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UNDERSTANDING APOCALYPTIC FICTION

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Abstract:

Apocalyptic literature, a literary genre that foretells supernaturally inspired cataclysmic events that will transpire at the end of the world. A product of the Judeo-Christian tradition, apocalyptic literature is characteristically pseudonymous; it takes narrative form, employs esoteric language, expresses a pessimistic view of the present, and treats the final events as imminent. The present paper sheds significant light on the concept of apocalyptic fiction. MLA 8th edition has been used to cite references and literary documentation.

Keywords: *Apocalyptic fiction, Climate change, Medical pandemic, Nuclear holocaust, etc.*

Apocalyptic literature has existed for millennia. Major western religions ranging from Christianity, Islam, and Judaism contain multiple tales of a civilization or locale reaching its end. The stories of the Garden of Eden, Noah, Sodom and Gomorrah, and the book of Revelation all contain apocalyptic themes. The ancient Mesopotamian epic of Gilgamesh is also concerned with the end of the known world. Apocalyptic stories of Babylon have been written all the way from antiquity to the present.

The Romantic and Gothic authors of the early nineteenth century explored apocalyptic themes, perhaps most famously in Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* (1826). Edgar Allan Poe's 1839 short story *The Conversation of Eiros and Charmion* centers on disembodied souls discussing the recent destruction of the Earth. In the twentieth century, the apocalyptic genre grew in the wake of World War I, World War II, and the Cold War nuclear arms race. Novelists, essayists, and filmmakers conjured many an apocalyptic world that offered everything from zombie wars to desolate post-nuclear wastelands. There are seven common themes in Apocalyptic Fiction. The themes that govern apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic books tend to involve circumstances that lead to mass unrest, societal breakdown, and widespread death. These include: Climate change, Nuclear holocaust, medical pandemic, the rise of sentient robots, the destruction of a major city like New York, Los Angeles, or London, Endless war, a fascist government engaged in mind control. In novels with these themes, a main character is usually tasked with navigating the death taps of a world afflicted by the prevailing apocalyptic conditions.

The earliest apocalypses are Jewish works that date from about 200 BCE to about 165 BCE. Whereas earlier Jewish writers, the Prophets, had foretold the coming of disasters, often in esoteric language, they neither placed these disasters in a narrative framework nor conceived of them in eschatological terms. During the time of the Hellenistic domination of Palestine and the revolt of the Maccabees, however, a pessimistic view of the present became coupled with an expectation of an apocalyptic scenario, which is characterized by an imminent crisis, a universal judgment, and a supernatural resolution.

The most famous and influential of the early Jewish apocalypses is the last part of the biblical Book of Daniel (chapters 7–12), written about 167 BCE and attributed to a revered wise man who supposedly lived some four centuries earlier at the time of the Babylonian captivity.

“Daniel” recounts a series of visions, the first of which (chapter 7) is the most succinct. He sees a succession of four terrible beasts, evidently representing a succession of earthly persecutors culminating in the contemporary Hellenistic tyrant Antiochus IV Epiphanes (the “eleventh horn” of the fourth beast). Daniel then sees the destruction of the last beast by the “Ancient of Days” and the coming of “one like the Son of Man,” to whom is given “everlasting dominion that shall not pass away” and whose kingdom will be inhabited by “the people of the saints,” who will forever serve and obey him.

The other Jewish apocalypses the first Book of Enoch (c. 200 BCE), the fourth Book of Ezra (c. 100 CE), and the second and third Books of Baruch (c. 100 CE) are “apocryphal” insofar as they do not belong to the canonical Hebrew Bible. They are extant in Ethiopic, Syriac, Greek, and Latin translations made by Christians rather than in their original Hebrew or Aramaic forms. The reason that the apocalypses survived in this manner seems to be that, after the failure of a series of Jewish revolts against the Roman Empire (i.e., after about 135 CE), the rabbis who began the process of codifying the Jewish tradition turned away from apocalypticism to an emphasis on upholding and interpreting the law of the Pentateuch. Fatefully, however, while Jewish apocalypticism was still flourishing, it was taken up by Christians.

