

Reduction in the Apocalyptic Focus of the Church in Africa

by

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INTRODUCTION

The church has gone through different phases in history. She is affected by and affects the society in which she functions. The church life is always a ‘response to existing socio-economic political realities.’¹ In current society, the socio-economic situation is such that people are lovers of themselves, selfish, ungodly, evil, lovers of pleasure rather than of God and people of materialistic mindsets. One wonders if the church is different or caught up in ‘the order of the day’ or if she, like apocalyptists of past eras has derided the current situation and is looking forward to ‘a calamitous end by divine intervention;’² a destruction of the present order by God Himself to establish righteousness, justice and a good society.

One way to find out is through research. This paper is therefore a research into whether or not the church in Africa (with Nigeria representing the Continent) is apocalyptic. The features of apocalyptic writings whether in whole or in part ‘build up an *impression* of a distinct kind which conveys a particular *mood* of thought and belief.’³ Hence, the features are used as a yardstick to assess the teaching and preaching ministry of the church since this is the means by which members are educated. The Baptist church (to which the researcher belongs) is used for the study. The study was carried out in 2012 and presented to Dr. Yeboah of the university of Ghana, Legon as well. The research report includes a very brief definition of the church in Africa, a

¹ Brandford Yeboah, Class notes, SREL 607: Apocalyptic Literature (M. A. Study of Religions Sandwich programme), 9 July, 2012.

² M. Rist, ‘Apocalypticism’ in George Arthur Buttrick, Emory Stevens Bucke et al (eds). *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible: An Illustrated Encyclopedia* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 18th printing, 1990), p. 161.

³ D. S. Russell, *The Method and Message of Jewish Apocalyptic*, (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1964), p. 105

discourse on apocalypticism, report of findings from a researcher-designed questionnaire and the researcher's conclusions from her findings.

The Church in Africa

The word 'Church' is from the Greek *ecclesia* and may be used to refer to the saints and sanctified, the believers and the faithful, the people of God, the body of Christ or a community of believers in Christ who are inhabitants in a particular area.⁴ The church in Africa therefore refers to those in Africa who have identified themselves as Christians regardless of their denominational affiliation.

The continent of Africa itself is the second largest continent in the world, 'lying south of Europe, with the Atlantic Ocean to the west and the Indian Ocean to the east' and covering an area of 30,243,910 sq km.⁵ Africa has multifarious cultures with a population of more than the 2008 estimate of 955, 006,740⁶ people. Since no writer can write beyond his or her scope on experience and the writer of this research work is a Nigerian and more conversant with Nigeria, the church in Nigeria is used as representative of the church in Africa. Being a country with a population of about 160 million, with over 521 languages and over 250 ethnic groups;⁷ the most densely populated country in Africa with the largest system of higher education in the continent;⁸ Nigeria is rightly called the 'giant of Africa' and is eligible to represent the continent.

⁴ P. S. Minear 'Church, idea of' in George Arthur Buttrick, Emory Stevens Bucke et al (eds). *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible: An Illustrated Encyclopedia* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 18th printing, 1990), pp. 607 – 617.

⁵ 'Africa,' Microsoft Encarta Dictionary, 2009.

⁶ 'Africa,' Microsoft Encarta Dictionary, 2009.

⁷ <http://www.kwintessential.co.uk/resources/global-etiquette/nigeria.html>

⁸ Tim Curry 'Countries and their Cultures: Nigeria' 'Countries and their Cultures: Culture of Nigeria' <http://www.everyculture.com/index.html>

Apocalypticism

The word “apocalyptic” is derived from the Greek word *apokalypsis* and it ‘means ‘uncovering’ or revelation.’⁹ Thus, literature which goes by this name exposes something that has been hidden but is now brought into the open. Rist describes apocalypticism as originating in ‘Zoroastrianism, the ancient Persian religion’ before it was taken over by Judaism in the exilic and postexilic periods and it mediated into Judaism and early Christianity and now has ‘firm roots ...’ in Christianity and is a ‘popular Christian belief down to the present.’¹⁰ He further defines apocalypticism as

the dualistic, cosmic, and eschatological belief in two opposing cosmic powers, God and Satan (or his equivalent); and in two ages- the present, temporal and irretrievably evil age under Satan, who now oppresses the righteous but whose power God will soon act to overthrow; and the future, perfect and eternal age under God’s own rule when the righteous will be blessed forever.

