



Dreams and images: Exploring the imagination of Revelation

Apocalyptic Unveiled

When we use the word 'apocalyptic' today, what do we mean? Major disasters and threats to civilisation might come to mind: the environmental crisis, nuclear threats, widespread famine or extreme weather. The book of Revelation is an example of 'apocalyptic' writing in the Bible, often interpreted as a vision of the end of the world.

The original word 'apocalyptic' (from the Greek 'apokalypsis') has the sense of 'to reveal', 'to uncover' or 'to unveil'; it is 'revelation' of hidden truth or spiritual secrets. Apocalyptic writing is the unfolding of things previously hidden, drawing back the curtain on what has been concealed. It's a term used to describe not just Revelation, but a whole body of particularly Jewish literature which flourished from about 200 BCE to 150 CE.

The Open Heaven

Apocalyptic has been described as 'the literature of crisis', and it is no wonder that it flourished at a time of political and cultural pressure and religious persecution. We see in it one of the ways in which the human social psyche copes with the challenge of uncertain destiny. We do not know what external influences, mixing with a strong biblical tradition, may have helped to shape Jewish apocalyptic. What we do know is that we have subject matter that is essentially concerned with:

- The future rather than the present;
- The spiritual rather than the material;
- The purposes of God rather than human actions.

The writing transports the reader out of their immediate existence and circumstance and allows them to stand under an open heaven and share in the mysteries of what God will finally do with the universe. The curtain between the temporal and the eternal is thrown back. The reader is offered a revelation direct from God. There is the clear belief that God has spoken directly to the seer.

Image, Impact and Truth

One of the most striking features of much apocalyptic writing is its use of powerful images and graphic language. Added to this there is also the frequent reference to sound and colour.

Jewish apocalyptic imagery rests heavily upon its biblical roots. This is seen plainly in Revelation where quotations and themes from the Hebrew scriptures saturate every page.

But added to that there is the vivid use of both colour and sound. White, red, gold and azure are mentioned time and again. Things are also often described as dripping with blood.

There are the sounds of thunder, hail, earthquake, trumpets, harps, voices like the sound of the sea, there is singing and lion's roaring. There are the cries of 'Alleluia', 'Woe' and 'Come'; and much more. All this creates a deep sense of awe and wonder.

The fundamental power of apocalyptic writing, as in Revelation and elsewhere, is probably found in its use of 'archetypal images'. These are deeply rooted emotional symbols that the human mind uses to interpret the world outside itself, and to make sense of its own experiences. These archetypal images are present in the mythology and folklore of peoples the world over.

They are simply stated and not described; they are left to make their own deep impact. They paint their own picture and speak for themselves. They are powerful primeval imprints upon our psyche that can open a window beyond ourselves.

They are vehicles for strong emotional and spiritual understanding. When we are confronted with these images they appear strangely familiar, we cannot say why because they are buried deeply in our unconscious mind.

The archetypal images used in Revelation include:

- The dragon
- The abyss
- Sea giving up its dead
- Locusts
- The Beast
- City of precious stones
- Book of life
- Morning star
- The great banquet
- The key
- White horse
- War in heaven

There is a real challenge in the creative power of the apocalyptic, as to how we think about communicating truth through symbol and image in a way that strikes an emotional chord. We live in a time when there is a cultural return to primal images, for which apocalyptic writing has perfectly prepared us.

Questions

1. What can we learn, both about truth and its communication, from the way Revelation's writer used apocalyptic imagery?
2. Biblical apocalyptic writers use many powerful primal images. These would be instinctively understood in most cultures of the world. Why do you think they used this language and how do these images connect with the truth?
3. How might contemporary cinema and theatre be a medium to use similar ideas to explore meaning and truth today?