

Preaching from Apocalyptic Literature

What are we talking about?

'Apocalyptic' comes from Rev. 1:1

Exercise 1: Look at Revelation 1:1-5 – What clues do get here about what Revelation is going to be all about the sort of writing that it is?

Apocalypse (v1) - meaning 'an unveiling' cf. Rev. 13; 11:8 – the reality behind reality

Jesus Christ (v1) – his testimony and it's all about him (v5)

Future (v1) – here the stress is on 'soon' [things which must occur with speed] (cf. v3 – 'near') and *fulfilment* of the distant prophecies of OT apocalyptic (cf. v19 – present and future)

Angle (v1) – here probably 'the angel of the Lord' but angels often turn up in apocalyptic

Seeing & hearing (v2, 10-12) – an audio-visual experience, lots of visions and graphic imagery

Prophecy (v3) – the apocalypse is a prophecy, John is a prophetic figure receiving God's Word

A letter (v4) – opening like Paul's

Apocalyptic is simply literature that sounds like Revelation.

What can you think of in the rest of the Bible that would sound like Revelation – that might be classified as apocalyptic?

a) Most commonly:

Daniel

Zechariah

Revelation

b) Other places in the OT:

Isaiah 6, 24, 65

Ezekiel 1-3, 8-11, 37, 40-48

c) And some less common / more debatable OT examples:

Genesis 1-11¹

1 Kings 22 // 2 Chronicles 18

Psalms 18:6-15; 46

Joel

Habakkuk (e.g. 2:2-3; 3:3-16)

Zephaniah

d) Other places in the NT:

Preaching of John the Baptist – Matt. 3; Luke 3; John 1

Olivet Discourse / Little Apocalypse – Matt. 24, Mark 13 and Luke 21

Pronouncement of Simeon – Luke 2

Vision of Stephen – Acts 7

1 Thessalonians 4-5

¹ Possibly retrospective apocalyptic – creation of heaven and earth, patterns of seven, a river, the tree of life, the serpent, deception, a mark, worldwide judgment, a rainbow, the fall of Babel (further on this see [here](#)).

2 Thessalonians 2

2 Peter 3

Other fragments – e.g. use of ‘kingdom’, ‘son of man’, Mark 11:23, Luke 23:29-31; 1 Peter 5:13

So we must tackle this literature because if we leave it:

- a) We’ll be ignoring a lot of the Bible;
- b) We’ll leave it to the manipulation of cults and cranks and our congregations will have little defence against their teaching;
- c) We’ll miss the wonderful and powerful message of apocalyptic literature to the church.

So what is apocalyptic like?

What things do you notice that those writings we looked at have in common?

Often future / end time

Often angels / throne room of heaven

Often universal

Often prophecy – an intensification of prophecy – screaming warnings and encouragement²

Visionary - often narrative visions

Recorded in figurative, allegorical language and particularly **strong metaphor**

- a) Metaphor = “speaking about one thing in terms... suggestive of another”³;
borrowing language from one place and using it unconventionally in another place
- b) Impossible to read literally – e.g. Rev. 5:5-6; 20:1-2; 21:9-10
- c) Original not stock images and fixed symbols – e.g. Rev. 5:5-6
- d) Undefined, open and shifting – e.g. Zech. 4; Rev. 4:5; 5:6; 14:3-5
- e) All-consuming, total metaphor – e.g. Rev. 1:14; 5:6; 11:7; 1 Peter 5:13 – not A=B, just B⁴
- f) Allusions⁵ to OT – e.g. Zeph. 1:2-3//Gen. 6; Zech. 14:8//Ezek. 47; throughout Rev.
- g) Metaphor is being used to show the reality behind reality – ‘naming’ contemporary reality with an OT image to give a powerful spiritual diagnosis of the situation – e.g. 1 Peter 5:13; Rev. 11:8

² Cf. Rev. 22:10-11 – the sense that disaster is imminent.

³ The definition of metaphor given by J. M. Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language* (Oxford: OUP, 1985) 49.

⁴ Which is incidentally why there is so much debate a) about whether Rev. is metaphorical or literal and b) what the different metaphors refer to (e.g. who is the beast?).

⁵ An allusion is language which reminds you of language somewhere else. It may be a word for word reciting of another text but it is different from normal quotations because it doesn’t tell you it is a quotation – it doesn’t have “This was to fulfil what the prophet X said:...”

Exercise: Revelation 12

- Pray, read, read again
- What is basically going on?
- Can you take this literally?
- What allusions can you see here?

Gen. 37

Gen. 3 – serpent, woman, seed, labour pains

Isaiah 26:17-18; 66:7

Daniel 7-8, 10

Psalm 2:7

Exodus – e.g. Ex. 19:4

Daniel 7:25; 12:7 – time, times and half a time

How can we preach from apocalyptic?

