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Envisioning *The Book of Daniel* as Apocalyptic Literature with Contextual Relevance

Dr. Lyola Thomas
Assistant Professor,
Kristu Jayanti College Autonomous,
Bangalore.

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Abstract:

This research article seeks to trace an overview of Apocalyptic Literature, its peculiar characteristics, and its position in the genealogy of the History of English Literature. The paper also attempts to discern the distinct niche apocalyptic literature occupies with particular reference to the Book of Daniel. This research article was prompted by the view that The Book of Daniel has not received its just due from academic research experts from the field of literature nor has it achieved the paramount attention it deserves from apocalypse aficionados literary or otherwise even though it holds within it an array of apocalyptic material. This research paper hopes to sieve out the major literary elements in The Book of Daniel that has the irresistible ability to catch the imagination of its perusers as it is loaded with apocalyptic symbols that hold relevance to these apocalyptic times of today.

Key Terms: History of English Literature, Intertextuality, Apocalyptic Literature, Symbolism, Supernatural Beings, The Book of Daniel, Literary elements, Apocalyptic times and Current trends in Research and literature.

*Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned; - The Second Coming, W. B. Yeats*

The world we live in seems to be collapsing within itself. The year 2020 has been particularly ominous with nation after nation reeling under the onslaught of the barrage of disasters and calamities that strike and affect them both natural and manmade. As the times and the age keeps turning and turning in an ever-widening gyre, it certainly seems that the 'center cannot hold and the falcon cannot hear the falconer'. The world we live in is fast transforming into an unfamiliar world where we seek to traverse uncharted territory. The enormity of the dangers we face in the light of the pandemic truly make the world seem as if it were reeling toward an apocalyptic end. "Surely some revelation is at hand" an opportune moment for academicians to turn our attention toward the wide and varied field of Apocalyptic Literature.

The word Apocalypse comes to us from the Greek word *apokalypsis* which the literal meaning is "something uncovered" or "revealed." Apocalypse comes to us in the English language as defined by Webster among many other dictionaries as that which refers to a foreboding imminent disaster, a final doom or to forecast the ultimate destiny of the world. The word apocalyptic is the adjective form that refers to something momentous or catastrophic. A general misconception would be that the apocalyptic literature would be an emergent form of literature that caters to the modern apocalyptic times and answers the needs of the dystopic era but the truth is in fact far removed from this. Apocalyptic Literature can be traced as far back as to the third century.

It emerged as a new genre of literature in early Jewish tradition commencing sometime in the third century BCE. Apocalyptic thinking has been called "the child of prophecy in a new idiom." This idea aptly reflects both its origins out of the older prophetic tradition and its new elements. For prophecy in ancient Israel, even down to the period of the Babylonian exile, had little to do with predicting the future or forecasting historical events. (White)

To gain its full form and blossom as a genre of its own standing this particular brand of writing incorporated the additional influence of Greek and Persian Literature.

chief among these were influences from first the Persian culture and then the Greek, in the period from the fifth to the third centuries BCE. In this vein, apocalyptic has also



been called "a product of hope and despair; hope in the eternal power of God and despair over the present evil conditions of the world." This sense of dualism, drawn chiefly from Persian Zoroastrianism, is characteristic of the genre, but specifically looks at time and history in dualistic categories: the present evil age will give way to a glorious new age. The break between these two was usually termed the "end" or "last things" (Greek: eschaton or eschata), meaning the "end" of the present evil age. The outlook of apocalypse literature thus recounts how the world will work itself out in this manner (White)

Characteristics of Apocalyptic Literature

It was K. I. Nietzsche, a German scholar who came up with the term 'Apocalypse' in relation to this particular brand of writing in the year 1822. As such Apocalyptic literature has certain very exclusive characteristics and is generally presented by an author who does not wish to be known by name, "it takes narrative form, employs esoteric language, expresses a pessimistic view of the present, and treats the final events as imminent (Britannica) hence most Apocalypse works are pseudonymous with some of them written by some ancient figure and some tracing its origin to some ancient culture or learned and historic civilization. Another common feature that can be seen in most apocalyptic work is that the work emerges as a response or rejoinder to forms of authoritarian oppression and persecution that may be religious or political so much so that apocalyptic literature has also been called resistance literature. In most apocalyptic literature we find the appearance of a supernatural being appearing or issuing edicts, providing dreams or visions, some of which are explained and some of which are not. The source and content of this prophetic knowledge generally seems otherworldly and it is the burden of the author to present it in some form that makes sense to common mortals and it is mostly presented as mysterious texts heavily loaded with symbols. Thus, a common element in apocalyptic text is the presence of creatures and beings that humans are unfamiliar with adding to the transcendental nature of the text. This provides the effect of inviting the reader not to be established in his/her present physical circumstance and environment but invites their attention into a spiritual realm that exists beyond the limits of the time space continuum of this world. This spiritual realm often reflects a world that is dominated by what is good and right unlike the present oppressive environment that is overpowered by evil, this presents an environment of contrast and duality

which coexist and jostle for space in the binary world peopled by mortals who harbour a latent expectation to a final showdown which requires a divine intervention.

