

“The Apocalyptic Technique”: How John’s Apocalypse Makes Meaning

The Lamb that was slain had actually defeated the Beast who seemed omnipotent. Wherever the two creations had met, there the Beast had readily deceived his worshipers by appealing to their reliance on the observable continuities of space and time. But there also the Lamb had revealed to his servants the purpose of God in the present *kairos*, the nearness of the heavenly Jerusalem to the streets of Smyrna, the dawning of the light at the moment of great darkness.

—Paul Minear, “The Cosmology of the Apocalypse”¹

My goal in this study is to explore the way John presents his political theology within an overall vision of rhetorical cosmology. How is the political related to the cosmological? Or more specifically, what is the relation between the activity of God and the Lamb to unmake and make new the cosmic order and the activity that John urges upon his audience? The apocalypse of Jesus Christ effects a turbulent regime change not just on the political level, but within the entire created order. Indeed, it will be my argument that a thorough regime change politically cannot but include this cosmological upheaval as well. In light of this it is perhaps surprising, then, that John envisions his own testimony, set forth in his prophetic apocalyptic letter, to contribute in some way to this transition when it is read aloud in the midst of his addressees’ gathered worship. My task is to investigate how John envisions this to take place. I will address this question fully in chapters 3 to 6, but here I wish to ask how John’s Apocalypse

1. Paul Minear, “The Cosmology of the Apocalypse,” in *Current Issues in New Testament Interpretation: Essays in Honor of Otto F. Piper*, ed. William Klassen and Graydon F. Snyder (New York: Harper, 1962), 34.

does its work. What I am after is something that we might identify as an “apocalyptic technique,” or more specifically, John’s apocalyptic technique.²

This question brings us into the territory of literary genre and rhetoric. Looking at the genre of apocalypse helps interpreters to know what to look for in a text—both what to anticipate and what might be surprising by its presence or absence. But the genre question, for reasons explicated below, can only take interpreters so far because it remains a conversation on the level of form, identification, and categorization.³ To understand the power of a text we must understand how form and content are molded in persuasive ways to cause an effect on its audience. Rhetorical inquiry then will help interpreters understand how John’s apocalyptic discourse seeks to move its audience and place them within this vision of worship as political and cosmic regime change. Therefore, I first seek to engage the genre conversation before turning to examine John’s apocalyptic rhetoric.

THE GENRE DISCUSSION

To speak of genre is to seek to classify for the sake of interpretation.⁴ Attention to genre helps to “orient and guide the reader’s encounter with the text.”⁵ Once a reader can identify something familiar about how the text is constructed, she will have a pretty good idea of how to find her way through that text. Genre definition, however, requires more than just listing similar traits among pieces of literature. As David Barr has shown, no comprehensive list can contain all the similarities of a group of texts while at the same time attending to the specificities and peculiarities of particular texts within the group.⁶ The upshot of all of this is that genre is a complex phenomenon, but also limited in scope.

2. I borrow this terminology, but not necessarily all of its content from John J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction to Jewish Apocalyptic Literature*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids and Livonia: Eerdmans and Dove Booksellers, 1998), 41.

3. This point is made from a different angle by Rowland who argues that there is very little common content to apocalypses, and that genre considerations should be limited to form. See Christopher Rowland, *The Open Heaven: A Study of Apocalyptic in Judaism and Early Christianity* (New York: Crossroad, 1982), 49, 70–71.

4. Gregory L. Linton, “Reading the Apocalypse as Apocalypse: The Limits of Genre,” in *The Reality of Apocalypse: Rhetoric and Politics in the Book of Revelation*, ed. David L. Barr, SBL Symposium Series 39 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2006), 9, 12–14.

