

## Introduction

Apocalyptic writings as a genre can be difficult to define in a concise manner.<sup>1</sup> It is also a form of writing that is vastly different in style to the majority of both the New and Old Testament. Furthermore, the language and style found in these books is unlike much that modern Western readers are used to reading which further complicates the task of understanding. However its presence in the book of Revelation and several other places in the New Testament demands that we devote our attention to understanding these writings. To complicate matters further, distinctly Christian apocalyptic writings, such as Revelation differ from Jewish apocalyptic literature in several ways.<sup>2</sup> As such the task of this assignment is to explore some of the important features of specifically Christian apocalyptic writings and examples of their use within the New Testament.

## Characteristics

The first and one of the most prominent features that must be addressed when examining apocalyptic literature is the heavy use of symbolism and mythical language found throughout these writings.<sup>3</sup> The meaning within these texts is being deliberately concealed behind such language, with characteristics of the elements within the story being abstracted and represented through the use of

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<sup>1</sup> Klaus Koch, *The Rediscovery of Apocalyptic: A Polemical Work on a Neglected Area of Biblical Studies and Its Damaging Effects on Theology and Philosophy*, Studies in Biblical Theology(London: SCM Press, 1972), 20.

<sup>2</sup> Walter Schmithals, *The Apocalyptic Movement Introduction and Interpretations*(Nashville: Abingdon, 1975), 168.

<sup>3</sup> D. S. Russell, *Divine Disclosure: An Introduction to Jewish Apocalyptic*(London: SCM Press, 1992), 70.

alternative imagery.<sup>4</sup> One such example of this would be in chapter 12 Revelation where the nation of Israel is portrayed as a woman, Satan as a dragon seeking to devour her and then, in chapter 13, Rome finally represented through the image of the beast, an ally of the dragon.<sup>5</sup> This symbolic language means that the task of interpretation for the reader is significantly more important in order to uncover the intended meaning of the text.

One feature that is apparent when considering Christian apocalyptic is that God's messages for the author are being mediated through heavenly beings. This is a standard part of Jewish apocalyptic writing, with the message from God being mediated by an angel or other heavenly being, as opposed to being directly prophetically received by the author.<sup>6</sup> In the opening verse of Revelation, Jesus Christ is identified as this intermediary (Revelation 1:1) coming to John with a message that he is to proclaim from God the Father. In addition to this, throughout the book angels feature heavily in the unfolding visions and at several points also act as messengers to the author. (Revelation 19:9) As distinct from Jewish apocalyptic, a significant point that we find that in the book of Revelation is the message from the author is not portrayed as an ancient message from God that has been kept and remained secret, but is instead new Revelation concerning the person of Jesus.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Koch, *The Rediscovery of Apocalyptic: A Polemical Work on a Neglected Area of Biblical Studies and Its Damaging Effects on Theology and Philosophy*, 26.

<sup>5</sup> Adela Yarbro Collins, "Apocalyptic Themes in Biblical Literature," *Interpretation* 53, no. 2 (1999): 125.

<sup>6</sup> Collins, "Apocalyptic Themes in Biblical Literature," 117.

<sup>7</sup> Russell, *Divine Disclosure: An Introduction to Jewish Apocalyptic*, 130.

Another important feature that is present in Christian apocalyptic is the author experiencing visions that involve travelling to different heavenly places. This is an important feature of Jewish apocalyptic where the author, through the course of their visions will experience a journey through heavenly or earthly locations.<sup>8</sup> This is evident in the book of Revelation in that there are four distinct visions described by the author, each taking place in a different location and offering a different aspect on the unfolding message.<sup>9</sup> Given this, it is important then for the reader to be aware that the events of the book of Revelation are taking place within visions which are being reported by the author and that it would be inappropriate to treat them as strictly chronological in nature.<sup>10</sup>

One of the key elements that cannot be ignored when considering apocalyptic literature is the clear contrast that is made between good and evil and the inherent conflict between the two. This conflict is a major theme in much apocalyptic literature and will often take the form of people, kingdoms or heavenly creatures being drawn into battle between those loyal to God and those opposed.<sup>11</sup> This distinction is made in both Jewish and Christian apocalyptic and is done in such a way so that readers can readily distinguish between who is on either side.<sup>12</sup> Considerable emphasis is also placed on the ongoing conflict between these two sides, often with the good suffering unjustly at the hands of the evil.

