

Session 2: Introduction to the Book of Revelation

I. Jewish Apocalyptic Context

A. Summary of the “Messianic Woes”

A tumultuous period of eschatological distress and tribulation that, according to early Judaism, was to precede the coming of the Messiah. Characteristic features include apostasy, war, earthquakes, drought, famine, pestilence, familial strife and betrayal, cosmic signs, increasing wickedness, and the scarcity of truth and wisdom. Otherwise known in the rabbinic literature as the “birth pangs of the Messiah,” these woes lead inexorably to the birth of the final state of blessedness.

The concept of messianic woes has OT roots (Isa. 13:6–8; 26:16–19; Jer. 13:21; Mic. 5:2–4 [MT 1–3]; 7:1–6), more generally in OT depictions of the trauma associated with the day of the Lord (e.g., Joel 1:15–2:11; 2:30–31 [3:3–4]; Zeph. 1:14–18; esp. Dan. 12:1–3). The messianic woes pattern finds fuller development in the OT Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha (4 Ezra 5:1–13; 2 Apoc. Bar. 25–32; Jub. 23:13–25; Apoc. Abr. 30:4–8; T. Mos. 8–9), the Dead Sea Scrolls (1QH 3:3–18), the NT, and in patristic (Did. 16:3–6; Herm. Vis. 4.1–2; Barn. 4:3–5) and rabbinic (m. Soṭa 9:15; *b. Sanh.* 97a–98b; Šabb. 118a; *Pesah.* 118a; *Ketub.* 111a) literature.

The Synoptic eschatological discourse (Matt. 24; Mark 13; Luke 21) offers a striking NT parallel to the Jewish notion of messianic woes (cf. the “beginning of birth pangs,” Matt. 24:8; Mark 13:8), as do the visions of the seven seals, trumpets, and bowls (Rev. 6–16). Numerous other NT texts may also share this same background (e.g., Matt. 10:17–23, 34–36; Rom. 8:17–18; 2 Cor. 4:16–17; 1 Thess. 3:3–5).¹

B. Old Testament

While I was thinking about the horns, there before me was another horn, a little one, which came up among them; and three of the first horns were uprooted before it. This horn had eyes like the eyes of a man and a mouth that spoke boastfully.

⁹ As I looked, thrones were set in place, and the Ancient of Days took his seat. His clothing was as white as snow; the hair of his head was white like wool. His throne was flaming with fire, and its wheels were all ablaze. ¹⁰ A river of fire was flowing, coming out from before him. Thousands upon thousands attended him; ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him. The court was seated, and the books [Gk. *biblos*, LXX; cf. Rev. 5:1] were opened.

¹¹ Then I continued to watch because of the boastful words the horn was speaking. I kept looking until the beast was slain and its body destroyed and thrown into the blazing fire. ¹² (The other beasts had been stripped of their authority, but were allowed to live for a period of time.)

¹³ In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. ¹⁴

¹ Mark Dubis, “Messianic Woes,” *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 890.

He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and men of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed...

¹⁷ 'The four great beasts are four kingdoms that will rise from the earth. ¹⁸ But the saints of the Most High will receive the kingdom and will possess it forever—yes, for ever and ever... ²³ The fourth beast is a fourth kingdom that will appear on earth. It will be different from all the other kingdoms and will devour the whole earth, trampling it down and crushing it. ²⁴ The ten horns are ten kings who will come from this kingdom. After them another king will arise, different from the earlier ones; he will subdue three kings. ²⁵ He will speak against the Most High and oppress his saints and try to change the set times and the laws. The saints will be handed over to him for a time, times and half a time. ²⁶ But the court will sit, and his power will be taken away and completely destroyed forever. ²⁷ Then the sovereignty, power and greatness of the kingdoms under the whole heaven will be handed over to the saints, the people of the Most High. His kingdom will be an everlasting kingdom, and all rulers will worship and obey him.' (NIV Dan 7:8–27)

C. Intertestamental

Now concerning the signs: lo, the days are coming when those who inhabit the earth shall be seized with great terror, and the way of truth shall be hidden, and the land shall be barren of faith. ² Unrighteousness shall be increased beyond what you yourself see, and beyond what you heard of formerly. ³ And the land that you now see ruling shall be a trackless waste, and people shall see it desolate... ⁴ and the sun shall suddenly begin to shine at night, and the moon during the day. ⁵ Blood shall drip from wood, and the stone shall utter its voice; the peoples shall be troubled, and the stars shall fall... ¹⁰ and [wisdom] shall be sought by many but shall not be found, and unrighteousness and unrestraint shall increase on earth. ¹¹ One country shall ask its neighbor, 'Has righteousness, or anyone who does right, passed through you?' And it will answer, 'No.' (NRSV 2 Esdras 5:1–11)