5. Linton, “Reading the Apocalypse as Apocalypse,” 12.

6. David L. Barr, “Beyond Genre: The Expectation of Apocalypse,” in *The Reality of Apocalypse*, 75–77.

The best starting point when turning to apocalypse as a genre is the work done by the Society of Biblical Literature Genres Project, led by John Collins.⁷ The group’s definition is well worn by now and has become the standard for those working with apocalyptic literature. They define “apocalypse” as

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.⁸

This definition concentrates on form and content and is helpful in a variety of ways, but there are reasons to be critical of it. First, as David Hellholm has articulated, the definition does not address function of the apocalyptic genre. Hellholm argues that it is literature intended to comfort a “group in crisis.”⁹ Collins himself has taken Hellholm’s criticism into account and sees great promise in examining the illocution of apocalyptic literature, while pushing back on the narrowness of Hellholm’s proposal.¹⁰ Collins ultimately concludes that apocalypse functions in a broad sense to “shape one’s imaginative perception of a situation and so lay the basis for whatever course of action it exhorts.”¹¹ This is perhaps overly broad, but it may be the case that the range of effects that any genre may produce is too large in scope to take into account in one overarching definition.

Second, as David Barr points out, both the genre “apocalypse” and its definition are modern constructs.¹² The definition’s function is taxonomic rather than inner-descriptive. Understanding this is not to discount the merit of the definition, but rather simply to draw attention to the fact that it stands

7. John J. Collins, ed., *Apocalypse: The Morphology of a Genre*, Semeia 14 (Missoula: Scholars, 1979).

8. Collins, *Apocalypse*, 9.

9. David Hellholm, “The Problem of Apocalyptic: Genre and the Apocalypse of John,” in *SBL 1982 Seminar Papers* (Atlanta: Scholar’s, 1982), 167. This specification of apocalypse’s function is probably too narrow to fit the wide range of intended uses within the literature.

10. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination*, 41. Collins argues that, “the nature of exhortations may vary...the literary function must be seen to be integrally related to form and content in what may be called the ‘apocalyptic technique.’ ”

11. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination*, 42.

12. Barr, “Beyond Genre,” 78. See also Linton, “Reading the Apocalypse as Apocalypse,” 28: “The term functions as a genre designation for modern readers because the genre apocalypse now exists in critical discourse, but to claim that it served as a genre designation for the original readers is not accurate since this was the first time the word was used to refer to a complete written work.”

apart from its subject and evaluates it according to Enlightenment and modern standards. An apocalypticist's definition of apocalypse would look and feel quite different and would attend to matters in another way. Barr argues that ancients would in fact have a category for the apocalyptic phenomenon, but that it would not refer to a category of literature so much as a "claim to a certain kind of experience: they have had an apocalypse/revelation."¹³ Likewise, we would hardly expect an ancient near-eastern apocalypticist to characterize the images and events in his or her work as having to do with "supernatural" phenomena.¹⁴

L. Gregory Bloomquist suggests that new ways of getting at apocalypse may be necessary to understand it more fully: "Further reflection on apocalyptic rhetoric may, then, necessitate an apocalyptic approach itself."¹⁵ This is an important consideration, and will guide the following discussion of the genre and rhetoric of apocalypse.¹⁶ Though modern readers can never claim to be inner-descriptive from our vantage point, we can as interpreters do our very best to take the apocalypticist at his or her word. Interpreters must give their best effort to hear the Apocalypse with John's churches' ears.¹⁷ Approaching apocalypse from an audience perspective may be the best way to go beyond genre as merely a categorical phenomenon and understand it as a text whose constituent parts signal things to hearers.¹⁸ To do this necessitates, at the very

13. Barr, "Beyond Genre," 78 n. 21. See also David E. Aune, *The New Testament in its Literary Environment*, Library of Early Christianity (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987), 226; Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *The Book of Revelation: Justice and Judgment* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 150: "[I]t is doubtful that the author chose this title ["apocalypse"] to qualify his prophecy as an apocalyptic document."

14. Rather than "supernatural," a term foreign to the ancient world, having its origin in the 15th century, perhaps the word "heavenly" or "other-worldly" would be appropriate. See Malina, *Revelation*, 21; "Supernatural," in *The Oxford English Dictionary*.

