Apocalyptic Literature and Its Relevance in the Contemporary Christian Church.

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Abstract

A lot has happened and is still happening that the world wonders why, without calling to mind that, all these things are connected with the content of Apocalyptic Literature written long time ago. The rejection of these literatures/books at the canonicity of the Bible did not invalidate the content or the prophecy content in it. This paper consciously brings to light how relevant the content of the apocalyptic Literature is to the present Christian Church owing to the happenings and occurrences of events long predicted by the Literature. The paper concluded by affirming the relevance of the literature, defend the Pseudonymous nature of the literature and backup the prophetic and revelation independence of the literature. While the paper recommends that: apocalyptic literature and its contents should be valued and seen as prophetic, revealing, informative, and morally park for admonishing the present society. Theologians and scholars of the word of God should regard apocalyptic literatures as books given by God to His people to warn them about things happenings and things to come. Christian students should be encouraged to study apocalyptic literature due to its richness in addressing current issues. Contemporary churches and Christians should embrace the apocalyptic literatures by laying emphasis on the efficacy of their teaching. And finally, Society and its inhabitants should not neglect the revelations that were given in the apocalyptic literatures for their survival.

Key words: Relevance, Apocalyptic Literature, Contemporary, Christian, Church.

Introduction

Many factors concerning the historical milieu of apocalyptic literature are debated among scholars. Many scholars agreed that the Book of Daniel provides the prototype for this literary form and that apocalyptic writings arise out of a context of renewed Jewish nationalism, beginning with the Maccabean revolt. It is also generally agreed that the apocalyptic writings were written during times of intense persecution and crisis. According to Russell (1964) "It is essentially a literature of the oppressed that saw no hope

for the nation simply in terms of politics or on the plane of human history" While Peter (n.d) on the other hand posited that, due to lack of evidence, it is hard to pinpoint exactly where and when Apocalypticism originated. It is pertinent to note that, the apocalyptic literatures in this paper are both canonical (Book of Revelation) and non-canonical (Book of Daniel chapters 7-12, 1 Enoch, The Assumption of Moses etc) books of the Old Testament (O.T) that lies outside the canon of the Bible, but they have their roots firmly embedded in the O.T prophetic tradition. For instance, the authors are heirs to the prophetic view of history; alongside the Biblical writers they speak in the name of the One who is sovereign over the whole of human history. Secondly, they call Israel to repentance and bring a message of comfort and encouragement to the faithful. Lastly, they draw heavily on the visionary imagery of the prophets—chiefly Daniel, but also Joel, Zechariah, Isaiah and Ezekiel. (Russell, 1964). This paper dwells mainly on the eschatological nature of the content of the literature other than whether the books are canonical or not, the recent events in the Christian church inspired this study, which the relevance of the literatures will be drawn side-by side with the current happenings.This paper focus on: concept of Apocalyptic Literature, it's characteristic, example of apocalyptic literature, it's relevance in the contemporary Church and recommendations for a clearer view.

The Concept of Apocalyptic Literature

Apocalyptic: It has its root from a Greek word "Apokalypsis", which means "a revelation" or "a disclosure" it also refers to a special kind of prophecy. Most prophecy concerns the future within the earth's history, like Nahum who prophesied the fall of Nineveh, an event that took place within decades of his prophecy, (Horizons, 1989). In its broadest sense, the term "apocalyptic" is applied to parts of the writings of the O.T prophets specifically to passages in Joel, Amos, Zechariah, and Daniel as well as the portions of the New Testament (N.T) (Matthew 24:1-25:46, 1 Thess. 4:13-18, John 14:1-4, I Cor. 15:51-52 and the Revelation 6:1-19:21).

