

**Further Reflections on What Kind of Book
The Book of Revelation Is
(Revisiting the Question of Genre)
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What kind of book is Revelation? I suggest in *Revelation's Rhapsody* that the book of Revelation blends three genres and that these three were quite familiar to John's readers (see pp. 67ff.). Specifically, the book is a Christian apocalyptic-prophetic-circular letter. John's audience would have known "how" to read or listen to these genres that had been brought together in the same book for the first time. What we need to do is use the same principles that the original recipients would have used in deciphering the message given to John.

What I would like to develop in this brief essay are some of my recent observations about how John hints at the beginning of the book what genres he is using. An awareness of the genres provides guidance for us in reading and interpreting the revelation given to him. In other words, John is giving us a heads-up at the very beginning of the book so that we may know how to read the book properly. Essentially, John is saying: Because this book is part-apocalypse, don't be surprised by all of the symbols! Because this book is prophecy, don't be surprised by the challenge to be obedient! Because this book is a letter, don't be surprised that you find the book's major themes at the very beginning of the writing!

First, some thoughts concerning the word "apocalypse" used in Rev. 1:1. In the verse where John calls his work an "apocalypse" or "revelation," there is a verb that is translated "made known" in the NIV when a better translation is "to give a sign" or to "signify." The word means that Jesus used sign language, that is, truth is expressed in symbolic language to communicate God's message (The KJV translates it "he sent and signified it . . .").

The verb is related to the noun translated "sign" in John's Gospel. Both words emphasize that there is something "deeper" going on with regard to the miracles that John records in his Gospel and the images that fill Revelation. John's "literal" understanding of the language he uses is that he

is communicating the truth in symbolic ways (e.g., actions, words, etc.). Hence, the significance of this is that from the very beginning of Revelation John emphasizes that the reader should expect to be bombarded with symbolism.¹

Second, some thoughts concerning the word “prophecy” used in Rev. 1:3. In this verse John identifies his book as a prophetic one and there is a verb that is translated as “take to heart” in the NIV, that is, take to heart this prophecy. The verb is better translated “obey” or “heed” or “keep.” John calls upon the readers to “obey” or “keep” this prophecy.² The importance of this call is that it challenges the way we read prophecy today.³ If you understand prophecy to be mainly predictive, then you may well miss the point of most prophecy: it is to be obeyed! How does one “obey” predictions? You don’t, of course. If you think of the book being mainly predictive prophecy, then it becomes confusing. But if you think of the book as proclaiming God’s will, then its intention becomes clearer. When we read Revelation as a prophetic work, it is a prophetic work in the sense that God not only reveals the future, but John is primarily interested in how a vision of the future challenges us to be an obedient people.⁴

Third, some thoughts concerning the “letter-like” section in Rev. 1:4-8. The more I have reflected on this section, the more important it has

¹ G.R. Beasley-Murray observes John “does not provide photographs of heaven, nor do his descriptions of coming events constitute history written in advance. He uses ‘sign language’ to portray the invisible realities of the present and the future of man and his history. Even when speaking of the past John prefers picture-language to plain description (as in Rev. 12, which relates the birth of Jesus to his future victory.” See his commentary, *The Book of Revelation*, rev. ed. (Greenwood, S.C.: Attic Press, 1978), p. 51.

² John’s Gospel was written so that we may believe (John 20:30-31). John’s three short letters were written so that we know the truth that is found in Christ (I John 1:4-5; 5:20; II John 8-11; III John 9ff.). The Revelation was written so that we may obey because of the hope we have (Rev. 1:3; see also 22:9).

³ A short story is appropriate. Nearly twenty-five years ago while living in Scotland, I was sitting at the dining table of a fellow doctor student at the University of Aberdeen. As Russ and I were discussing Rev. 1:1ff., for the first time I realized that the verb in verse 3 should be translated “obey,” and the light went on. John is concerned with obedience: whom we are to obey, what we are to obey, how we obey, why we obey, and the consequences of either obeying or disobeying. My reading of Revelation has been shaped ever after by that afternoon translation session.

⁴ In *Plowshares and Pruning Hooks: Rethinking the Language of Biblical Prophecy and Apocalyptic* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2002, pp. 130ff.), D.B. Sandy argues that prediction is the least prominent characteristics of the prophetic literature and that the emphasis is on prosecution and persuasion. As to persuading, the prophets realize that a key function was to enforce the historic covenant between God and the Israelites. I believe that John was given the revelation by God to remind disciples living in Asia Minor about their covenant relationship with God (Rev. 1:5b-6; see Exod. 19:5ff.). A prophet's other key role was to awaken the people of God from their self-sufficiency and to reorient their worldview in line with God’s. Concerning prediction, Sandy notes that its “function was to make the prosecution and persuasion more convincing” (see p. 131).

become to me in understanding John's dominant themes. Scholars and others often focus on the prophetic and apocalyptic aspects, and quickly dismiss or play-down the "letter-like" characteristics. I have been guilty of doing this as well. In my book (see pp. 73-74), I discuss the point that John is writing a circular letter meant for at least seven congregations in Asia Minor (see also Rev. 22:21, a letter-like ending). Like the other letters in the New Testament, the opening verses, quite often in the so-called thanksgiving sections, give a preview of themes to be developed throughout the book.

The function of Rev. 1:4-8 is not unlike the way that a news channel headlines the events of the day at the very beginning of the newscast, and then develops those headlines more fully.

Let me list themes and images found in 1:4-8 that are developed more fully throughout the book:

John . . .

The seven churches . . .

Grace and peace . . .

From him who is and who was and who is to come . . .

From the seven spirits before his throne . . .

And from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead and the ruler of the kings of the earth . . .

To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood . . .

And has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve (literally "for") his God and Father . . .

To him be glory and power for ever and ever. Amen. . . .

Look, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him . . .

Even those who pierced him . . .

And all the peoples of the earth will mourn because of him . . .

So shall it be! Amen. . . .

I am the Alpha and the Omega, says the Lord God,

Who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty. . . .

I encourage you to take the words, or the phrases, or the topics/themes and trace them throughout Revelation; you will find that they saturate the book: the role of John and the seven churches, God, the Holy Spirit, Christ, kingdom, priests, peoples of the earth, etc. What I think we will find are the

dominant characters as well as the themes that are played out in more detail in later chapters.

So what's the bottom line? Whenever you read the opening paragraphs of any book of the Bible, pay attention. Why? The author is informing you about what kind of book he has written and how it should be read.