15. L. G. Bloomquist, "Methodological Criteria for Apocalyptic Rhetoric: A Suggestion for the Expanded Use of Sociorhetorical Analysis," in *Vision and Persuasion: Rhetorical Dimensions of Apocalyptic Discourse*, ed. Greg Carey and L. Gregory Bloomquist (St. Louis: Chalice, 1999), 181–203, 200.

16. Great strides have been made in the scholarship of the last forty years on the imperial cult, as we will see in the next chapter. The ritual and honor in worship of the emperor and his family and of the imperial regime is no longer considered mere flattery or disposable decorum, but has lately been seen for what it was in that culture: the fabric of social relationality. See Holland Hendrix, "Thessalonians Honor Romans," Th.D. diss., Harvard University (Cambridge: Harvard, 1894), 327; S. R. F. Price, "Rituals and Power," in *Paul and Empire: Religion and Power in Roman Imperial Society*, ed. Richard A. Horsley (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1997), 71

17. See J. Louis Martyn's attempt to exegete Paul's letter to the Galatians by "hearing with Galatian ears" in *Galatians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 33A (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1997), 40–41.

18. Barr, "Beyond Genre," 77.

least, a suspension of the hermeneutic of suspicion, if not its outright dismissal, and also draws attention to the importance of a text’s effective history, that is, how the text has actually affected readers at various times.¹⁹

Very early in a reading or hearing of the Apocalypse it is evident that the work is a multi-faceted book. Linton refers to it as a hybrid genre, which leads him to question whether the book can be read as an apocalypse at all.²⁰ John himself calls the work an ἀποκάλυψις (1:1) and a προφητείας (1:3) and it is clear from the epistolary opening that John intends it to be circulated as an open letter to seven (or more) churches (1:4–6).²¹ It is therefore appropriate to look at each of these genres in turn, paying special attention to the facets of each that contribute to the way they make meaning and setting each of these next to the specificities of John’s Apocalypse in order to examine how John employs them.

APOCALYPSE

Scholars have traditionally differentiated the categories of apocalypse as a genre, apocalyptic eschatology as an ideology, and apocalypticism as a social movement, but it is nearly impossible, and indeed quite counterproductive, to speak of them in isolation.²² I will proceed by speaking of these phenomena together, with the realization that they are nuanced concepts and that one should not be too optimistic about what can be said regarding the social reality of apocalypticism.²³ First, apocalypses are “revelatory literature...disclosing a transcendent reality.” Apocalypses reveal transcendent realities in both temporal and spatial terms. Often scholars propose eschatology as a primary feature of the literary genre.²⁴ This is true regarding both time and space. Another way of

19. See Markus A. Bockmuehl, *Seeing the Word: Refocusing New Testament Studies*, Studies in Theological Interpretation (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 6499; David Armstrong-Reiner, “You Opened the Book”: *An Instrumental Understanding of the Patristic Use of the Revelation to John* (Saarbrücken: VDM Verlag Dr. Müller, 2009).

20. Linton, “Reading the Apocalypse as Apocalypse,” 18–26. We should not miss the irony here: a genre of literature that receives its title from the one work many consider not to belong fully to the genre!

21. See Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*, New Testament Theology (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 1–17.

22. Klaus Koch, *The Rediscovery of Apocalyptic*, SBT 2/22 (London: SCM, 1972); Paul D. Hanson, “Apocalypses and Apocalypticism: The Genre,” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 1, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 279–282.

