

An African Reflection on the Milieu and Literary functions of Jewish Apocalyptic Writings

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Abstract

Jewish apocalyptic writings were written during times of persecution, alienation, oppression, death and other crises. The writings were to inform, express and persuade; they offered hope to their readers who could not do much to change their inauspicious conditions. Most of African people live under similar situations of the apocalyptic readers. The literary functions of the apocalyptic writings then serve as a tool to encourage, exhort and inform the suffering Africans to cope with their present situations. Thus, Jewish apocalyptic writings are important sources to inform the African that God is in control over the powers of social evils and will bring them to an end. It grants the African strength to endure the present troubles and pain and hope for a blissful future.

Keywords: African, apocalyptic writings, functions, milieu, reflection

Introduction

The Jewish apocalyptic writings have crisis of many forms as their background. Thus, they were written during times of persecution, alienation, oppression and death. The purpose of the writings was to inform, persuade and express the suffering few to endure and hope for a better future. The social settings of the Jewish apocalyptic writings are similar to the social settings of suffering Africans. The purposes of these writings can be sources of encouragement and hope for the African. This article aims to draw Africans' attention to the fact that

some believers of old experienced suffering and remained faithful to God. It also uses the literary functions of the apocalyptic writings to encourage suffering Africans to be hopeful in God. The article is divided into four main sections. Section One looks at the term *apocalyptic* and its meaning. The second section discusses the milieu of the apocalyptic writings, arguing that the writings did not come from a single social setting, but rather from different social settings. The third part deals with the literary functions of apocalyptic writings. Finally, the article discusses Africans' reflection of the Jewish apocalyptic writings. It concludes that the Jewish apocalyptic writings are good sources of encouragement and hope for suffering Africans.

The term and definition of Apocalyptic

The term *apocalypse* and its derivatives, such as *apocalyptic*, come from the Greek noun *apokalypsis*, which is translated as *revelation* or *disclosure*.¹ The first occurrence of the term to refer to a literary work is in the first verse of the book of Revelation, “The *apokalypsis* of Jesus Christ”.² In view of this, literature that shares similarities with the Book of Revelation is depicted as belonging to the *apocalyptic* genre.

Any identification of a genre depends on whether a group of texts shares significant features that distinguish it from other writings. The Society of Biblical Literature Genre Project undertook a methodical analysis of all the literature referred to as “apocalyptic” with the objective to show the extent and limits of “apocalyptic literature” in

¹ See Willem S. Vorster, “Texts with an Apocalyptic Perspective”, in Words from Afar, ed. Willem S. Vorster & Ferdinand Deist (Cape Town: Tafelberg, 1989), 166; Milton S. Terry, Biblical Apocalypses (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988), 11.

² Paul D. Hanson, “Apocalypses and Apocalypticism: The Genre”, ABD 1:279.

order to give a precise definition.³ The outcome was published in *Semeia* 14 (1979), which defines an apocalypse as:

a genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework, in which a revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being to 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.⁴

Apocalypticism is a pattern of thought or worldview dominated by ideas and motifs found in apocalypses; it “is a world-view of an apocalyptic movement or group” and “in practice, a gospel of the marginalised”.⁵

Milieu of Jewish Apocalyptic Writings

The apocalyptic genre was not born in a vacuum; it erupted under specific social and religious conditions. Thus, there are historical conditions that shaped it. This section will deal with the crisis phenomena and the social setting of the literature.

Crisis Phenomena

Apocalyptic did not flourish when life was easy and straightforward. But it made life liveable for people under intolerable conditions with its emphasis on God’s final and perfect solution.⁶ Many issues concerning the historical milieu of apocalyptic literature are debated among scholars. It is commonly thought that apocalyptic literature was written in a time of persecution. This view, based primarily on the canonical apocalypses of Daniel and Revelation, cannot be true of all apocalyptic

³ John J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination* (New York: Crossroad, 1984), 4.

⁴ John J. Collins, ‘Towards the Morphology of a Genre’, *Semeia* 14 (1979): 9.

⁵ Wilfrid Harrington, *Revelation* (San Jose, CA: Resource Publications, 1994), 6.

