

RS 116
The Apocalypse
Europe Semester 2024

I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. For in hope we were saved...

Romans 8:18-24

Biblical apocalyptic literature was written in response to the oppression and persecution of the people of God. The vivid imagery and dramatic events offered readers a way to interpret their experience of the world. The proclamation of God's victory over evil gave them hope for their future. The visions of biblical apocalyptic literature also have provided imagery and concepts for later writers, in and outside Jewish and Christian communities. Writers throughout history and into our own day adopt and adapt biblical imagery in response to new crises in the world. In this class, we will explore the biblical roots and literary echoes of apocalyptic literature.

"Not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait..." Paul wrote that two thousand years ago, and here we are, still waiting and groaning. What is *our* hope? How do biblical apocalypses continue to speak to *us*? What does the promise of God's victory mean in *our* world today? Our study of the apocalypse can also inform and inspire our own interpretation of the world around us, and our hope of salvation.

Catalogue description

A study of the New Testament book of Revelation in the context of biblical and Second Temple apocalyptic literature with attention to literary conventions, symbolism, theology, historical context, and contemporary relevance.

General education and major/minor requirements

RS 116 is an upper division Religious Studies course. In addition, this particular version of the course fulfills credit for the Environmental Studies minor, and the Reading Imaginative Literature General Education area.

As a **Religious Studies** course, RS 116 explores the hermeneutics of apocalyptic literature. We will engage in deep, detailed readings of biblical apocalypses, analyzing the genre, style, socio-historical contexts, and theological interests of apocalyptic literature *in* and *as* scripture. We will explore and apply different interpretive frameworks. We will address the place of apocalyptic literature and theology in the life of the church: the early church, the medieval church, and the church today. We will ask how apocalyptic theology might matter for us, our understanding of the world around us, and our hope.

As an **Environmental Studies** course, RS 116 draws attention to the environmental imagery and themes of apocalyptic literature, as well as the ways in which apocalyptic literature informs the interpretation of and response to existential threats: war in the first century, the plague in medieval Europe, the environmental crisis today. We will explore the intersection of

environmental concerns with theology in apocalyptic biblical and post-biblical thought. We will particularly analyze the representation of apocalyptic upheaval with environmental imagery. We will address the imagination of the new creation in relationship to the creation within which we live.

As a **Reading Imaginative Literature** course, RS 116 offers opportunity to “engage in close reading of imaginative texts”—ancient, medieval, and modern. We will conduct deep analyses of apocalyptic literature, paying attention to the way the authors constructed their work, the imagery they use, the style and structure of the texts, genre (poetry, short story, novels), the use of narrative voice and perspective, characterization, narrative devices like visuality and audition, intertextuality, the poetics of apocalyptic literature, and more. We will put these pieces together to seek to understand how apocalyptic literature constructs meaning.

Course learning outcomes and assessment

In RS 116, students will:

1. Analyze the genre, literary styles, imaginative imagery, and theologies of biblical and post-biblical apocalyptic literature in support of thoughtful, considerate interpretations.
 - This learning outcome combines the RS major learning outcome of hermeneutical judgment and the Reading Imaginative Literature learning outcomes.
 - The skills necessary to this outcome will be practiced through analysis of primary sources, secondary readings, lectures, and the Revelation manuscript study.
 - This outcome will be assessed through the Revelation manuscript study, class discussions, and brief writing assignments.
2. Assess the intersections of creation imagery and environmental concerns with apocalyptic literature and theology in the biblical world, medieval Europe, and our own day.
 - This learning outcome combines the RS major learning outcome of ecclesiastical engagement, the Reading Imaginative Literature student learning outcome 2, and Environmental Studies minor concerns.
 - The skills necessary to this outcome will be practiced through analysis of primary sources, secondary readings, lectures, and site visits.
 - This outcome will be assessed through reading summaries, class discussions, and reflective essays.
3. Address the potential of apocalyptic literature and theology as an interpretive framework for understanding politics, society, creation, and the Christian life.
 - This learning outcome combines the RS major learning outcome of ecclesiastical engagement with the Environmental Studies minor concerns.
 - The skills necessary to this outcome will be practiced through secondary readings, lectures, and site visits.
 - This outcome will be assessed through class discussions, reflective essays, and the final exam summative essay.

