

I can now give a brief description of how the book of Revelation functions as an apocalypse – that is, how the features of the genre, that I’ve already mentioned, work themselves out in the narrative of the book. Again, this is taken from my textbook on the New Testament.

In general terms, Revelation corresponds to the basic description of apocalypses that I have given. It is a first-hand account written by a prophet who has been shown a vision of heaven that explains the realities of earth, a vision that is mediated by angels and that is chock-full of bizarre and mysterious symbolism. The nature of the book is indicated at the outset, in the magnificent vision of the exalted Christ that the prophet describes in ch. 1. Here Christ appears as “one like a Son of Man” (cf. Dan 7:13-14, where the phrase describes the cosmic judge of the earth) and is seen walking amidst the seven golden lampstands (i.e., he is present among the seven churches of Asia Minor, 1:20), with seven stars in his hands (i.e., he himself is in control of the guardian angels of these churches and therefore of the churches’ own destinies; 1:20). His appearance is symbolic: among other things, he is a king (long robe with golden sash, 1:12); he is ancient (white hair, 1:14); he is the cosmic judge (eyes like fire, 1:14); he is full of splendor (feet of burnished bronze, 1:15); he is all-powerful (voice of many waters, 1:15); he speaks the word of God (two-edged sword in his mouth, 1:16); he is totally overpowering (face like the sun, 1:16). The prophet’s response to this vision is understandable: he falls down as if dead. But Christ raises him up and commands him to convey both the message of his vision and the truth of what is yet to come.

Features of the Apocalypse

Rather than examining all that happens in this book in detail, it may prove more useful to see how some of its features make sense in light of the apocalypse genre, as I have just described it.

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