Apocalyptic Literature and the Book of Daniel

I. Introduction to the Course

With the year 2000 being the transition between an old millennium and a new one, some attention has been given to what people call the “End of the World,” or the Parousia. Part of the Christian Faith states that “Christ has died, Christ is risen, [and] Christ will come again.” For some Christians, the year 2000 is a milestone. They believe that the End Times are near and that Jesus will come back to earth to take dominion and power.

To this end some Christians quote the books of Daniel and Revelation, in order to prove and/or show certain prophesies. Some Fundamentalist preachers use these “books of Doom” to show the world that Christ is coming soon. Because of this widespread use of these two books, this fundamentalist view is often the only “interpretation” people have of what is called Apocalyptic Literature. On the contrary, Daniel and Revelation are not “books of Doom” but, rather, books of hope.

Our goal for this course is to look at the genre of Apocalyptic Literature and to use the knowledge of it to study the Book Revelation.

II. Introductory notion regarding the term Apocalyptic

So…. what is Apocalyptic? Father Felix Just, S.J., a professor at Loyola Marymount University states the following:

Preliminary Description of “Apocalypse”:

- In popular terminology today, an “apocalypse” is a catastrophic event (e.g., nuclear holocaust).
- In biblical terminology, an “apocalypse” is not an event, but a “revelation” that is recorded in written form:
  - it is a piece of crisis literature that “reveals” truths about the past, present, and/or future in highly symbolic terms;
  - the revelation often comes in dreams or visions, and usually needs to be interpreted with the help of an angel;
  - it is usually intended to provide hope and encouragement for people in the midst of severe trials and tribulations.
- Please note: “The Apocalypse” is an alternate name (used esp. by Protestants) for “The Book of Revelation” in the New Testament.
Also, “The Little Apocalypse” and/or “The Apocalyptic Discourse” are names sometimes given to Mark 13 (and the parallel passages in Matt 24 and Luke 21), containing the teachings of Jesus about the future of Jerusalem and the end of the world.


“‘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, disclosing a transcendent reality with is both temporal, insofar as it envisages eschatological salvation, and spatial insofar as it involves another, supernatural world.”

Definition addition regarding the genre’s purpose, incorporating suggestions of Hellholm (1982) & Aune (1986): “…intended to interpret the present, earthly circumstances in light of the supernatural world and of the future, and to influence both the understanding and the behavior of the audience by means of divine authority.”

Subdivisions or Types of Apocalypses:

- Apocalypses can be classified according to features in their CONTENT:
  - Some apocalypses contain “Otherworldly Journeys” (e.g., the seer is purportedly taken on a tour of heaven)
  - Others do not contain “Otherworldly Journeys” (e.g., while seeing heavenly things, the seer stays on earth)

- Apocalypses can also be classified according to their primary REFERENTS:
  - Some apocalypses deal with Personal Eschatology (the death and after-life of individuals)
  - Others focus more on Ethnic or National Eschatology (the end of a nation or empire)
  - Many others contain Cosmic Eschatology (the ultimate end of the whole world)

n.b. see the addendum for other related terminology.

n.b. Please see the addendum for other definitions and explanations of Apocalyptic Literature.
III. **Apocalyptic Literature and Symbolism**

A good Example of symbolism in scripture is Daniel 8:

> 1 In the third year of the reign of King Belshazzar, I, Daniel, was granted a vision. This vision was after that first one.  
> 2 In the vision I saw myself in the fortress city of Susa in the province of Elam, where I was at the Ulai Gate.  
> 3 As I looked about, I saw a ram standing before the gate. It had two long horns; one was longer than the other and appeared after it.  
> 4 I noticed that the ram was butting toward the west, the north, and the south; and no beast could withstand it or be rescued from its power. It did as it pleased and became mighty.

> 5 As I was looking on, I saw a he-goat come from the west, and cross the whole earth without touching the ground; and a conspicuous horn was on its forehead.  
> 6 The he-goat came up to the two-horned ram that I saw standing before the gate, and rushed at it with savage force.  
> 7 I noticed that, when it reached the ram, it was enraged against it, and gave it such a blow that it broke off its two horns; for the ram had not the power to withstand it. The he-goat knocked the ram to the ground and trampled it down; and there was no one to rescue the ram from its power.

> 8 The he-goat then grew exceedingly. But at the height of its power, its big horn broke off, and in its place four conspicuous ones came up toward the four winds of the heavens.  
> 9 From one of them there came forth a small horn, which grew mightily toward the south and the east [and the Lovely One].  
> 10 It grew up to the host of the heavens and hurled some of the host [some of the stars] to the earth, where it trampled them down.