Course details

Class meets: As listed in the Europe Semester Itinerary

Professor: Caryn Reeder, creeder@westmont.edu, 805.705.6029

Student hours: By appointment

Required texts

NRSVue Bible

Book of Revelation manuscript (Canvas download)

1 Enoch (Canvas download)

Commented [cr1]: SLO 1: Students will be able to distinguish among genres (or sub-genres) of imaginative literature by identifying the defining characteristics, authorial purposes, and thematic implications associated with various literary and dramatic forms.
SLO 2: Students will be able to analyze imaginative literature to indicate an understanding of its language beyond its literal level by offering a close reading that demonstrates at the level of the individual sentence or line not just what the text means but how the text means what it means.

Commented [cr2]: Following the expectations of the Reading Imaginative Literature GE (certification criterion 1), the majority of material assigned in the class consists of primary texts (ancient, medieval, and modern). Readings from secondary literature will be supplementary, rather than the focus of the class.

Shepherd of Hermas (Canvas download)
Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love* (Oxford World Classics)
William Langland, *Piers Plowman* (Oxford World Classics)
John Joseph Adams, ed., *Wastelands: Stories of the Apocalypse*, 2008
Anna Smaill, *The Chimes*, 2015

Additional readings from the following resources will be required:

Brian Blount, *Revelation* (New Testament Library), 2009 (available through the Westmont library)
Bruce Chilton, *Visions of the Apocalypse: Receptions of John's Revelation in Western Culture*, 2013
Micah Kiel, *Apocalyptic Ecology: The Book of Revelation, the Earth, and the Future*, 2017
Amos Yong, *Revelation* (Belief), 2021

Recommended resources:

Caroline Walker Bynum and Paul Freedman, *Last Things: Death and the Apocalypse in the Middle Ages*, 1999
Justin Byron-Davies, *Revelation and the Apocalypse in Late Medieval Literature: The Writings of Julian of Norwich and William Langland*, 2020
Richard Emmerson, *Apocalypse Illuminated: The Visual Exegesis of Revelation in Medieval Illustrated Manuscripts*, 2018
Richard Hays and Stefan Alkier, eds., *Revelation and the Politics of Apocalyptic Imagination*, 2012
Colin McAllister, *The Cambridge Companion to Apocalyptic Literature*, 2020
Stephen D. Moore, *Untold Tales from the Book of Revelation: Sex and Gender, Empire and Ecology*, 2014

Class policies

Hospitality and mutual respect

According to Westmont's Community Life statement, "our social and intellectual growth needs freedom for exploration complemented by a commitment to good will and graciousness." We will practice both freedom and commitment in RS 116 by listening to each other carefully; by asking questions as we seek to understand each other; by being open to the exploration of different interpretations of biblical texts and apocalyptic traditions; with intellectual honesty as we evaluate varying perspectives; and by engaging in discussion with respect and civility.

A particular aspect of hospitality and mutual respect to consider in this course is our gendered language. What words and pronouns are we using? What presumptions do those words and pronouns reveal? Whom do we include or exclude with our choices? In RS 116, please practice inclusive language as appropriate (e.g., humanity; s/he or they), and always consider the significance and effect of the words you use.

Disagreement is a good and useful element in social and intellectual growth. As we all know, though, disagreements often become acrimonious, and can actually prevent growth. In this class, we'll try to disagree constructively, with respect for the viewpoints of others. All participants in the class are expected to avoid the ridicule, abuse, or harassment of other students, your professor, or guest lecturers. I hope you will engage fully in class—but do so in the recognition that words matter. Practice kindness and generosity as you participate in the classroom and beyond.

Attendance

Attending class means being present physically and mentally: during class, you should be seated on time, with all assigned readings completed, prepared to contribute to class discussions. Habitual tardiness, absence of body or mind, and failure to bring necessary resources may result in loss of points (up to 10% of your total grade in the course for unexcused physical or mental absences beyond the two allowed absences).

There are good reasons to miss class. In the case of illness, family emergency, or an approved extra-curricular activity, please let me know by email, before class if possible. Be sure to get notes from an attentive student, and remember you're always welcome to set up an appointment to discuss any material you missed.

Evacuations and quarantine

In the case of required evacuations or quarantines, students should complete all required readings and homework assignments scheduled for the day. The instructor will provide online resources to compensate for missed in-class time, including lecture notes, readings, and podcasts. Additional assignments may also be incorporated to support student learning.

