethical content meant to promote endurance among God's people (Koch 1972:25).
- The majority of apocalyptic writings, with the exception of Revelation, are 'pseudonymous'.
- The language used by the authors is highly mythical and rich in symbolism, making it sometimes difficult and bizarre for contemporary readers.
- Apocalypses display a 'composite character' where narratives and different visionary reports are integrated into the final form.

This list of formal characteristics is followed by eight 'moods and ideas' illustrating apocalyptic as a historical movement (Koch 1972:28–33). These characteristics are:

- An imminent expectation of the end of certain circumstances, to be replaced by another.
- This end is envisioned not just on a national scale but rather on a cosmic scale.
- This end of one 'segment' and the beginning of another has been predetermined long ago.
- The tension between the current circumstances of the elect and non-elect is, in reality, a reflection of conflict between angelic and demonic forces.
- Because of the scale of this conflict, salvation will emerge in the new dispensation, where 'uncreation' gives way to a new creation.
- This new creation will be characterised as God's reign, where either God or the Son of God will ascend the heavenly throne, which in turn will be established on earth.
- The occupant on the earthly throne will mediate between God and the chosen.
- Because of this present mediation, the 'catchword glory' is consistently used because of the 'amalgamation of the earthly and heavenly spheres' (Koch 1972:32).

Composing lists of traits to define a genre is not common in current research, and it is essential to note that Koch (1972) never intended this list to serve as a checklist. All of these characteristics are found in other writings, but what makes a writing an apocalypse is how they are combined (Koch 1972:33).

Koch (1972) and Lücke (1852) do not distinguish between apocalypse as a genre and worldview; both are labelled 'apocalyptic'. This changed with Hanson's (1979) *The dawn of apocalyptic*. Commenting on the increase in modern obsessive association of the end of the world with apocalyptic and apocalypses, Hanson (1979:3) cautions that 'current interpretations of contemporary apocalyptic movements' should not become 'normative for our interpretation of ancient apocalyptic writings'. To address this call to caution, Hanson sets out to establish historical situated definitions for the terms apocalypse, apocalypticism and apocalyptic eschatology.

Apocalypse, the literary genre, is defined by Hanson (1976a:27, 1979:428) as a 'revelation of future events by God through the mediation of an angel to a human servant'. Apocalypticism in turn is a 'religious movement' that encompasses the 'overall phenomenon' expressed in apocalypses (Hanson 1979:429). This movement aims to create a 'symbolic universe' in which the community 'codifies its identity and interpretation of reality' (Hanson 1976b:30). As such it is not possible to give 'one formal cognitive definition of apocalypticism' (Hanson 1976b:30), rather each writing should be read in its historical context. In discussing apocalyptic eschatology, Hanson makes a less rigid distinction between prophetic and apocalyptic eschatology than Lücke (1852) and later also Von Rad (1965:301, 308). Von Rad (1965:306) echoes Lücke's (1852) view that there is a 'great gulf which separates apocalyptic literature from prophecy'. Contrary to this view, Hanson (1979:11–12) sees prophetic and apocalyptic eschatology as representing a continuum. In doing so, Hanson establishes a clear connection between Israel's prophetic and apocalyptic writings. Prophetic and apocalyptic eschatology is a religious perspective taken by a divinely inspired human who receives and announces a divine plan to Israel. The primary difference between prophetic and apocalyptic eschatology lies in their perspectives on history. The prophets encode prophetic eschatology in terms of 'their nation's history and the history of the world' (Hanson 1979:11). Apocalyptic eschatology expresses a more pessimistic view of current conditions and history as a whole. This means the divine message is not encoded in terms of 'plain history, real politics and human instrumentality', but in otherworldly and futuristic terms (Hanson 1979:11–12). In short, apocalyptic eschatology 'is neither a genre (apocalypse) nor a socioreligious movement (apocalypticism) but a religious perspective which views divine plans in relation to historical realities in a particular way' (Hanson 1979:431).

The increasing precision in defining the genre apocalypse is evident in this overview, from Lücke (1852) to Hanson's (1976a, 1976b, 1979) works. This precision reached its climax in the work produced during the genre decade.