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<sup>8</sup> Russell, *Divine Disclosure: An Introduction to Jewish Apocalyptic*, 75.

<sup>9</sup> Tenny Merrill C. Douglas J.D., "Revelation, Book Of," in *The Niv Compact Dictionary of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1989), 504.

<sup>10</sup> Koch, *The Rediscovery of Apocalyptic: A Polemical Work on a Neglected Area of Biblical Studies and Its Damaging Effects on Theology and Philosophy*, 33.

<sup>11</sup> Collins, "Apocalyptic Themes in Biblical Literature," 123.

<sup>12</sup> Ellen T Charry, "A Sharp Two-Edged Sword," *Interpretation* 53, no. 2 (1999): 159.

So while strong emphasis is placed on the existence of conflict between forces of good and evil, one of the central themes present within apocalyptic writings is the promise that God will ultimately be victorious, that at a cosmic level good will triumph over evil.<sup>13</sup> This is important as apocalyptic literature tends to emerge from communities where God's people are being threatened and attacked by the forces of darkness.<sup>14</sup> Because of this these texts come as a message of hope to God's faithful, bringing a message to them that ultimately justice will prevail, even if not within their lifetime.<sup>15</sup> The key message here is that God being good, powerful and faithful will ultimately be able to rescue his people from those who would attack them, and that the people are to remember this as the basis for their hope.<sup>16</sup> This is an important feature for apocalyptic writings as it goes hand in hand with the emphasis on the reality of conflict between good and evil in acknowledging its ultimate resolution.

Finally, one of the key important features that need to be mentioned concerning specifically Christian apocalyptic literature is its Christocentric focus. This is one of the key differences between what is found in the book of Revelation and Jewish apocalyptic. Throughout the book, Revelation puts a strong focus on the finished work of the crucified Christ, the lamb that was slain.<sup>17</sup> This is emphasised throughout as each vision found in Revelation is focused on

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<sup>13</sup> Charry, "A Sharp Two-Edged Sword," 159.

<sup>14</sup> Charry, "A Sharp Two-Edged Sword," 158.

<sup>15</sup> Charry, "A Sharp Two-Edged Sword," 159.

<sup>16</sup> Charry, "A Sharp Two-Edged Sword," 158.

<sup>17</sup> Russell, *Divine Disclosure: An Introduction to Jewish Apocalyptic*, 130.

different aspects of Christ.<sup>18</sup> Instead of simply offering hope to the readers about a distant victory of God the author emphasises the present and eternal victory over darkness that has been achieved through the finished work of Christ.<sup>19</sup> The salvation event is no longer viewed as something far off but as reality in the present time.<sup>20</sup>

## **Conclusion**

It can be seen upon investigation of Jewish apocalyptic that there are good reasons to take serious the place of apocalyptic literature within the Christian faith and seek to better understand it. It is also apparent however that there are several aspects unique to specifically Christian apocalyptic writings that cannot be ignored. In being aware of these characteristics of apocalyptic literature the Christian reader can be better equipped to understand the intended meaning concealed within the text. The overriding message of hope found within these writings should be instructive to a church that finds itself in an increasingly hostile culture and at the same time prevent the eschatological realities of the faith from being forgotten or ignored.

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<sup>18</sup> Douglas J.D., "Revelation, Book Of," 505.

<sup>19</sup> Schmithals, *The Apocalyptic Movement Introduction and Interpretations*, 169.

<sup>20</sup> Schmithals, *The Apocalyptic Movement Introduction and Interpretations*, 170.

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