23. Paul D. Hanson, “Apocalypses and Apocalypticism: Introductory Overview,” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 1, 281; John J. Collins, “Apocalypse and Apocalypticism: Early Jewish Apocalypticism,” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 1, 284, 287.

stating this is that apocalypses are concerned with limits—the end of history as well as the far reaches of visible and accessible physical reality.²⁵

Apocalypses are often, though not exclusively, interested in eschatology and the end of history. This interest in history and its end is specifically oriented toward divine judgment. As apocalyptic literature and thinking began to develop out of the Israelite post-exilic prophetic tradition there began to be a kind of pessimism regarding the direction of history.²⁶ Whereas the prophetic tradition expressed an optimistic eschatology where the divine plan and direction for the creation would be realized in history through historical forces, apocalyptic eschatology increasingly emphasized that this divine fulfillment would take place outside of the historical realm of politics and human instrumentality.²⁷ However, this does not necessarily entail a historical dualism. According to Richard Bauckham, neither does this entail an abandonment of the promises of God for creation. Rather, as apocalyptic thought developed within its context in the post-exilic experience of history as under the domination and rule of foreign regimes, the transcendence of history is a refusal to accommodate the prophetic promises for history to Gentile rule. The apocalyptists seemed to be saying that God would indeed accomplish God's promises, but not within the processes and dictates of the current establishment. Bauckham is instructive here:

[T]he apocalyptists did not begin with a dogma about the nature of history: that God cannot act in the history of this world. They began with an empirical observation of God's relative absence from history *since the fall of Jerusalem*. It did not appear to them that [God] had been active on behalf of [God's] people during this period . . .

24. Martin Rist, "Apocalypticism," in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, vol 1, ed. David A. Buttrick (Nashville: Abingdon, 1962), 158.

25. See Bloomquist, "Methodological Criteria for Apocalyptic Rhetoric," 197–198: "[P]resent analysis of the earliest tendencies within discursive cultures of early Christianity [*sic*] literature suggests that there is value in analyzing the social practice and function of early Christians as nomads, that is, a group with *no fixed address* . . . It is in this way that apocalyptic rhetoric appears to share characteristics of the social and cultural location of sophistic, and even cynic, rhetoric, for each of these function within a despotic system but 'at the periphery, where they can decodify existing social and institutional codes, and where they themselves cannot be overcodified by the despotic apparatus.'"

26. See Christopher Rowland, "Apocalypticism," in *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, vol. 1, ed. Katherine Doob Sakenfeld (Nashville: Abingdon, 2006), 191: "In prophetic eschatology the future arises out of the present, whereas in the apocalyptic literature the future is said to break into the present."

27. See Paul D. Hanson, *The Dawn of Apocalyptic* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), 11; Richard Bauckham, *The Jewish World Around the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010), 41.

This was not a retreat from history but precisely an expectation that God would vindicate [God’s] people and [God’s] justice on the stage of history, though in such a way as to transcend ordinary political possibility.²⁸

Bauckham demonstrates that the terminology of two ages did not arise until the late first century CE (see 4 Ezra 7:50), and therefore apocalypticism did not begin with the abstract dualistic philosophy of history, but emerged out of a particular experience of history by a particular social stratum. The result of this is that, in most cases, apocalypticism is not an escapist, disembodied philosophy of history, but rather a grounded, particular, and historical practice of history.²⁹

In addition to its concerns with the limits of time, apocalypticism is also an exploration of the limits of physical space. Apocalypses may contain revealed knowledge about “astronomy, or the creation, or celestial worlds, or matters concerning the heavenly Jerusalem.”³⁰ The material world is often regarded as a wonder, working in harmony and obedience with God’s purposes.³¹ Its steadiness and consistency is set in contradistinction with the rebelliousness and lawlessness of humanity (1 Enoch 5:12, 4–6; 36:4; 72:1). When the cosmos is portrayed as out of joint or standing under divine judgment it is “understood as a part of the punishment of human sin, not as a necessary destruction of a hopelessly corrupted cosmos.”³² In the same way the eschatological apocalypse refuses to concede history to imperfect governance, cosmological apocalypse transcends the physical reach and scope of those in power. Again, this is not in order to escape material reality, but to critique and relativize the power of the foreign empires were exercising over that reality.³³

28. Bauckham, *The Jewish World Around the New Testament*, 58.

29. Bauckham, *The Jewish World Around the New Testament*, 60–61.

30. Larry J. Kreitzer, “Apocalyptic, Apocalypticism,” in *Dictionary of the Later New Testament and Its Developments*, ed. Ralph P. Martin and Peter H. Davids (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1997), 57. See also Stone, “Lists of Revealed Things.”