By this definition, Rist has not only defined apocalypticism but has also given its features/characteristics. These characteristics are what give apocalyptic (literature) ‘a new creation with a character and “personality” of its own’¹¹ even though it is recognizable as ‘a child of prophecy.’¹² Rist categorizes these features into ‘the basic pattern’ and ‘secondary features.’ The former consists of its dualistic and eschatological patterns while the latter includes: vision (which Morris calls revelation),¹³ pseudonymity, A messiah, angelology and demonology, animal symbolism, numerology, predicted woes, and astral influences.¹⁴

⁹ Leon Morris, *Apocalyptic*, (USA: Wm. B. Eerdmans 1972), p. 20.

¹⁰ Rist, M. ‘Apocalypticism’ in George Arthur Buttrick, Emory Stevens Bucke et al (eds). *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible ...*, p. 157

¹¹ D. S. Russell, *The Method and Message of Jewish Apocalyptic*, (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1964), p. 104.

¹² Group 3: Olusola Ayo-Obiremi, Emmanuel Dacosta A.Okai et al ‘Some Characteristics/Features of Apocalyptic Literature’ An assignment done in partial fulfillment of requirements for SREL 607: Apocalyptic literature (M. A. Study of Religions Sandwich programme), 10 July, 2012.

¹³ Leon Morris, *Apocalyptic*, (USA: Wm. B. Eerdmans 1972), p. 34

¹⁴ M. Rist, ‘Apocalypticism’ in George Arthur Buttrick, Emory Stevens Bucke et al (eds). *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible ...*, p. 157

Some of the said characteristics listed by Russell,¹⁵ citing J. Lindblom and E. Stauffer are as many as twenty five but Russell singles out four of them as features which characterize apocalyptic literature as distinct from apocalyptic teaching. These four are: its esoteric character, literary form, symbolic language and pseudonymous authorship. Morris, on the other hand, singles out thirteen features of apocalyptic literature, four of which bear almost exactly the same terms used by Russell. The ones not yet in Rist's list of the thirteen or which go by some other name or are embedded within a larger context are: pessimism, the shaking of foundations, the triumph of God, Determinism (explained as part of astral influences by Rist), its literary form, rewritten history, ethical teaching, prediction and historical perspective.¹⁶ Russell notes that while these features make for the homogeneity of apocalyptic writings; it is not all of them that are found in all apocalyptic discourses. Examples of apocalyptic books identified by Russell include: *The Book of Daniel, I Enoch, the Book of Jubilees, the Psalms of Adam, the Apocalypse of Abraham, II Esdras, III Baruch*¹⁷ and so on with the Book of Daniel being the first and greatest of them all.¹⁸

As Russell has rightly observed that not all characteristics have to be present to determine apocalyptic literature, some have been singled out to assess the teaching and preaching ministry of the (Baptist) Church in order to comment on the level of apocalypticism of the church in 2012. These are: The Conflict between good and evil, darkness and light and between God and Satan; Heaven/paradise, Hell/gehanna, resurrection, judgment, the end times and rapture. These were put in form of a questionnaire and administered to twenty five respondents in all – all of them involved in theological education at some level or the other. Twelve of them are full time

¹⁵ Russell, *The Method of the Jewish Apocalyptic*, pp. 105 – 106.

¹⁶ Group 3: Olusola Ayo-Obiremi, Emmanuel Dacosta A. Okai et al 'Some Characteristics/Features of Apocalyptic Literature,' An assignment done in partial fulfillment of requirements for SREL 607: Apocalyptic literature (M. A. Study of Religions Sandwich programme), 10 July, 2012.