Linear Literary Dossier

The Bible is the model for and subject of more art and thought than those of us who live within its influence, consciously or unconsciously, will ever know. (Robinson). Many literary figures have attested to the verity of this fact. There is no doubt that Biblical Literature has had inestimable influence on the literatures of the world “the work created by the author of the Primary History is at the basis of the Jewish, Christian and Islamic civilization and has thus become the most influential literary work of world history” (Wesselius). Thus it is becoming an increasingly relevant exercise to analyse this literary work and gain literary perspectives about its origins and literary traditions to gain a better and insightful understanding of the literary works that owe its influence to the Bible as a master literary work that contains all varied literary genres and has been hailed as the bestselling book of all time. Innumerable work and literary research has gone into the study of the contents of the Bible and the method of its expression but recent research trends tend to include the socio political cultural milieu at the time of its production and how it has had a hand in the creation and production of the text – with researchers considering as important the historical background that produced both the original and the translated versions.

The Literary tradition of Linear Literary Dossier which is a relatively recent technique identified in this field refers to the use of “a work that is formally a dossier, but exhibits continuity of actions and contents under this guise” (Wesselius) meaning there may be different versions of the same event but compiled separately yet chronologically so as to give a sense of authenticity as it shows that it has been recorded from different sources, “this is what Wesselius calls a ‘literary linear dossier’ – a compilation of traditions in chronological order, with deliberate disharmonies” (Wajdenbaum). This is also true of the Apocalyptic sections of The Book of Daniel as it is not a given that the various episodes fall one after the other chronologically.



Intertextuality in The Book of Daniel

Scholars have long claimed that a literary understanding of the Book of Revelation demands a thorough understanding of the Book of Daniel primarily because of the amount of similar references found in both, and as the Book of Daniel appears way before the Book of revelation this claim does not seem farfetched, in fact Moyses goes on to quote “contents of the whole book are to be conceived of ultimately within the thematic framework of Daniel 2” (Moyses) But the element of Intertextuality found in the book of Daniel is found in the similarity of myths and motifs that are used in the contemporary pagan societies of the time as seen in recorded history of the time for example in the erection of colossal statues of Kings – which is observed and recounted as an important plot narrative in Daniel too. Another striking example of the use of pagan rituals is the punishment by fire in the cultures of Assyrian, Babylonian and Persian cultures which is similar to the episode of the three friends of Daniel who are commanded to enter the burning fire to prove their innocence.

Symbolism in The Book of Daniel

The book of Daniel though it falls under the genre of Apocalyptic literature also falls under the genre of literary narrative that seeks to narrate the major events that took place in the life of Daniel. Daniel is the central protagonist in the book who was part of a noble family in Jerusalem. When Jerusalem was overthrown and ransacked, he was taken as a prisoner to Babylon by the special order of Nebuchadnezzar who ordered that sons of nobility be captured to help in the administration of his vast empire. He serves the king with great ardour and dedication and becomes well known for his piety to his God so much so that he becomes a great minister even in the court of the next king Cyrus and after that he also works in a very senior capacity in the rule of Darius the Mede. Among the many other characteristics that Daniel was known for he was also known as a man who could interpret dreams. He was able to interpret dreams and visions seeking divine help in these matters. Daniel himself had a lot of visions which he has recorded in the Book of Daniel. Most of these visions incorporate symbols which make it an ideal narrative that opens itself up for literary analysis. Some of the symbols that we see used in the text are the symbols of Four Winds, Tree, Beasts, Earthquake, Head of Gold, Dragon, Clouds and various other animals that symbolise different nations. It becomes interesting to note at this

juncture that though the root word apocalypse comes from the Greek *avpokaluptein* which means ‘to reveal’, ‘to disclose’ it is heavily loaded with symbols that tend to mystify. But then again that could refer to the unveiling of the future happenings and events. The use of symbols is generally used to enrich and add a wealth of meaning than to camouflage meaning. Admittedly the use of the symbols in *The Book of Daniel* may have been relatable to a culture that Daniel was part of but far removed as we are from that culture it might seem enigmatic and mysterious to readers of today. But the other side of the coin in this matter that bears consideration is that if the culture of the time influenced the symbols used can the interpretation gradually become a constant with a universal appeal similar to the universal themes in literature or should we consider them as meaning with a certain fluidity attached to it. Barr also talks about taking this a little further as in how symbols can transform themselves. David L. Barr gives three examples of what he “calls ‘symbolic transformation’ whereby symbols of suffering turn to be symbols of victory” (Barr 1984, 39).

