

APOCALYPTIC LITERATURE: IMAGES OF THE END

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What is Apocalyptic Literature?

The term apocalypse comes from a Greek word meaning "to uncover or lift up, what has been hidden under." It is most simply translated "revelation." It is the first word in the Greek text of the book of Revelation, explaining this book's English appellation (and why it is occasionally called the Apocalypse of John).

Some books and parts of books in the Old Testament are very similar to Revelation and are also called apocalyptic: Daniel (particularly chapters 7-12), Zechariah, Joel, and Isaiah 24-27, are examples of apocalyptic writing in the Old Testament. Most examples come from late in the history of Israel, and there are many examples of non canonical apocalypses written in the period of time between the testaments. The book of Enoch is perhaps the best known and is actually included in some contemporary Bibles whose traditions recognize certain apocryphal books.

The term *apocalypse* has entered our everyday language. It's not uncommon to hear our time in history described as an "apocalyptic age." In terms of everyday usage, the word indicates the end of history and even further, the violent end of history.

This usage isn't too far from the biblical reality. The books listed above as apocalyptic, each at least in part, describe the process and end of history in violent terms. Daniel 7 pictures evil empires as hybrid beasts against which the Son of Man and the saints of the Most High do battle. The book of Zechariah closes with a description of the Day of the Lord when God will lead His holy army to destroy His enemies and save His people. Jesus Christ appears on a white horse leading an army against the forces of evil in Revelation 19. Thus, apocalyptic literature contains prophecy in the distant sense, with vivid images of the end of time.

Pictures of the End

Like prophecy, of which it is a type, apocalyptic literature often begins in the present and then turns to the future. The main difference between prophecy and apocalypse has to do with the scope of its vision. While apocalyptic writing does refer to the near future: it goes far beyond the next few years—or even the next few centuries—to anticipate the end of history as we know it. Daniel 7 is a concise example. Let's look into it for more insight about apocalyptic writings.

In this chapter Daniel records a vision he experienced while he was lying in bed. He sees the coast of the sea, the waves dashing against the beach. Out of the sea emerges the first of four beasts—a hybrid. At first it appears as a lion with eagle's wings, but then it transforms into a human being. After the first, a second beast appears—a bear. The emphasis is on its two-sided nature as it lifts itself up and chews on three ribs. The third beast is a monster with mixed characteristics. Apparently its body is that of a leopard, but it also has four wings and four heads.

Little detail accompanies the description of the fourth and last monster to emerge from the sea. Indeed, no known animal is mentioned, the focus being on the iron teeth that devour those who stand before it, and its ten horns. The vision of this terrifying beast continues as a new horn appears, uprooting the first three and self-confidently boasting.

The scene then dramatically shifts to another realm. Here we discover rather humanlike figures. First an old man, called the Ancient of Days, seated on His throne. The scene is awe-inspiring, conveying a flame-engulfed throne, a river of fire flowing out from it, and countless thousands of people in a courtroom. Into His presence comes a second humanlike figure, riding the clouds. He "was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and men of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed" (Daniel 7: 14).

The picture is just incredible. We gain a sense of power in both parts of the chapter, evoking feelings of horror and awe. But what are we to make of it all? It seems too strange, too weird for us to grasp. And we aren't the only ones to have this reaction: "I, Daniel, was troubled in spirit, and the visions that passed through my mind disturbed me. I approached one of those standing there and asked him the true meaning of all this" (Daniel 7: 15-16).

Almost always in apocalyptic writing a supernatural being assists with the interpretation. God uses His angelic creatures to guide the person who receives the revelation toward the meaning of the vision or dream, though the one who receives the message is always left—as we often are—with a great measure of



mystery. In this case, the angelic interpreter gets right to the heart of the first half of the vision: "The four great beasts are four kingdoms that will rise from the earth." Interestingly, the angel does not then go on and give clear and decisive identification of the four kingdoms or of the subsequent horns. It's enough to say that world history will be characterized by successive human governments that will be sources of fear and danger to God's people.

We can make some probable identifications, of course, but the further we go in the list the more difficult that becomes. It's important to note that the vision begins in Daniel's time. That is, the first beast is most likely Babylonia, the empire in power at the time Daniel receives the vision. Though apocalyptic writing is ultimately concerned about the end of history, it begins, like prophecy, in the present.

While the first beast roots the prophecy in Daniel's day, the following beasts stretch out the vision into the indefinite future. The repeated description of future kingdoms as hybrid beasts magnifies the evil of these human kingdoms. The fact that the beasts are made up of more than one type of animal would have produced a reaction of horror and revulsion in the original Israelite readers. The Old Testament creation account makes it clear that God's original creation kept every one of God's creatures separate; they were created "according to their kind." The laws in Deuteronomy go to great pains to prohibit any mixing of different animals or even material fabric (22:9-11).

Even the setting of the vision has symbolic overtones and adds to the horror of the scene. By the time Daniel lived and wrote, in the sixth century B.C., the sea was a well-established image for denoting the forces that stood against God. God was the one who established order out of chaos and the sea represented a reversion to chaos. At times in poetic literature, God was the One who waged war against the sea (Psalm 77, 114; Nahum 1) and its monsters (Leviathan, Psalm 74).

Further study shows that much of the imagery of this chapter the sea image, for example-comes from the ancient Near East. From before the time the Bible was written, the religious literature of people like the Canaanites and the people of ancient Mesopotamia saw the creator-gods as locked in combat with the forces of chaos represented by a sea deity. The Bible, especially in poetic and apocalyptic passages, utilized imagery from the broader cultural background of the Israelites.

A similar phenomenon occurs in the second half of the vision. The cloud rider is also a well-established biblical image by the time of Daniel's vision. God rode the clouds into battle, according to passages like Psalm 18:11-12, 68:4, 104:3; Jeremiah 4:13; and Nahum 1:3. The clouds are the battle chariot of God, which makes it obvious that the "one like the son of man" is a divine figure. This picture image, like that of the sea, has an ancient Near Eastern background. In ancient Canaanite documents the god Baal is frequently called "the cloud rider." Once again God uses images that are well known in the surrounding culture in order to communicate truth about Himself.

The principle we need to recognize in our reading of biblical apocalypse is that at least a good part of the material that strikes us as strange was not strange to the original audience. They knew the images well from earlier Scripture and from their broader cultural background. Since we are no longer in direct contact with these traditions we must do some study and research to recover a better understanding of these passages. Even without this kind of research and study we can still understand the basic message of apocalyptic writings and Daniel 7 in particular. But if we take advantage of all the resources available to us, our understanding will be far richer and possibly more accurate.

The climax of Daniel 7 comes when the two realms, the evil human kingdoms represented by hybrid beasts and the divine realm represented by human images, clash. Initially, the evil human kingdoms will appear to dominate the world, destroying everything before them. But here is what happens with a simple decision from the Ancient of Days:

Power will be taken away and completely destroyed forever. Then the sovereignty, power and greatness of the kingdoms under the whole heaven will be handed over to the saints, the people of the Most High. His kingdom will be an everlasting kingdom, and all rulers will worship and obey him. (Daniel 7:26-27)

Victory Assured

Apocalyptic writings rip away the veil that separates us from heaven. God calls the prophet and shows him what is in store for the future. By narrating his vision the prophet gives us a highly symbolic picture of what is to come. God both reveals and conceals as he speaks to us in the apocalyptic poetic images. He informs us accurately but not with precision. We get the basic point but not necessarily all the details.