

A Reappraisal of Jewish Apocalyptic Literature

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THE BEGINNINGS OF APOCALYPTIC

Apocalyptic literature was first so called after the best known member of the genre: the New Testament Apocalypse or "The Revelation to John" (as it is entitled in RSV). The extension of the term from the particular to the general is apt, for the Revelation to John exhibits the essential feature of all apocalypses—the "unveiling" to a human being by divine or angelic power of things not normally accessible to knowledge, such as the heavenly throne-room of God in chapters 4 and 5, or the sequence of things to come in chapters 6-22. The revelation may be visual or audible; quite often it is both, as when a vision is explained in words by an interpreting angel (for example, the vision of the scarlet woman on the seven-headed beast in chapter 17 is explained by one of the seven chief angels in terms of the city of Rome supported by the Roman Empire).

This essential feature of apocalyptic appears in literature which is not itself distinctively apocalyptic. It is present in the book of Ezekiel, which is not an apocalypse: we may think of Ezekiel's vision of God in chapter 1, his vision of the valley of dry bones in chapter 37, or his vision of the new temple and commonwealth in chapters 40-48. The valley of dry bones is purely symbolical, and needs to be explained by God; the new temple is quite factual: Ezekiel is taken round it on a conducted tour by a man with a measuring rod, and the architectural complex, with the measurements indicated, was envisaged as being created after the Babylonian exile. If in fact Zerubbabel's temple did not reproduce those measurements, and the post-exilic constitution of Judaea deviated yet more markedly from Ezekiel's blueprint for the new commonwealth, that does not affect the exegesis of Ezekiel's prophecy.

After the exile some of these apocalyptic features reappear in the visions and oracles of Zechariah 1-8, with their veiled allusions to the overthrow of a great power and the reestablishment of the dynasty of David alongside the restored Zadokite priesthood. But in fact the Jewish state settled down to a long and relatively comfortable existence under the Persian kings and (after them) the Hellenistic rulers. From the viewpoint of the author of Chronicles, for whom the ideal had been practically realized in the temple-state with its religious autonomy, there was little room for apocalyptic aspirations. Apocalypses have been called "tracts for bad times," and the Chronicler and

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those who shared his outlook did not think they were living in bad times. If the collapse of the Persian Empire before the armies of Alexander the Great roused hopeful excitement in some Jewish breasts, such excitement soon subsided. The Hellenistic administration was not less efficient than its predecessor, but the sacral constitution and religious liberty enjoyed by the Jews under the Persians were preserved.

The crisis precipitated by the attempt of Antiochus Epiphanes to abolish the Jews' religious autonomy and his diversion of the temple in Jerusalem to the cult of a pagan divinity came as a shock to many of his Jewish subjects. For some time the godly in Israel could see no way

out apart from direct divine intervention, destroying the oppressor and vindicating the oppressed. There were indeed activists in Israel, led by Judas Maccabaeus and other members of the priestly Hasmonaean family, who engaged in guerrilla warfare against the oppressor, and in due course they achieved quite astonishing success. But at the height of the persecution the godly looked to heaven for aid, and their hopes found expression in apocalyptic texts. Many of the apocalyptic visions in the book of Daniel reach their climax in the crisis under Antiochus. Their perspective belongs to the time when the pagan cult, the "abomination of desolation,"¹ has been installed in the temple and nothing short of divine action is expected to expel it. From this unpropitious perspective the visions look forward to the establishment of God's eternal kingdom on the ruins of gentile world dominion. The sovereignty of heaven would be delegated to the persecuted "saints of the Most High,"² this reversal of their fortunes would put an end to sin, atone for iniquity, bring in everlasting righteousness, set the seal of fulfilment on vision and prophecy and consecrate the holy of holies.³

