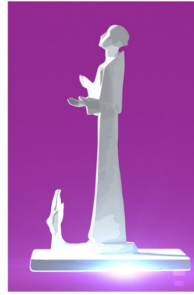


# EXPLORING THE BIBLE

a St Francis College short course



## Theme 4: Reading the New Testament

### 4h: How do we make sense of the Book of Revelation and apocalyptic literature?

#### REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Marian suggests that apocalyptic literature emerges when people feel threatened. Where have you seen evidence of this in film, television, rhetoric, fiction and news?
2. Some people have made claims that the book of Revelation tells the future. Scholarship clearly states this is not so. But what is the attraction of such a 'theory'?
3. Many Christians feel that the Book of Revelation is a mystery. Marian hints that some understanding of the context out of which it emerged can help people appreciate the text. See what you can find out about the book online. Wikipedia is a great place to start.
4. Consider investigating who wrote it, when, what was happening at the time.

#### TRANSCRIPT

The Rev'd Dr Marian Free

Lecturer in New Testament

Well apocalyptic literature is a class of its own and it emerges in times when people feel under threat. So if you've been invaded or your life's falling apart, particularly if you're being oppressed, what you want is for the baddies to get it. So, you project this with the

general expectation of the end of time. If you read books like Isaiah, you have the lovely language of the lion lying down with the lamb and the swords being battered into ploughshares. Apocalyptic literature is all about the baddies suffering and the goodies getting their reward in heaven, I mean I'm oversimplifying it because there's a vast array.

'Eschatology' is more about earth being transformed whereas the 'apocalyptic' literature projects it to heavenly sort of existence. Nothing exactly fits one or the other, and this is a simplification, but a definition can be helpful. I'm thinking of the Book of Jubilees for example, where sinners are tied up in chains in hell for a thousand years so it's very colourful. But it's usually contemporary and that's what we have to remember. Just like the prophets are critiquing the current situation the people who are writing the apocalyptic literature are in a particular situation. Take chapter 13 of Mark for example. We think that the people to whom Mark was writing were experiencing some sort of threat, oppression or persecution, and that this is to assure them that things will work out, you know that God's got a plan and they will get their just reward as will the people who are oppressing them.

This brings me to the Book of Revelation which has to be understood in that context. It's complex because there is so much rich imagery. One of the things about the Book of Revelation is that it's repetitive there are three cycles of destruction. Now you cannot destroy the entire world three times. The first shows the destruction of humankind, then there is the destruction of the world, and then last is the destruction of the universe. There are trumpets, there are plagues! They are the same story but just on the different levels. But within that there is just so much imagery some of which we don't even understand. We think the 'Whore of Babylon' is Rome but there are armies on the East that we think are referring to Nero's armies because Nero by then is dead but there is a myth that Nero will return. If you don't know those things the book makes no sense at all. If you could take out the middle it still is one of the most amazing books - because the letters to the churches at the start are chiding and also so affirming. Then you have that wonderful chapter 21 that we often have at funerals about a new heaven and a new earth - God wiping away every tear. It has to be read as something that is completely contextual and filled with symbolism some of which we don't understand and it does not pertain to the present nor was it ever intended to be relevant a hundred years later let alone 2000 years later.