FROM REVELATION TO CATASTROPHE: THE HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF THE TERM “APOCALYPSE”

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Abstract. The term “apocalypse” is commonly associated with catastrophe and destruction, though its original meaning refers to revelation. This article examines the transformation of the Greek term *apokalypsis* from “unveiling” to “end of the world” through etymological, textual, and historical analysis. Drawing on key scholars such as John J. Collins, David E. Aune, Lorenzo DiTommaso, and David Hellholm, it shows how literary, theological, and cultural factors shaped this shift. The study concludes that restoring the original revelatory meaning offers a more accurate understanding of apocalyptic thought in both historical and modern contexts.

Keywords: apocalypse, revelation, catastrophe, apocalyptic literature, biblical genre, etymology, literary criticism

Annotatsiya. “Apokalipsis” atamasi bugungi kunda ko‘proq falokat va vayronagarchilik bilan bog‘lanadi, aslida esa uning dastlabki ma’nosi vahiy va ochilishni anglatadi. Ushbu maqolada yunoncha *apokalypsis* atamasining “ochilish”dan “dunyoning oxiri” ma’nosigacha bo‘lgan o‘zgarishi etimologik, matniy va tarixiy tahlil asosida ko‘rib chiqiladi. John J. Collins, David E. Aune, Lorenzo DiTommaso va David Hellholm kabi olimlar qarashlariga tayangan holda, ushbu o‘zgarishga adabiy, diniy va madaniy omillar ta’siri yoritiladi. Xulosa sifatida, atamaning asl — vahiyga oid ma’nosini tiklash apokaliptik tafakkurni to‘g‘riroq anglash imkonini beradi.

Kalit so‘zlar: apokalipsis, vahiy (ochilish), falokat, apokaliptik adabiyot, bibliyaviy janr, etimologiya, adabiy tanqid

When we hear the word “**apocalypse**”, we almost instinctively think of destruction. Hollywood has played no small role in this: films like “The Day After Tomorrow”, “2012”, or even “Apocalypse Now” have conditioned us to associate the term with collapse, catastrophe, and the end of everything. It has become, in the popular imagination, a synonym for annihilation.

But where does the word actually come from? And does it really mean what we think it means? The Greek “apokalypsis” tells a different story entirely — one of unveiling, of revelation, of something hidden suddenly coming to light. No floods, no falling skyscrapers. Just the act of seeing clearly for the first time.

This gap between the word's origins and its current meaning is not trivial. It reflects centuries of literary, theological, and cultural transformations that gradually buried the original sense under layers of fear and spectacle. Tracing that journey — from ancient biblical texts to modern disaster cinema — reveals something important not just about a word, but about how Western culture has long used the idea of the end to process its deepest anxieties.

The approach taken in this article is primarily philological and literary-historical. The starting point is the word itself — its Greek origins, its passage through Latin translation, and the long process by which its meaning shifted from revelation to catastrophe. Tracing this semantic journey requires close attention to language, and so etymological analysis forms the backbone of the study.

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This linguistic inquiry is, however, inseparable from the texts that carried the word across centuries. The article therefore relies on close reading of the key works in the apocalyptic tradition, beginning with the biblical corpus — Revelation, Daniel, Ezekiel — and following the threads that connect them to later literary and cultural production. The aim is not simply to catalogue references, but to understand how the formal and rhetorical choices of these texts shaped the concept itself.

Finally, the article adopts a historical-comparative perspective, moving across different periods and placing texts in dialogue with one another. This is necessary because the transformation of “apocalypse” did not happen in a single moment — it accumulated gradually, through translation, reinterpretation, and cultural pressure. Comparing how different eras understood and used the term is what makes that accumulation visible.These three approaches — philological, textual, and historical — are not treated as separate procedures but as naturally overlapping dimensions of the same inquiry.

One of the most persistent problems in the study of apocalyptic literature is deceptively simple: what exactly is an apocalypse? The question has preoccupied scholars for decades, and the sources consulted in this article make clear that no fully settled answer has yet emerged. What has emerged, however, is a rich and productively contested debate about genre, definition, and cultural function — a debate that bears directly on the question of how the term's meaning has shifted over time.

The foundational move in modern scholarship was the attempt to define apocalypse as a literary genre with identifiable formal features. Collins's influential work approaches the question taxonomically, seeking to isolate the structural and thematic characteristics that distinguish apocalyptic texts from related genres such as prophecy or wisdom literature: “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” [1; 3-b.]. This was a necessary and clarifying intervention. Yet as John J. Collins himself acknowledges in his later reconsideration of the genre question, the boundaries remain unstable: “the genre apocalypse must be seen as a cross-cultural phenomenon” that exceeds any single tradition or set of formal criteria [2; 22-b.]. The texts resist clean categorization, and the criteria that seem to define the genre in one context tend to blur or fail in another.