From the above quotation one can easily see the use of symbolism and figurative language. In Apocalyptic Literature the use of symbol is one of the most prominent features of the genre. At the same time it is a source of problems and confusion in interpretation. Because Apocalyptic Literature is filled with figurative language, symbols, types and literal language, the danger the interpreter faces is to NOT interpret the words/passages as if it has some hidden meaning. Sometimes we think that there is some deep mystery involved with these passages, and admittedly there is some, but the Bible is unified in its message and has a consistent coherence of truth with it. What this means is that Apocalyptic Literature is a reflection of the author's times and circumstances. It also means that there is a biblical basis for its interpretation as it can be linked with previous revelation.

What is the nature of a symbol? **The nature involves a 1 for 1 correspondence between the symbol and the object.** A good example would be a road sign (e.g., a “STOP” sign) or product trademarks and logos. It is not a simile or a metaphor. A simile is defined as “a figure of speech in which two essentially unlike things are compared, often using ‘like’ or ‘as’, as in ‘eyes like a cat’.” A metaphor is defined as “a figure of speech in which a word or phrase that ordinarily designates one thing is used to designate another, thus making an implicit comparison, as in the evening of life.”

- Simile — Zechariah 12:8
On that day the LORD will put a shield about the inhabitants of Jerusalem so that the feeblest among them on that day shall be like David, and the house of David shall be like God, like the angel of the LORD, at their head.

- Metaphor — Genesis 49:27
  Benjamin is a ravenous wolf, in the morning devouring the prey, and at evening dividing the spoil.

IV. Decoding Symbols

When we look at symbols in general and how we decode them, at one at the same time it is easy but yet, difficult. We do it constantly in life; therefore, we all have the skill (for example, do we think about what a stop sign is? Don’t we just stop, look and proceed?). What is necessary, and what makes things difficult is the need for a “key.” Without the “key” decoding could be difficult.

When there are difficulties in decoding symbols in scriptures, scholars take into account various factors.

- Potential historical references
  - The symbol may be referring to a historical event. Because of this use, the author may presume that the reader has knowledge of the historical event.
  - The symbol may be opaque without this historical knowledge, so a remedy may be to locate the work in its historical settings.
  - It is very easy for meanings in this area to be lost.

- Possibility of conventional symbols
  - In this scenario the symbol has an agreed on meaning in literary society. Because the symbol is assumed, the meaning may have to be learned.
  - For example, in our society, the symbol of the dove means peace. The donkey and the elephant mean political parties. The bear means Russia….the golden arches….  
  - In the Bible examples may be
    - Horn = power
    - Sea = chaos
    - Zion = Yahweh’s dwelling place

One thing to keep in mind is to know when the symbol’s meaning ends. For example, the “bear” may mean Russia, but what of the fur, color, height, claws, etc? What are their meanings? Sometimes they do not have any, so we should not put meaning there. Therefore, DON’T OVER-SYMBOLIZE!
A problem occurs when there is a loss or removal of the historical roots of a particular text. For one thing it may render the text incomprehensible. For another the removal of the historical roots opens the way for reassigning meaning. **REMEMBER**, symbols do not have meaning in themselves but only assigned ones, and a symbol may be apt for many things (for example, H₂O).

The techniques of some Apocalypticists (that is, those who try to predict the future from using scripture)

- When they remove the historical roots, they usually ignore the question of the text.
  - They don’t investigate the historical roots
  - Therefore, since “it wasn’t fulfilled then; therefore, it refers to the future” (the future being the here and now).

- They reassign meaning
  - Because the historical meaning was removed, a new meaning may now be given. This can be superficially convincing because the symbol may be apt.

- They fragment the text
  - When they quote part of a passage, it destroys the symbol system. They key in its totality is lost.
  - It, therefore, reduces the passage to a “raw” single symbol, independent of everything else.
  - This works well with those who do not have a knowledge of the whole of Daniel, Ezekiel, and Revelation.

- This use is often coupled with phrases like “The Bible says that…”, “It is clear from Biblical Prophesy that…”, etc.

Intelligent discussions require a better than average knowledge of the biblical text and a good deal of specific detail.
V. **Apocalyptic as a Literary Genre**

When reading Apocalyptic Literature there are some **BASIC ELEMENTS** to look for. These are:

- **The Recipient of the Revelation** (the “Biblical” figure)
- **The Mediator of Revelation** (the “Heavenly” figure)
  - Narrates
  - Describes
  - Guides
  - Interprets
- **A Revelation**
  - Vision (seeing)
  - Auditory (hearing) e.g., Daniel, chapter 9
  - Other worldly journey (“traveling”)

The **MANNER OF REVELATION** may involve:

