

Apocalyptic



Apocalyptic Literature

The word “**apocalyptic**” comes from the Greek word apocalypses (αποκαλυψις), meaning “**revelation**”, something being unveiled.

Revelation 1:1 • The revelation from Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John...

All apocalypses are narrative: stories describing the revelation of matters we'd never be able to discover ourselves, revelation given by a heavenly being to a human being.

There are **two** main kinds of apocalypses. In the **first**, the seer travels to heaven or some such place usually inaccessible to humans. In the **second**, there isn't any such journey but there's a review of history, culminating in a final crisis and resolution, such as a conflict between the forces of good and evil, resulting in the defeat of evil.

Apocalyptic literature addresses the central crisis of faith: **If God is truly in control, why has he allowed things to get so bad here on the earth?**

The flow of Apocalyptic is usually as below:

A call to **worship**

Comfort that God is in control

Insight into final issues

Hope for the persecuted

Assurance of God's victory

A call to **purity**

So of course, the basic question is: How are we to read these texts? How do we make sense out of it?

The pattern:

All creation is involved

Catastrophic language

Extreme evil

God is Sovereign in the midst of it all – he rules

And God is going to overcome all this evil and destroy all opposition

And this is how you are supposed to live in the midst of it all

Visions of angels and demons and supernatural beings

Heavenly interpreters

A dualistic perspective

Visions presented in a very stylized structure

Foundational to all the above, God's promise to act in the last days to restore his people and establish a new and glorious world order

Apocalyptic Texts are Difficult to Interpret

1. Is it predictive or poetic?

Consider Psalm 22

John 19:24 • “So they said to one another, “Let us not tear it, but cast lots for it to see whose it shall be.” This was to fulfill the Scripture which says, “They divided my garments among them, and for my clothing they cast lots.” So the soldiers did these things” (ESV)

Hebrews 2:12 • “Saying, “I will tell of your name to my brothers; in the midst of the congregation I will sing your praise.”” (ESV)

2. Is the language literal or figurative?

Isaiah 14:23 • I will sweep her with the broom of destruction

Isaiah 48:4 • Your neck muscles were iron & your forehead bronze

Isaiah 49:2 • He made me into a polished arrow & concealed me in his quiver

Lamentations 2:11 • My heart is poured out into the ground

Lamentations 3:16 • He has broken my teeth with gravel

Isaiah 60:6 • Herds of camels will cover your land

Jeremiah 31:9 • I will lead them beside streams of water on a level path where they will not stumble

Jeremiah 51:42 • The sea will rise over Babylon; its roaring waves will cover her

Isaiah 5:13 • My people will go into exile

Isaiah 10:21 • A remnant will return

Isaiah 7:14 • A virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son

3. Is the language exact or emotionally exaggerated?

Jeremiah 25:9 • I will completely destroy them and make them an object of horror and scorn, and an everlasting ruin

Isaiah 32:14 • The fortress will be abandoned, the noisy city deserted; citadel and watchtower will become a wasteland forever

Isaiah 58:12 • “Your people will rebuild the ancient ruins and will raise up the age-old foundations”

4. Is what is said conditional or unconditional?

Jonah 3:4 • “Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown.”

5. Is the imagery real or not?

Zechariah talks about a man standing among myrtle trees with red, brown and white horses behind him (1:8)

There’s a man with a measuring line preparing to measure Jerusalem (2:1-2)

What about the seven eyes on a stone (3:9)

A solid gold lampstand with seven lamps (4:2)

Four chariots – red, black, white & dappled (6:2)

6. Is it fulfilled or unfulfilled?

Case Study: Daniel 8

There's a lot of debate over when exactly Daniel was written. This is important because Daniel appears to speak of events that happened in the 4th c BC. The two dates generally put forward as to when Daniel was written is either the 2nd c BC or the 6th c BC. For the sake of discussion I'm going to assume it was written in the late 6th c BC, which implies that the apocalyptic material we're looking at is predictive.

Alexander the Great died in Babylon in 323 BC. Fifteen years earlier, the dominant power in world politics was Persia, and the Persian king. At that time, it was inconceivable that within a short time there'd be another kingdom that would rise to power and threaten the supreme might and power of the Persian monarchy. Macedonia was barely heard of. But within a few short years, Alexander and his army marched out of Macedonia and across the continent as far as India, taking everything in their path.

Alexander's father Philip was the first great ruler who unified all the kingdoms of Greece into one, except for Sparta. When Alexander succeeded Philip, he moved eastward against the great Persian empire and took everything in his path. For the first time ever, much of the East came under the control of the West.