31. Hanson, “Biblical Apocalypticism: The Theological Dimension,” *Horizons in Biblical Theology*, 7.2 (1985), 6–7: “[O]ne finds especially in the apocalyptic writings of the Hellenistic and Roman periods a search for cosmic harmony expressed in highly imaginative descriptions of the heavenly bodies, the winds, the topography of heaven and of the far reaches of the earth, coupled with attempts to relate such far ranging data to the institutions and concepts regulating human life like temple sacrifice and the calendar.”

32. Donald E. Gowan, “The Fall and Redemption of the Material World in Apocalyptic Literature,” *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 7 (1985), 99–100.

33. Apocalypses are often delivered by otherworldly beings such as angels or human seers who have attained a kind of heavenly or special status. This mediator lends the message an air of authority that the

The transcendent in apocalypses is not only a category of content but also form. In addition to speaking about “heavenly” or “other-worldly” phenomena, they also employ expressive language and mytho-poetic imagery designed to articulate “feelings and attitudes rather than [describe] reality in an objective way.”³⁴ The language of apocalypse is intentionally symbolic and evocative and is not intended to be literal, logical, or universal.³⁵ Adela Yarbro Collins argues that this evocative language is employed in order to persuade the reader to adopt a position on a particular issue. Apocalyptic language is a “call for *commitment* to the actions, attitudes, and feelings uttered . . . It makes no attempt to report events or to describe people in a way that everyone would accept. Rather, it provides a highly selective and perspectival view.”³⁶

The evocative language serves a second related function. As David Barr has pointed out, following David Aune, an apocalypse uses language in such a way that “the audience does not just learn about the experience of the seer [sic], they also experience that original revelation as it is ‘re-presented’ and ‘re-actualized’ for them.”³⁷ Apocalypses therefore do not seek to merely convey information, but to make present an experience of revelation for an audience. The message is conveyed through the medium of the revelatory experience. Barr suggests this phenomenon is akin to what happens in the transformative power of religious ritual.³⁸

PROPHECY

The Apocalypse also bears characteristics of prophetic genre, specifically early Christian prophecy. It is probably best not to hold too distinctly the category of prophecy from that of apocalypse. Apocalyptic thought developed from, among many other streams of influence, post-exilic Israelite prophecy—some of which Hanson refers to as “early apocalyptic” (Isa 24–27; 56–66; Zech 9–14).³⁹ Nevertheless, there is a gulf between the thought of the biblical prophets of

seer might not have on her own. If the message is delivered by a figure outside of the purview of the merely human stratum, an audience will be more willing to listen and accept the message.

34. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination*, 17.

35. Contra Hanson, “Biblical Apocalypticism,” 6.

36. Adela Yarbro Collins, *Crisis and Catharsis: The Power of the Apocalypse* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984), 144.

37. Barr, “Beyond Genre,” 85. See also David E. Aune, “The Apocalypse of John and the Problem of Genre,” *Semeia* 36 (1986), 89: An apocalypse functions to “mediate a new actualization of the original revelatory experience.”

38. Barr, “Beyond Genre,” 86.

39. Hanson, “Apocalypses and Apocalypticism: Introductory Overview,” 281. See also J. Collins, “Apocalypses and Apocalypticism: Early Jewish Apocalypticism,” 284.

the late fifth century BCE and the apocalyptists of the second century BCE, both chronological and philosophical. In that gap emerges the practice of pseudonymity and historical surveys via prophecy *ex eventu*, as well as highly developed angelologies and cosmologies.⁴⁰ Perhaps the biggest distinction between late prophecy and early apocalyptic thought is the transcendence of death in the form of resurrection. As John Collins indicates, late prophecy’s eschatology was a vision of old age that included death, but apocalyptic thought proposed that a human can “pass over to the world of the angels or become a companion to the host of heaven.”⁴¹ Thus Collins makes the appeal that scholars consider post-exilic prophecy to be “late prophecy” rather than “early apocalyptic.”