Those in whose eyes these hopes were not realized by the rise of the Hasmonaean dynasty of priest-kings did not give up their hopes: they continued to cherish them but concluded that the time for their fulfilment had been farther extended. The visions of Daniel, with their interpretations, were recast in later apocalypses, and it is interesting to trace the successive attempts to reinterpret the various calculations of the interval preceding the denouement given in Daniel itself (in fact, there are still areas in the underworld of biblical exegesis where such exercises are earnestly and confidently undertaken). In the original Christian message the definitive realization of Daniel's eschatological hope was proclaimed when Jesus began his ministry with the announcement that the appointed time had run its course and the kingdom of God had drawn near,⁴ and spoke, in terms which could scarcely point to another than himself, of the Son of Man who must suffer many things and be set at nought before his revelation in glory.⁵ Daniel's "saints of the Most High" are then the companions of the Son of

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Man, who share his sufferings and his glory, the little flock on which the Father is well pleased to bestow the kingdom.⁶

But the success of the Hasmonaean rising, in bringing about first the rededication of the temple to its proper use (164 B.C.) and then, twenty-two years later, the independence of the Jewish state, bade fair to put an end to apocalyptic speculation. What Daniel in his last vision heard described as "a little help" (Dan. 11:34) had proved much more effective than could have been foreseen in the early days of the resistance. Now that the yoke of the gentiles was thrown off after many centuries, and Israel was now ruled by a native dynasty of priest-kings, was there any further need to look for the direct divine intervention which, but a short time before, had been envisaged as the only way out?

Some thought not: they were well content with the new order. John Hyrcanus (134-104 B.C.) was believed to concentrate in his own person the threefold functions of prophet, priest and

¹ Dan. 8:13; 9:27; 11:31; 12:11; 1 Macc. 1:54.

² Dan. 7:18, 21 f., 27.

³ Dan. 9:24.

⁴ Mark 1:15.

⁵ Mark 8:31; 9:12; Luke 17:25.

⁶ Luke 12:32.

king.⁷ was he not the ideal ruler of the golden age to which the prophets had looked forward? True, the prophets had pictured that ideal ruler as a prince of the house of David; but perhaps (it may have been argued) this should not be understood in terms of physical descent from David but as pointing to a second David who would exhibit the same combination of sacral endowments as had marked the historical David. And when John Hyrcanus began to extend his frontiers by armed force so as to incorporate Idumaea, Samaria, and part of Galilee, was not this the increase of that new kingdom which, by divine action, was to displace gentile imperialism and consolidate the rule of the saints?

Over against those who were well content with the new order, there were others who did not see in the Hasmonaean victory the establishment of everlasting righteousness. To them the Hasmonaeans had more in common with the "little horn" which waged war on the saints⁸ than with the "one like a son of man" to whom the Ancient of Days granted world dominion and judicial authority.⁹ To the Pharisees and kindred groups the Hasmonaeans' increasing persecution of the godly stamped them as the enemies of God, while there were some in whose eyes the Hasmonaeans' assumption of the high priesthood was a new "abomination of desolation." Such people continued to look for the inbreaking of the kingdom of God and indulged in apocalyptic thought and language.

THE APOCALYPTISTS OF QUMRAN

The community of Qumran claims our special attention among such people. We have learned a good deal about this community since the discovery of its library and the excavation of its headquarters in the district of Qumran, north-west of the Dead Sea, in the years following 1947. Its members were first organized by a leader whom they called the Teacher of Righteousness; under his guidance they settled in the wilderness of Judaea,

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where they remained for about two centuries (until the Romano-Jewish war of A.D. 66-73), and were instructed in the part they had to play in the last times. They appear to have regarded themselves as being in the succession of the *maškīlīm* of Daniel 11:33 and 12:3, the "instructors" of the people, and in this they may well have been historically justified. They believed in the exclusive right of the house of Zadok to occupy the high priesthood in Jerusalem: this is in keeping with the outlook of Daniel, where the beginning and end of the Zadokite high priesthood in post-exilic times are eschatologically significant epochs (Dan. 9:25, 26). They repudiated the Hasmonaean high priesthood as illegitimate and thought that the temple and land were so polluted thereby that they had to keep aloof from both. They looked on themselves as the righteous remnant and organized themselves as a miniature Israel in the wilderness. They had a clear understanding of their role in the end time: to them, as the elect of God, authority would be given to act on his behalf in executing judgment on the ungodly. But, until that time came, they must endure suffering at the hands of the wicked establishment. By their endurance of suffering, however, together with their devotion to the study and practice of the divine law, they would accumulate a store of merit which would make expiation for the polluted land.