It is customary, however, to identify that specific genre of literature which came into existence during the intertestamental period, but which has remained outside of the Biblical canon, much of which is included under the heading of the Pseudepigrapha, by this term, the Book of Daniel in the O.T and the Revelation in the N.T are possible exceptions. From the above, the books of the apocalyptic have a common mission that is to foretell about things to come or an impending disaster, but often lack inspirational standing due to the period it was written "intertestamental period" a time where no prophecy is heard; Because of that, writings during that time was rejected as not meeting the criteria for the "canon" of the Bible. But despite the claim of not meeting the criteria, the content of these writings lived to fulfill what was said, which is captured below.

Apocalypse: The word Apocalypse is derived from the Greek Noun which refers to "unveiling" or "revelation" of some sort (Richard and David 2016). When one speaks of "Unveiling" or "Revelation" it connote that something that is not known or hidden from

human knowledge and understanding, but is brought to light or make-known to human knowledge and understanding. When information is make-known, a channel or media is used, which often times through a mediation (Angel and human recipient) for example Rev. 1:1-3 "…He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John…" Richard & David (2016) are of the view that:

> *Apocalypse is a genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework, in which a revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipients, disclosing a transcendent reality which is both temporal, insofar as it envisages eschatological salvation, and spatial, insofar as it involves another, supernatural world. Is intended to interpret present, earthly circumstances in light of the supernatural world and of the future and to influence both the understanding and the behaviours of the audience by means of Divine authority (p31-32)*

Apocalypticism: This refers to the attitude, presuppositions, expectations and beliefs that form the religious or cultural milieu of those belonging to movements similar to those that produce apocalypses. Or it is a way of thinking; it is a mindset that looks to imminent divine intervention as the only solution to evils confronting a community that sees itself as righteous (Richard and David 2016).

Apocalyptic Literature: John (2007) posited that: Apocalyptic literature "is a genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework in which a revelation is mediated by another world being to a human recipient, disclosing a transcendent reality which is both temporal. It also envisages eschatological salvation, spatial, and involves another supernatural world". This implies that, the literature despite its time of writing, it is believed to have been revealed, due to its message of the eschatological salvation. This is contrary to the claims of the biblical "canon" of the apocalyptic literature not meeting up with the criteria.

Richard and David (2016), on the other hand stated that "Apocalyptic literature are those writings that are specifically designated as apocalypses, it also includes related literature that shares certain Characteristics with the apocalypse without qualifying for that more specific label. Or it refers to a type of writing that adopts to a significant degree the outlook of apocalypticism and portrays those themes through a vivid use of symbolic language".Hillary (2018), opined that "Apocalyptic literature" refers to the ancient writings that were written to reveal the plans of God about the future, most especially on the salvation of mankind. He also maintained that, these ancient writings were given or revealed to make man whose nature is characterized by sin to be conscious of what he does on daily basis in order to live a pleasant life that will please God and his fellow being.

From all the above discourse, the authors are of the view that: "Apocalyptic literature" are writings which deals with moral and spiritual instructions, which serve basically not only the immediate church or society, community or generation, but the generation to come.

Characteristics of Apocalyptic Literature

There are numerous features that identify a piece of writing as apocalyptic, they are stated thus: the presence of a cosmic dualism, visions and revelations; a contrast between the present evil age and the coming eschatological age; pessimism concerning the present age and optimism concerning the age to come; references and allusions to mythology, numerology, and animal symbolism; the idea of the unity of history and a goal toward which history is moving; the development of belief in life after death, and especially the resurrection of the righteous and the judgment of the wicked (there is no resurrection for the unrighteous dead); and the appearance of a transcendent figure identified as "the Son of Man". David (2003), on the other hand was of the view that Apocalyptic Literature most contained the following Characteristics thus: Culture, End Times, Discourse, Veil, Ethical Dualism, Eclectic, Angelic Mediator, Crisis and History. Others are as follows: It is esoteric in character; Literary in form; Symbolic in language; Pseudonymous in authorship and, Crisis and Catharsis.