Most authorities regard early Christianity as a fervently apocalyptic religion, intent on the imminent “Second Coming” of Christ to preside over the Last Judgment and the end of the world. Early Christian apocalypticism is evident in the Gospels, which are permeated with language taken from Daniel. The so-called Little Apocalypse, a sermon by Jesus found in Matthew (24–25) with parallels in Mark (13) and Luke (21), foretells the imminence of collective tribulation and chastisement before the coming of the “Son of Man” who will “sit upon the throne of his glory” and separate “the sheep from the goats.” Some Pauline epistles also contain apocalyptic content. The last book of the New Testament, the Revelation to John, also known as the Apocalypse of St. John (the Greek term apocalypses literally means revelation), concludes canonical Christian scripture in a ragingly apocalyptic key. Written in Asia Minor about 95 CE by a Christian named John (the fact that the author gives his true name is the one major exception to the rule of pseudonymity), the Revelation offers a vibrant, sometimes lurid, account of imminent crisis, judgment, and salvation. Evidently obsessed by the persecution of Christians by the Roman Empire, which he refers to as “Babylon,” John recounts a series of visions that foretell a crescendo of persecutions and martyrdoms followed by universal judgment, retribution for the forces of evil, and rewards for the faithful. Details are often impenetrable because of esoteric allusive language (e.g., “a woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet...being with child [and] travailing in birth”). Moreover, the narrative is bewildering because it repeats itself frequently. Nevertheless, the psychedelic imagery is easily etched in the mind, and the mysteries found in the text have proved endlessly fascinating. Nor can there be any doubt of their ultimate message: the world, which is already suffering, will soon be washed in blood, but the “King of Kings” will come to “tread the winepress of the wrath of God,” and everlasting rewards will be given to those who have “washed their robes in the blood of the lamb.” (Revelation 14:19)

A number of other Christian apocalypses were written during the period between 100 CE and 400 CE, including the Apocalypse of Peter, the Apocalypse of Paul, the Ascension of Isaiah, and the Testament of Abraham. Although these works adhere to apocalyptic form in recounting supernatural visions pseudonymously in esoteric language, they refer to an individual’s salvation and lack the characteristic apocalyptic content of treating collective history and collective salvation. The trend toward concentrating on individual salvation was reinforced in the theology of the leading Church Fathers, pre-eminently St. Augustine. The Fathers were eschatological insofar as they believed in the Last Judgment but non-apocalyptic in that they insisted that the time of the last act of history was utterly uncertain. Yet beliefs inherited from Daniel and the New Testament permitted the survival of apocalyptic thinking in the Middle Ages and led to the creation of new apocalyptic works, such as the Revelations of Pseudo-Methodius (mid-7th century) and the Vision of Brother John (late 13th century). Many medieval authors also wrote pseudonymous prophecies that did not take the form of narrative visions but foresaw imminent crisis, judgment, and salvation. Although the apocalyptic genre disappeared after the Middle Ages, an apocalyptic mood, reinforced by explicit references to the Revelation to John, appears in numerous modern literary works (e.g., Katherine Anne Porter’s *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* (1939) and Nathanael West’s *Day of*

the Locust (1939) and films (e.g., Ingmar Bergman's *The Seventh Seal* (1957) and Federico Fellini's *La dolce vita* (1959)). Moreover, several Protestant denominations in the United States propound apocalyptic beliefs, which have been expressed in numerous sermons and pamphlets by such preachers as Billy Graham and Jerry Falwell, as well in a book that was an American best seller, Hal Lindsey's *The Late Great Planet Earth* (1970). The Left Behind series of novels (the first was published in 1995) by Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins, which describe apocalyptic events in particularly violent terms, achieved phenomenal popularity. It is estimated that 40 million copies of books in the Left Behind series were in print by the early 21st century, and a computer game based on the series was also produced.

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