

The apocalyptic
genre in revelation
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INTRODUCTION

John writes about things he had seen and heard. The expression " I Saw" appears more than forty times in the book of Revelation and so does " I heard," almost as frequently. Revelation is like a picture book with words, a narrative which unveils the awe inspiring mysteries of the future in a series of colourful constantly-changing scenes. Hendriksen (1962: 40) proposes: " The fabric of the book consists of moving pictures. The details that pertain to the picture should be interpreted in harmony with its central thought we should ask two questions. First, what is the entire picture? Second, what is its predominant idea?" It is a wake-up call to be vigilant but also a consolatory book for the oppressed believers through all the ages, because He who walks among the lamp stands, that is, in the heart of His Church as King and Judge certainly and without fail will come to accomplish, for ever, the victory of His persecuted Bride (Church), and the enormous defeat, over Satan and his henchmen. Revelation is a combination of three genres; prophesy apocalypse and epistle. John calls his book " this prophecy" (1: 3, 19: 10, 22: 18-19). It was a word from God for the present situation, to speak God's Word forth in the present. It also combines prophetic and apocalyptic elements which are cast in the form of a letter. In its final form Revelation was sent by John as a letter to the seven churches in Asia Minor. As a whole, Revelation fits all the characteristics of an apocalypse. Hendriksen (1962: 8) is of opinion that: " The theme is the victory of Christ and His Church over the dragon (Satan) and his helpers. The Apocalypse is meant to show us that things are not what they seem. The beast that comes up out of the abyss seems to be victorious."

THE APOCALYPTIC GENRE IN REVELATION

Collins in (Bock & Fanning, 2006: 242) defines the genre as follows:

"'Apocalypse' is a genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework, in which a revelation is mediated by an other-worldly 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." In simplest terms this could be expressed as "a story viewed through the lens of a heavenly perspective, looking toward the future resolution of cosmic conflict in the end times." Another definition from encyclopaedia Britannica: "Apocalyptic literature, literary genre that foretells supernaturally inspired cataclysmic events that will transpire at the end of the world. A product of the Judeo-Christian tradition, apocalyptic literature is characteristically pseudonymous; it takes narrative form, employs esoteric language, expresses a pessimistic view of the present, and treats the final events as imminent." From the above definitions certain characteristics peculiar to the apocalyptic genre can be derived: It is set in the context of a narrative but it is distinguished from other forms of narrative in that it reveals or discloses something. The Greek word apokalypsis means "revelation", "an unveiling or unfolding of things not previously known and which could not be known apart from the unveiling." (Wikipedia). The revelation or disclosure is of a supernatural nature. An other-worldly being, like an angel acts as a go-between to reveal something to a human recipient. The awe-inspiring truth or fact disclosed in this manner is earthly, as it looks at the final liberation at the end of time, implying earthly development towards that end. It is written in difficult times and is pessimistic concerning the present world, portraying it as irredeemable. Achtemeier (2001: 564) say <https://assignbuster.com/the-apocalyptic-genre-in-revelation-theology-religion-essay/>

more on this: " Apocalyptic literature is often assumed to have arisen among marginalized groups and in times of crisis, in contexts in which suffering and persecution were realities of everyday life. It follows that the function of this literature was to offer consolation, comfort, and hope to those who were experiencing religious persecution or social alienation. Daniel, for example, seems to have taken shape during the Maccabean crisis to urge faithfulness to the law of God during the persecution of Antiochus IV Epiphanus." It claims to be prophetic, stating that God will intervene catastrophically to destroy evil and preserve the righteous. The message is often framed in vivid and even grotesque symbols and it shares with prophecy revelation through visions and dreams, and these often combine reality and fantasy. It is however, important to note as Achtemeier (2001: 562) reflects: " The symbols are not the message; they carry and embody the message." Hendriksen (1962: 45) also remarks in this respect: " The Apocalypse is rooted in contemporaneous events and circumstances. Its symbols should be interpreted in the light of conditions which prevailed when the book was written." Bock and Fanning (2006: 244) also comments that: " Apocalyptic eschatology, on the other hand (as exemplified in the book of Revelation) describes movement to the end through the direct intervention of cosmic forces penetrating into human history from outside. Angelic beings are the primary players on stage where apocalyptic is concerned." Achtemeier (2001: 259): " A striking instance of one of the distinctive features of Revelation is the author's presentation of himself simply as " John". In Jewish apocalypses the author always writes under a pseudonym, presenting himself as a worthy ancient figure such as Adam, Abraham, Moses, Enoch, or Ezra. Revelation, however, is not pseudonymous. The author names himself <https://assignbuster.com/the-apocalyptic-genre-in-revelation-theology-religion-essay/>