¹⁷ Morris, citing Russell, pp. 22 - 23

¹⁸ Russell, p. 16.

pastors, ten student pastors, one a children's pastor, another a teenager's pastor and two are pastors' wives. They responded to whether or not they have taught or heard; preached or heard teachings/messages on these aspects of apocalypticism from January to July 2012 and the results are given in this paper.

Apocalypticism - The Nigerian Situation

Before analyzing the questionnaires, there is the need to first give an interdenominational picture of Nigerian Christian teaching/ministry because it is apt to measure followership by leadership since like begets like. In Nigeria, there are many ministers of the Christian Gospel who are popular. Some are known truly as Christian ministers and others are controversial. Those who appear on television are very many but some of the more popular ones and what they are identified with are listed below in no particular order:

- Pastor 'Tunde Ojo – one million babies – i. e. ministry to people who need children and subsequent birth of babies;
- Pastor 'Tunde Bakare – current affairs. He has something in common with apocalypticists –i.e. raising 'the standard of revolt against entrenched authorities'¹⁹ but this is and revelation are the only two features he exhibits consistently. Thus, he does not qualify for apocalyptic classification.
- Pastor Chris Oyakhilome – prosperity, healing
- Pastor Chris Okotie – revelations, symbolism/coded language and eschatological /apocalyptic preaching
- Rev. 'Tunde Jooda – Christian life generally
- Rev. Samson Ayorinde – prophetic prayers
- Pastor Adeboye – balanced Christian life and living
- Bishop Oyedepo – prosperity
- Rev. W. F. Kumuyi – holiness
- Rev. Dr. Olukoya – prayer, healing and deliverance
- T. B. Joshua (controversial) – healing and deliverance.

Of these ten ministers, only one is known for apocalyptic teaching/preaching, one for holiness, one for child birth related issues, three for prayer ministrations, healing, deliverance and related issues and two on a balanced Christian life and living. These observations show that there are more ministers dealing with the 'here and now' and survival issues. Prosperity ministers are also

¹⁹ Morris, p. 40.

increasing by the day. The Bible makes it clear that faith comes by hearing and hearing by the Word of God. Hence, it is clear that what people hear in messages and teachings have a long way to go in what they believe and act upon. If there is less of hearing the things related to end times, the destruction of the present world systems, the battle of darkness and light and so on; then, there will likely be less of apocalypticism in the church and society.

The church has become more and more individualistic and there is less of caring and the virtues expected in the church. People run after materialism and recognition. Newspapers daily carry news of people seeking money by all means and committing all sorts of atrocities. Yet, the number of churches is daily on the increase and as someone said, cars, bags and other items are becoming more 'born again' than their owners. In apocalyptic literature, authors are usually pseudonymous. Only, Revelation and Daniel in the Bible have their authors stated. Even with that, though, these Bible books project God and the message, not themselves. In this generation, a good number of pastors seek to make themselves known. Their names and photographs with their spouses are conspicuously displayed on bill boards, advertisement boards, bulletins and so on. The projection of self mars the message they are supposed to proclaim.

Apocalypticism notes and is pessimistic about the gloom in society but is determined to make it to the heavenly kingdom and to overcome when God destroys the evil in the world as a result of the shakings He will do. Unfortunately, many pastors in the society today have the 'if you cannot beat them, join them' approach. In order to verify the hunch that apocalypticism is not being sufficiently taught or preached about in churches today; this researcher designed and administered twenty five copies of a questionnaire. These questionnaires were randomly distributed to those undergoing theological education at the Nigerian Baptist Theological Seminary, Ogbomoso, Nigeria who are also currently involved in either full time or bivocational ministry in the church setting. (A copy is attached as appendix). Of the twenty five people, nineteen were males and six females, all between the ages of twenty and fifty nine. They

represented seven of the thirty six states of Nigeria as a result of their native towns. Out of the twenty five respondents, nineteen people (i.e. seventy six percent) indicated that in Church (Bible teaching on Sunday - called Sunday school, Discipleship training ministry and Small Group age grade meetings and/the Children’s Department); they had taught or heard teachings on resurrection and rapture between January and July, 2012.