⁶ Leon Morris, *Apocalyptic* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 27.

writings. Thus, to say that apocalyptic writings were written in times of persecution is close to the truth, but too narrow to be entirely accurate.⁷ It would be appropriate to say that the apocalyptic writings were written during times of intense crisis including times of persecution.⁸ The crisis that sociologists find at the root of every apocalyptic movement is a minority phenomenon. This crisis is the collapse of a well-ordered worldview which defines values and orders the universe for a group of people, thrusting them into the uncharted waters of chaos and *anomie*. While the majority continues the course defined by past norms, the apocalyptic minority calls attention to signs indicating that this course leads to perdition and offers in its place a new vision of life's values.⁹

Importantly, the crisis related to the apocalypses are of different kinds. For instance, while in Daniel the crisis is persecution, in the book of Watchers, it is cultural shock. Similarly, in Ezra, it is injustice, while in the Testament of Abraham, it is the inevitability of death. Thus, the context of the apocalyptic is the belief of the faithful community that it is powerless before some evil force such as death, persecution, oppression, total cultural disenfranchisement. It is for those times when theologically speaking, "all hell breaks loose".¹⁰ It should be noted that the crises are *perceived* crises and may not have been so perceived by everyone.

As Vorster shows,¹¹ the crisis arises when the values and structures of a society lose all meaning for some minority group within that

⁷Thomas G. Long, 'Preaching Apocalyptic Literature', RE 90, no. 3 (1993): 374.

⁸The term crisis is not used lightly. The apocalypse is a genre for times of emergency; times when the ordinary means for addressing life's difficulties are simply insufficient.

⁹Paul D. Hanson, *The Dawn of Apocalyptic*, rev. ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), 2.

¹⁰Long, "Preaching Apocalyptic Literature", 374.

¹¹Vorster, "Texts with an Apocalyptic Perspective", 167-68. 166-185.

society and are replaced by a new (symbolic) meaning-system. This minority group becomes alienated, turns into a marginal group, a subculture, and clashes with the majority group of the society. The conflict concerns the things which this latter group believes and knows are sensible. The majority maintains the *status quo* and tries, in various ways, to safeguard and strengthen institutions and values. On the other hand, the minority sees the solution to its problems in a radical break with those institutions and values. In so doing, they reinterpret the present and the past in view of a brand-new future. Because of its radical pessimism regarding the *status quo*, the minority group creates new meaning-symbols that enable it to give new significance to its life.

As indicated by Max Weber,¹² the politically- and economically-deprived minority derives its sense of honour from some concealed promise for the future which implies the assignment of some function, mission, or vocation to it. What the members of the minority cannot claim to *be*, they replace by the worth of what they will one day *become*, to which they will be called in some future life here or hereafter. The minority's thirst for worthiness that is yet to come produces a rationalistic idea of providence. Every need for salvation is an expression of some distress, so social or economic oppression becomes an effective source of salvation beliefs, though not the exclusive source. We can say that the apocalyptic "is essentially a literature of the oppressed [in various forms], who saw no hope for the nation simply in politics or on the plane of human history".¹³

¹² Max Weber, *The Sociology of Religion*, trans. Ephraim Fischhoff (Boston: Beacon, 1963), 106-107.

¹³ David S. Russell, *The Method and Message of Jewish Apocalyptic* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1964), 17.

Ladd has aptly identified three main factors in the milieu of the apocalyptic.¹⁴ First is the emergence of the “righteous remnant” factor. Whenever people found themselves in a minority group, faithfully serving God, they came to hold that the “Righteous Remnant” prophecies have been fulfilled in them. The second factor is the problem of evil. In the early days of Israel, the belief that God punished the wicked and rewarded the righteous was prevalent. When Israel was restored to its land after the exile, it was more faithful in keeping the Law than in the earlier days. To its dismay, Israel was not prosperous. Except for one brief period, it was subject to one nation or another. Third is the cessation of prophecy. This factor is sometimes stated explicitly, for example, “the prophets have fallen asleep” (2 Baruch 85:3). There was no doubt that, for centuries, Israel had heard those spiritual giants thunder forth their denunciations of evil as they pointed the way to the service of God. When the voice of the prophets fell silent, there was a need for something to fill the vacuum. The apocalyptists spoke for God as best they could.

It is noteworthy that, though apocalyptic movements always generate their symbolic universes in opposition to the symbolic universe of the dominant society, the form of the opposition varies. The variation depends on the status of those involved, the intensity of the conflict, and the goals envisioned by the leaders. In early stages, opposition is often channelled into social protest with the purpose of reforming the dominant society, in which case we can speak of an *alternative symbolic universe*. There are three responses to oppression and disenfranchisement. First, it could lead the community to

¹⁴ George E. Ladd, “Apocalyptic”, in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker Books House, 1984), 63.

withdraw and establish a new society based upon a *symbolic utopian universe*. Second, in the face of opposition, the community could yield and go underground, which leads to a subsociety expressing its identity in a *symbolic subuniverse*. Third, the community could choose to reply with violence in the face of persecution and so become a revolutionary community constructing a *symbolic counteruniverse*.¹⁵