as " John," and the authority of his writing depends to some extent on the relationship he has with the recipients of the document." Revelation borrows to a great extent from the Old Testament. As Achtemeier (2001: 563) notes: " From Daniel, John draws descriptions of the kingdoms of the earth in the form of bizarre beasts, as well as the portrayal of Jesus as the Son of man, and the image of the sovereign God seated on the heavenly throne. The four winged creatures around the throne have characteristics drawn from the cherubim of both Ezekiel 1 and Isaiah 6, and their hymns reverberate with the " holy, holy, holy" of Isaiah's vision."

EXEGESIS OF REVELATION 13

In chapter 12: 7 John shows that the events in history are the result of a deeper spiritual struggle that has been taking place in the heavenlies. In chapter 13 John unveils the main opponents of God and the church: The dragon (Satan) and the agents of the dragon, namely the Beast from the Sea and the Beast from the earth.

3. 1 The Beast out of the Sea (13: 1-10)

The dragon stood on the shore to welcome his first helper. He is fiercely described as having ten horns and ten crowns, with blasphemous names on each head. The background to the beast from the sea seems to be Daniel 7: 2-7. However, the beast in Revelation is a composite of the beasts in Daniel, (lion, bear, leopard, and a fourth beast). Because Daniel specifically tells us that the four beasts are four kingdoms, and the sea symbolizes nations and peoples (Rev 17: 5), the assumption then is that the beast from the sea must be an imperial empire made up out of these nations. According to

Greijvenstein (s. a.: 111) he acts as described in 2 Th 2: 4 " He will oppose <https://assignbuster.com/the-apocalyptic-genre-in-revelation-theology-religion-essay/>

and will exalt himself over everything that is called God or is worshipped, so that he sets himself up in God's temple, proclaiming himself to be God." In Rev 17: 9-12 John is referring to Rome, the city famous for seven hills as well as seven emperors. The seven heads bear "blasphemous names" – the kings assumed the titles of divinity, Nero was called "Saviour of the World" and Domitian, "Our Lord and God." Rome was also a culmination of other empires. This beast then, in John's time was a picture of the Roman Empire. Hendriksen (1962: 144) writes: "Chapter 13 shows us the agents, instruments, or tools which the dragon uses in his attack upon the Church. Two beasts are described. The first is a monster of indescribable horror. The second has a harmless appearance and for that very reason is even more dangerous than the first. The first beast comes up out of the sea. The second arises from the land. The first is Satan's hand, which represents the persecuting power of Satan, operating in and through the nations and governments of the world. John was writing to the Christians who were persecuted because they refused to burn incense to the emperor and confess that Caesar is Lord. The second is the Devil's mind" (own accentuation), which symbolizes the false religions and philosophies of this world. The dragon gave the beast his power and authority. According to Greijvenstein (s. a.: 111) the beast has a close relationship with the dragon and has as the latter mentioned, seven heads and ten crowns. Achtemeier (2001: 581) remarks about Rev 13: 3, with reference to the fact that one of the heads of the beast seemed to have a fatal wound: "... this description makes use of the Nero redivivus legend to depict not only the reigning emperor but, through him, the Roman Empire." The above is confirmed by Wagner (2001: 40) "13: 3 One view is that the "fatal" sword-slash (see 13: <https://assignbuster.com/the-apocalyptic-genre-in-revelation-theology-religion-essay/>

4) indicates the death of an emperor followed by an amazing recovery. It is important to note that the Nero redivivus theory-suicide in 68, pseudo-Neros appearing in Asia in 69 and 68, and the myth of his resurrection later.

