

## Some notes on Apocrypha/Revelation

First, Apocalypse is not peculiar to the Book of Revelation. Ezekiel and Daniel and Zechariah in the mainstream Bible are, or have parts which are, Apocalypse. Esdras 4 in the Apocrypha is an Apocalyptic book. (Apocrypha means simply not one of the universally accepted mainstream Bible books. Most Apocryphal books are not in the least Apocalyptic.) The Book of Enoch is one of the best known Apocalyptic books not in either the Bible or the Apocrypha, but there are many others. It was a popular form of writing from about 200 BC to 100 AD.

Apocalypse is basically finding hope in a dark situation, in the belief that the present order of things will be destroyed and a new order instituted. The weirdness comes partly from inability to describe the transition from old to new orders other than in very picturesque terms; but perhaps more from the writers having to describe *current* events and people in picture terms. Given that the context is often persecution of Jews or Christians, you really don't want it to be seen that you are describing your persecutors and pleading for their destruction! There is also quite often apparently internal inconsistency in Apocryphal writing – sometimes because there are different writers, sometimes because vision is rather different from hard fact, and sometimes because the writers are naturally clearer in their own minds about what they don't like (e.g. being tortured and killed) than about how all this might end and what the better world would be like.

Generally, the underlying belief is that God is in charge of past, present and future (times and seasons); and has his own timetable for bringing in the new order. (Predestination/ Determinism) Most commentators seem to see Apocalypse as writing off the present world as hopeless, past praying for, and beyond redemption – just as with the Flood, and with the other Old Testament occasions when God threatens to scrap it all and start again. Prophecy is largely different: the prophets want radical reform, and are more inclined to proclaim humans working with God to reform the world rather than sitting back waiting for God to destroy and rebuild.

You will detect in Jehovah's Witness teaching, and in some Evangelical Christian teaching, this sort of pessimistic version of hopefulness. Give up on this world, Wait for the next one. This doesn't necessarily mean that JWs and Evangelicals fail to do good works. It does mean that they tend to opt out of politics and secular reform movements. At least one of the Commentators sees the Book of Revelation not as an excuse to opt out, but as an incentive to help move things towards the Vision.

Another controversial aspect of Revelation is the issue of how far the book describes the writer's world in all its horror and looks forward to the creation of a new world in which all is good and new; and how far it actually spells out in some detail a future history and schedules the end of the world. Down the years, people have seen Revelation as forecasting the First World War, the Second World War, the restoration of Jerusalem as the

Jewish capital, etc, etc. The contrary view, and probably the most realistic view, is that Revelation would have made perfect sense to John's readers as a description of recent history; and any apparent coincidence with our recent history is just because we are still human and make the same mistakes.

Luther and some of the other Reformers were determined to get Revelation (and some of the other books) out of the Bible. Others have seen Revelation as a masterpiece of art – modern art at that: hugely beneficial if you savour the message, and don't waste time trying to turn pictures into history and vision into forecast.