

Apocalyptic Genre

Robert C. Newman



Definitions

- **Apocalyptic** – those ancient visionary writings which purport to reveal the mystery of the end of the age and of the glories of the age to come.
- **Prophecy** – an utterance of a prophet, one who claims to speak for God. Since it often pertained to the future, comes to be identified with foretelling future events. Usually distinguished from narrative, law, psalms, wisdom; but not strictly a category of form, but rather of claimed source.

– Soulen, *Handbook of Biblical Criticism*



Characteristics of Apocalyptic

- Revelation of a visionary sort
- Extensive use of symbolism
- Tendency to pessimism re/ human nature
- Cosmic perspective
- World-shaking events
- Triumph of God
- Deterministic – events are set
- Dualistic – struggle between good and evil
- Pseudonymous – claims famous author
- History rewritten as prophecy



OT Material usually considered Apocalyptic

- Numbers 23-24 – Balaam's oracles
- Isaiah 24-27 – events of end of age
- Ezekiel – chariot w/ cherubim, departure of Glory, invasion of Israel, visionary temple, parabolic visions
- Daniel – parabolic visions, dreams re/ future & end of age
- Zechariah – parabolic visions, events of end



NT Material usually considered Apocalyptic

- Olivet Discourse – Christ reveals signs of end, 2nd coming to disciples
- 1 Thessalonians 4-5 – 2nd coming, resurrection, end of age
- 2 Thessalonians 1-2 – 2nd coming, man of lawlessness
- Revelation – visions of heaven, symbolism, end of age



Extrabiblical Apocalypses

- **1-3 Enoch**
 - 1 Enoch – visionary journeys thru world & underworld; angels, Messiah; world history
 - 2 Enoch – visionary journey thru heavens; revelation of creation & world history to flood
 - 3 Enoch – visionary journey of R. Ishmael to heaven; secrets from Metatron re/ cosmos, end
- **2-3 Baruch**
 - 2 Baruch – preview of world history to Messiah
 - 3 Baruch – complaint re/ destruction of Jerusalem leads to visit to different heavens



Extrabiblical Apocalypses

- **War Scroll (1QM)** – rules for conducting end-time war against Gentiles
- **Assumption of Moses** – Moses, before departure, reveals history of Israel
- **Martyrdom & Ascension of Isaiah** – visits heaven, sees future; sawn in two by king
- **4 Ezra** – 7 visions answering Ezra's Qs re/ Jerusalem, # of saved, history to Messiah



Extrabiblical Apocalypses

- **Shepherd of Hermas** – allegorical visions from woman & shepherd re/ Christian life
- **Apocalypse of Peter** – Christ on Mt Olives describes heaven & hell, esp punishments
- **Apocalypse of Paul** – carried up to 3rd heaven, meets angels, patriarchs; blessing of righteous, punishment of wicked
- **Apocalypse of Thomas** – events leading up to end in a 7-day scheme



Summary on Apocalyptic

- Diverse materials here, particularly when both canonical & non-canonical lumped together
- Origin of genre is earlier than IT period, continues centuries later.
- Except for Jude, no clear evidence that canonical borrowed from non-canonical.
- Rather dependence seems to go the other way
 - 1 Enoch dependent on Ezekiel, Daniel
 - Hermas, Apoc Peter on Revelation



Summary on Apocalyptic

- Does not mean canonical cannot use symbolism existing in culture at time:
 - Some Greco-Roman symbolism in Revelation
 - Seven-sealed book, white stone, etc.
- No real evidence of pseudonymity in canonical apocalyptic.
- What does this mean for interpretation?
 - End of age, history
 - Final judgment
 - Fate of wicked
 - Eternal state



Some Comments on Genre

Genre studies often overlook important items:

- Truth vs fiction of the book's contents
- Public vs private status of the book's circulation



Truth vs Fiction

- Book of Mormon shares many genre features with Old Testament, but
 - BM is fiction
 - OT is history
- Apocryphal Acts resemble Canonical, but later is history, former fiction
- Similarly with the Canonical vs Apocryphal Gospels
- I suggest that the Canonical Apocalypses are real visions from God while Apocryphal are not.



Public vs Private

- Canonical apocalypses apparently in public circulation since time of claimed authors, no reason to think this true for apocryphal ones.
- Compare Gospel of Thomas: “These are the secret words...” and Joseph Smith ‘finding’ golden plates.
- I think the apocryphal apocalypses were semi-secret works of Mormon-like groups in antiquity.
- Semi-secret because all such groups have occasional cases of apostasy.



Some Comments on Genre

- These two matters will have considerable bearing on whether false authorship was OK in antiquity:
 - Obviously it was OK to the founders of heretical cults who wrote such stuff
 - They would have been in big trouble with their followers if they found out!
- I suspect the apocryphal works were written to mimic the canonical when these became well-known.



The End!

Don't dismiss end-times prophecy
as just "apocalyptic"!