Esoteric: it is said to be an apocalyptic writing purport to be revelations of divine mysteries to certain illustrious individuals of Israel's past, which were subsequently recorded in secret books for the instruction of God's chosen remnant; The secrets are revealed to the seer in the form of a dream or vision, often in the context of a literal or spiritual transition to heaven. The vision may consist of a review of the history of the world up to the time of the assumed author, or it may take the form of prediction and outline the future destiny of the world and the coming of God's kingdom. Or it may describe the mysteries of the unseen world, i.e. heaven(s) and Hades, the movements of the heavenly bodies, and the forces of nature. What is seen by the seer as written down, to be hidden away for many generations and faithfully preserved until the time of the end (John 2007).

Literary: In spite of the visionary character of Apocalyptic Literature, it is quite clear that the visions are, for the most part, literary creations by the author, that is to say, they are not the descriptions of actual ecstatic experiences, but rather are self-conscious theological statements (Peter (n.d).

Symbolism: Apocalyptic Literature is marked by imagery and style which are striking to say the least, some of the images are taken from the O.T (especially from Daniel). Some of it has its origin in ancient Near Eastern mythology, e.g. references to Leviathan, Behemoth and "the dragon" (also alluded to in the O.T); the use of animals to symbolize men and nations; allusions to "heavenly tablets" and astral phenomena; etc. In fact, the whole

Literature is marked by a carefully developed symbolism, which tends to suit its esoteric character (Richard 2016).

Pseudonymous: Apocalyptic Literature is generally, though not always, pseudonymous, that is to say, the writers put their message into the mouth (or at least the pen) of some honored figure from ancient times (e.g. Enoch, Moses, Abraham, Isaiah, etc.). The traditional explanation stated that these writers had to attribute their writings to men of God prior to the time of Ezra (when, it was believed, prophecy had come to an end in Israel), in order to have them accepted as authentic revelations. Another suggestion is that they adopted pseudonyms to avoid persecution by the authorities of the day (but why not simple anonymity?). Another explanation given by some is that pseudonymity was merely a literary custom with no attempt to deceive the reader (Russell, 1964)

Crisis and Catharsis: These writings spoke to pious individuals and communities who were experiencing suffering at the hands of their enemies. It could be contemporary "crisis" or crisis that is to come for those believers who had grown complacent in their faith, believers who required a reminder that the end is not yet and that the battle against the enemy be it super world powers or some spiritual power must continue until God intervenes. While "cathartic" element speaks to those who are well aware of the battle at hand and need to be reminded that God is still in control and will resolve all things accordingly (Leif, 1992).

Examples of Apocalyptic Literature/ Discourse

The literatures considered to be apocalyptic in nature in this paper are: Half of the book of Daniel (Chapter 7-12), Portion of the book of Isaiah (Chapter 56-66), Book of Ezekiel (Chapter 38-39), Book of Zechariah (Chapter 1-8), Book of Revelation (Chapter 4 & 22), and Book of Joel 2: 1-11 (Richard and David 2016). Some example of New Testament (N.T) books that content apocalyptic literature are: Mark Chapter 13, Matthew Chapter 24, 2 Thessalonians 2:3, Luke 3:7-9, Ephesians Chapter 6 and Revelation Chapter 19:11ff.

Half of the book of Daniel (Chapter 7-12): The book of Daniel is full of imagery and its massage is both eschatological and things that came to pass during his time and after his time. In chapter 7 of Daniel it centers on Daniel dream of four beast, in verse 15ff the explanations was given to him about the four kings that would rise from the earth, of cause these four kings did rule as Daniel saw. Again Daniel saw a vision of a ram and a goat in Chapter 8:1ff, and in verse 26 it states that "the vision of the evenings and mornings that has been given you is true, but seal up the vision, for it concerns the distant future". Chapter 12 conclude with the massage of the end of time, where it says: "…there will be a time of distress such as has not happened from the beginning of nations until then…" despite the fact that the end is yet to come but the glimpse of it is been feel by the present day Church (Christianity).