## The genre decade

Beginning in 1979, the Society of Biblical Literature's (SBL) Forms and Genre project aimed to define apocalyptic literature. This work group's efforts culminated in the publication of *Semeia* 14 and the postulation of the now widely accepted definition by Collins (1979) of an apocalypse being:

[A] genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework, in which a revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient, disclosing a transcendent reality which is both temporal, insofar as it envisages eschatological salvation, and spatial insofar as it involves another, supernatural world. (p. 9)

Along with this definition, a master paradigm was also postulated (Collins 1979:6–8) and further divisions of apocalypses into two subtypes: those featuring otherworldly

journeys and those presenting a review of history. In a later article, Collins (2016:24; cf. also Collins 2020) summarises the master paradigm as containing 'framing elements (form)' and 'patterned content'. The overall framing element of all apocalypses is the narrative framework and how this narrative is presented. That is, how the revelations are reported in an apocalypse, the this and otherworldly characters involved and the recipient's reaction. Content distinguishes 'between a temporal axis, describing the course of history, and a spatial axis, describing otherworldly places and beings' (Collins 2016:24). Using this definition and master paradigm, a writing can be read and classified as being a literary type belonging to the genre apocalypse. Initially, this might seem like a repetition of Koch's (1972) aim, but there is an important difference. As noted, the characteristics identified by Koch do not constitute all apocalypses, but rather how different elements are combined. In contrast, *Semeia* 14's definition is 'constitutive of all apocalypses and indicates the common core of the genre' (Collins 1998:5).

The August 1979 Uppsala *Colloquium on apocalypticism* followed the publication of *Semeia* 14, which focused on apocalypticism as a worldview. The purpose of this Colloquium was to give a comprehensive survey of the situation in apocalyptic research, to put forth new thoughts and methods to analyse apocalyptic texts and to contribute to the stimulation of further research (Hellholm 1983:2). In addition to Jewish and Cristian texts, texts from Egypt, Akkadia and Persia were looked at. A consistent theme throughout this colloquium was the realisation of the importance of social situatedness in determining the function of apocalypses (cf. Bergman 1983; Collins 1983; Hartman 1983; Smith 1983). Prior to the publication of Uppsala's papers, Rowland (1982) expresses the same view in his study. Rowland's (1982:3, 9, 11, 13, 14, 28) minimalistic definition of apocalyptic literature is the revelation of 'divine mysteries'. Although this revelation of divine mysteries is considered by Rowland (1982:49) as constituting a fixed genre type among Jewish apocalypses, he still accounts for the variations by noting that 'the mode of revelation appears to be influenced very much by the situation and outlook of the particular author' (Rowland 1982:52). This variation does not only influence the types of revelatory experiences but also what the function of each writing is (Rowland 1982:53–72).

The most controversial aspect of *Semeia* 14 was the omission of considering social function and setting in the definition (Collins 2014:4). This was not because the SBL work group deemed this unimportant. Rather, they worked from the assumption that the social setting and function would have to be determined for each apocalypse, especially in ancient literature, where 'our knowledge of function and setting is often extremely hypothetical and cannot provide a firm basis for generic classification' (Collins 1979:1–2). In *Semeia* 36 (Early Christian apocalypticism: Genre and social setting, 1986), the issue of function was addressed. Both Aune (1986) and Hellholm (1986) work with Revelation, using *Semeia* 14's

definition as a starting point. Hellholm (1986:27) adds to this definition that an apocalypse is 'intended for a group in crisis with the purpose of exhortation and/or consolation using divine authority'. Aune (1986) provides a more expanded addition, noting that the function of an apocalypse is:

- (1) [T]o legitimate the transcendent authorization of the message,
- (2) by mediating a new actualization of the original revelatory experience through literary devices, structures, and imagery, which function to 'conceal' the message which the text 'reveals',
- so that (3) the recipients of the message will be encouraged to modify their cognitive and behavioral stance in conformity with transcendent perspectives. (pp. 87–88)

Yarbro Collins (1986:7), based on Aune and Hellholm's additions, presents a succinct addition to *Semeia* 14's definition that an apocalypse aim to 'interpret present, earthly circumstances in light of the supernatural world and of the future, and to influence both the understanding and the behaviour of the audience employing divine authority'.