But then Alexander died, suddenly, a month short of his 33rd birthday. The problem then was who would succeed Alexander, and who would hold all his conquests together. There was utter chaos.

Within a week of Alexander's death, at least 10 of his former generals laid claim to or were assigned as rulers of the pieces of the former Persian empire. For more than 20 years, some of these generals sought to gain control of the whole and to be the next Alexander. It never happened – the lands that Alexander conquered splintered back up into various kingdoms

Eventually three kingdoms prevailed. The Ptolemies controlled Egypt. The Seleucids controlled Syria and parts of Asia. The Antigonids controlled Greece and Macedonia. Besides these, various minor monarchies controlled small areas of their own – Pergamum, Bithynia, Pontus and Galatia.

Israel ended up under the Seleucids. Under the fourth Seleucid king, Antiochus Epiphanes (175-164 BC) the sacrifices in the Temple were stopped and the Temple was defiled. Eventually the Jews revolted in the famous Maccabean uprising in 166 BC.

Interpretation of the vision

Gabriel, a heavenly messenger interprets it for Daniel

The two-horned ram represents the kings of Media & Persia

The goat is the king of Greece and the great horn is the first king

The four horns represent four kingdoms that will arise from the goat's nation

Out of one of the horns comes another horn that does incredible damage to Israel

This horn will be destroyed, but not by human power

Interpretive difficulties

1. The interpretation identifies the two-horned ram as the kings of Media & Persia
2. The ram only moved out to the west, the north and the south.
3. The conquering horn identified as the first king – Alexander – was not the king of Greece
4. Alexander is described as the first king or hegemon of Greece
5. The goat's victory over the ram describes one climactic battle
6. When the great horn was broken off, four new horns showed up
7. The little horn that we identify with Antiochus Epiphanes is full of allusions that we can't do much with

Daniel 8 (TNIV)

In the third year of King Belshazzar's reign, I, Daniel, had a vision, after the one that had already appeared to me. In my vision I saw myself in the citadel of Susa in the province of Elam; in the vision I was beside the Ulai Canal. I looked up, and there before me was a ram with two horns, standing beside the canal, and the horns were long. One of the horns was longer than the other but grew up later. I watched the ram as it charged toward the west and the north and the south. No animal could stand against it, and none could rescue from its power. It did as it pleased and became great.

As I was thinking about this, suddenly a goat with a prominent horn between its eyes came from the west, crossing the whole earth without touching the ground. It came toward the two-horned ram I had seen standing beside the canal and charged at it in great rage. I saw it attack the ram furiously, striking the ram and shattering its two horns. The ram was powerless to stand against it; the goat knocked it to the ground and trampled on it, and none could rescue the ram from its power. The goat became very great, but at the height of its power the large horn was broken off, and in its place four prominent horns grew up toward the four winds of heaven.

Out of one of them came another horn, which started small but grew in power to the south and to the east and toward the Beautiful Land. It grew until it reached the host of the heavens, and it threw some of the starry host down to the earth and trampled on them. It set itself up to be as great as the commander of the army of the LORD; it took away the daily sacrifice from the LORD, and his sanctuary was thrown down. Because of rebellion, the LORD's people and the daily sacrifice were given over to it. It prospered in everything it did, and truth was thrown to the ground.

Then I heard a holy one speaking, and another holy one said to him, "How long will it take for the vision to be fulfilled—the vision concerning the daily sacrifice, the rebellion that causes desolation, the surrender of the sanctuary and the trampling underfoot of the LORD's people?"

He said to me, "It will take 2,300 evenings and mornings; then the sanctuary will be reconsecrated."

While I, Daniel, was watching the vision and trying to understand it, there before me stood one who looked like a man. And I heard a man's voice from the Ulai calling, "Gabriel, tell this man the meaning of the vision."

As he came near the place where I was standing, I was terrified and fell prostrate. "Son of man," he said to me, "understand that the vision concerns the time of the end."

While he was speaking to me, I was in a deep sleep, with my face to the ground. Then he touched me and raised me to my feet.

He said: "I am going to tell you what will happen later in the time of wrath, because the vision concerns the appointed time of the end. The two-horned ram that you saw represents the kings of Media and Persia. The shaggy goat is the king of Greece, and the large horn between its eyes is the first king. The four horns that replaced the one that was broken off represent four kingdoms that will emerge from his nation but will not have the same power.