Student hours

Because of the experience of traveling, regular office hours are difficult to schedule. I am happy to meet with you to discuss readings, lectures, the New Testament, current events, movies, books, life experience, travel... You are warmly invited to make an appointment (or lunch or coffee date!) to ask questions about course material, to talk about study skills, or simply to hang out.

Technology

Laptops, smart phones, and other devices can be great aids for learning. However, using your devices for non-class purposes causes you to miss out on the discussion. You distract all the people sitting around you, and it's rude to the people who are participating and trying to learn (not to mention rude and distracting to your professor).

Here's something else to consider: some studies suggest that taking notes by hand helps us remember, integrate, and engage with the material better than typing notes. Consider trying it yourself – but in any case, if you want to use a laptop or other device in class, conquer the temptation to multitask. Consistent misuse of technology counts as a mental absence from class.

Submitting assignments and making up missed work

All readings and assignments are due on the date listed in the syllabus. To be prepared to complete your readings and submit your assignments on time, read the syllabus and any assignment requirements carefully so you can plan your approach ahead of schedule. Factor in time to balance any computing or printing problems (which are not an adequate reason to miss an assignment, or submit work late).

Most assignments can be submitted on Canvas. To avoid difficulties with sharing uploaded documents, please copy and paste from your own word processor, or type directly in the text entry box.

In the case of a pre-known absence (sports, extra-curricular activities) or an unexcused absence, work must be submitted before the missed class or it will be counted late. In the case of an unexpected excused absence, please contact me to make arrangements.

Academic integrity

Westmont College is committed to the highest standards of academic honesty. Please reflect this commitment in your work: avoid cheating, falsification, and plagiarism. Westmont College's policies on academic integrity and plagiarism are available on Canvas; please take time to read these policies thoroughly. If you plagiarize, cheat on, or falsify any work in this class, you will receive a 0 for the assignment, and a severe offense may result in failure of the course. Academic dishonesty is a serious matter; please don't do it.

To avoid plagiarism, be sure to cite anything you take from someone else – quotes, phrases, words, facts, theories, ideas – even if I know what source you're using. If you didn't think it, don't take credit for it. When in doubt, cite! In written work, reference biblical passages by book, chapter, and verse (Mark 15:51-52). Cite your secondary sources in an acceptable style (MLA, APA, etc.); at a minimum, you must provide the author's name and page number for each quote, phrase, word, or idea you use.

Academic accommodations

Students should be aware of Westmont College's Office of Disability Services, located on the second floor of the library (ext. 6186). The following statement is provided by the director, Sheri Noble (snoble@westmont.edu): "Students who choose to disclose a disability are strongly encouraged to contact the Office of Disability Services as early as possible in the semester to discuss possible accommodations for this course. Formal accommodations will only be granted for students whose disabilities have been verified by the Office of Disability Services. Accommodations are designed to minimize the impact of a disability and ensure equal access to programs for all students with disabilities."

Emergency accommodations are also possible for students who do not have documentation from disability services. In particular, illness, injuries, and stress related to academics, work, family life, pandemics, and personal relationships can happen to anyone. If you feel you need a short-term emergency accommodation to manage coursework, please speak to your professor to work out an appropriate plan.

Grade definitions

Westmont has an extensive description of what it means to get an A, B, C, D, or F (available on Canvas). Here is my own brief summary of the policy:

- A: Exceptional. Engages with course material critically, grasps its wider implications, and applies it creatively. Submitted work is superior in content and presentation.
- B: Very good. Demonstrates interest in and comprehension of the material and the associated scholarship. Submitted work is neat and mostly free of errors.
- C: Satisfactory. Meets the course requirements and shows adequate knowledge and understanding of the material. Submitted work is presented according to expectations.
- D: Poor. Completes course requirements, but submitted work does not show understanding of the material.
- F: Failing. Course requirements are not met and submitted work indicates a lack of understanding.

The course assessment rubric available on Canvas gives a more detailed explanation of my expectations for your progress. Note that grades will be entered on Canvas so that you can track your progress in the class. But also keep in mind that grades are not everything—your learning matters more than the points earned.