Bauckham proposes bridging this gap, in part, by considering much apocalyptic thought as interpretation of prophecy. Apocalyptists lived after the end of the prophetic spirit (1 Macc 4:46) and thus took up and developed the prophetic tradition for their own era. In Bauckham’s view they viewed their vocation as “inspired interpreters of prophecy.”⁴² For Bauckham this difference in self-understanding produces a different sense of authority as well, one that does not stand on its own but is derives its authority from that of the prophets.⁴³ This explains for him the phenomenon of pseudonymity:

Pseudonymity is therefore a device expressing the apocalyptist’s consciousness that the age of prophecy has passed: not in the sense that he fraudulently wishes to pass off his work as belonging to the age of prophecy, but in the sense that he thereby acknowledges his work to be mere interpretation of the revelation given in the prophetic age. Similarly, the *vaticinia ex eventu* are not a fraudulent device to give spurious legitimation to the apocalyptist’s work; they are his interpretation of the prophecies of the past, rewritten in the light of their fulfilment in order to show how they have been fulfilled and what still remains to be fulfilled.⁴⁴

Here it is important to advance Collins’ suggestion that to relate apocalyptic thought too closely with its prophetic antecedents can lead to making value judgments about the inferiority of apocalypse compared to prophecy.⁴⁵

40. Bauckham, *The Jewish World Around the New Testament*, 43–44.

41. Collins, “Apocalypses and Apocalypticism: Early Jewish Apocalypticism,” 284.

42. Bauckham, *The Jewish World Around the New Testament*, 53.

43. Bauckham, *The Jewish World Around the New Testament*, 53.

44. Bauckham, *The Jewish World Around the New Testament*, 54–55.

Bauckham makes this interpretive move regarding the derivative authority of apocalyptic, which implies a lack of independent productivity. Notwithstanding this, his point is well taken that apocalyptic often makes present and develops for a new era the late Israelite prophetic imagination.⁴⁶

Christian prophecy stands inside this tradition of interpreting messages from God, especially messages of promises fulfilled or being fulfilled, in light of contemporary events. Christian prophecy interpreted the fulfillment of God's purposes for history and the cosmos in light of the concrete events surrounding the advent, life, death, resurrection, and *parousia* of Jesus of Nazareth.⁴⁷ The characteristic setting for Christian prophecy was the worship gathering, where the one who received a revelation by the Spirit would speak by the Spirit (1 Cor. 14:26–33; Hermas, *Mand.* 11:9). These messages were understood as oracles to the church from God or Christ where the prophetic speaker's voice was taken up into the divine speech (Odes Sol. 42:6). Prophecy also took the form of visions that were later reported to the church (Acts 10:9–11:18; 2 Cor. 12:1–4; Hermas, *Vis.* 1–4).

John certainly conceives his own vocation to be in the stream of biblical and Christian prophecy. He calls his work prophecy, intends it to be read aloud in a gathered worship setting (Rev 1:3), and expects it to be received as prophecy (22:18–19). Allusions to the biblical prophets abound in John's vision, and he has picked up many of the major biblical themes, though no direct quotations exist.⁴⁸ John is clearly reinterpreting the ancient prophecies and promises for his own context and era in light of the events surrounding the slain Lamb, the Messiah Jesus. His own voice is taken up into the divine speech and intended to present the fulfillment of God's vision and intention for creation. As Bauckham argues, John perceives his own work as "the climax of prophetic revelation, which gathered up the prophetic meaning of the Old Testament scriptures and disclosed the way in which it was being and was to be fulfilled in the last days."⁴⁹ This is reflected when John hears that when the seventh angel blows his trumpet, "the mystery of God will be completed, as God proclaimed to God's slaves the prophets" (10:7).

45. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination*, 20.

46. Bauckham, *The Jewish World Around the New Testament*, 64: "Their transcendent eschatology, which is apocalyptic's theological centre, is already developed in post-exilic prophecy, and the apocalypticist's role is to intensify it and enable their own generation to live by it."

47. Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*, 5.

48. deSilva, *Seeing Things John's Way*, 158–174.

49. Richard Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy: Studies on the Book of Revelation* (London & New York: T & T Clark, 1993), xi. Cf. Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*, 5.

Ultimately for John, prophecy is witness to Jesus in worship. In 19:10 along with the angel’s command to worship God, we hear that “the witness to Jesus is the spirit of prophecy.” Witness here is the Greek μαρτυρία [*martyria*]. Central to the concept of prophecy in the Apocalypse is “martyring” for Jesus.⁵⁰ John’s work of prophecy is to bear witness to Jesus in the context of the seven cities in Asia, to indicate the places and times in the lives of the audience where God is active. This work of bearing witness is exactly how John is interpreting and developing the promises from God given to the prophets as he sees them fulfilled and being fulfilled.⁵¹ The testimony of Jesus makes the prophetic promises present in the lives of John’s audience. It causes the past to rush into the present even as it draws the promised fulfillment of the future. John’s prophetic vision invites his hearers into an eschatological constellation comprised of divine faithfulness and promise in the past, the indeterminate present, and the future of creation made whole.

LETTER

The third genre consideration to take into account is that Revelation presents itself as a letter. This is evident given its epistolary frame (1:4-6; 22:16-21) and the letters to seven churches in Asia Minor at the beginning (1:11; 2-3). At the outset we may ask how important these epistolary features are to the work as a whole? Also, what relation does the epistolary frame have to the rest of the Apocalypse? Answering these questions will go a long way in determining the significance of how the letter features of the Apocalypse contribute to the way the work makes meaning.

One suggestion is that the epistolary features are incidental to the work because of John’s absence due to exile on Patmos.⁵² This doesn’t account for the fact that the letters and hence the overall message are from Christ—who is certainly not exiled on Patmos—and not from John (despite the epistolary introduction being in John’s name it is a “revelation of/from Jesus Christ which God gave”). In the text, Christ specifically commands John to write letters to

50. “Martyring” is here a more appropriate term than martyrdom. The technical sense of martyrdom did not arise until after the time of the Apocalypse. Also, martyring has a more active sense and captures the activity better than martyrdom which denotes a status.

51. Bauckham argues that John is working with a very particular set of Old Testament texts, *The Climax of Prophecy*, x-xi.

52. Frederick David Mazzaferri, *The Genre of the Book of Revelation from a Source-Critical Perspective*, BZNW 54 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1989), 231-233. See also Adela Yarbro Collins, “The Early Christian Apocalypses,” *Semeia* 14 (1979), 70-71; David E. Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, WBC 52a (Dallas: Word, 1997), lxxxiii; Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination*, 270.

seven churches (1:11), and the content of those letters are tied very closely to moments in the visionary section.⁵³ In addition, there seems to be a very deliberate and purposive aspect of the work as a written and literary entity, an aspect that suggests the writing is meant to do something rather than just serving as something dictated by circumstances of absence.⁵⁴ Therefore, it seems safe to say that the letter form is a very integral part of the Apocalypse as a whole and therefore has some bearing on how the Apocalypse functions to make meaning.⁵⁵