David E. Aune's 1986 study of the Book of Revelation sharpens this problem considerably. By focusing on a single text — the most canonical of all apocalyptic works — Aune demonstrates that Revelation itself sits uneasily within the genre it ostensibly defines. Its formal complexity, its blending of epistolary, prophetic, and visionary modes, makes it a problematic prototype [3; 65–96-b.]. Ralph Kallas had already raised a version of this challenge as early as 1967, provocatively questioning whether the Apocalypse is, in any strict sense, an apocalyptic book at all, noting that its core theological concerns differ substantially from those of other texts in the tradition [4; 69–70-b.]. David Linton's later work pursues a similar line of inquiry, arguing that reading Revelation purely through the lens of genre risks flattening its rhetorical and political dimensions — precisely those dimensions that gave the text its historical force [5; 9–12-b.].

This tension between formal definition and lived function is one of the central threads running through the scholarship. Paul D. Hanson, working within the broader project of mapping apocalypticism across the ancient world, emphasizes that

apocalyptic literature cannot be understood purely as a set of textual conventions — it is also a mode of thought, a way of organizing historical experience around a horizon of cosmic resolution [6; 27–28-b.]. Lars Hartman reinforces this by situating the genre question within a broader Mediterranean and Near Eastern context, arguing that apocalypticism as a worldview preceded and exceeded any particular set of literary forms [7; 239–241-b.]. David Hellholm's extensive contribution to the same methodological conversation pushes further still, suggesting that the problem of apocalyptic genre is ultimately inseparable from questions of social context and rhetorical purpose, and that formal analysis alone cannot account for the texts' extraordinary cultural persistence [8; 13–15-b.]. John J. Collins and James H. Charlesworth, in their edited volume following the Uppsala colloquium, similarly conclude that apocalypticism must be understood as a broad cultural phenomenon rather than a narrowly defined literary category, one whose boundaries have always been negotiated rather than fixed [9; 5–9-b.].

It is precisely this functional dimension that becomes most relevant when tracing the concept's journey into modern culture. Lorenzo DiTommaso's two contributions document the remarkable persistence and adaptability of apocalyptic thought outside its original religious context. In his study of apocalypticism and popular culture, DiTommaso observes that contemporary popular media has not simply borrowed apocalyptic imagery but has actively reshaped it, stripping away its revelatory dimension and retaining primarily its catastrophic one [10; 473–476-b.]. His later work on apocalypticism in the contemporary world extends this argument, demonstrating that the concept continues to perform urgent cultural work in secular contexts — organizing collective anxieties around narratives of imminent ending and potential renewal [11; 317–320-b.]. What DiTommaso's work reveals, taken together, is that the popular appropriation of apocalypse is not simply a vulgarization or misreading of the original concept. It is, rather, the latest iteration of a pattern that has repeated itself across centuries: each cultural moment selects from the available repertoire of apocalyptic imagery those elements that best express its own anxieties and desires.

Peter Henning's contribution to *The Cambridge Companion to the Bible and Literature* provides a useful bridge between these two dimensions of the discussion — the literary-historical and the cultural. By situating apocalyptic literature within the broader context of biblical influence on literary tradition, Henning argues that the transformation of the term is not merely a semantic accident but the result of a long process of reading, translation, adaptation, and reinvention [12; 166–170-b.]. Literary culture, in this account, has been as active an agent in reshaping the concept as theology or popular entertainment.

What emerges from this body of scholarship, taken together, is a picture of apocalypse as a fundamentally unstable concept — one whose instability is not a weakness but a source of its extraordinary durability. The word has survived precisely because it has been flexible enough to absorb new meanings without entirely losing its older ones. The catastrophic and the revelatory remain in tension within it, and it is that tension, more than any fixed definition, that continues to make the concept productive for literary criticism.

The word “apocalypse” has come a long way from its origins. It started as a Greek term for unveiling — for seeing what was hidden — and ended up meaning, in everyday language, little more than total destruction. That shift did not happen overnight, and it

was not simply a matter of popular misunderstanding. It happened through centuries of translation, reinterpretation, and cultural pressure, each era bending the concept toward its own fears and expectations.

What this article has tried to show is that the tension between revelation and catastrophe was present in the tradition from the very beginning. The biblical texts were never as unified or as straightforward as they are often assumed to be. Collins, Aune, Hellholm and others have spent decades demonstrating just how contested the genre was even in antiquity — how unstable its boundaries, how varied its purposes. The apocalypse was always many things at once: a literary form, a theological claim, a political cry, a way of making sense of suffering. It was never just one of these things, and that is precisely why it proved so durable.

Popular culture inherited this complexity and simplified it. The revelatory dimension faded; the catastrophic one remained and grew. Films like “2012” or “The Day After Tomorrow” are, in this sense, legitimate grandchildren of John of Patmos — not because they preserve his meaning, but because they continue to use the end of the world as a way of talking about the anxieties of the present.

But something is lost in that simplification, and it seems worth naming. The original apocalypse was not about destruction for its own sake. It was about truth coming to the surface — about the moment when what has been concealed can no longer be hidden. That is a different kind of ending, and perhaps a more unsettling one. Not the world swallowed by water, but the world finally seen clearly.

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