Social Setting

The problem of the social setting of apocalyptic literature is another issue that has not yet been satisfactorily resolved. The question of the social setting of the apocalyptic genre is inevitably bound up with that of the dates and historical contexts of the actual texts.¹⁶ What makes it difficult to trace the social setting is that the historical situations of the texts are concealed by the device of pseudonymity. For instance, the Enoch literature is given a fictional setting before the flood and Daniel in exile. The aftermath of the destruction of Jerusalem is especially popular (Daniel, 4 Ezra, 2 and 3 Baruch). In the “historical” apocalypses, it is often possible to discover the actual time of composition with some precision from the latest historical events mentioned in the *ex eventu* prophecy. The much-more difficult cases are the otherworldly journeys. One must rely on more general evidence, such as their affinity with other literature.

Describing the situation as a complex one, Davies asserts that, without doubt, apocalypses have social contexts, but the existence of a literary genre does not imply a corresponding discrete social “genre”. For Davies, “the anatomy of literature and the anatomy of society are

¹⁵ Paul D. Hanson, ‘Apocalypticism’, IDBSup, ed. Emory S. Bucke (Nashville: Abingdon, 1976), 31.

¹⁶ Collins, Daniel with an Introduction to Apocalyptic Literature, 19.

not equivalent, and one cannot infer one from the other”. In other words, the way literature and society interact is without question a highly-complex one to which we do not yet have a satisfactory key.¹⁷ Koch assumes that, “if there was really a community of ideas and spirit between the different books which we now call apocalypses, these books must go back to a common sociological starting point; they must have a comparable *Sitz im Leben*”. He continues to complain that “the secondary literature shows an unsurpassed jumble of opinions” and concludes that apocalypse is a genre of which we do not yet know the *Sitz im Leben*.¹⁸

Despite the problem of identifying the social setting of apocalyptic, it is generally agreed that apocalypse is not simply “a conceptual genre of the mind”;¹⁹ rather, it is generated by social and historical circumstances. The *social setting* common to all ancient apocalyptic movements seems to be the group’s experience of alienation. This stems from the disintegration of the life-sustaining socio-religious structures and their supporting myths. This alienation can be the result of the actual physical destruction of institutional structures; it can also arise as a community finds itself excluded from the dominant society and its symbolic universe, due either to choice or to banishment. The result is a cultural void which threatens life with chaos. Such a condition is graphically described in Isaiah 24, with respect to both the fabric of society (verses 1-13) and the cosmic structure of reality (verses 17-23). The pressure becomes intolerable as members of the community are disenfranchised and reduced to

¹⁷ Philip R. Davies, ‘The Social World of Apocalyptic Writings’, in *The World of Ancient Israel*, ed. Ronald E. Clement (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 252.

¹⁸ Klaus Koch, *The Rediscovery of Apocalyptic*, trans. Margaret Kohl (London: SCM, 1972), 21.

¹⁹ Rolf Knierim, ‘Old Testament Form Criticism Reconsidered’, *Interpretation* 27 (1973): 438.

powerlessness. Their existence becomes marginal, and their orientation confused, as described in Isaiah 66:5.²⁰

The actual sociological setting is yet to be fully established. However, we can say that the apocalyptic originated and recurred in times of oppression and among groups experiencing alienation, especially in the times of trial imposed by foreign occupation of Palestine.²¹ It is worth mentioning that apocalyptic literature was not produced by a single movement; not all apocalypses necessarily have a *Sitz im Leben* in a movement or community.²² It will thus be better to talk of social *settings*. This is necessary because, for instance, it is not apparent that the authors of Daniel belonged to the same circles as those of 1 Enoch.²³ Also, 4 Ezra and 2 Baruch represent a very different theological tradition from that of the Enoch literature;²⁴ they lack any distinctive group designation and do not appear to express the beliefs of any special movement. The Testament of Abraham is not restricted to a particular group and may be perceived as a reflection on the nature of righteousness.²⁵ In view of this, the more specific social and historical matrices of the apocalyptic literature should be sought by considering the specific text(s) in question.

Three Social Settings

Hanson and Russel have suggested three social settings of apocalyptic writings. Hanson, who believes that apocalyptic has its antecedent in the Old Testament, alludes to two social settings. He alleges that, by

²⁰ Hanson, 'Apocalypticism', 30.

²¹ Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 379.

²² Collins, Daniel with an Introduction to Apocalyptic Literature, 21.

²³ For the text, see Ephraim Isaac, '1 Enoch' in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, vol. 1, ed. James H. Charlesworth (New York: Doubleday, 1983), 13-89.

