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Apocalyptic

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Apocalyptic

An adjective used to describe a broad category of phenomena linked by a similar worldview. It is part of a constellation of terms (apocalypticism, apocalyptic eschatology) derived from the literary genre apocalypse.

The genre name "apocalypse" derives from Gk. *apokdipsis* ("revelation" or "disclosure"), which occurs in the opening line of the New Testament book of Revelation. This book, the parade example of an apocalypse in early Christian literature, gives its name to the entire genre. The genre itself may be defined 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" (Collins, *Apocalypse*, 9). Apocalypses are characterized by the presence of vision, symbolism, a human seer and an otherworldly mediator, an otherworldly journey, an emphasis on events in the cosmic rather than human realm, an increased interest in angels and demons, the notion of the transcendence of God, and pseudonymity. Given this definition, there is only one example of a true apocalypse in the OT, Dan. 7-12. while the Christian New Testament's only apocalypse is the book of Revelation (which is exceptional for not being pseudonymous).



*The beast from the sea and the beast with lamb's horns
(Rev. 13:1-13) (Woodcut by Albrecht Dürer, 1498)*

The genre, however, was more widespread than the canonical examples. Apocalypse as a genre nourished between 250 B.C.E. and 250 C.E., giving many more examples to the literature, such as 1 Enoch, 4 Ezra, and 2 Baruch. However, the antecedents of apocalyptic literature can be found much earlier, in the prophetic and wisdom traditions of ancient Israel, and the mythologies of the ancient Near East. Apocalyptic literature draws on prophecy, in which the message of God concerning a particular historical situation is conveyed to a human recipient through an aural or visual experience,

through its emphasis on vision, the special revelation given to the human recipient, and the use of historical events to disclose God's hidden plan. Late prophetic texts which contain incipient characteristics of the apocalypse include Ezek. 1-3 and Zech. 1-6. The antecedents of the apocalypse in the wisdom tradition can be seen particularly in the speculative material of books such as 1 Enoch, where in the Book of the Heavenly Luminaries Enoch is taken on an otherworldly journey and is shown the secrets of the heavenly realm (cf. Job 37-38). Finally, the influence of ancient Near Eastern mythology, especially the literatures of Babylon and Persia, can be discerned in the type of symbols used throughout apocalyptic literature, e.g., the sea as a symbol of chaos (Dan. 7:2-3; Rev. 13:1).

The genre "apocalypse" lends its name to a broad range of phenomena loosely organized under the rubric "apocalyptic." The reasons for the rise of this type of literature and its associated phenomena in the Second Temple period are not fully understood, but there seems to be a strong connection with some crisis, bringing about a sense of social, political, or religious powerlessness, either of a community or an individual. Sometimes the crisis is clear to the later reader, such as the persecution of the Jews by Antiochus IV Epiphanes, reflected in Dan. 7-12, or the destruction of the Second Temple by the Romans in 70 C.E., reflected in 4 Ezra or 2 Baruch. However, sometimes the precipitating crisis is not at all evident, and may have been of importance only to the original author. This is the case for large portions of the Enoch literature.

This sense of crisis and impending doom explains the appearance of a phenomenon known as apocalyptic eschatology, in which the apocalyptic worldview is applied to events surrounding the end of the world, usually thought of as rapidly approaching. Apocalyptic eschatology declares that the

adverse conditions of the present world, brought about by the precipitating crisis, will end in judgment for the wicked and vindication for the righteous, both from the hand of God. The judgment of the present world usually includes its destruction, followed by a new and glorified existence for the righteous. A cogent example of this is found in Rev. 20-21, in which a judgment, the "Great White Throne" judgment, of all the dead occurs, following which the damned are thrown into the lake of fire. After this judgment, the seer recounts:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. (21:1-2)

Apocalyptic eschatology is part of the movement known as apocalypticism, a term used to describe a worldview or symbolic universe whose characteristics have been extrapolated from the apocalypses. Whole communities, not simply individuals, may have a worldview best described as apocalyptic, with a tendency towards believing that history is moving toward a crisis, that the eschaton will come about soon (within the lifetime of the community or believer), and placing an emphasis on the community's possession of a revelation which gives it special (and sometimes secret) knowledge about the present age. Two communities from the Second Temple period which have been described as apocalyptic are the Qumran community and the early Christians. Although the Qumran community evidently did not produce any apocalypses as such, its literature is permeated with apocalypticism. For example, *ihepesherim*, a type of biblical interpretation unique to the community, use the biblical prophets and

psalms to interpret contemporary events in the sect's existence as part of the unfolding of the eschatological drama. The War Scroll (1QM), a description of the battles of the eschatological age, assumes that humans and angels fight together in the army of God, and it is only the decisive intervention of God in the final battle which brings about the defeat of Belial's army.

It has long been recognized that at least parts of the early Christian community were apocalyptic in outlook. The Gospel of Mark understands the coming of Jesus as the dawn of the eschatological age, and the Gospel closes with the expectation of the imminent return of Jesus in glory (Mark 16:6-7). The Apostle Paul likewise expects the return of the risen Jesus in his lifetime, with the subsequent resurrection of the dead (1 Thess. 4:13-5:11). Also, Paul hints in 2 Corinthians of an otherworldly journey during which he was caught up "to the third heaven" (2 Cor. 12:1-4). Apocalypses also occur in the mystical tradition of later Judaism, e.g., 3 Enoch (Sefer Hekalot), indicating perhaps the persistence of apocalyptic thought into the rabbinic period.

Bibliography. J. H. Charlesworth, ed., *OTP*, 1: *Apocalyptic Literature and Testaments* (Garden City, 1983); J. J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, 1998); *The Scepter and the Star: The Messiahs of the Dead Sea Scrolls and Other Ancient Literature* (New York, 1996); Collins, ed., *Apocalypse: The Morphology of a Genre*. *Semeia* 14 (1979); P. D. Hanson, *The Dawn of Apocalyptic*, rev. ed. (Philadelphia, 1979).

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