At the 1989 SBL meeting, the genre decade comes to a close, with a review of preceding works. The discussions from the meeting were published in *Mysteries and revelations: Apocalyptic studies since the Uppsala colloquium*, edited by Collins and Charlesworth (1991).

Since the end of the genre decade, considerable attention has been devoted to apocalyptic literature, and a critical evaluation will be presented in the final section of this article. However, initially, the influence of this research on considerations of Revelation's genre will receive attention.

## Revelation

### Revelation, not an apocalypse

Considering that the genre label 'apocalyptic', applied to writings dating between 250 BCE and 250 AD, derives from the first word of Revelation, ἀποκάλυψις (Rv 1:1), one might assume that classifying Revelation as an apocalypse would be a foregone conclusion. However, the matter is not as simple as finding texts with this designation in itself and grouping those texts under the label 'apocalypse'. Smith (1983:19), after reviewing uses of ἀποκαλύπτω and ἀποκάλυψις in the Septuagint (LXX), Greco-Roman literature, Pauline and Deutero-Pauline letters, concludes that 'the literary form we call an apocalypse carries that title for the first time in the very late first or early second century A.D' (cf. also, Aune 1997:12; Koester 2014:209; Witherington 2007:66). Even after this time, using ἀποκάλυψις as a type of classification label is problematic. Many texts are 'labelled "apocalypses" or "revelations" in the manuscripts, but many are not' but can plausibly be classified as such (Collins 2014:1). Thus, before turning to Revelation as an apocalypse, arguments against this classification need consideration.

According to Kallas (1967:69), Revelation contains certain typical apocalyptic elements, such as 'weird' and 'grotesque' symbols, as well as a complex representation of the heavenly world. However, these are all 'accidental

or secondary aspects of true apocalyptic'. The theodicy of a document is what makes it authentically apocalyptic for Kallas. True apocalyptic theodicy is where evil is a force that God opposes and eradicates from the world (Kallas 1967:71). To support his thesis, Kallas (1967:71–74) begins by discussing two ways of viewing the origin of suffering in Israel. One is that suffering originates with God with the intent to bring the sufferer to repentance. The other is that devotees suffer because of their faithfulness in God. Thus, suffering in the second sense originates from forces that oppose God. The afflictions suffered in the time of Antiochus Epiphanes (167–160 BCE) are typical of the second (1 Mc 1:60–64; 2 Mc 6:18–31; 7). Examining Revelation, Kallas (1967:76–78) notes that suffering will be eradicated by the imminent return of Christ (Rv 1:3; 20:10; 22:10), but that the source of suffering means that Revelation cannot be a true apocalypse. Suffering in Revelation 'is the work of God' (Kallas 1967:78). In the heavenly scene of Revelation 4–5, suffering, brought about by the opening of the seven seals, is brought about by the Lamb (Rv 5:5). Suffering originates not from God-opposing forces but from the throne of God. Even when Satan is introduced in Revelation 12–13, Satan is not the origin of suffering but a tool in the hands of God to inflict more suffering on the world. Kallas (1967:80) concludes that after enough suffering has been endured in the world, Satan and Rome, having served their divine purpose of bringing the church to repentance, are then cast into the lake of fire. Kallas concludes on this basis that Revelation cannot be a true apocalypse. One might not agree with Kallas' view on theodicy in Revelation. Still, this raises important issues that fall outside the scope of this discussion, which will be addressed in a subsequent contribution (cf. Barr 2003a, 2003b).