Portion of the book of Isaiah (Chapter 56-66): In Isaiah Apocalyptic discourse, he call the people to maintain justice and do what is right (cf 56:1). This was not only meant for the people during the time of the prophet but extend beyond that. Isaiah added that: "the righteous perish, and no one takes it to heart, the devout are taken away and no one understands…" (57:1) these is not far fetch from today's experience when men of God are been taken captive until ransoms is paid. The discourse continue on the aspect of fasting and no result is seen (58:3), this is as a result of the sins committed by the people during Isaiah's time, and today's Church is guilty of the same crime. In Chapter 59:3 it states: "for your hands are stained with blood, your fingers with guilt. Your lips have spoken falsely, and your tongue musters wicked things". How can someone in this state of life style call on the lord and his prayers answer? Christians today are not free from what Isaiah said, and so we all suffer from the hands of our enemies. There was a dramatic change of tune in Chapter 60-64 of Isaiah. He speaks of hope, hope that things will change for the better, whatever they most have suffer it will be a thing of a past. While Chapter 65-66 center its discourse on Judgment, salvation and hope, the creation of new heavens and new earth. What was said by the Prophet is sure to come, it is eschatological in nature; and Christians believe in that, and the only way to see the new heavens and the new earth, is to live according to the laws and commands of God.

Book of Ezekiel (Chapter 38-39): The discourse in this book was how God plan to punished his people as well his plan to restore them after they are punished. Is it apocalyptical in nature because it foretold what is to comeand it did came, for instance "… now I will restore the fortunes of Jacob, and have mercy upon the whole house of Israel..." (39:25).

Book of Zechariah (Chapter 1-8): This is included among apocalyptic literature because, it contain the features of Apocalyptic literature describe above, for instance in chapter 1:18 it talks about four horns and four craftsmen. "Then I looked up, and there before me were four horns". And not only that in chapter 5:1 it talks about flying scrolls " I looked again, and there before me was a flying scroll" and in Chapter 6:1 speaks of four chariots coming out from between two mountains-mountains of bronze. At the end of Zachariah's message, there was a promise and blessings from the lord to Jerusalem and by extension to "Christians". In Chapter 8:4-5 it says: "…once again men and women of ripe old age will sit in the streets of Jerusalem, each of them with cane in hand because of their age. The city streets will be filled with boys and girls playing there".

Book of Revelation (Chapter 4 & 22): Chapter 4 of the book of Revelation gave us an insight what John saw, and he gave only the description of what he saw using imagery. These actually fit the feature of an apocalyptic literature were images are used to describe what the writer saw. His description can be limited due to the limitation found in human; this implies that there is more to what the writer is reporting. Likewise in Chapter 22 took the same pattern, but in verse 6, John said that what he saw are things that must soon take

place. And verse 11 speaks on those who does wrong will continue in it, and those who does right will continue, today those who dwell in sin see nothing wrong in what they are doing vi-sa-vis. It therefore means that, the literature is much relevant in our present day Church.

Book of Joel 2: 1-11: Speaks about the day of the Lord that is to come, and it speaks on how dreadful it will be and how no one can endure it. The prophet gave an imagery description on an army of locust. Locust was given all the attribute of human solder; verse 6 speaks on the reaction of the nations of the world, "At the sight of them, nations are in anguish; every face turns pale". These are things that are to come, because none of the words of apocalyptic literature, that fails in fulfilling its purpose. It therefore means that the content of these literatures are not to be jettisoned, overlooked or undermined.

Relevance of Apocalyptic Literature in the Present Christian Church

It is pertinent to note that, the esoteric nature of Apocalyptic Literature Shows its relevance to the present Christian community. When it speaks of impending suffering, war, outbreak of diseases and earth quake, we see that playing today, what was said ages ago is happening today, it therefore means that Apocalyptic Literature despite its rejection during the canon of the Holy Scriptures, its content is relevant if not during the time it was written, but there is fulfillment of its content presently.

