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INTRODUCTION

I. REVELATION AND APOCALYPTIC LITERATURE

The book of Revelation is normally considered as belonging to a class of literature referred to as apocalyptic. The term "apocalypse" used to denote a literary genre is derived from Rev. 1:1, where it designates the supernatural unveiling of that which is about to take place. In contemporary discussion "apocalyptic" applies more broadly to a group of writings that flourished in the biblical world between 200 B.C. and A.D. 100 and to the basic concepts contained in those writings.¹ While it is not possible to establish with any precision the exact boundaries of apocalyptic (it often verges off into other literary styles and conceptual modes),² it is generally true that an apocalypse normally purports to be a divine disclosure, usually through a celestial intermediary to some prominent figure in the past, in which God promises to intervene in human history to bring times of trouble to an end and destroy all wickedness.³ The writers were

1. Thompson distinguishes between *apocalypse* ("a set of writings, a literature, that includes such works as Daniel, 1 Enoch, 4 Ezra, and the Book of Revelation"), *apocalyptic eschatology* ("a religious perspective . . . that involves certain beliefs about the world and the place of humans in it"), and *apocalypticism* ("social aspects of apocalypses and transcendent eschatology") (*Revelation*, 23).

2. Michaels writes that "many literary theorists have suggested that good, and especially great works never quite belong to a single genre. They are highly individual creations that expand the categories to the breaking point" (*Interpreting the Book of Revelation*, 31).

3. The SBL Genres Project defined apocalyptic as "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 which is both temporal, insofar as it envisages eschatological salvation, and spatial insofar as it involves another, supernatural world" (cited in J. Collins, *Apocalyptic Imagination*, 4). Rist defines apocalypticism as "the eschatological belief that the power of evil (Satan), who is now in control of this temporal and hopelessly evil age of human history in which the righteous are afflicted by

normally pessimistic about people's ability to cope with the evil world. The great cosmic forces that lie behind the turmoil of history are portrayed by vivid and often bizarre symbols. Visions abound. The apocalyptists followed a common practice of rewriting history as prophecy so as to lend credence to their predictions about that which still lay in the future.

The problem of the origin of apocalyptic is far too complex a subject for adequate discussion at this point. Some scholars, such as Betz, who understands apocalyptic as a Hellenistic phenomenon,⁴ and Conzelmann, who takes it as a development from Iranian religion,⁵ argue for a non-Jewish origin. While various influences were undoubtedly at work in shaping apocalyptic, the stubborn fact remains that it is essentially a Jewish and Christian phenomenon.⁶ Rowley is correct in his judgment that "apocalyptic is the child of prophecy."⁷ D. S. Russell acknowledges that while apocalyptic drew nourishment from many sources, "there can be no doubt that the tap root, as it were, went deep down into Hebrew prophecy."⁸ Later he writes that apocalyptic is not a substitute for prophecy but a readaptation and development of the same message for a new historical situation — "prophecy in a new idiom" is the phrase he borrows from B. W. Anderson. Paul Hanson, in an important work entitled *The Dawn of Apocalyptic*, holds that "the rise of apocalyptic eschatology is neither sudden nor anomalous, but follows the pattern of an unbroken development from pre-exilic and exilic prophecy."⁹

George Ladd holds that apocalyptic rose out of a historical milieu that involved a historical-theological problem consisting of three elements: (1) the emergence of a "righteous remnant" who maintained loyalty to the law over against the prevailing mood of compromise; (2) the problem of evil in the sense that even when Israel was apparently keeping the law she was under-

his demonic and human agents, is soon to be overcome and his evil rule ended by the direct intervention of God, who is the power of good, and who thereupon will create an entirely new, perfect, and eternal age under his immediate control for the everlasting enjoyment of his righteous followers from among the living and the resurrected dead" (347). Cf. introductory paragraphs of Ladd's article, "Why Not Prophetic-Apocalyptic?" *JBL*, 76 (1957), 192-200.

4. *JTC*, 6 (1969), 155.

5. *An Outline of the Theology of the New Testament*, 23.

6. Leon Morris, *Apocalyptic*, 30-33. Fiorenza writes that at an earlier time "the majority of scholars agreed that the book was an only slightly redacted Jewish apocalypse" but today it "seems to emerge more and more as a Christian writing *sui generis*" (*Revelation*, 25).

7. *Relevance of Apocalyptic*, 15. Aune acknowledges that "most scholars regard apocalyptic as the offspring of Israelite prophecy" but adds the caveat, "Yet apocalyptic must be regarded, not simply as the successor of prophecy, but as one among many offspring" (*Prophecy in Early Christianity*, 114).

8. *Method and Message of Jewish Apocalyptic*, 88.

9. *Dawn of Apocalyptic*, 7-8.