We are however equipped with an added advantage as most of the episodic visions filled with symbols in the text are followed by an interpretation by a divine being whose explanations too Daniel faithfully records. “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 meaning of all this. So he told me and gave me the interpretation of these things: The four great beasts are four kings that will rise from the earth.” Daniel 7:15-17. This helps us dovetail into the next section of this paper which is the intervention of supernatural elements in *The Book of Daniel*.

Supernatural elements

As we read through the various visions of Daniel it becomes evident that the visions are about great countries and empires that span the world, the overthrowing of kingdoms and mighty kings, of mighty governments and domains being supplanted by another that comes to take its place, and as it moves on from Age to Age the reader avidly pores over the texts to decipher who is referred at a particular point to use that as a marker to gain a foothold in the unfolding pattern of history that is painted in front of our eyes through the narrative of Daniel. The reader is



invited to fall and tremble with him as we see what he saw through his eyes and as he describes in graphic detail both the physical and emotional sensations that he undergoes.

Only I, Daniel, saw the vision; the men with me did not see it, but a great terror fell upon them, and they ran and hid themselves. So I was left alone, gazing at this great vision. No strength remained in me; my face grew deathly pale, and I was powerless. I heard the sound of his words, and as I listened, I fell into a deep sleep, with my face to the ground. Suddenly, a hand touched me and set me trembling on my hands and knees. He said to me, “Daniel, you are a man who is highly precious. Consider carefully the words that I am about to say to you. Stand up, for I have now been sent to you.” And when he had said this to me, I stood up trembling - Daniel 10:7 -11

The description of these supernatural divine beings are even more magnificent and intimidating and Daniel attempts to describe them for us too as we see in Daniel 10:5-6 where he provides us with a wonderful description of divine being that he has just witnessed, “I looked up and there before me was a man dressed in linen, with a belt of fine gold from Uphaz around his waist. His body was like topaz, his face like lightning, his eyes like flaming torches, his arms and legs like the gleam of burnished bronze, and his voice like the sound of a multitude.” What Daniel is describing is a being with a face compared to a lightning bolt, eyes that were like burning, flaming torches of fire, limbs that were made of shining metal and gleaming like polished chrome, and a great voice like that of distant crowd all talking at the same time in a soothing yet commanding manner or like the crashing waves in the roar of a distant sea. Not only are we provided with exalted descriptions of these marvelous appearances of these divine beings we also are provided with accounts of their exploits and angelic encounters in the spirit world as we see in Daniel 10:12-13 “Then he said, “Don’t be afraid, Daniel. Since the first day you began to pray for understanding and to humble yourself before your God, your request has been heard in heaven. I have come in answer to your prayer. But for twenty-one days the spirit prince of the kingdom of Persia blocked my way. Then Michael, one of the archangels, came to help me, and I left him there with the spirit prince of the kingdom of Persia. Now I am here to explain what will happen to your people in the future, for this vision concerns a time yet to come.”

The lessons that we learn from Apocalyptic literature are important especially in times such as these, the contextual relevance of Apocalyptic Literature cannot be understated. “In his visionary experiences Daniel was given a fuller understanding of the conflict in which he was personally involved in. It was not limited to his own experience, rather his experience was but one aspect of a cosmic struggle between the kingdoms of this world and the kingdom God is establishing.” (Carson) Individuals all over the world are silently fighting battles on their own, no one is exempt, the struggle is real and valid. Consequently, just as Classicism was an answer to the elaborate excessiveness of the Elizabethan times and romantic lyrical poetry provided comfort during the gradual shift away from classicism and postmodern took the place of modernism the time for Apocalyptic Literature has truly arrived as a response to these cataclysmic times

Though there are no doubt “considerable difficulties in explaining the prophetic meaning of some passages in the book we always find examples worthy of imitation and encouragement to faith and hope. (Henry 612) The stage is set for Apocalyptic literature to flourish and serve as the catalyst that we need for times such as these.

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