D. New Testament

Now concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered together to him, we ask you, brothers, ² not to be quickly shaken in mind or alarmed, either by a spirit or a spoken word, or a letter seeming to be from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come. ³ Let no one deceive you in any way. For that day will not come, unless the rebellion comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction, ⁴ who opposes and exalts himself against every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, proclaiming himself to be God. ⁵ Do you not remember that when I was still with you I told you these things? (ESV 2 Thess 2:1–5)

E. The Didache

16. "Watch" over your life: do not let your lamps go out, and do not be unprepared, but be ready, for you do not know the hour when our Lord is coming. Gather together frequently, seeking the things that benefit your souls, for all the time you have believed will be of no use to you if you are not found perfect in the last time. For in the last days the false prophets and

corrupters will abound, and the sheep will be turned into wolves, and love will be turned into hate. For as lawlessness increases, they will hate and persecute and betray one another. And then the deceiver of the world will appear as a son of God and “will perform signs and wonders,” and the earth will be delivered into his hands, and he will commit abominations the likes of which have never happened before. Then all humankind will come to the fiery test, and “many will fall away” and perish; but “those who endure” in their faith “will be saved” by the accursed one himself. And “then there will appear the signs” of the truth: first the sign of an opening in heaven, then the sign of the sound of a trumpet, and third, the resurrection of the dead—but not of all; rather, as it has been said, “The Lord will come, and all his saints with him.” Then the world “will see the Lord coming upon the clouds of heaven.”²

II. The Book of Revelation

A. As Jewish Apocalypse

The book of Revelation is regularly regarded as belonging to that literary genre we have described as apocalyptic. It is the NT counterpart to the OT apocalyptic book of Daniel. There are good reasons to support this classification. The extensive use of symbolism, the vision as a major instrument of revelation, concentration on the close of this age and the dramatic inauguration of the age to come, the unveiling of the spiritual order lying behind and determining the course of events in history, the use of common apocalyptic motifs—all combine to justify the application of the term “apocalyptic” to the book of Revelation. These similarities account for the ease with which the first word of the Greek text (*apokalypsis*) came to serve as a technical designation for all the other literature of the same general class.³

Most of the works that are considered Jewish apocalypses were written between 200 B.C. and A.D. 100. Daniel, particularly chaps. 7–12, usually considered the earliest apocalypse, is the only one included in the OT canon, though portions of other OT prophetic books contain proto-apocalyptic features and sections (Isa 24–27; 56–66; Ezek 38–39; Joel 2–3; Zech 9–14; see Hanson, *Apocalyptic*, 1–31). Other compositions widely regarded as apocalypses include *1 Enoch*, *2 Enoch*, *2 Baruch*, *3 Baruch*, *4 Ezra*, the *Apocalypse of Abraham*, the *Testament of Abraham*, and *T. Levi* 2–5 (Collins, *Apocalyptic*, 2–8; Koch, *Apocalyptic*, 18–23)... Perhaps the most influential definition of the apocalypse genre is that proposed by J. J. Collins, who chaired the Apocalypse Group of the SBL Genres Project (*Semeia* 14 [1979] 9; *Apocalyptic*, 4): “Apocalypse” is a genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework, in which a revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient, disclosing a transcendent reality which is both temporal, insofar as it envisages eschatological salvation, and spatial, insofar as it involves another, supernatural world.”⁴

² Michael William Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations*, Updated ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999), 267–69.

³ Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 6.

⁴ David E. Aune, *Revelation 1–5*, WBC (Dallas: Word, 1998), lxxvii–lxxviii.

B. General Outline

- Introduction (ch. 1)
- Letters to Churches (chs. 2-3)
- Messianic Woes (chs. 4-18)
 - Heavenly Courtroom (chs. 4-5)
 - Seven Seals (chs. 6-8)
 - Seven Trumpets (chs. 8-11)
 - Woman, Dragon, 2 Beasts (chs. 12-13)
 - 3 Angels & Harvest (ch. 14)
 - Seven Plagues (chs. 15-16)
 - Prostitute & Beast (chs. 17-18)
- Apocalyptic Triumph (chs. 19-22)
 - Return of Jesus (ch. 19)
 - Millennial Reign (ch. 20)
 - New Heavens and New Earth (chs. 21-22)

C. Highlighted Passages

To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood ⁶and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen. ⁷Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him. Even so. Amen. (^{ESV} Rev. 1:5–7)

Then I saw in the right hand of him who was seated on the throne a scroll written within and on the back, sealed with seven seals. ²And I saw a mighty angel proclaiming with a loud voice, “Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals?” ³And no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth was able to open the scroll or to look into it, ⁴and I began to weep loudly because no one was found worthy to open the scroll or to look into it. ⁵And one of the elders said to me, “Weep no more; behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals.” ... ⁹And they sang a new song, saying, “Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation, ¹⁰and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth.” (^{ESV} Rev. 5:1–10)

And when the dragon saw that he had been thrown down to the earth, he pursued the woman who had given birth to the male child. ¹⁴But the woman was given the two wings of the great eagle so that she might fly from the serpent into the wilderness, to the place where she is to be nourished for a time, and times, and half a time. (^{ESV} Rev. 12:13–14)