“In the latter part of their reign, when rebels have become completely wicked, a fierce-looking king, a master of intrigue, will arise. He will become very strong, but not by his own power. He will cause astounding devastation and will succeed in whatever he does. He will destroy the mighty warriors, the holy people. He will cause deceit to prosper, and he will consider himself superior. When they feel secure, he will destroy many and take his stand against the Prince of princes. Yet he will be destroyed, but not by human power.

“The vision of the evenings and mornings that has been given you is true, but seal up the vision, for it concerns the distant future.”

I, Daniel, was worn out. I lay exhausted for several days. Then I got up and went about the king's business. I was appalled by the vision; it was beyond understanding.”

Psalm 22 (TNIV)

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, so far from the words of my groaning? My God, I cry out by day, but you do not answer, by night, but I find no rest. Yet you are enthroned as the Holy One; you are the praise of Israel. In you our ancestors put their trust; they trusted and you delivered them. They cried to you and were saved; in you they trusted and were not disappointed.

But I am a worm, not a human being; I am scorned by everyone, despised by the people. All who see me mock me; they hurl insults, shaking their heads. "He trusts in the LORD," they say, "let the LORD rescue him. Let him deliver him, since he delights in him."

Yet you brought me out of the womb; you made me feel secure on my mother's breast. From birth I was cast on you; from my mother's womb you have been my God. Do not be far from me, for trouble is near and there is no one to help. Many bulls surround me; strong bulls of Bashan encircle me. Roaring lions that tear their prey open their mouths wide against me. I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint. My heart has turned to wax; it has melted within me. My mouth is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth; you lay me in the dust of death. Dogs surround me, a pack of villains encircles me; they pierce my hands and my feet. All my bones are on display; people stare and gloat over me. They divide my clothes among them and cast lots for my garment.

But you, LORD, do not be far from me. You are my strength; come quickly to help me. Deliver me from the sword, my precious life from the power of the dogs. Rescue me from the mouth of the lions; save me from the horns of the wild oxen.

I will declare your name to my people; in the assembly I will praise you. You who fear the LORD, praise him! All you descendants of Jacob, honor him! Revere him, all you descendants of Israel! For he has not despised or scorned the suffering of the afflicted one; he has not hidden his face from him but has listened to his cry for help.

From you comes the theme of my praise in the great assembly; before those who fear you I will fulfill my vows. The poor will eat and be satisfied; those who seek the LORD will praise him— may your hearts live forever! All the ends of the earth will remember and turn to the LORD, and all the families of the nations will bow down before him, for dominion belongs to the LORD and he rules over the nations.

All the rich of the earth will feast and worship; all who go down to the dust will kneel before him— those who cannot keep themselves alive. Posterity will serve him; future generations will be told about the Lord. They will proclaim his righteousness, declaring to a people yet unborn: He has done it!"

Revelation 12 (TNIV)

A great and wondrous sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet and a crown of twelve stars on her head. She was pregnant and cried out in pain as she was about to give birth. Then another sign appeared in heaven: an enormous red dragon with seven heads and ten horns and seven crowns on its heads. Its tail swept a third of the stars out of the sky and flung them to the earth. The dragon stood in front of the woman who was about to give birth, so that it might devour her child the moment he was born. She gave birth to a son, a male child, who “will rule all the nations with an iron scepter.” And her child was snatched up to God and to his throne. The woman fled into the wilderness to a place prepared for her by God, where she might be taken care of for 1,260 days.

And there was war in heaven. Michael and his angels fought against the dragon, and the dragon and his angels fought back. But he was not strong enough, and they lost their place in heaven. The great dragon was hurled down—that ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan, who leads the whole world astray. He was hurled to the earth, and his angels with him.

Then I heard a loud voice in heaven say: “Now have come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God, and the authority of his Messiah. For the accuser of our brothers and sisters, who accuses them before our God day and night, has been hurled down. They triumphed over him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony; they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death. Therefore rejoice, you heavens and you who dwell in them! But woe to the earth and the sea, because the devil has gone down to you! He is filled with fury, because he knows that his time is short.”

When the dragon saw that he had been hurled to the earth, he pursued the woman who had given birth to the male child. The woman was given the two wings of a great eagle, so that she might fly to the place prepared for her in the wilderness, where she would be taken care of for a time, times and half a time, out of the serpent’s reach. Then from his mouth the serpent spewed water like a river, to overtake the woman and sweep her away with the torrent. But the earth helped the woman by opening its mouth and swallowing the river that the dragon had spewed out of his mouth. Then the dragon was enraged at the woman and went off to make war against the rest of her offspring—those who keep God’s commands and hold fast their testimony about Jesus.

