

The Prophetic Genre of the Apocalypse in Light of Visionary Literary Devices

The final book in the New Testament opens with the phrase Ἀποκάλυψις Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ ("The revelation of Jesus Christ"; 1:1). It is from this phrase that its name is derived, "the book of Revelation," otherwise known as "the Apocalypse."

Scholarly consensus views the Apocalypse as an example of apocalyptic literature. This apocalyptic designation is not just applied to its eschatological content but also to a classification of its genre. As an "apocalypse," the book of Revelation is said to correlate most extensively with other Jewish apocalyptic writings of the Second Temple period (third cent. BCE – first cent. CE).

Others, however, contend that prophecy is more reflective of the Apocalypse's genre. In this regard, the influence of OT prophetic literature is cited as an important factor in the literary character of Revelation. A denial of the Apocalypse's prophetic character is seen by some as placing into question the divine authority, and even the possible historicity, of the ἀποκάλυψις ("revelation, uncovering") contained within its text.

Perhaps as a way of redressing this angst, David Aune, in his magisterial three-volume commentary on Revelation, suggests a literary middle road for the ongoing genre discussion. He designates the book of Revelation as a "prophetic apocalypse" that incorporates both genres, but with the prophetic and the apocalyptic sections occurring in textually distinct sections. Thus, he proposes a diachronic development for the text in which the apocalyptic material (the First Stage: 4:1–22:5) was written first (i.e., pre-70 CE) with the prophetic framework (the Second Stage: 1:9–3:22; 22:6–21) being added afterwards (i.e., the end of the first century CE).

The present thesis will argue that there are three literary devices used to structure vision-oriented texts within OT, Jewish Second Temple, and Christian literature. These three are the "space/time referent," μετὰ ταῦτα εἶδον (and its variations), and καὶ εἶδον (καὶ ἰδοὺ). The "space/time referent" is consistently used to indicate the textual starting point of a seer's visionary experience. Since there is only one "space/time referent" in Revelation (1:9, 10), a synchronic reading of the text indicates that John's visionary experience extends from 1:9 to 22:20. This challenges Aune's contention that 4:1 demarcates the start of a new visionary experience, and, thus, a new literary genre (apocalypse; 4:1–22:5), a genre that is different from the preceding text (prophetic; 1:9–3:22).

Furthermore, if 1:9–22:20 is to be viewed as a single literary unit, then verses of prophetic self-identification (22:7, 10, 18, 19) must be included in one's consideration of the Apocalypse's genre identification. These verses expressly characterize the single literary unit of 1:9–22:20 as a prophecy, rather than as an apocalypse.

However, the prophetic genre of the Apocalypse's vision report (1:9–22:20) does not necessarily exclude an apocalyptic eschatology. An evaluation of the Apocalypse's eschatology will suggest that it is primarily apocalyptic in nature. This association of the prophetic genre with apocalyptic eschatology favors viewing John's visionary experience (1:9–22:20) as an "apocalyptic prophecy" rather than as a "prophetic apocalypse," as Aune suggests.

The structure of Revelation, which results from the occurrences of the three visionary literary devices, appears to demonstrate reiteration within its eschatological content (6:12–22:20). The reiterative organization suggested by the present thesis emphasizes the eschatological earthquake (6:12; 8:5; 11:13; 11:19; 16:18) as the central motif around which the other global end-events of the eschaton are chronologically arranged. Describing Revelation as an "apocalyptic prophecy" implies that it contains an element of prediction that may extend beyond the symbolic world of the text, possibly even to the real world of the eschaton itself.