- **Medium of Revelation: the Visual**
  - Dream Visions
    - Circumstance
    - Description of the vision
    - Request for an interpretation
    - Mediator interprets
    - The Conclusion: reaction, instructions, etc.
    - E.g., Daniel, chapters 7 and 8
  - Epiphany
    - A vision of a single supernatural figure
    - This cannot be apocalyptic itself without other forms
    - The supernatural figure often becomes revealed
    - E.g., Daniel, chapter 10

- **Medium of Revelation: the Auditory**
  - Angelic Discourse
    - Revelation as speech
    - Delivered by an angel
    - Often follows epiphany
    - E.g., Daniel, chapters 10-11
  - Revelatory dialogue
    - A conversation between the recipient and revealer
    - This is relatively rare except in Gnostic works
    - E.g., 4 Ezra
  - Revelation Report
    - The content of the revelation from vision, etc, just stated
    - Rare
- E.g., 1 Enoch 93:1-10

- Medium of Revelation: the *otherworldly journey*
  - Literary format
    - Report of ascent (by clouds, angels, etc.)
  - The Revelation Account
    - Report of the tour (of anywhere)
    - Ascent through numbered heavens
      - Usual number — 7
      - Similar to periods in history
      - The heavens show the order of creation
  - Things usually observed
    - Lists of revealed things
    - The abode of the dead
    - Judgment scenes
    - A throne vision
    - List of vices (and virtues)
  - E.g., III Baruch

- Medium of Revelation: the *writing*
  - Written usually in a sacred book

- The *Otherworldly Mediator*
  - Identity
    - A heavenly being
    - Usually an angel (most frequent)
    - Sometimes Jesus Christ (in some Christian Apocalyptics)
  - Function
    - Communicate (e.g., auditory)
    - Interpret (e.g., visions)
    - Guide (e.g., journeys)
  - This is often the source of the “key” to the symbols.

- The *Human Recipient*
  - Pseudonymity — the recipient is presented as a figure from the past.
  - Disposition — the state of the recipient when the revelation is revealed (e.g., sad, troubled, perplexed)
  - Reaction — state arising from the revelation (e.g., awe, fear, physical disturbance)

- The *Context in which the Revelation is received*
  - Immediate — exact place, etc. of the revelation
  - Proximate — the larger narrative context
    - An elaboration of biblical narratives (the “ladder of Jacob”)
    - An elaboration of a biblical figure
The **CONTENT OF REVELATION** may involve a *TEMPORAL AXIS* (The content is the Temporal axis. It envisions an eschatological salvation)

- **Protology** (the origins, beginning — that is, where it all began)
  - Theogony — an account of the origin and descent of the gods
  - Cosmogony — an account of the origin of the world
  - Primordial Events — an account of the origin of our situation
    - It has a paradigmatic significance for the rest of humanity
    - E.g., the fall of the “watchers”, the fall of Adam.

- **Reviews of history**
  - Purpose
    - How we arrived where we are
    - What led up to the present
    - Where are we in the schemes of history
  - Manner of review
    - Straight-forward telling
    - “ex eventu prophesy”
      - a survey of the past in the form of a prediction
  - **Ex Eventu Prophesy**: further detail
    - **Meaning**: a prediction of events that have already taken place.
    - It is found in all Jewish Apocalyptic Literature with otherworldly journeys.
    - It always leads to eschatological conclusions.
    - It is a periodization of history
      - This means that it divides history into set periods
      - Typical units: kingdoms, weeks, year groups.
      - Typical numbers used: 4, 7, 10, 12 and their multiples
      - E.g., Daniel 7 and 2
    - Regnal prophesy
      - It’s not divided by periods of history by by kings (or kingdoms)
      - E.g., Daniel 11 and 8:23-27
    - The purpose of Ex Eventu prophesy is to show that history is controlled, not just some random happenings
      - It allows the readers to locate their place
      - It is always at the end of a sequence.
  - **Eschatological Crisis**
    - Persecution
    - Eschatological upheavals in nature and history
Eschatological Judgment / destruction on:
- Sinners / oppressors
- The world (nature)
- Otherworldly beings (Satan, evil beings)

Eschatological Salvation
- A cosmic transformation (e.g., a new earth)
- Personal salvation
  - Vindication
  - Exaltation/restoration
  - Resurrection/afterlife

Please note: Judgment and Salvation are brought about by a divine action.

The CONTENT OF REVELATION may involve a SPATIAL AXIS
(The content is the spatial axis. It involves the other world journey)

- People had assumptions regarding the other world
- There were parallel worlds
  - The celestial
  - The terrestrial or earthly
    - The actions in the celestial would affect the earthly
    - Beings in the celestial world affect beings in the earthly
    - Because of these two factors there is a necessity to “see” what happens behind the scenes.
- Otherworldly Beings
  - God
  - Angels
  - Demons

N.b. the development of angelology and demonology enters into the picture with apocalyptic literature

Otherworldly Regions
- Heaven
  - Heaven is sometimes divided into stages, regions, or levels (e.g., 7th heaven)
- Hell
- Sheol (this is the place in Jewish thought where the dead went. It was underneath the earth. A “neither good or bad” place.