Bruce W. Jones (1968), while noting the importance of Kallas' (1967) work, notes that theodicy cannot be used as apocalyptic literature's 'real touchstone'. For Jones (1968:326), the touchstone of apocalyptic literature is the presence or absence of pseudonymity and by implication, the presence of *vaticinium ex eventu* prophecy. That is, a review of history as predictive prophecy received by the author of the apocalypse (Collins 1998:64). Because John of Patmos is not a pseudonym, Jones rejects its classification as apocalyptic. Jones is not alone in this. Mazzaferri (1989), arguing from a source-critical stance, classifies Revelation as a classic Old Testament prophetic book. Mazzaferri (1989:157–184) defines 'classical apocalyptic' as always written under a pseudonym. This allows the author to present the content as 'pseudo-prophecy' (i.e. *vaticinium ex eventu* prophecy). If there is no pseudonymity, Mazzaferri (1989:184) argues, then the 'pseudo-prophecy' would be inauthentic. Roloff (1993:3) argues along the same lines and also deems the lack of pseudonymity and *vaticinium ex eventu* prophecy as evidence that Revelation is not an apocalypse.

While these arguments are important to note, the current scholarly consensus is that Revelation belongs to the genre of apocalypse.

## Revelation as an apocalypse

The genre of Revelation is often regarded as one of hybridity (Barr 2006; Collins 2016; Linton 2006; Osborne 2004; Paul 2018:28–29; Schreiner 2023:35), but this is not taken as evidence for excluding it from the genre of apocalypse. Linton (2006) notes that this feature makes Revelation unique among apocalypses, and Witherington (2007:32–33, 2014:216–245) sees hybridity as characteristic of apocalyptic literature. While this genre hybridity is an important consideration (Barr 2006; Linton 2006; Paul 2018), the focus here is on how the genre decade's work influenced discussions on Revelation as an apocalypse.

Aune (1997:lxviii–lxxxii), Koester (2014:104–107) and Osborne (2002:14) all work consciously with the definitions and refinements of the genre decade. In addition to defining form, content and function, Aune (1997:lxxxii) further utilises *Semeia* 14's master paradigm to classify Revelation as a Type 2b apocalypse, featuring an otherworldly journey with cosmic and/or political eschatology. Aune (1997:lxxxii–lxxxvi) illustrates Revelation's resemblance to other apocalypses by highlighting, among other elements of the master paradigm, visions (Rv 10:1–11; 11:19–12:17), epiphanies (Rv 1:9–3:22), otherworldly mediator (Rv 1:2; 22:8–16), cosmogony (Rv 4:11; 10:6) and otherworldly regions (Rv 4:1–5:14; 7:9–17).

Like Aune, Koester (2014:104) begins with *Semeia* 14's definition but differs from Aune in that he works more implicitly with the master paradigm. Nonetheless, this paradigm can be discerned when compared with the outline provided by Collins (1979:6–8). John's revelation comes 'from the unseen realm above' mediated by heavenly beings in visionary and auditory experiences (Koester 2014:105; cf. Collins 1979:6). Agents of evil and their eradication occupy a central place in Revelation's narrative (Koester 2014:105; cf. Collins 1979:6–7). Otherworldly elements, regions and beings play a central role in the unfolding of the narrative on the special axis. 'Most vision cycles begin and end in the heavenly realm, and the decrees of God and actions of his associates affect what occurs on earth' (Koester 2014:105; cf. Collins 1979:7–8). Koester (2014:107) explains Revelation's lack of pseudonymity by referring to the communal context in which John writes. Because John is a communal prophet among the seven communities, he does not need to write in the name of past prophets. In addition, the mixed genre of Revelation also contributes to this lack of pseudonymity. As a letter, John identifies himself by name, which was typical of ancient letters (cf. Collins 1977). *Semeia* 36's focus on function is also reflected in Koester's understanding of an apocalypse as providing 'perspectives on the world that transcend the usual boundaries of space and time so readers can see their present situation in light of God's designs'. Both DeSilva (2018:790) and Paul (2020:38) come to similar conclusions on Revelation as an apocalypse.