⁷ Josephus, *Antiquities*, xiii. 299 f.

⁸ Dan. 7:8, 20 f.

⁹ Dan. 7:13 f.

Much of their understanding of this role which they had to fill was based on their method of biblical exegesis—a method first devised by the Teacher of Righteousness. This method was strongly influenced by apocalyptic concepts. In the Aramaic section of Daniel, a divine communication is made in two stages. First there is a vision (like Nebuchadnezzar’s dreams), followed by an interpretation. Neither is complete without the other. So, in the Qumran commentaries on Old Testament scriptures, the biblical text is treated as a mystery or secret (Hebrew *rāz*) which is unintelligible without the interpretation (Hebrew *peshér*). What God revealed to the prophets could not be understood until he put the interpretative key into the hand of the Teacher of Righteousness; then all became luminous. The Teacher and his disciples accordingly praise God for making known to them his wonderful mysteries, by which they mean not only what he is about to do but when he will do it.

All that the prophets had spoken, the men of Qumran believed, referred to the last days which, they were convinced, were now upon them. Figures of Old Testament prophecy were to be identified not with the prophets’ contemporaries but with persons who, from the commentators’ perspective, had recently arisen or were about to arise. This was not, for them, an entirely new exegetical principle: the portrayal of the “king of the north” in the closing part of Daniel 11, for example, is in part a reinterpretation of Isaiah’s portrayal of the Assyrian king¹⁰ and Ezekiel’s portrayal of Gog.¹¹ But the principle is more fully developed in Qumran exegesis. Isaiah’s Assyrian, Ezekiel’s Gog, Habakkuk’s Chaldeans¹² and Daniel’s king of the north are all realized in the last gentile oppressor of Israel—that is, the

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Romans or, as they are commonly called in the Qumran documents, the Kittim. Precedent for so designating the Romans was available in Daniel 11:30, where a Roman fleet which anchored off Alexandria in 168 B.C. is described as “ships of Kittim”—probably because this was regarded as the fulfilment of Balaam’s prophecy about “ships... from Kittim” in Numbers 24:24.

From the ancient predictions of the downfall of those gentile powers the men of Qumran derived their assurance that the Kittim (Romans) would soon be destroyed. The Kittim had been raised up to be the executors of divine wrath against the Hasmonaean dynasty, but the Kittim themselves acted so rapaciously that their own overthrow was inevitable. Just how their overthrow was envisaged at Qumran is spelt out in the *Rule of War*. The opening part of this document is a rewriting or reinterpretation of the closing part of Daniel 11 and the beginning of Daniel 12. The king of the north is no longer a Seleucid monarch but the Roman forces in Syria; the king of the south is no longer one of the Ptolemies but the Roman forces in Egypt. The author had studied not only the rules for a holy war in Deuteronomy 20 but also the tactics and weapons prescribed in the latest Roman military manuals. Thus spiritually and materially equipped, the community would return from the wilderness as the spearhead of the army of the “sons of light.” After six years of war, the dominion of the Kittim would be exterminated and a pure worship would be restored in the Jerusalem temple, under legitimate priests. The seventh year would be observed as a sabbatical year; then the war would be resumed against the other “sons of darkness”—Israel’s traditional enemies in neighbouring countries. There would be seven major battles: in three the sons of light would win and in

¹⁰ Isa. 10:4-34; 31:8 f.

¹¹ Ezek. 38:1 ff.

¹² Hab. 1:6 ff.

three they would be beaten, but in the seventh and last, final victory would be theirs by the aid of their archangelic champion Michael, as foretold in Daniel 12:1.

The stage would thus be set for the introduction of the kingdom of the saints, administered by the great priest of the new age with the Messiah of David's line at his side.¹³ As in Ezekiel's new commonwealth,¹⁴ so in the expectation of the Qumran community the Davidic prince would be subordinate to the priesthood.