Another view related the " death-blow" to the WHOLE Empire in the chaotic years 67-69. It recovered under Vespasian in 69-79." In 13: 5 we read that the beast was given forty two months to exercise his authority and utter proud words and blasphemies. The forty two months are equal to three and a half years. According to Hendriksen (1962: 143) it is calculated as follows: " In fact, forty-two months is equal to 1, 260 days; both are equal to 'a time, times, and half a time', if the term ' time' be interpreted as meaning one year, and ' times' as indicating two years." Hendriksen (1962: 144) continues that " In the Apocalypse the period of three years and a half refers to the entire gospel age." He describes this as beginning at the moment of Christ's first coming (His Birth) up and to a point in time very close to his second coming (Hendriksen, 1962: 143).

3. 2 The Beast from the Earth (13: 11-18)

(13: 11) It had two horns like a lamb, but it spoke like a dragon. As noted earlier Hendriksen warned of its apparent harmless appearance and as such being more dangerous than the beast from the sea. He also referred to it as being the devil's mind. This second beast is the servant of the beast from the sea. (13: 12) " He exercised all authority of the first beast and made the earth and its inhabitants worship the first beast, whose fatal wound had been healed." But who is this beat really? The answer lies in (16: 13) " Then I saw three evil spirits that looked like frogs; they came out of the mouth of the dragon, out of the mouth of the beast and out of the mouth of the false

prophet." He is in fact the false prophet. Greijvenstein (s. a.: 117) has a description which endorses its apparent harmless appearance described earlier: " The lamb horns is however, also the cunning camouflage whereby he pretends to be an example of innocence and gentleness". Jesus warned about this in Mt 7: 15 " Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves." This beast represents the false religions and false philosophies of the world. This was the situation in John's day. According to Wagner (2001: 11) " In the first century there was the Imperial Cult which used religion to unite the world in loyal obedience to the emperor. They employed tricks, miracles, superstition, terror and tactics to manipulate the people." In (13: 13) we read of great and miraculous signs that this beast performed, even causing fire to come down from heaven. In this regard Greijvenstein (s. a.: 118) remarks that it could be that he tries to imitate Elijah but it is more likely that he tries to copy the wonder of Pentecost. Wagner (2001: 41) correctly remarks: " Here is an evil duplicate of Jesus' " signs" recorded in the Gospels." And further: " Centuries before God warned against the prophet who performed tricks, but incited people to rebel against God." This is written in Dt 13: 1-3: " If a prophet, or one who foretell by dreams, appear among you and announces to you a miraculous sign or wonder, and if the sign or wonder of which he has spoken takes place, and he says, ' Let us follow other gods" (gods you have not known), " and let us worship them," you must not listen. Paul in 2 Th 2: 9 also refers to this: " The coming of the lawless one will be in accordance with the work of Satan displayed in all kinds of counterfeit miracles, signs and wonders." In Rev 13: 15 we read that the beast was given power to give breath to the image of the first beast. There are several viewpoints on this: <https://assignbuster.com/the-apocalyptic-genre-in-revelation-theology-religion-essay/>

In his book on Revelation, Mounce (1998: 258) claimed that statues were made to speak . . . ventriloquism was practised by oriental cults and Simon Magus." Morris (1983) suggests another possibility, that the spirit given may be an unclean spirit, or demon: The word in the Greek is pneuma, meaning "spirit" or "wind". The false prophet is enabled (by his own master, Satan) to impart a spirit to the image, but that spirit is one of Satan's unclean spirits, probably a highly placed demon in the satanic hierarchy. This is a striking case of demon possession, with the demon possessing the body of the image rather than that of a man or woman. Although it is impossible to know precisely what is inferred from the "breath" being given to the image, the results are nothing short of life - for the image exhibits apparent intelligence and speaking abilities. We must remember that the False Prophet "exercises all the authority of the first beast" (Rev. 13: 12) and that the first beast is given "great authority" by the dragon. If the dragon revives the Beast and brings him back from the abyss, as evidenced by the worship of the masses, then why couldn't the False Prophet with the same measure and source of power give life to the image? Certainly this is not beyond the ability that God could grant if it were within His purpose to do so. Moreover, we have no examples in Scripture of the animation of inanimate objects by demonic possession. Spirits seek embodiment in living hosts (Mark 5: 12). Either way, the image appears convincingly lifelike. The image probably plays a role in the sequence of events associated with the "abomination of desolation" spoken of by both Daniel (Dan. 11: 31; Dan 12: 11; Dan 9: 27) and Jesus (Mat 24: 15)." In the end the false prophet orders that the mark of the beast be affixed on the right hand or forehead of everyone and those who would refuse should be killed." There are almost endless theories