Osborne (2004) in turn does not quote *Semeia* 14's definition, but his definition of an apocalypse is clearly influenced by

the works of Aune (1986), Collins (1979), Hellholm (1986), Rowland (1982) and Yarbrow Collins (1986). Osborne (2002:14, 2004) defines apocalyptic as literature that:

[E]ntails the revelatory communication of heavenly secrets by an otherworldly being to a seer who presents the visions in a narrative framework; the visions guide readers into a transcendent reality that takes precedence over the current situation and encourages readers to persevere in the midst of their trials. The visions reverse normal experiences by making the heavenly mysteries the real world and depicting the present crisis as a temporary, illusory situation. This is achieved via God transforming the world for the faithful. (p. 476)

Focusing on Revelation, Osborne (2002:14–15) notes the important role John's otherworldly journeys play (Rv 4–5), the heavenly mediators (Rv 5:5; 7:13–14; 11:1–2; 17:6–18), the exhortation function of the book and partial dualism found therein (a similar amalgamation of the genre decade's works are found in Harrington 2008:1–5; Reddish 2001:3–7; Talbert 1994:4).

Ian Paul (2018:30) presents a concise definition of Revelation as an apocalypse, which is 'a revelation from God'. This echoes Rowland's (1982) minimalist definition. Paul further agrees with DeSilva (2018:790) and Koester (2014:107) that the purpose of an apocalypses is to present a divine interpretation and 'perspective on the world' that would otherwise not be available (Paul 2018:30).

In Schreiner's (2023) commentary, Aune's (1997) extended definition serves as a starting point; however, the definitions of *Semeia* 14 and 36 form the basis of his discussion of Revelation as an apocalypse. Revelation is presented as a 'narrative' of Christ's victory over the forces of evil. This revelation is mediated by 'otherworldly beings' and originates from a 'transcendental reality', thus making the 'mysteries of the cosmos, hidden from ordinary mortals', known to John, who communicates it to his communities (Schreiner 2023:40–41). Schreiner (2023:41) highlights the significance of the context of the communities to whom John writes, particularly their perception of reality, in his discussion of common apocalyptic features. Here, he agrees with Collins (2017:34–35) that listing features found in different works is not sufficient grounds for defining a genre, but such listings can be useful in discussing apocalyptic literature. The list provided by Schreiner (2023:41) includes historical dualism, visions, interpretation of visions, pseudonymity, symbolism, numerology, angelology, demonology, predicted woes, otherworldly journey, comic conflict and a narrative framework. All of these are typical of apocalyptic literature, as the preceding discussion has highlighted; still, at the same time, they are adopted, changed or absent because of John's interpretative matrix of his revelation. This matrix is constituted by these communities' belief in Jesus as the Messiah of the God of Israel and their situatedness in the Roman Empire (Schreiner 2023:46).

It is not only in recent commentaries that the influence of the genre decade is seen. In Ehrman's (2023) *Armageddon: What*

the Bible really says about the end, the form and content definitions, along with the shared common feature list, and the function of apocalypses are all noted. Ehrman (2023:111) reiterates what the genre decade set out to show, that Revelation 'is not a sui generis work that requires unique principles of interpretation'. As an apocalypse, it agrees in genre with works like 1 Enoch, 2 Baruch, 4 Ezra and the Shepherd of Hermas. A 'one-sentence' definition of an apocalypse is a 'first-person narrative of highly symbolic visionary experiences that reveal heavenly secrets to explain earthly realities' (Ehrman 2023:111). While all of these apocalypses 'share a number of key features [...] each apocalypse does not necessarily have all of them' (Ehrman 2023:119). Finally, the function of Revelation as an apocalypse is to reinterpret the experiences and hardships of the communities, showing them that, regardless of the suffering experienced by the chosen few, 'God is in control' (Ehrman 2023:120).

Many more works can be included in the preceding discussion, illustrating the same point that these paradigmatic scholarly works highlight: the continuous and abiding influence of the genre decade on defining the literary genre of apocalypse and using it as a hermeneutical tool to read Revelation as an apocalypse.

## A critical evaluation

Identifying the genre of a text is not an end in itself. Rather, through the identification of a text's genre classification understanding can be mediated (Collins 2017:34; Osborne 2004:474). For the communities, hearing what follows is an 'ἀποκάλυψις Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ ἣν ἔδωκεν αὐτοῖς ὁ θεός' (Rv 1:1; cf. Rv 1:3), they were able to classify and understand what followed. For them, Revelation was a meaningful configuration of language that communicated clearly because of their expectations of what an ἀποκάλυψις encompassed. Current readers are removed from this original context, one that needs to be imaginatively reconstructed. This is where the reconstruction of apocalypse as a genre functions as a heuristic tool. These different definitions and reconstructions should not be seen as 'metaphysical entities that live independently of texts or readers' (Linton 2006:17). Rather, they are 'modern analytic categories' (Collins 2014:1) representing 'some sort of mental grouping of texts on the basis of perceived similarity' (Newsom 2007:22). As such any evaluation of a genre definition rests on the usefulness thereof to explain the most amount of data relating to texts identified as such (Collins 2001:25–28, 2014:5; Linton 2006:16–21).