The CONTENT OF REVELATION may involve a PARANESIS AXIS
(The content is the Paranesis axis. It involves instruction)
• This area is rare
• It is usually found in Christian Apocalypses
  o E.g., the letter to the 7 churches in the Book of Revelation

The **CONCLUDING ELEMENTS** may involve

• Instructions to the Recipient
  o To publish what he hears
  o To conceal them until the End, etc.

• Narrative Conclusion
  o Awakening
  o Return to earth
  o Departure of the mediator
  o Consequent actions of the Recipient

VI. **The Sitz im Leben of Apocalyptic Literature**

*Sitz im Leben* is a German term that can be translated as ‘settings’ in life and was first used by Herman Gunkel. It is a term used in form criticism to describe the idea that we need to look at the settings or situations of the people who created the literature. The term can also describe the social context or particular situation with which a certain text type or genre is connected. This term becomes important in the analysis of a text because it refers us to look into the background of our writers. It is also sometimes used in redaction criticism in a similar way – to discover what the community or church was like that produced a particular writing.

When we look at Apocalyptic Literature and the setting that it was in, there are some factors that we should keep in mind. The influencing cultures of the times include: Post-Exilic prophesies (especially Zechariah), Babylon, Persia (especially Zoroastrianism and Dualism), and the general Hellenistic (Greek) milieu (the disenfranchised nations and the culture shock).

Some typical suggestions for the Apocalyptic Era might include:
  • Late Prophesies
  • Disaffected Groups
  • The Essenes
  • Hasidism
  • The Persecuted

But, as with all things, there are problems, since not all apocalyptic literature fits the groups named. J.J. Collins, one of the first modern scholars to take up the challenge of defining Apocalyptic Literature, suggests the following:
• He suggests that there was a crisis of some kind, which may have involved persecution, a culture shock, an evil/injustice in history, or death.

Think about it. How do we in today’s society exhibit a crisis mentality?

VII. Features of Apocalyptic Thought

• View of History in general
  o Because of a threat (or reality) of imminent death, people do not see salvation coming in their lifetime. Therefore life has little value.
  o Salvation comes from a heavenly or transcendent order.
    ▪ This implies an end to the historical order
      o Absolutely or as experienced
    ▪ This is where we get the source of the image of the End of the World.
  o The Heavenly realm enters with salvation
    ▪ It terminates the evil and restores Justice

Note: this is a major difference from prophecy

• Periodization of History
  o The Phenomenon
    ▪ This is a sequential list of eras, ages, empires, kings, etc.
    ▪ It’s basically a historical review.
  o Its Function
    ▪ To demonstrate a pattern in history which may/will repeat in the present.
    ▪ It is to show how everything leads up to the present as a culminating point.
    ▪ It is a historical perspective of a crisis.

• Universalization of History
  o The focus is not just Israel, but the cosmos.
  o The consequences extend to all
  o There is a focus on the individual’s decision in the crisis.

• Notion of the Present
  o It is a culminating point / a crisis point.
  o The past is often seen as building up to the present
  o There is a necessity of a radical decision — that is, one must align oneself with true values.

• A Tendency towards Determinism
A theory or doctrine that acts of the will, occurrences in nature, or social or psychological phenomena are causally determined by preceding events or natural laws

A belief in predestination

Things don’t flow out of acts as much as they break into the present experience

Comparison with prophetic utterance

- There is a contrast between the Act and the Consequence
  - “Repent, lest you….”
  - “If you turn to Yahweh….”
- Apoc. Lit. uses more of a positive act of grace. This aspect, however, is also part of the prophetic view.

A Tendency towards Dualism

- Literary imagery
  - Light – Darkness
  - Above – Below
  - Hideous – Beautiful
  - See Daniel 7
- “Real” images
  - God – Satan
  - Angels – Demons
  - The Good – The Wicked
  - This Age – The Age to come
  - Earth - Heaven
- The notion of Two “Worlds”: the Celestial and the Earthly

The “Bottom Line” of Apocalyptic Thought

- There is a perception of basic order beyond appearances
  - The Present may be opaque and/or meaningless
  - This dictates a visionary form
  - The periodization, etc, attempt to see behind the appearances of history.
- There is a choice of which “world” to live by
- There is an affirmation of the true economy of the world.
- There is a statement of faith rather than an encouragement of the “wishy-washy.”

Note: this is more of a feeling of optimism; people were not naïve.