Revelation | Outline

1-3 | letters | To him who overcomes, I will give the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I overcame and sat down with my Father on his throne. (3:21)

Revelation begins as a letter from John to the seven churches in the province of Asia in which he recounts the vision he saw of the risen Lord, and a whole lot else. The book opens with a striking vision of Jesus, who commands John to write down all that he is about to see. The second and third chapters contain seven letters from Jesus to seven churches in Asia Minor, each containing an exhortation to persevere and “overcome”.

4-11 | worship | Amen! Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honor and power and strength be to our God for ever and ever. Amen! (7:12)

The fourth chapter is where John begins to tell of his vision, and he is caught up into heaven, where he sees some incredible things around the throne of God, including a rainbow resembling an emerald, 24 elders dressed in white and wearing gold crowns, seven blazing lamps, and a sea of glass. There were also four “living creatures” who, along with the 24 elders, were worshipping God.

A scroll was brought out with seven seals, and a Lamb who appeared to be slain was the only one who was found worthy to open it. As he opened the seven seals, strange things began to appear: the four horsemen of the Apocalypse, the souls of the martyrs, and after the sixth seal, worldwide natural cataclysm. There follows an interlude of the Great Multitude dressed in white, and then the seventh seal was opened, which was followed by silence and then a terrible thunderstorm accompanied by an earthquake. After the opening of the seven seals comes the sounding of the seven trumpets, the first six of which bring about: 1) hail and fire mixed with blood, 2) a flaming mountain thrown into the sea, 3) a blazing star falling from the sky, 4) darkness, 5) the smoking Abyss with locusts, 6) the four avenging angels. Before the seventh trumpet was sounded, an angel with a little scroll appeared shouting with the voice of the seven thunders. Then come the two witnesses, who are men who testify about Jesus, but who are ultimately killed by the beast that comes up from the Abyss. The world rejoiced over their death, but then they were resurrected and lifted up to heaven. Then the seventh angel blew his trumpet, and heaven was opened, revealing God’s temple, followed by another thunderstorm and an earthquake.

12-18 | beast | And there was war in heaven. Michael and his angels fought against the dragon, and the dragon and his angels fought back. (12:7)

Chapter 12 holds a vision of a woman giving birth and a dragon waiting to devour her child. The dragon is revealed to be Satan, and the woman, presumably, is Mary, with the child being Jesus. A war in heaven ensued, with Michael and his angels defeating Satan, who was cast to the earth. The dragon then went to wage war against “those who obey God’s commandments and hold to the testimony of Jesus.”

Then a beast came out of the sea who astonished the whole world, and he was worshiped by everyone. He waged war against the saints, killing many of them. Then a beast came out of the earth, who exercised authority on behalf of the first beast. After this, the Lamb stood on Mount Zion, accompanied by 144,000 who bore the mark of God (contra the mark of the beast). Three angels appeared, the first proclaiming the Gospel, the second proclaiming the fall of Babylon, and the third proclaiming the wrath of God upon all who worship the beast. Then the earth was harvested by one who looked “like a son of man”.

Then came the seven angels with seven plagues, followed by the seven bowls of God’s wrath. The seven bowls had these consequences: 1) ugly and painful sores, 2) the sea turned to blood, 3) the rivers turned to blood, 4) intense heat from the sun, 5) darkness on the kingdom of the beast, 6) drying up of the Euphrates, 7) a thunderstorm and the worst earthquake in history. After this, another beast appeared, with a woman riding it. Then an angel declares the fall of “Babylon”.

19-22 | wedding | Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory! For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready. (19:7)

After the overthrow of Babylon, a great multitude in heaven rejoiced, declaring the wedding of the Lamb. Then the rider on the white horse appeared, who waged war against the beast, defeating him and throwing him into the Abyss for a thousand years. Then the martyrs came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years. After the thousand years, Satan is released and sets to wage war against Jesus again, and loses again, being thrown into the lake of burning sulfur. Then the dead are raised and judged, with death and Hades being thrown into the lake of fire, along with anyone whose name is not written in the book of life. Then comes the new heaven and new earth, and the new Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God. And a voice cries out from the throne, “Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them.” All things are made new, and in the city is the River of Life and the Tree of Life. The book ends with a promise from Jesus that he is coming soon.