Grading scale

A 94-100 B 84-86 C 74-76 D 64-66

A- 90-93	B- 80-83	C- 70-73	D- 60-63
B+ 87-89	C+ 77-79	D+ 67-69	F 0-59

Course components

1. Daily preparation and presence (30%)

This class will operate primarily as a seminar. To make the class profitable for yourself and everyone else (see Phil. 2:4), you should complete readings and research before class, bring your Bible, other texts, and notes with you, and be ready to participate in a meaningful way in class discussions. Your grade will be hurt by lack of preparation, lack of participation, misuse of technology (texting, watching movies, etc.), and excessive absence or tardiness.

The readings for this class allow you to engage with apocalyptic literature and its intersection with theology more deeply, giving you the tools and information you need to begin to become proficient interpreters of biblical, medieval, and modern apocalypses. Being prepared to discuss an assigned reading requires deep thought (see the reading guides on Canvas for more detailed guidance):

- *Ancient texts*: Read carefully and intentionally, noting literary elements of biblical, Second Temple, and early Christian texts; key words and ideas; theological development; and the styles, literary devices, and themes of apocalyptic literature.
- *Secondary sources*: Be able to summarize and critically evaluate secondary sources. Is the argument logical? Is the supporting evidence adequate? Are alternate interpretations considered?
- *Medieval and modern texts*: Be able to analyze and appreciate medieval texts and contemporary novels. How does the story develop apocalyptic themes? What visual and auditory elements are present? How does the author construct the story—from the level of sentences and images, to character development, to plot, to literary style?
- *Connections*: Finally, consider how the particular readings assigned for the day connect with other course readings and discussions, program site visits and speakers, and your own experience of the church.

To help you prepare for class discussions, brief analyses of assigned readings must be submitted before class on Canvas. In general, the analyses will follow this format: (a) summarize the main point of each assigned reading in 1-2 sentences; (b) list 3 questions, concerns, or critiques you have after completing the reading; and (c) connect the reading to the class as a whole (conceived of in very broad terms!).

2. Revelation Manuscript Study (30%)

Over the course of the semester, you will read the book of Revelation as a whole at least five times, using the Revelation manuscript available on Canvas, as scheduled in the syllabus. In each reading, annotate your manuscript to mark repeated words and themes, apocalyptic imagery, narrative voice, cyclical structures, characterization, etc. Track echoes of biblical texts, vocabulary, and imagery. Pay attention to major concerns—creation (and its disruptions), violence, gender, suffering. In addition to your annotations, incorporate notes that reflect your developing interpretation from class discussions, secondary resources, artistic representations, and later imaginative literature.

Your final product will be a colorful, detailed, thoughtful analysis of and reflection on the visions of Revelation, showcasing your own skills as a reader and interpreter of the biblical text.

3. Reflecting on the Apocalypse (30%)

Commented [cr3]: The 'preparing' component of reading and analyzing assigned readings supports **Reading Imaginative Literature** by developing students' close reading skills, which we will practice together in class discussions and analyses of texts (ancient, medieval, and modern).

Commented [cr4]: The manuscript study is primarily conceived as a resource for developing students' **hermeneutical competence** (an RS department learning outcome). However, the close reading skills that this analysis requires transfer beyond the Bible. Students' ability to analyze texts is an important component of **Reading Imaginative Literature**.

Commented [cr5]: The reflective essays will give students opportunity to explore the themes and meaning of imaginative apocalyptic literature – ancient, medieval, and modern. These essays therefore develop students' ability to understand "not just *what* the text means but *how* the text means what it means" (**Reading Imaginative Literature** certification criterion 2).

Three brief reflective (yet analytical) essays throughout the semester give you the opportunity to consider major questions of interpretation, put course material together in your own understanding, and think through the implications of apocalyptic visions for your own theology, spiritual formation, and worldview.

The essays relate to each section of the course – the biblical world, medieval Europe, and the contemporary apocalyptic imagination. Prompts will be provided, but you can also feel free to develop your own essay in response to questions you've been mulling over, and ideas you've been considering. Essays should be 750 words in length (submitted via a text entry box on Canvas).

4. Final Summative Essay (10%)

The final exam will consist of a summative essay on the intersection of environmental disruptions with apocalyptic sensibilities (especially the hope of a new creation). Your essay should draw on biblical texts, the novels and other texts read for class, and site visits. You may use course texts in responding to the prompt during the exam period.

