

The Characteristics of Apocalyptic Literature

- **What are the characteristics of apocalyptic?**

The word *apocalyptic* comes from the Greek meaning “to reveal” or “to uncover.”

Apocalyptic is a type of literary genre and theological ideology current in the time of Jesus. The literature appeared in times of persecution to encourage faithfulness on the part of the persecuted. The thought pattern emphasized the dualistic conflict between the forces of good and forces of evil. The present age of persecution was dominated by evil, but God would intervene, destroy the persecutor and establish a new age. The literature itself was characterized by elaborate symbolism and imagery.

The single most important element in the development of apocalyptic comes from Persian thought. It was the Persians who contributed the dualistic view of the universe.

There are two basic characteristics which are central in Jewish apocalyptic thought:

1. dualism
 2. eschatology
1. **Dualism:** The battle being waged on the cosmic level between the forces of good and the forces of evil was being felt in this world, particularly by God’s people. It was believed, however, that the time would come (usually very soon) when the persecution of the people would be withdrawn. In this type of situation the idea of two ages became very prevalent, the present evil age, dominated by forces of evil persecuting the people of God, would increase in intensity until God intervened, destroyed the persecutor, and established a new age in which the persecutor had been eliminated. The present situation was believed to be so harsh that nothing short of God’s intervention could remove the evil. These two elements, dualism and the two age motif, become foundation for apocalyptic thought.
 2. **Eschatology:** The study of “end things.” It may denote the end of all things, but it most often denotes the end of a particular era or segment of one’s life or a specific period such as a period of persecution. The meaning intended must be determined by an examination of the literary piece. The term may also be used to refer to something of great and special significance, something which has ultimate significance. The “end” must be understood against the background of the individual writing and not automatically understood as the “end of the world.”

Therefore, the two primary characteristics of apocalyptic literature are a belief in dualism, the presence of good and evil forces in the created order, and in eschatology, the belief that there will be a climactic confrontation between those forces of good and evil which will inaugurate a new age.

Secondary characteristics of apocalyptic are called “secondary apocalyptic characteristics” (I thought you might like that)!! These characteristics tend to exaggerate symbolism and imagery to illustrate the points the writer is trying to make.

1. **unusual and weird beasts** – represent kingdoms or nations.
2. **heads of beasts** – symbolize leaders of nations.
3. **horn** – symbol of power, or sometimes one who exercises power, a ruler or king.
4. **numerology** – the use of numbers to symbolize certain ideas.
 - a. **Three** – spiritual realm
 - b. **Four** – created order
 - c. **Five** – human completeness
 - d. **Seven** – completeness
 - e. **Ten** – totality
 - f. **Twelve** – the people of God
 - g. **Three-and-one-half** – the length of time that the powers and forces of evil are allowed to exercise authority over the people of God.
5. **Colors**
 - a. White – victory; sometimes purity but not often
 - b. Red – war
 - c. Black – lack, want, pestilence, famine...
6. **Pessimism and Determinism** – no hope for the present evil age. History is running a course, a course which would ultimately be completed with the persecution god and the people of God free to worship and live as they were required by their religious faith, in the new age. Both of these were used to give the people hope.

These characteristics of apocalyptic were depicted as having been given to or seen by the author in a “vision.” When the author uses the vision motif, there is always someone (usually an angel) to interpret the vision.

Apocalyptic literature is not written in code to hide the meaning of the works from the persecutors. However, this is a popular theory. The fact is that **the wild symbolism is interpreted in the text**. The elaborate symbols were to present evil in such a hideous manner to emphasize the greatness of the one who is the destroyer of the evil.

One must remember in dealing with apocalyptic that the writing was intended to give hope to a people who were experiencing serious persecution. All the elements in each book were designed to sustain faith and engender strength for the horrible days ahead. The promise was that the persecution would soon be over and that the worst that the persecutor could do was nothing compared to the grand things to come for those who endured!