²⁴ Collins, *Apocalyptic Imagination*, 29.

²⁵ Collins, Daniel with an Introduction to Apocalyptic Literature, 21.

altering the symbolic universe of their antecedent traditions, both Ezekiel and Second Isaiah were able to bequeath to their followers programmes of restoration written from a standpoint quite advanced along the path from prophetic to apocalyptic eschatology. Hanson continues to indicate that, in the period of restoration following the return from exile, the two groups embracing these reform programmes developed into rival parties.²⁶

The Ezekiel programme was adopted by the group under Zadokite leadership that returned from exile in the years following the Edict of Cyrus (538 BCE). After the return, the alienation caused by the disastrous collapse of nation and cult in 587 was worsened by hostility and economic hardship in Palestine. The situation was conducive to an apocalyptic movement, which arose when the prophets Haggai and Zechariah seized upon the apocalyptic eschatology in Ezekiel's restoration programme and transformed it into an apocalyptic symbolic universe (Hag 2:6-9; Zech 1-6), which functioned as a counter-universe. It forecasted an impressive intervention of Yahweh and the establishment of a messianic kingdom under a Davidic king and Zadokite high priest, events pictured clearly by Zechariah. According to Hanson, this particular apocalyptic movement was short-lived, apparently annihilated by the Persians, who removed its revolutionary leaders and cooperated with its more pragmatic members in constructing a hierocratic programme in which the perspective of apocalyptic eschatology was abandoned for a pragmatic social system enjoying Persian support. From this pragmatic standpoint the apocalypses of Zechariah were re-edited and given a

²⁶ Hanson, 'Apocalypticism', 32.

new function as propaganda for the hierocracy and its Zadokite leaders.²⁷

Hanson maintains that the second apocalyptic movement, that arose in the early post-exilic period, was not easily adapted into the dominant social system. From the early years of the return, its adherents resisted the restoration efforts of the Zadokite group in the name of a noble vision of cosmic intervention and deliverance. For this group, the alienation that arose from the Babylonian destruction and the chaotic conditions of the land was not resolved through collaboration with the Persians, but was increasingly aggravated by the oppression to which they were subjected by the Zadokite leaders indicated in Isaiah 66:1-5.²⁸ Hanson explains that the oppression was followed by excommunication, and thus the symbolic universe which these visionaries built around the apocalyptic eschatology of Second Isaiah broke increasingly with the restraints of the historical realm.²⁹ Hanson indicates that the situation of “truth ... fallen in the public squares” (Isaiah 59:14) was to be addressed not by efforts to reform the social system, but by a theophany of Yahweh coming “like a rushing stream” to “repay, wrath to his adversaries, requital to his enemies” (Isaiah 59:18b-19).³⁰ For Hanson, these gloomy conditions and the dissenting response of the visionaries set in motion an effective apocalyptic movement which increased in power in the latter part of the 6th century and through most of the 5th century, as shown in Zechariah 12 and 14.³¹ Comparing these two apocalyptic movements,

²⁷ Hanson, “Apocalypticism”, 32.

²⁸ Hanson, “Apocalypticism”, 32.

²⁹ Hanson, “Apocalypticism”, 32.

³⁰ Hanson, “Apocalypticism”, 32.

³¹ Hanson, “Apocalypticism”, 32.

Hanson asserts that, unlike the former, the latter apocalyptic movement persisted because the socio-historical sphere and its dominant social system created a feeling of alienation; thus, the environment was defiled to the extent that they could not participate. So, the apocalypticism of their symbolic universe was established upon the disintegration of the present order and the creation of a new cosmic order of blessedness for the elect. Therefore, responsibility regarding the political order, which was a central characteristic of prophetic eschatology, was abandoned in favour of a new super-mundane universe of meaning. The result was the division of reality into two parties along certain axes. For instance, past history was seen as the era of evil and the coming era as one of delightful salvation; the enemy was seen as wicked and the elect as righteous; the earthly order was described as ruin and the heavenly order as life.³²

Russell locates a social setting of apocalyptic in the second century BCE. For Russell, the Book of Daniel is the first and greatest of all the Jewish apocalyptic writings. It was occasioned by the oppression of Antiochus IV Epiphanes (175-163 BCE), the Seleucid ruler, who was determined to carry through his outright policy of Hellenisation, at whatever cost. He was determined to wipe out the Jewish religion altogether. First Maccabees 1:54 shows his prohibiting of the distinctive characteristics and rites of the Jewish faith and his erection of an altar to the Olympian Zeus on the altar of burnt-offerings within the temple court of Jerusalem.³³

The Hasidim (Hasideans) or “pious ones”, devoted to the Law and the religion of their fathers, gave strong material support and full

³² Hanson, “Apocalypticism”, 32-33.

