In the just finished thread I discussed the number of the Beast, 666, in the context of the book of Revelation and its broader symbolism. In response, several readers asked me to say some more about Revelation (which by the ways does NOT have an “s” on the end!! That’s one of my pet pieves. It’s not the book of Revelations but the book of Revelation). So I think I’ll do two or three posts on it. It is the one book my students are *most* interested in. The book is so weird, so unlike anything they’ve ever seen, that they assume that it can only have come about by divine revelation, and that it is in fact predicting something that is to happen in our near future.

I’m afraid that I end up disappointing my students by my understanding of the book. I don’t think it is a blue-print for what is to transpire in the early 21st century. It is a book written in its own day, and for its own audience, to give them a message for themselves, not for people living 2000 years later.

The way to make sense of the book is to understand that it is written in the ancient genre known as the “apocalypse.” The view I stress in my class is that if you do not know how a genre of literature “works,” you won’t know how to interpret any particular book in that genre. If you have never encountered a novel before, or a short story (these are both very modern inventions), then probably you wouldn’t be able to figure out what is going on. Is *David Copperfield* some kind of biography of a 19th century Englishman?

The way I explain it to my students is this. Suppose you read an account of a scientific experiment that could easily go awry: if the virus that has been invented in the test tube escaped the laboratory, it could cause massive death worldwide. If you read this in a science fiction novel, you might decide to buy another book by the same author; if you read it on the front page of the NY Times, you might call your senator. It is important to know which genre you’re reading, if you want to know the real meaning of a text.

So too with apocalypses. If you read one, you need to know how the genre works. And so this is how I begin to describe the genre in my textbook on the New Testament, in the chapter that deals with the Apocalypse of John (a.k.a. the book of Revelation).

Apocalyptic World Views and the Apocalypse Genre

The first thing to say is that...

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