1. Context, context, context
 - i. The immediate context – e.g. the way the narrative flows in Rev. 12
 - ii. Connections within the book – e.g. Rev. 11:2,3; 12:6,14; 13:5 or 12:5 cf. 19:15
 - iii. The structure of the book – e.g. Ezekiel structure,⁶ Daniel structure⁷, use of Olivet Discourse in different gospels,⁸ Rev. as one prophecy structured around sevens etc.⁹
 - iv. The tone of the book – e.g. Ezekiel – 15 x ‘rebellious house’; Revelation – 5 out of 7 letters negative - comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable
 - v. The Bible context – especially Gen. 1-3 and the Christ event (cf. Daniel 7 the ‘Son of Man’); universal emphasis; creation to new creation (Rev. 21-22)
2. The Bible interprets the Bible
 - i. NT interprets OT apocalyptic – e.g. Ezek. 40 cf. John 2; Rev. 21-22
 - ii. OT interprets NT apocalyptic – e.g. Rev. 1:13-16
 - iii. Listen for the allusions. And the more we read the Bible the more we will see the connections and hear the allusions
3. Listen to how apocalyptic literature asks to be read:
 - i. Ezekiel 3:15; Daniel 8:27; 9:1-4
 - ii. Revelation 1:3; 22:7 – hear, receive and keep (cf. Dt. 29:29)¹⁰

⁶ Note the 4 references to being seized by the Lord and carried away – Ezek. 1:1-3:15; 8:1-11:25; 37:1ff; 40:1ff – the first and third speak of the Spirit raising onto feet (Ezekiel and then Israel), and the second and fourth speak of the Glory of the Lord and the Temple (departing and then returning).

⁷ Daniel 2-7 is in Aramaic and may have a chiasmic structure – A-B-C-C’-B’-A’.

⁸ E.g. In Matthew the Olivet Apocalypse is linked to death of Christ and return of Christ; in Mark it is linked to confrontation and vindication, Luke linked to Temple and weeping.

⁹ See outline below.

4. So in practice:
 - i. Read the whole book in which your passage is found
 - ii. Read the passage *aloud*, don't worry about knowing what everything means
 - iii. Expect lots of imagery and feel the force of it – is it terrifying, beautiful, repulsive, awesome? It's about affections – feeling the emotional force of the imagery rather than trying to puzzle everything out as an intellectual challenge
 - iv. Notice the allusions and follow up where they come from in other parts of the Bible
 - v. When you preach, don't flatten out the metaphors by translating them into normal language – they work as metaphors – preach the imagery, help people feel the force of it
 - vi. And...

5. Preach Christ – most important

Exercise: Acts 2

- Read Acts 2:17-21 – what would be the main thing you would preach from that?
- Then read Acts 2:22-41 – what does Peter preach from Joel?
 - i. The focus of apocalyptic is Christ:
 - a. Ezekiel 1,8
 - b. Daniel 2,3,4,5,6,7,10
 - c. Zephaniah 2:3¹¹
 - d. Zechariah 1-3, 9, 12, 14
 - e. Matthew 24
 - f. Revelation 1,5 (cf. 19:9-10), 20-22

Exercise: Revelation 12

- How would you preach the gospel of Christ crucified from this chapter?

¹⁰ For more ways that Revelation directs us in the way we read it as a something to stir our hearts and cause us to run from idolatry to Christ see [The Affective Directives of the Book of Revelation](#).

¹¹ See further on the gospel theme of Zephaniah [here](#).

Overview of Revelation

1:1-8	Title & greeting – It's all about Jesus and his return
1:9-3:22	Vision of the exalted Jesus who holds the churches in his hands
2-3	The 7 churches
4:1-16:21	Vision of the Lamb who opens the scroll
4:1-5:14	The throne room
4:1-11	The set
5:1-14	The action
6:1-8:1	The 7 seal openings
6:1-17	First 6 seal openings
7:1-17	Interlude: The people of God sealed
8:1	The 7th seal opening
8:2-11:19	The 7 trumpet blasts
8:6-9:21	First 6 trumpet blasts
10:1-11:13	Interlude: Receiving and delivering prophecy
11:14-19	The 7th trumpet blast
12:1-15:8	The 7 signs? - The heart of the message - a call to endure and be faithful amid the persecution of
12:1-17	the devil
13:1-18	and beasts I & II
14:1-15:8	in view of the end
15:1-16:21	The 7 bowl pourings
16:1-14	First 6 bowl pourings
16:15	Interlude: Being ready for Jesus' return
16:16-21	The 7th bowl pouring
17:1-18	Vision of Babylon the Prostitute
18:1-19:10	Babylon → judgment
19:11-21	beasts I & II → judgment
20:1-10	the devil → judgment
20:11-15	everyone → judgment
21:1-22:6	Vision of the New Jerusalem the Bride
22:7-21	Closing – It's all about Jesus and his return

Suggested reading:

- John Richardson, *Revelation unwrapped*, 1996 – available from www.thegoodbook.co.uk.
- Graeme Goldsworthy, *The Gospel in Revelation*, 1984/1994 – available from Amazon (or from The Good Book Company as part of the *Goldsworthy Trilogy*).
- [666 and all that](#)
- [A few resources on Daniel](#)