³³ Russell, *Method and Message of Jewish Apocalyptic*, 16.

religious sanction to the revolt (1 Maccabees 2:42ff.). The Book of Daniel, in its present form, reflects the religious outlook of these Hasidim. As suggested by Russell, the Book of Daniel was presumably written by one of their ranks in the time of Antiochus Epiphanes, shortly after the outbreak of the Maccabean Revolt. It is a remarkable declaration of faith in God's overruling purpose that could not, and would not, be thwarted by the devices of evil persons, no matter how powerful and tyrannical they might be.³⁴ This kind of attitude, Russell says, is revealed in many other apocalyptic writings in the ensuing years. Most of them, like Daniel itself, were perhaps the result of persecution or the political and economic pressures of the times. Though some of the books do not bear the marks of crisis, the same message of urgency about the shortness of time and the end of time is evident.³⁵

This section can be concluded by saying that, though there is no single setting for all the apocalyptic books, the individual apocalyptic writings or books themselves reflect the historical situation out of which they arose, and that these situations helped to create the writings. Having dealt with the apocalyptic as a crisis phenomenon and explained its social settings, it is important to consider the function(s) of apocalyptic literature.

Literary Functions

In the preceding section, it was apparent that the social setting of the apocalyptic genre poses complex problems which make

³⁴ Russell, *Method and Message of Jewish Apocalyptic*, 16-17.

³⁵ Russell, *Method and Message of Jewish Apocalyptic*, 17.

³⁶ Collins indicates that the literary function must be seen to be wholly related to the form and content. Whatever the underlying problem, Collins argues that it is viewed from a distinctive apocalyptic perspective. This perspective, he adds, is framed spatially by the supernatural world and temporally by the eschatological judgment. The problem is viewed in the light of a transcendent reality disclosed by

generalisations of limited value.³⁶ Nevertheless, it is possible to speak of the literary function of a text apart from its social setting. Three functions have been suggested: the persuasive, informative, and expressive functions.³⁷

Persuasive

Rhetoric plays a role in almost all texts. As Burke shows, rhetoric is the use of words by human agents to form attitudes or induce actions in other human agents. Identification is the rhetorical motive behind the call for a change of attitudes and actions. In other words, the writer urges the readers to identify with him or her by experiencing and adopting the same attitudes that he or she espoused. The apocalyptic writers make use of rhetorical devices to involve their readers in their message. These *persuasive* texts seek to exhort the reader to persevere and not to be discouraged by the current oppression and suffering inflicted by the unrighteous.³⁸ It is, then, no wonder that Hellholm has suggested that the definition of apocalypse in *Semeia* 14 be amended by the following addition: “intended for a group in crisis with the purpose of exhortation and/or consolation by means of divine authority”.³⁹ As indicated by Collins, the main problem with specifying the function in the definition is that, even on this general level, the purpose of a text may be a matter of dispute.⁴⁰ For instance,

the apocalypse, putting the problem in perspective, and projecting a definitive resolution to come. He continues to say that this “apocalyptic technique” provides a resolution in the imagination by instilling conviction in the revealed “knowledge” that it effects (Collins, *Apocalyptic Imagination*, 32).

³⁷ Vorster, “Texts with an Apocalyptic Perspective”, 181-184.

³⁸ Kenneth Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), xiv-xv.

³⁹ David Hellholm, “The Problem of Apocalyptic Genre and the Apocalypse of John”, SBL Seminar Paper

one may ask, “Is the function of 4 Ezra to console or to instruct and refute?” However, it can generally be maintained that one of the literary functions of Jewish apocalypses is exhortation and consolation.

It is imperative to indicate that the nature of the exhortation or the kind of stance upheld may vary.⁴¹ For instance, an apocalypse may support either militant revolution or passive resistance. This can be seen from 1 Enoch and Daniel. The Animal Apocalypse in 1 Enoch encourages support for the Maccabean revolt. On the other hand, Daniel, written in the same setting, seeks to console and strengthen those who were faithful to their religion and were, therefore, threatened with death. It is also important to note that the consolation and exhortation are sometimes made clear, but are usually conveyed indirectly, through the worldview portrayed in the apocalypse.⁴²

To illustrate variations in the exhortations, it is useful to consider two exhortations as they appear in different texts. In 1 Enoch 92-105, the exhortation is in a special sense, and there is little ethical admonition, though it is present and implicit. The main verbs in the exhortations are of a different order: fear not; grieve not; take courage; be hopeful; rejoice. Given the astounding world there is a temptation to give way to fear, grief, dismay, despair, and sadness. Into this phenomenal world, as it is experienced by the righteous, the author’s message comes as “good news”, as a revelation that things are not as they appear to be. To the community that possesses this revelation,

21 (1982): 168.

