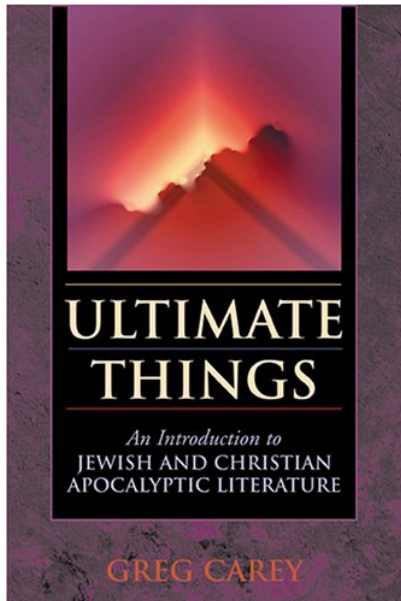


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Carey, Greg

***Ultimate Things: An Introduction to Jewish and Christian Apocalyptic Literature***

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For a long time, scholars relied on the word “apocalyptic” to designate not only a specific type of literature but also its characteristic ideology, eschatology, language, themes, settings, and purposes. While such indiscriminating usage reflected the common wisdom that all these elements were essentially interrelated, it ultimately proved to be unsatisfactory for scientific study. In the late 1970s, a group from the Society of Biblical Literature, led by John J. Collins, proposed a new taxonomy that isolated and defined the discrete phenomena: “apocalypse,” which became the primary category, designated the formal literary genre, while “apocalypticism” specified the underlying ideology of movements that share the genre’s conceptual framework. The protean old label “apocalyptic” was henceforth restricted to adjectival applications, such as “apocalyptic movement” or “apocalyptic eschatology.”

The importance of the SBL taxonomy can hardly be overstated: it has been the foundation for nearly all the advanced research conducted on apocalypses and apocalypticism over the past three decades. Yet some scholars, while applauding the utility of the taxonomy, have suggested that it incompletely articulates the substrative relationship among the phenomena. Others have observed that it does not account for the complementary issues of function and social settings, a complaint that later prompted the definition of the genre

to be modified so as to include a functional aspect. On another front, recent research has drawn attention to certain types of literature, such as the Dead Sea eschatological-sapiential texts or the late antique historical apocalyptic, which while critical to the understanding of the phenomena seemingly extend beyond their definitions in matters of content or form.

As a result, specialists such as Lester L. Grabbe and others have rejected the SBL taxonomy in favor of a broader classification wherein “apocalyptic” is considered no more than a genus of revelatory or prophetic literature.<sup>1</sup> In my view, however, this methodology disregards the highly distinctive nature of apocalypses and apocalypticism and minimizes their theologically revolutionary aspects. For those of a similar mind, a central issue is whether the current data support the possibility of a fresh approach to the evidence that, while acknowledging the heuristic utility of the SBL categories and the distinctive nature of apocalypticism, is able to embrace the full range of apocalyptic literature and to describe the interactions among all the phenomena. A secondary issue is whether such an approach should be underwritten by a new category or freighted by means of a single, elegant field hypothesis. Naturally, these options are not mutually exclusive.

Greg Carey opts to admit a new category, “apocalyptic discourse,” in order to facilitate his purpose of providing an introduction to ancient Jewish and Christian apocalyptic literature.<sup>2</sup> As he defines it, apocalyptic discourse “refers to the constellation of apocalyptic topics as they function in larger Jewish and Christian literary and social contexts. Thus, apocalyptic discourse should be treated as a flexible set of resources that early Jews and Christians could employ for a variety of persuasive tasks” (5). A “topic” may be a motif, device, or literary convention. Carey’s list of topics includes an interest in a transcendent reality, either temporal or spatial; a focus on visual or auditory revelation and a stress on its heavenly mediation; a heavy reliance on literary devices such as pseudonymity, *ex eventu* prophecy, and symbolism; and a preoccupation with the themes of cosmic catastrophe, dualism, cosmologic speculation, the final judgment, and the afterlife. According to him, not every apocalyptic text need contain all these topics, nor

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1. L. L. Grabbe, “Introduction and Overview,” in *Knowing the End from the Beginning: The Prophetic, the Apocalyptic and Their Relationships* (ed. L. L. Grabbe and R. D. Haak; JSPSup 46; London: T&T Clark, 2003), 2–43, esp. 22. For additional examples and a survey of the ongoing debate regarding taxonomies and definitions, see L. DiTommaso, “Apocalypses and Apocalypticism in Antiquity (Part I),” *CBR* 5.2 (2007): 235–86 at 238–50.

2. Carey addressed aspects of the apocalyptic mode of discourse in an earlier collection of essays: G. Carey and G. Bloomquist, eds., *Vision and Persuasion: Rhetorical Dimensions of Apocalyptic Discourse* (St. Louis: Chalice, 1999).

does their totality represent a complete roster, but together they offer a good idea of the contours of the discourse.

The chief question is whether this approach sheds light on the subject of ancient apocalyptic literature. The answer very much depends on what one expects from the book.

From the perspective of the history of the study of apocalypses and related phenomena, Carey's approach does not represent a step forward. He acknowledges that the corpus of ancient Jewish and Christian apocalypsa comprises more than the formal apocalypses, which obliges him to include a broader range of texts than are normally included in introductions to the subject. Carey is also sensitive to the rhetorical and the theological dimensions of apocalyptic literature and to the diversity of the social settings of apocalypticism, all of which further expand the scope of his enquiry. The net result, as he correctly notes, is a "remarkable variety of apocalyptic texts, beliefs, and social phenomena" (4).