The dichotomy initiated by Lücke (1852) between Revelation and the canonised prophetic collection cannot be maintained. Rather, Revelation is situated in the prophetic tradition (Schüssler-Fiorenza 1998:133–165) or on a continuum (Paul 2018:9; Reddish 2020:30–32). Summarily, Mazzaferri's (1989) view that Revelation should be classified as a classical prophecy rather than an apocalypse, based on the absence of a single 'typical' apocalyptic element (i.e. pseudonymity), can also not be maintained. While Revelation is situated on

the continuum of Israelite prophetic works, there are clear differences between Revelation's view of reality and history and the prophetic collections (Hanson 1976a, 1976b, 1979; Koch 1972; Schreiner 2023:43–46). Koch's (1972) analysis shows that while different apocalypses share common features, these traits cannot solely define their classification. Each work presents a unique combination of these characteristics. Ultimately, how they are displayed and interact determines whether a text is more apocalyptic or prophetic (see also Collins 2017).

Much has been written about the definition of the literary genre apocalyptic from the inception of the genre to the present day. But in all this time, a continuous line can be traced. Already in *Semeia* 14, Collins (1979:10) notes that 'transcendence' is a key term in the definition and understanding of apocalyptic literature. What is revealed to the recipients does not originate with themselves nor from their terrestrial world. Rather, it is revelations from a transcendental world. This element is seen as playing a key role in many of the definitions that followed with regard to form, content and function. Rowland's (1982) definition places the origins of apocalypse revelations in a 'divine' or 'heavenly' reality. *Semeia* 36's inclusion of function notes that the interpretation of reality and the authority thereof is transcendental in nature. DeSilva (2018:789–790), Koester (2014:107), Osborne (2002:14, 2004:476), Paul (2018:90) and Schreiner (2023:36) all agree on this that the interpretation presented in Revelation is presented as a transcendental view of earthly circumstances. Even DiTommaso's (2014:473–474, 2020:317–318) work on popular culture and apocalyptic notes the importance of the transcendental view taken on space, time and human destiny or the existential view of reality.

This transcendental element is clear from the start of Revelation. Revelation is mediated to John 'διὰ τοῦ ἀγγέλου' and is given to Christ by 'ὁ θεός' (Rv 1:1). The situations of all seven communities are given not as John's interpretation, but each is introduced with the phrase 'τάδε λέγει' (Rv 2:1, 8, 12, 18; 3:1, 7, 14) followed by a description of the heavenly Christ (cf. Rv 1:12–16). John's heavenly journey in Revelation 4–5 is so that he can receive insight into 'δεῖ γενέσθαι μετὰ ταῦτα' (Rv 4:1) and so have a transcendental understanding of reality below. Commenting on Revelation 11:19–12:17, Koester (2014:555) notes that the central question addressed here is, why 'does evil so persistently threaten the faithful?' This heavenly scene again provides the answer to the question, namely that evil knows 'God will triumph in the end' (Koester 2014:555).

This shows that apocalyptic texts contain rhetorical potential to convince readers to take on a certain view of reality. With Revelation being a canonical text, this rhetorical potential increases greatly and receives an added layer of authority. As a transcendental unveiling of divine mysteries, and if removed from the historical ancient contexts, Revelation is perceived as being the literal words of God (cf. Tsarfati & Yohn 2022). Ehrman (2023:110) makes the important observation in this regard that the 'literary context of words' is 'just as important

as their historical context'. If Revelation's literary genre as an apocalypse is misunderstood, this 'may not be the end of the world, but it may make you think it is the end of the world' as seen from a transcendental viewpoint (Ehrman 2023:110). The misclassification of Revelation's genre entails not merely hermeneutical error but may also engender socio-political ramifications, including the emergence of violent and destructive movements (cf. Wessinger 2014).