⁴⁰ Collins, *Apocalyptic Imagination*, 32.

⁴¹ Wilson has drawn attention to the fact that the stance of a particular document varies with the tradition from which it comes (Robert R. Wilson, ‘From Prophecy to Apocalyptic: Reflections on the Shape of Israelite Religion’, *Semeia* 21 [1981]: 92).

there is now, currently, a moment of salvation. Therefore, in the phenomenal world of injustice and deprivation, the little flock can live without fear and grief, in hope and courage and joy.⁴³ As Collins shows, the writer of 1 Enoch 104:14 and 94:1, the fear of personal loss, of pursuing an unprofitable course of action, and especially of the ultimate loss of death, is countered by the hope of a form of life that transcends death. This hope gives the freedom necessary to respond freely to the demands of righteousness and so attain the present depth experience in life.⁴⁴

In the book of Daniel, with the belief that the course of history is predetermined and that its end is assured, the future of the wise was projected beyond this life, in a resurrection and the world of the angels. Life is, thus, bounded by a supernatural world; therefore, the revelation mediated by the angels is very important.⁴⁵ He shows that this imaginative construction enables the persecuted Jews to cope with the crisis of the persecution by bringing its atrocity to expression, so that it can be clearly recognised, by providing assurance that the forces of evil will inevitably be overcome by a higher power and by providing a framework for action, since it provides an explanation of the world that supports those who have to lay down their lives if they are to remain faithful to their religion. That is to say, “it provides a basis for non-violent resistance to Hellenistic rule, even in the throes of the Maccabean rebellion”.⁴⁶ Furthermore, the angels form a necessary part of Daniel’s construction of reality. It was their faith in the angelic

⁴² Collins, *Daniel with an Introduction to Apocalyptic Literature*, 22.

⁴³ George W. E. Nickelsburg, ‘Apocalyptic Message of 1 Enoch 92-105’, *CBQ* 39 (1977): 326.

⁴⁴ John J. Collins, ‘Apocalyptic Eschatology as the Transcendence of Death’, in *Visionaries and their Apocalypses*, ed. Paul Hanson (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), 76-77.

⁴⁵ Collins, *Apocalyptic Imagination*, 91.

⁴⁶ Collins, *Apocalyptic Imagination*, 92.

world and in the possibility of future participation in it that enabled the *maskilim* to withstand the persecution without compromising their integrity. Also, the angelic world symbolises the transcendence of values, the conviction that there is more to reality than the physical world. This offers the reader the assurance that commitments are more important than the prolongation of one's individual life.⁴⁷ Collins adds that when the angel sums up the message of the preceding visions in the words "blessed are they who stand firm" Dan.12:12), he is encouraging the just to stand firm in the promise of the resurrection which has been given at the beginning of the chapter. Besides, he assures them that, hile they are standing firm, they are blessed.⁴⁸ Fohrer writes that the book seeks to strengthen the patience and courage of the devout who were suffering persecution by giving them new hope. Also, the writer seeks to exhort them to remain loyal to their faith as Daniel did, even to the point of martyrdom. It further seeks to assure them that the period of suffering will soon be over because the day is near when God will bring the powers of the world to an end and inaugurate his eternal reign.⁴⁹ Commenting on the vision in chapters 7 to 12, Eissfeldt asserts that the author wished to persuade those who were suffering with him of the certainty that everything they had to bear was not the result of blind chance but had been predetermined by God long ago.⁵⁰

In sum, as pointed out by Ferguson, apocalyptic literature was written to meet the question of how continued persecution could be

⁴⁷ John J. Collins, 'Daniel and his Social World', in *Interpreting the Prophets*, eds. James L. Mays & Paul J. Achtemeier (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 258-259.

⁴⁸ Collins, 'Apocalyptic Eschatology', 76.

⁴⁹ Georg Fohrer, *Introduction to Old Testament*, trans. David E. Green (Nashville: Abingdon, 1968), 479.

⁵⁰ Otto Eissfeldt, *The Old Testament: An Introduction*, trans. Peter R. Ackroyd (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1974), 528.

squared with Israel as the chosen people of God, who is just and merciful.⁵¹ In this vein, as discussed above, the apocalyptic writers sought to strengthen the faith of their readers and to instil hope. The persuasive function of apocalyptic literature, then, played an important role among the suffering faithful. “It wishes to *persuade* people to interpret life in a specific way.... To persuade the readers to persevere and not to become discouraged by the oppression and suffering caused by the wicked”.⁵² However, as indicated by the two examples from different texts, the exhortations varied from text to text.