But if the intromission of an additional category is warranted by such an enquiry and under the conditions I have outlined,<sup>3</sup> it would seem that it ought to reside in the hierarchy at a level above the SBL categories. That is to say, such a category must be able to inform the traditional aspects of genre, ideology, and eschatology as well as the related elements of function and social settings, not simply stand alongside them in an adjunct or even subordinate relationship. As far as I can tell, "apocalyptic discourse" operates in much the same manner as "apocalyptic" once did (and still does, for some), and topics such as "heavenly mediation," "dualism," or "pseudonymity" can be classified as characteristic elements of either label. Moreover, many of these topics are not uniquely associated with apocalypses or apocalypticism; this was one of the major problems that occasioned the formulation of the SBL definitions in the first place. Although attention to apocalyptic discourse, as we shall see, does much to highlight the presence and purposes of these topics in the literature, the category itself is unable to offer anything in the way of a general explanation for the larger phenomena. A more meaningful category (or hypothesis) would clarify the higher-level functions of the formal structures and theological axioms that underpin both the genre and the ideology and that, on the literary level, are expressed through this diversity of topics, whose selection and presentation were additionally molded by the requirements of the communities for which they were composed.

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3. The grounds for evaluating the book in this manner will be found in its introductory chapter, particularly on pages 3–6, where Carey uses the three categories of apocalypse, apocalypticism, and apocalyptic eschatology to build his case for another category, apocalyptic discourse.

On the other hand, Carey's approach works extremely well in terms of the less theoretical but still valuable task of introducing the motifs, devices, and literary conventions in the apocalyptic literature, including those texts often overlooked by other survey studies.

The book contains nine chapters. After the introduction, wherein Carey outlines the case for apocalyptic discourse, the first chapter introduces 1 Enoch and Daniel as the earliest apocalypses. Chapter 2 discusses the antecedents of apocalyptic discourse in the prophetic literature of the Hebrew Bible, specifically Ezekiel, Zechariah, Joel, and Isaiah. Chapter 3 addresses apocalyptic discourse in Jubilees, the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs, the Testament of Moses, the Qumran literature, and the earliest Sibylline Oracles. The next two chapters deal with apocalyptic discourse in the New Testament. Chapter 6, "Responses to Tragedy," covers post-70 Jewish apocalypses: 4 Ezra, 2 Baruch, 3 Baruch, and the Apocalypse of Abraham. Chapters 7 and 8 address early Christian historical apocalypses (Revelation and the Shepherd of Hermas) and ascent apocalypses (the Ascension of Isaiah, the Greek Apocalypse of Peter, and the Apocalypse of Paul). The final chapter, "Epilogue: Legacies and Prospects," contains the author's reflections on the reception history of apocalyptic discourse, particularly in late antique Judaism and Christianity and in contemporary Christian communities.

The book's principal strength, then, is its breadth. Carey asserts that his is the only single-authored volume to examine the full range of early Jewish and Christian apocalyptic literature, including those beyond the corpus of formal apocalypses (iv). This claim should be tempered by the fact that the book covers only a selection of the early Christian apocalypses and is somewhat spare in its treatment of the sapiential origins and aspects of apocalypticism. Still, its compass is extensive. Specialists and nonspecialists alike will benefit from Carey's informed and balanced discussion of the texts, clear writing, and logical organization of the material. Regrettably, the book lacks indexes, a serious oversight in an introduction to a wide variety of writings whose titles are unlisted even in its table of contents.

Another of the book's strengths is its focus on the topics of apocalyptic discourse, which, as I mentioned, casts the relevant motifs, devices, and literary conventions into high relief. Carey nearly always has something fresh to say about each text. He is concerned less with the issues relating to a text's literary sources and historical redaction than with its final form and purposes. Sometimes this methodology can result in missteps, as when he discusses 1 Enoch as if it had existed in this form in the early second century B.C.E. or when he refers to the "Jewish book" of the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs (20). More often, though, it allows Carey to isolate the motivations for the inclusion of the topics of apocalyptic discourse in each of the texts. This feature is present throughout the entire book, as are subsections on "reading" the apocalyptic texts in which he draws out

their idiosyncratic theological and rhetorical elements. These last qualities truly distinguish Carey's book from other introductions to the subject.

Without downplaying its prospective usefulness for specialists of early Judaism and Christianity, Carey's book might also have a potentially large impact on students and scholars outside the discipline. The further one ventures outside the field of biblical studies, the more likely it is the case that those who discuss apocalypses and apocalypticism do so in terms removed from the current understanding of the subject. For example, of the many recent works on modern "apocalyptic"—in popular literature or motion pictures, as a component of the revival of fundamentalism, or in its perceived role in American foreign policy—only a few betray an interest in anything but its typical settings and themes.<sup>4</sup> By providing an unambiguous list of the topics of apocalyptic discourse and a systematic overview of their function in the ancient texts, it is possible that over time Carey's book will come to enjoy a select appeal for scholars in other disciplines.

Inevitably, any new survey like this will be measured against John Collins's *Apocalyptic Imagination*, which in its second edition remains the gold standard among introductions to the subject (*The Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction to Jewish Apocalyptic Literature* [2nd ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998]). Yet despite an overlap in purpose and subject matter, Carey's book is distinctive, particularly in its approach. As an introduction to ancient Jewish and Christian apocalyptic literature, *Ultimate Things* does not replace Collins's book but should be used alongside it.

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4. It is also the case that the word "apocalyptic" has several additional shades of meaning in the modern world, particularly in the popular imagination.