Letters in the ancient world were sent to stand in for the sender in the sender's absence.⁵⁶ However, the letter was not just an incidental accommodation to an inconvenience in availability. In other words, it is not just what is said in the letter that is important, but the fact that it is said in a letter. J. Louis Martyn has attended to the way that Christian letters function, especially letters with an apocalyptic message.⁵⁷ Martyn argues that an investigation of the argument of a letter needs to include the "letter's work."⁵⁸ Since the letter is a stand in for presence, it would be expected to do what the one normally present would do. In this case, the letters to the seven churches are addressed from Christ, while the overall letter, which comprises the Apocalypse, is addressed from John. Therefore, the letter would seek to create the same effect or event that would be created when Christ and John are present with the hearing communities. From our discussions of apocalypse and prophecy above, the letter would have its setting in the gathered worship of the seven churches and be expected to reveal and interpret God's activity and intent for the current situation or exigency of the audience. It would be expected to draw the mysteries of heaven into the midst of the congregation, or vice versa. Martyn states that a letter's work is to create an "aural event" when the messenger read the letter aloud.⁵⁹ Martyn's point is Pauline in reference, but the

53. See for instance how the gifts promised to the one who conquers in the letters are fulfilled in the eschatological new creation.

54. Cf. Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*, 3–5.

55. Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*, 12.

56. See Robert W. Funk, "The Apostolic *Parousia*: Form and Significance," in *Christian History and Interpretation: Studies Presented to John Knox*, ed. W. R. Farmer, et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), 249–268.

57. J. Louis Martyn, "Events in Galatia: Modified Covenantal Nomism versus God's Invasion of the Cosmos in the Singular Gospel: A Response to J. D. G. Dunn and B. R. Gaventa," in *Pauline Theology*, vol. 1 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 160–179.

58. Martyn, "Events in Galatia," 161.

59. Martyn, "Events in Galatia," 161.

same could be said for the Apocalypse, as John expects and demands the letter to be read aloud (1:3).

We can begin to see this aspect of epistolary work when we examine how it is employed in the Apocalypse. In the letter addressed to Ephesus, Jesus designates himself as the one who “walks around in the midst of the seven golden lampstands” (2:1) which are said to be the seven churches (1:20). Thus, when the letter is read aloud it becomes a reminder and even a making-present of the one who addresses the congregations—the revelation of this Apocalypse is “of Jesus Christ” and the letter presents him as the one who is present.⁶⁰ Similarly, all of the letters begin with Christ’s words “I know” (οἶδα). This knowledge of the various situations of the church again creates an event where their various strengths and weaknesses, successes and failings, have not gone unnoticed. As they hear the Apocalypse in the midst of whatever they are facing, they can be confident that Christ is neither absent nor ignorant of them.

The letters also anticipate events to occur when the letter is read aloud. John does not intend the letters to simply describe something to be the case, but is expecting something to happen when the lector reads the letter. In the letter to the church in Laodicea Christ says, “Listen! I am standing at the door knocking; if anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will enter to that one, and feast with that one and that one with me” (3:20). When the messenger reads the letter aloud, the community hears Christ’s words of approach, and, as there would usually be a meal during this gathered worship, they are encouraged to consider their common meal the feast that Christ wants to eat with them.⁶¹ This feasting with Christ is meant to point ahead in the text to the marriage feast of the Lamb, thus making the feasting with Christ a proleptic participation in the eschatological feast.⁶² This feasting, understood as a participation in the marriage feast, is the event the letter anticipates as the outcome of its reading. In this way and others, the letters make clear at the outset that the Lamb depicted here as the cosmic and supra-historical divine being is present with the seven churches as they hear and perform the letter.

60. See David L. Barr, “The Apocalypse of John as Oral Enactment,” *Interpretation* 40 (1986), 252.

61. Barr, “The Apocalypse of John as Oral Enactment,” 253. See also Stanley P. Saunders, “Between Blessing and Curse: Reading, Hearing, and Performing the Apocalypse in a World of Terror,” in *Shaking Heaven and Earth: Essays in Honor of Walter Brueggemann and Charles B. Cousar*, ed. Christine R. Yoder, et al. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 143, 145.

62. Eugene Peterson suggests the same method is at work when the open door and throne are mentioned in the letter to Laodicea and then in the next chapter John sees an open door and a throne in heaven, *Reversed Thunder: The Revelation of John and the Praying Imagination* (New York: HarperCollins, 1988), 59.