Expressive Function

Certain portions of the apocalyptic literature have an expressive function, which come close to the persuasive function. The language of apocalyptic writings is not descriptive, but an expressive language of poetry that uses symbols and imagery to articulate a sense or feeling about the world. This is achieved by the language used to voice the writer’s convictions, feelings and faith. Such expressive uses of language are to be found in the numerous prayers that occur in the apocalyptic literature. An example of such is Dan.9:4-19. Commenting on this prayer, Vorster explains that the writer, using aesthetically-effective language, gives voice to his feelings of trust, dependence, repentance and union with God. This allows the readers *identify* themselves with Daniel in such a way that they will emulate him even if this results in persecution, martyrdom or torture.⁵³

⁵¹ Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, 380.

⁵² Jasper J. Burden, ‘The Book of Daniel’ in *Dialogue with God*, eds. Jasper J. Burden and Willem S. Prinsloo (Cape Town: Tabelberg, 1987), 213.

⁵³ Vorster, ‘Texts with an Apocalyptic Perspective’, 182.

Informative Function

As Hartman and di Lella show, much of the material in the apocalyptic literature is presented with the aim to *informing* the reader.⁵⁴ Many of the descriptions in the apocalyptic literature are intended to provide the reader with a symbolic universe that will enable them to make better sense of their situation and to live a more-meaningful life in it.⁵⁵ The books of Daniel and 1 Enoch illustrate this function.

Daniel's vision (chap. 7), involving a symbolic narrative about the judgment upon Antioch IV, Epiphanes serves as an example. The writer claims to know the inner plan of God who is Lord of history and the Vindicator of his people Israel. Because of this knowledge, the apocalyptic writer informs believers that the present distress will end, and an age of bliss will follow under the reign of God.⁵⁶ The book of Daniel informs the reader that "the people who are loyal to their God" (Dan 11:32) are the ones "who act wisely (and) make the multitude understand" (11:33). The practising Jews will be tested with sword and flames, exile and plunder (11:33) "to refine, cleanse, and purify them" (11:35). It continues to inform them that violence and bloodshed are not the answer to persecution. Rather, it is patience and perseverance alone that enable the believer in the God of Israel to overcome (12:12), for even death itself becomes for them a means of ultimate and glorious victory (12:3). In addition, the legends the author recounts in chapters 1 to 6 show the reader how faithful adherence to Jewish religion and custom could bring the pious into temporary distress.

⁵⁴ Louis F. Hartman and, Alexander A. Di Lella, *The Book of Daniel* (New York: Doubleday, 1978), 62.

⁵⁵ Vorster, "Texts with an Apocalyptic Perspective", 181.

⁵⁶ Hartman and Di Lella, *Book of Daniel*, 62.

In 1 Enoch, the astronomical book in 1 Enoch 72-82 is meant primarily as an explanation of the laws governing the movements of celestial bodies such as the sun and the moon and as an apology for the solar calendar of 364 days. These descriptions are given to inform the reader, not only about the workings of the celestial bodies, but also about the changes that are going to take place because of the sins of the unrighteous.⁵⁷

Apocalyptic literature, therefore, seeks to inform the reader of God's plan to save them from the present distress and of the blessed age to come. It informs the reader that they should not react to persecution by violence. In addition, the faithful are reminded that those who remain faithful to God in times of persecution count as the wise. With such information, the reader could learn to endure the hardships.

Overall, the effect of the apocalyptic is to create faith in dire circumstances. One may wonder how people in hopeless situations receive hope through rhetoric. The apocalyptic achieves its effect by drawing back the curtains and allowing the reader to see eschatological victory of God. The apocalyptic writings put the problem in perspective and predict a definite future solution. This skill provides a way to triumph over the powers of suffering through imaginative reconstruction of the meaning of their actions.

AFRICAN REFLECTION

The Jewish apocalyptic writings have much to tell the African. While the milieu of the writings reflects some situations of African people, the literary functions serve as an important tool to sustain the African in their difficult situations.

⁵⁷ Vorster, "Texts with an Apocalyptic Perspective", 181.

⁵⁸ Source: Al Jazeera, "Burkina Faso Military Coup: How the World Reacted". From Aljazeera.com, 25 Jan 2022.