Commented [cr6]: The final exam essay will assess students' Reading Imaginative Literature skills.

Course plan

Note: The organization of topics, lectures, and readings will depend on the program itinerary.

Part 1: The Apocalypse in the Early Church

Readings:

- Biblical texts: Daniel, Isaiah, Ezekiel, Mark 13, Romans, 1 Thessalonians, Revelation
- 1 Enoch
- Shepherd of Hermas
- Secondary resources: Select readings from Blount; Hays and Alkier; Kiel; Moore; Yong

Topics:

- Biblical roots of apocalyptic literature
- Literary structure, style, and motifs of apocalyptic literature
- Social location of apocalyptic literature
- Introduction and overview of Revelation
- Literary structure, style, and motifs of Revelation
- Theology of New Testament apocalyptic thought
- Hermeneutical approaches to biblical apocalyptic literature
- Apocalypse and creation
- Ethics of the apocalypse

Assignments:

- Daily reading analyses
- Book of Revelation manuscript study
- Reflective essay 1

Commented [cr7]: While these primary readings are all ancient (biblical, Second Temple, and early Christian) texts, a focus of our work on the texts will be their imaginative quality – visuality, the dramatic language, plot and character development, literary style, major literary motifs (e.g., the hero's journey). We will practice close reading of ancient sources to hone skills of analysis and literary appreciation. Finally, we will apply a variety of hermeneutical frameworks to learn and develop skills of interpretation and critique.

Part 2: Medieval England and Europe

Readings and visual art:

- Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*
- William Langland, *Piers Plowman*
- Doom paintings, Danse Macabre, and visual representation of apocalyptic visions (churches of England, Holland, Germany, Italy)
- Medieval manuscripts (museum collections)

Commented [cr8]: Parts 2 and 3 will involve detailed analysis of and reflection on medieval and contemporary apocalyptic imaginative literature – including poetry, spiritual reflections, and novels. Students will practice close reading, analysis of literary style and development, use of imagery, and the relationship between these structural factors and the meaning of the works.

- Secondary resources: Select readings from Bynum and Freedman; Byron-Davies; Emmerson; McAllister

Topics:

- Socio-historical contexts of medieval Europe and England, including economics, gender, and faith
- The history of the plague, exploration and trade, and war in medieval Europe and England
- Literary structure, style, and motifs of medieval apocalyptic literature
- Introduction to and overview of Julian's *Revelations of Divine Love*
- Introduction to and overview of Langland's *Piers Plowman*
- Introduction to and overviews of medieval visual representations of apocalyptic texts and themes in connection with biblical apocalypses and as independent authorial creations
- Analysis of apocalyptic visions and poetry
- Apocalypse and creation in medieval Europe and England
- Ethics of the apocalypse in medieval Europe and England

Assignments and activities:

- Daily reading analyses
- Reflective essay 2
- Required visits to churches and museums
- Group visit to Norwich

Part 3: Contemporary England and Europe

Readings:

- John Joseph Adams, ed., *Wastelands: Stories of the Apocalypse*, 2008
- Anna Smail, *The Chimes*, 2015
- Secondary resources: Select readings from Chilton; Kiel; McAllister; Moore

Topics:

- Socio-historical contexts of contemporary Europe and England, including economics, gender, immigration, nationalism, technology, and faith
- Technology, nuclear warfare, and environmental deterioration as apocalyptic concerns
- Literary structure, style, and motifs of contemporary dystopian and post-apocalyptic literature
- Introduction to and overview of contemporary apocalyptic literature, including its historical developments, major themes, intersections with young adult fiction, and secularization
- Connections of contemporary apocalypses with biblical and medieval themes, imagery, and concepts (tracing the literary and visual influence of earlier apocalypses in contemporary writings)
- Analysis of assigned texts
- Apocalypse and creation in contemporary Europe and England
- Ethics of the apocalypse in contemporary Europe and England

Assignments:

- Daily reading analyses
- Reflective essay 3
- Conversations with church communities on climate change and creation care

Part 4: Reflecting on the Semester

Topics:

- Consistent themes, literary styles, and imagery of apocalyptic literature and art
- Shifting concerns and developments of apocalyptic literature and art
- Exploration of major concerns of violence, gender, and creation in apocalyptic literature
- Return to Revelation: How do we read this book today?

Assignment:

- Final exam essay