CHAPTER TWO

READING THE FORM OF THE APOCALYPSE

We dance around in a ring and suppose, but the Secret sits in the middle and knows.¹

In this chapter, I deal with the relationship between the formal features of the Apocalypse and the reading experience. In dealing with the determining factors of literariness in the Apocalypse, this chapter looks into the exegetical conventions around the notion of apocalyptic. This includes the degree of the relationship between the apocalypses in general, as well as genre descriptions that tend to be tailored to fit the New Testament Apocalypse.²

We all agree as to what is a Greek comedy or tragedy. We know they are plays that were performed, although we may read them as written texts. Nevertheless, in reading the Apocalypse, we are still debating about the nature of the text. Readers repeatedly arrive at conclusions that are in tension with each other. The narrative elements of the work are one factor contributing to a tantalizingly fuzzy notion of how to read the Apocalypse. However, apocalyptic and apocalypticism are terms that have relevance in several cultural and religious discourses, no matter how slippery the concept are.³

Many of the general mental images whose origin we assume to be in the Apocalypse are, more accurately speaking, located in the frames governing its reading.⁴ Those involving themselves in reading the Apocalypse make different selections with regard to the elements that stem from form, content and function that contribute to the book’s interpre-

¹ Robert Frost as quoted in Rodden, J. and M. Dickstein, eds. Lionel Trilling and the Critics: Opposing Selves (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999) xv.
tative frames when reading the Apocalypse. This results in a variety of interpretative experiences of the artefact. A frame, according to Manfred Jahn, refers to the cognitive model that a reader selects and uses in the process of reading. An example of such a mental frame is found in what Paul Hanson identifies as ideology affecting a social movement. For Hanson, this reading frame for the artefact bespeaks of a socially deprived and possibly a religious fringe group, and he maintains that it is a controlling scheme for the reading experience. However, as will be shown below, this frame may confuse the distinction between the formation of an ideology and the social realities of the movement.

Most descriptions of the traits of the Apocalypse, such as literary functions, eschatological motifs and psychological characteristics, neglect other ideas and motifs prominent in the literary production of apocalypses. Michael Stone observes that certain Jewish apocalypses provide lists of revealed things: astronomy, meteorology and cosmology, the secrets of nature and wisdom. Other recurrent motifs include mysticism, existential anthropology and historiography. The notion of apocalyptic aids the reader by means of its own history of development, which essentially has taken place apart from the artefact of the Apocalypse. As Barry Matlock observes, there is an inherent circular reasoning in fitting the Apocalypse to an ideological reading. Right from the start, a seemingly historical ideology, labelled apocalyptic, was contrived and has been used as a supposed aid to the understanding of the New Testament and thus also to perceiving the Apocalypse. The result is a self-fulfilling project.

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5 Yolanda Majors, in a concrete way, deals with the issue that readers conceive a phenomenon based on their expectations. Consequently, concerning an assumed phenomenon and grounded in form, content and function, expectations are created, which serve to reconstruct the text in question. Majors, Y. J. “Narrations of Cross-cultural Encounters as Interpretative Frames for Reading Word and World.” Discourse & Society 7 (2007) 480.


10 Matlock labels this activity a vicious circle – a sort of irrational scripture-inter-