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going suffering and national abuse; and (3) the cessation of prophecy at the very time when the people needed a divine explanation for their historical plight.¹⁰ A major role of the apocalypse was to explain why the righteous suffered and why the kingdom of God delayed.¹¹ Prophecy had dealt primarily with the nation's ethical obligations at the time when the prophet wrote. Apocalyptic focused on a period of time yet future when God would intervene to judge the world and establish righteousness.

The genre apocalyptic may be distinguished by the presence of certain basic elements that combine to form an overall religious or philosophical perspective. In the first place, it is always *eschatological*. It treats a period of time yet future when God will break into this world of time and space to bring the entire system to a final reckoning. While prophecy was also predictive (contrary to the opinion that the prophets were preachers only), a distinction remains. Rowley put it this way: "Speaking generally, the prophets foretold the future that should arise out of the present, while the apocalyptists foretold the future that should break into the present."¹²

Secondly, apocalyptic is *dualistic*. This dualism is not metaphysical but historical and temporal. There exist two opposing supernatural powers, God and Satan. There are also two distinct ages: the present one that is temporal and evil, and the one to come that is timeless and perfectly righteous. The first is under the control of Satan and the second under the immediate supervision of God. Closely related to the teaching of two ages is the idea of two worlds, the present visible universe and the perfect world that has existed from before time in heaven. While some are of the opinion that this dualism betrays the influence of Persian thought, it should be observed that it may also be accounted for by ideas contained in the OT prophets.¹³

Apocalyptic is also characterized by a *rigid determinism* in which everything moves forward as divinely preordained according to a definite time schedule and toward a predetermined end. While this led to a rather complete pessimism about people's ability to combat the evils they encountered,¹⁴ it

10. "Apocalyptic, Apocalypse" in *BDT*, 50-51.

11. Thompson writes that there is "widespread agreement that an apocalypse arises within a particular kind of situation, namely a situation of crisis" (*Revelation*, 25), yet notes that Schmithals "severs all genetic connections between apocalypses and their social, historical situation" (27).

12. *Relevance*, 38.

13. Ladd mentions the prophetic expectation of the future kingdom including a redeemed earth, the transformation being accomplished by a divine visitation that will cause a new order to emerge from the old (*BDT*, 52).

14. Schmithals writes, "The apocalyptist meets this present age with radical pessimism. The world is on a downward course and cannot be halted" (*Apocalyptic Movement*, p. 21).

nevertheless bred confidence that God would emerge victorious even in the apocalyptic's own lifetime. It also shed some light on the problem of suffering. Concern about why the righteous suffer abated with the growing conviction that all of life had been determined by God and that what he did or allowed was by definition good. Other features that went to make up the apocalyptic outlook include the willingness to abandon the historical process in favor of the all-important consummation,¹⁵ an interest in consoling the righteous rather than rebuking them for their failures, and the conviction that they were living in the last days.

Not only may apocalyptic be distinguished by certain motifs that combine to form its general outlook, but also by several distinctive literary characteristics. Russell identifies apocalyptic as "esoteric in character, literary in form, symbolic in language and pseudonymous in authorship."¹⁶ Beckwith writes that "the highly elaborated vision, or similar mode of revelation, is the most distinctive feature in the *form* of apocalyptic literature."¹⁷ The content of apocalyptic normally comes to the author by means of a dream or vision in which he is translated into heavenly realms where he is privileged to see revealed the eternal secrets of God's purpose. Often an angelic interpreter is present to guide him on his heavenly journey and disclose the meaning of the extraordinary things he is seeing (e.g., many-headed monsters, cosmic catastrophes, etc.). Such visions are held to have been given to ancient seers and handed down for generations by means of a secret tradition that now in the last days is being revealed to the people of God. The apocalypticist was a "wise man uncovering the mysteries of God's purpose."¹⁸

While the prophets were primarily preachers whose messages were written down at a later time, the apocalypticists were literary men who put their confidence in the written word as a method of propagating their point of view. The prophet spoke out of an immediate relationship with God. His message was properly prefaced with the open declaration, "Thus says the LORD." The apocalypticist, on the other hand, adopted a conventional literary style and adapted his message accordingly. Much of his basic material was drawn from a common tradition.

Symbolism plays a major role in apocalyptic. In giving free rein to the imagination, symbols of the most bizarre sort became the norm.¹⁹ Over the years

15. Hanson says that in apocalyptic, history becomes no more than a "timetable of cosmic events" that indicates how close people are to the end (*Int.* 25 [1971], 478-79).

16. *Method*, 106. These four features are discussed at length in his chapter, "Characteristics of the Apocalyptic Writings" (104-39).

17. Beckwith, 169.

18. Russell, *Method*, 117.

19. *1 Enoch* 86:1-4 tells of stars falling from heaven, becoming bulls who "let out their privy members" and "cover the cows of the oxen." These then "bare [*sic*]