Table 1: Response on teaching/learning on Apocalypticism in church from January – July, 2012

No	Topic/Focus	f	%
11	The Conflict between good and evil	10	40%
12	The Conflict between darkness and light.	13	52%
13	The Conflict between God and Satan	11	44%
14	Heaven/paradise	16	64%
15	Hell/Gehanna	9	36%
16	resurrection	19	76%
17	judgement	17	68%
18	The end times	16	64%
19	rapture	19	76%
20	Any other topic related to apocalypticism	4	16%

Many of the respondents confirmed in their comments that apocalyptic messages are not very common in this current dispensation. However, the results show that the Baptist denomination is making good impact through her Sunday Bible teaching (for those who attend faithfully) as this was the forum identified by most respondents where they had taught or learnt about the conflict between good and evil; darkness and light, God and Satan; heaven/paradise, hell/gehanna, resurrection, judgment, rapture and the end times within the first seven months of 2012. Some

others identified small group meetings for their age grade as their fora for the learning experiences. Perhaps one may trace this positive trend to the fact that Baptists have curricula for Sunday school which follows the international/uniform lesson series. The said series takes learners through the whole Bible in a balanced manner in a cycle every three years. The curricula go through various stages of writing and editing before being published and as such, are most likely better thought through than messages and sermons on television and for Sunday worship.

Table 2: Response on *preaching* done/heard on Apocalypticism in church from January – July, 2012

No	Topic/Focus	f	%
21	The Conflict between good and evil	9	36%
22	The Conflict between darkness and light.	9	36%
23	The Conflict between God and Satan	9	36%
24	Heaven/paradise	16	64%
25	Hell/Gehanna	6	24%
26	resurrection	15	60%
27	judgement	13	52%
28	The end times	13	52%
29	rapture	9	36%
30	Any other topic related to apocalypticism	5	20%

From Table 2 above, it is very glaring that the preaching in the Baptist churches during the period under consideration was not sufficiently geared towards apocalypticism. The topic with the highest percentage (64%) is heaven followed by resurrection (60%) and then judgment and the end times (52% each) are still not very high percentages. Besides, they are not matched with or balanced with corresponding teachings on hell and evil. For the teaching to be truly apocalyptic,

the dualism should be obvious. People most likely are made to feel comfortable and have a false feeling of security and assurance of heaven when in fact, they are being nicely packaged for hell. While this paper has looked at the Baptist denomination (and only a fragment of it at that, for constraints of time); the picture may be more glaring where other denominations are included. A survey or statistical evaluation of the radio, television, print media and satellite broadcasts would reveal what the church is saying to the world through her programmes. Likewise, an examination of the so called 'gospel music' which currently tends towards 'success' with regard to riding flashy cars, building houses, eating to satisfaction with 'left overs' and other prosperity and survival themes would likely reveal a great emphasis on the 'here and now.' Such show little thought or teaching on the destruction of the present world order and eternity; the destruction of darkness and the prevailing gloom for light to reign, and other such apocalyptic themes.

CONCLUSION

From the foregoing, it is safe to conclude that there are efforts to do apocalyptic teaching and preaching in the Baptist Church in Nigeria (and possibly other churches and other parts of Africa) but they seem to be drowned in the louder voices of prosperity teaching and preaching, secularization of the church and survival issues. The church in Africa is less apocalyptic when one considers the preaching, teaching, music, social events and the approach, methods and contents of these and many other things in the church.

There is the need to learn from the apocalyptists and to be pessimistic enough of the current situation to show determinism to do right and to emphasize that evil will be destroyed for good to reign, as God will bring all to judgment, destroy every evil work and establish His kingdom. The church needs to wake up to her responsibility to educate the world. Rather than the world being 'churchy' and the church worldly; the difference should be clear as crystal. The Kingdom of Light should be advocated and the kingdom of darkness shunned through balanced

apocalyptic preaching and teaching which should affect lifestyles of people and ultimately the whole society. The church and her leaders need to join the apocalyptists to see their role as that of 'giving the word of God to the men of their day.'²⁰

²⁰ Morris, p. 36.

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