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concerning the mark of the beast; the branding like the branding of slaves, soldiers branding themselves with the name of a favourite general, a certificate of a person who had sacrificed to Caesar and religious tattooing are all proposed as possible background rites behind John's thinking" (Wagner, 2001: 42). John further states that wisdom is required to explain the number of the mark, which is, 666, for it is man's number, to determine the name thereof. All kinds of attempts were made, by reason of the numerical values of certain letters of the Greek alphabet, to determine the name. Many interpreters suggested that this number, working alphabetically, referred to the emperor, Nero. This actually is only successful if, with a slight variation in spelling, the name Caesar is translated from Hebrew. From Achtemeier (2001: 561) we learned that seven is a divine number which plays an important role in Revelation. Interestingly enough that Wagner (2001: 42) stated the following: " The Greek name Iesous adds to 888 - " Each digit is one more than 7, the perfect number" (Morris, 1983) " Others take 666 as a symbol for the trinity of evil and imperfection - each digit falls short of the perfect number 7" (LAB Bible). Hendriksen (1962: 151) has the best explanation: " Now, man was created on the sixth day. Six, moreover, is not seven and never reaches seven. It always fails to attain to perfection; that is, it never becomes seven. Six means missing the mark, or failure. Seven means perfection or victory. Rejoice, O Church of God! The victory is on your side. The number of the beast is 666 - that is failure upon failure upon failure! It is the number of man, for the beast glories in man; and must fail!" Further exegesis points to another aspect. This is yet another imitation by the beast, of the Seal of the living God in Rev 14; " the 144, 000 who had his name and his Father's name written on their foreheads" as a <https://assignbuster.com/the-apocalyptic-genre-in-revelation-theology-religion-essay/>

sign of ownership and security. The beast marks his followers on the right hand and forehead. The living God has a seal, a guarantee, the beast has a mark. This is not a literal mark. Hendriksen (1962: 150) clarifies this matter: " So ' receiving the mark of the beast' seems to mean ' belonging to the beast and worshipping the beast'. The ' mark of the beast' is the God-opposing, Christ-rejecting, Church-persecuting spirit of antichrist, wherever and whenever it shows itself. The forehead symbolises the mind, the thought-life, the philosophy of a person. The right hand indicates his deed, action, trade, industry, etc." In other words in their thinking, and in their behaviour, they follow the beast from the sea. According to Wagner (2001: 14): " In John's day this was already taking place, guild membership, which would have been similar to our trade unions, often involved participating in pagan ceremonies. And unless you belonged to the guild, you could not work. Many Christians were unable to find work because they refused to participate in the pagan ceremonies." 13: 18 Ends with: "... his number is 666" which, as noted by Hendriksen (1962: 78) display the failure and weakness of the beast and man, in sharp contrast with the opening text of chapter 14 which begin with the triumph of the saints. (14: 1) " The Lamb standing on Mount Zion, a hill of Jerusalem; (figuratively the Church militant or triumphant), but also the New Jerusalem or heavenly Jerusalem (Bible, 2004).

CONCLUSION

One of the two noteworthy features of the apocalyptic nature of Revelation is the dramatic symbolic imagery. But as pointed out by Achtemeier the symbols, as such, are not the message, it helps to convey and personify the

message. The author describes something with symbols which could easily identify with the aspect being described. Rome, for instance was described in many ways by means of symbols. The other feature is the use of the Old Testament. John sketches pictures of the earthly kingdoms in the form of weird beasts. From Deuteronomy comes the warning not to listen to false prophets. Achtemeier (2001: 263) agrees when he says that " John's description of the fall of ' Babylon, the great' applies the prophetic denunciations of Babylon in Isaiah and Jeremiah and the downfall of Tyre recorded in Ezekiel to his own day. The fates of Babylon and Tyre foreshadow the assured doom of the ' Babylon' known to John's readers - Rome."