The relevance of apocalyptic literature is further established thus: In both Daniel 2 and 7 symbolic historical reviews are therefore used to proclaim God's total sovereignty over kings and kingdoms. The faithful are to look at the violence and trials they experience from this perspective. Whatever afflictions or political troubles they are, these are to be viewed on the scale of God's development of history towards its final consummation when all will recognize his eternal kingdom. They do not know precisely where they are on this historical line, butthe final kingdom is elusive and they can only hold fast to their expectation. They can recognize from what they undergo that it must be near the end of the pattern. They can only ask: when will the end come? But it must be left to God to bring the end himself (Venter 2009). From Venter perspective, it can be infer that, today the church in particular and the world in general are facing violence, afflictions from outbreaks of diseases, and political troubles, these are all to prove to human that there is something greater than human intelligence and innovations.

Here we are presented with reality of both the righteous and sinners living together, sharing the same resources and space, but all awaits the final judgment. We see where sin is applauded and righteousness disregarded by many. Morality is hardly valued, it has become a thing of the past or simply put "old school". The apocalyptic writings become relevant because the world is leaving what was written long before now.

The O.T prophets such as Daniel and Zachariah foresaw violent conflict in the future, in their days, evil was reaching fearful dimension… (Horizon, 1989). What the above prophets saw and spoke is the same thing happening today, evil is the order of the day and violent conflict day in and day out, a day will hardly pass without news of killings, kidnapping and conflicts, these shows how relevant the content of the literature is to the church today.

In Luke 3:7-9 John the Baptist was expecting the immediate fulfilment of the Prophecy of Daniel and Zachariah who spoke about Jesus 'coming as a warrior and a violent Judge. But Jesus indeed fulfils that prophecy as a Divine warrior, who wages war not against flesh and blood, but against Satan and his host. Today Christians can see how evil powers, wickedness is the other of day; Ephesians 6:12 said it all: "for we are not contending against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, against the powers…" as Christians we are to "put on the whole armor of God" Ephesians 6:10ff. The final physical battle will surely come when Jesus Christ will lead his earthly and heavenly army against Satan and his demonic and human army as contain in Revelation 19:11ff.

Daniel 7:25 talks about how "He will speak against the Most High and oppress his holy people and try to change the set time…" the He depict the 'Devil and his angels', we see today how people speak against Jesus, mock him and those who call on the name of the Lord are been marginalize in all ramification, and they do all they could to change things from the way it used to be. This is by no means the fulfilment of what was written long ago and Christians should take all of them to mind, understand it so as the day of the lord will not meet them unprepared.

Conclusion

The study on Apocalyptic Literature and its relevance today, is a conscious effort to further bring to light the relevance of the content of these books to the reality faced by present day society (Church). Despite its non-canonical stand in the scripture, it critical content study, the pattern/style of writing speaks volumes about the literature. If apocalyptic literature was not relevant, it won't have been found in the book of Daniel in the O.T, and most importantly the book of Revelation in the N.T. Just as the author of the book of revelation (John) saw and wrote as well give the description using the same style and characteristics found in the apocalyptic literature, so also the apocalyptic literature authors saw and wrote. The pseudonymous nature of Apocalyptic literature can be excused on the ground that, during the time of their writings, prophecy and vision was uncommon and holds in high esteem, anything less than prophecy and vision is unacceptable. Be it as it may, the content has proven beyond doubts, that despite its lack of public prophecy and vision, it cannot be ruled out of the literature enjoying secret or hidden vision, revelation and prophetic independence of human knowledge and understanding.

Recommendations

Despite the non-canonical nature of the literature, the following should be adhered to:

i. Apocalyptic literature and its content should be valued and seen as prophetic, revealing, informative and morally park for admonishing the present society.
ii. Theologians and scholars of the word of God should regard apocalyptic literature as books given by God to His people to warn them about things happening and things to come.
iii. Christian students should be encouraged to study the books of the apocalyptic literature due to its richness in addressing current issues.
iv. Contemporary churches and Christians should embrace the apocalyptic literatures by laying emphasis on the efficacy of their teaching.
v. Society and its inhabitants should not neglect or disregard the revelations that were given in the apocalyptic literatures for their survival and good moral standing.

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