Situation of Contemporary Africa

Africa is a continent blessed with resources that should make its people prosperous and happy. However, these resources are enjoyed by a few, leading to suffering of many kinds of most of the population. Just as crisis of various varieties created apocalyptic communities in ancient Jewish society, so has crisis of different kinds (social injustice, marginalisation, poverty, diseases and others) created what can be called “apocalyptic communities” in Africa. The contemporary African world is full of an oppressive burden of evil. Awful things such as rape, kidnappings, ritual murder, motor accidents due to careless driving, happen every day. This majority appears to be powerless and voiceless. The abuse of power is at variance with the virtues of public accountability and personal responsibility. It leads to communities being socio-economically marginalised. Thus, just as prevailed in ancient Judah, relationships in society and social structures in Africa promote injustice and inequality between the powerful and powerless, rich and poor, beneficiaries and victims.

The continent is experiencing democratic backsliding.. Some countries suffer decline in political rights and civil liberties. This regression has set the stage for the military to seize power or at least use it as pretext for military action. Because of the alienation and suffering of the majority, the masses showcase support for the military. Many of the citizens have lost faith in their governments’ ability to protect them from militant fighters and to meet the needs confronting them. After one of the recent coups in Burkina Faso, referring to West Africa’s regional political bloc, a demonstrator, Armel Ouedraogo, said, “ECOWAS doesn’t care about us, and the international

community only wants to condemn. This is what we want”⁵⁸. This and many such statements show that groups of people on the African continent are fed up with their system of governance, policies of governments and the leaders who rule them. Apocalyptic communities have been created in Africa.

Literary Functions

The functions of apocalyptic writings have messages for contemporary Africa. First, the persuasive function of Jewish apocalyptic writings has much to tell Africans. The apocalyptic writers invite Africans to identify with them by adopting their attitude towards alienation and suffering. Africans are exhorted to persevere in their situation, and not to be discouraged by their present suffering afflicted to them by the wicked. The writings console and exhort the suffering population of the African continent. The African Christian is to continue the path of faithfulness in the midst of trials and pain. Just as the book of 1 Enoch issues, the African believer should not fear and grieve, but rather take courage, be hopeful and rejoice. The believer is to overcome despair, sadness and their associated emotional problems. As the book of Daniel shows, the believer should know that God controls human history and that he is in control of the present bad condition and situation of the believer. This means that the Africa believer should not resort to violence, but a non-violent resistance of evil rule on the continent. The believer should counter the unpleasant condition with the hope of a life beyond the present situation. This hope offers the needed freedom to respond freely to the demands of righteous living.

Secondly, Africans should reflect on the expressive function of apocalyptic writings. Thus, the language of the prayers of the supplicants teaches the African a great lesson. The suffering African is encouraged to express themselves in their situation to God in prayer. For example, Daniel's prayer in Dan 9:4-19 exhorts the African to confess their sins and those of their leaders to God; they are to express their trust and dependence on God; and indicate their belief in God's plan for their lives. This would help them to maintain their faith in God even in difficult times.

Thirdly, reflecting on the informative function plays a major role in the life of the African. The descriptions in the apocalyptic writings provide the African a symbolic universe that enables them to make better sense of their situation and live a more-meaningful life in their situation. For example, the book of Daniel informs the African that, first, God is in control of human history and the vindicator of those loyal to them; second, that the present distress will end and would be ushered into a blissful state under God's rulership; thirdly, it informs the African that violence and bloodshed are not the solutions to their problems, but that patience and perseverance would enable them overcome their distress. Furthermore, it reminds the African to remain faithful to God in their difficult situation to be counted as wise.

In sum, the Jewish apocalyptic writings create faith in the African in their seemingly-hopeless situations. They allow the African to see God's eschatological victory for his people, for apocalyptic writings put the problem in perspective and predict a definite future solution. This skill provides a way to triumph over the powers of suffering through imaginative reconstruction of the meaning of actions.

Conclusion

The milieu of Jewish apocalyptic writings shows that the present situation of most African people is not new. Some faithful people among ancient Jews have gone through similar situations – alienation, persecution, oppression and even death. The African can, therefore, reflect on the situations of the past, identify themselves with them and learn lessons from them. The literary functions of the apocalyptic writings have much to share with African people. The persuasive, expressive and informative functions serve as tools to enable the African face life with hope and expectations. It encourages the African to be faithful to God in times of troubles. It teaches that God rules in our chaotic world, that He reacts to evil and sin, and will cause evil to end, and that there is hope for the faithful. Finally, the Jewish apocalyptic writings provide a manual for Christian ministers in performing their pastoral duties as well as how to console their congregants in times of disaster, bereavement, alienation and others, by drawing attention to the eschatological future and the future bliss.

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