While the literary genre theories on Revelation as apocalypse are helpful, it is also important to realise that 'generic categories are meaningful only if one recognises they are history-bound and relate mainly to one's own period' (Osborne 1983:6; cf. also Newsom 2007). Collins (2014:1) states this explicitly by noting that, "'apocalypse" and "apocalyptic" are modern analytical categories that coincide only partially with ancient generic labels'. Thus, it is important to keep in mind when working with these genre theories that, "'apocalypse" is simply that which scholars can agree to call an "apocalypse"' (Collins 1979:3). These literary genre theories originate in a literary world where authors choose to write in one or another literary genre. Books are readily available, including the Bible, which is the 'most commonly purchased, widely read' book (Ehrman 2016:1). Consequently when approaching Revelation, it is normal to assume that as a literary product it 'was written to be read' (Tsarfaty & Yohn 2022:7). However, when John refers to his experiences as an ἀποκάλυψις from a transcendental reality, this was not presented as a genre label. Rather, as other occurrences in the New Testament documents highlight (i.e. 1 Cor 1:7; 14:6, 26; Gl 1:12; 2:2), this was a dynamic lived experience in the life of a person situated in a certain community and embedded in a certain culture. In John's case, he was situated in a preliterate culture, where the ability to read was rare (Ehrman 2016:87). Even in elite Roman households, the ability to read was limited (cf. Fagan 2006). Thus, for a more nuanced understanding of Revelation as an apocalypse, these realisations need to be incorporated into a model of its genre, while still making sense of it as a transcendental interpretation of the communities' experience of reality.

## Conclusion

The application of the scholarly reconstructed literary genre apocalypse to Revelation has contributed significantly to a more responsible and historically sensitive reading thereof. While for modern readers, the apocalyptic tropes of Revelation seem strange and esoteric, it is clear that for any first-century hearer, these would have been expected. Through the classification of Revelation as an apocalypse, the similarities, but also differences, with other ancient apocalypses are apparent. As with other apocalypses, John and his communities did not so much need interpretation as it interpreted their reality and experiences from a transcendental perspective.

While studies on the genre apocalypse did bring much-needed clarity to discussions of Revelation as an apocalypse, they also highlight topics for further exploration:

- Considering the pivotal role that the heavenly realm plays in Revelation (and other apocalypses), a fuller understanding of how John and his communities thought about the influence of this realm on their own needs exploration. Did they also make such a clear distinction between the natural and supernatural modern readers do?
- The influence of Revelation and apocalypticism in the modern world is not only in religious movements but also in popular culture, such as SF. Considering this pervasive influence, a reasonable question would be if there is any use in comparing Revelation to the modern genre of SF.
- By classifying Revelation as an apocalypse and comparing it with other ancient apocalypses, it is clear that violent imagery therein is typical of this type of writing. Critical engagement with these violent symbols is needed. As Ehrman (2023:167) notes, symbolic 'images reveal an author's deepest values, commitments, perspectives, and beliefs'. The violent imagery cannot be explained away by just stating it is 'just a story' or symbolic. Critical engagement with these images is needed.
- Ehrman (2023), Linton (2006) and Osborne (2004) all emphasise that the meaning of a genre is inseparable from its historical context. As Linton (2006:17) notes, genre definitions are not 'metaphysical entities that live independently of texts or readers'. This understanding of genre applies equally to Revelation, written for communities under Roman rule. Its rhetoric addresses the hardships of these communities while also challenging imperial ideology. Revelation not only seeks to persuade readers of an alternative reality but also challenges the Roman's claim to be an eternal empire (cf. Vergil, *Aen.* 1.278–279). Like other apocalypses, such as Daniel, it deconstructs imperial ideology and reconstructs an alternative theological vision. John's purpose was not entertainment; Revelation offered his communities a reality distinct from, and opposed to, the official imperial worldview.

These topics will be the focus of the subsequential articles in this series on Revelation.

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