The situation did not develop in accordance with the Qumran blueprint for victory. But when it came to war between the Jews and the Romans in A.D. 66, the men of Qumran were not found wanting. Now was the time to come "to the help of the LORD against the mighty"; and they came—only to be crushed by the sons of darkness and to have their headquarters destroyed by fire and steel. If some of the survivors fled across the Jordan and made common cause with part of the dispersed church of Jerusalem, that would explain certain features of the Jewish Christianity of that region in the following generations.

But the men of Qumran did not only reinterpret apocalyptic and prophetic literature according to exegetical precedents established by

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apocalyptists; they composed apocalypses themselves. Several fragments have been recovered of an *Apocalypse of the New Jerusalem*, for which Ezekiel's last vision served as a basis. While they were debarred from participation in the temple services for the duration of their wilderness sojourn, they looked on their community as a living sanctuary, members being the holy place and the priests the holy of holies; they also believed that their praise and general devotion of life would be an acceptable sacrifice in God's sight. But they did not conclude that a material temple with a sacrificing priesthood was therefore obsolete. It has indeed been argued that the details of the new temple in the *Apocalypse of the New Jerusalem* are pictorial symbols of the community, but the dimensions are so precisely given that this is improbable. In any case, the document provides further illustration of the apocalyptic orientation of the community's thought.

THE ENOCH APOCALYPSE

The apocalyptic orientation of its thought may also be illustrated by the inclusion in its library of other apocalyptic works which, while not composed within its ranks, were very congenial to its outlook. Some of these works could be called apocalyptic only by stretching the meaning of that adjective beyond its normal limits. The *Book of Jubilees*, for example, is a recasting of the narrative of Genesis and Exodus from the creation to the giving of the law; its contents were divulged by an angel to Moses when he ascended Mount Sinai. Its title is due to its presentation of the history from the creation to the Israelites' entry into Canaan in a framework of fifty jubilees of forty-nine years each. Its main purpose was to command the exclusive use of a purely solar calendar of 364 days. This was the calendar followed at Qumran, where the *Book of Jubilees* was acknowledged as authoritative.

¹³ 1QSa ii. 11-22.

¹⁴ Ezek. 44:3; 45:7 ff.; 46:2 ff.; 48:21 f.

From the same circles came the *Testaments* of the sons of Jacob, in which the ancestors of the twelve tribes of Israel lay charges on their offspring before they die and forecast their future history. A collection of twelve documents called the *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs* has been preserved in Greek, but this collection is a Christian recension of earlier Jewish material. This earlier Jewish material is probably represented by Aramaic or Hebrew fragments of a *Testament of Levi* and *Testament of Naphtali* identified among the Qumran manuscripts.

But the circles which produced *Jubilees* and the *Testaments* also produced a corpus of unmistakably apocalyptic literature in 1 Enoch, frequently called the Ethiopic Enoch—in distinction from the Slavonic Enoch (2 Enoch) and the Hebrew Enoch (3 Enoch)—because it is only in Ethiopic that it is extant in its entirety, thanks to its canonical status in the Ethiopic Church. The Ethiopic version is based on a Greek version. About one third of the work is extant in Greek. Fragments of about ten Aramaic manuscripts of 1 Enoch have been identified from Cave 4 at Qumran,¹⁵ Aramaic may well have been its original language, though Hebrew is a

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possibility for some parts of it. Clearly it was highly esteemed in the Qumran community: although it is not a sectarian piece of literature, the sect probably belonged to the broader nonconformist tradition which 1 Enoch reflects.

The corpus comprises five principal parts: (a) Enoch's journeys to other worlds (chapters 1-36), (b) the *Similitudes of Enoch* (chapters 37-71), (c) the courses of the heavenly bodies (chapters 72-82), (d) world history seen in dream-visions (chapters 83-90), (e) the concluding section (chapters 91-108), which incorporates an independent *Apocalypse of Weeks* in which the history of the world is divided into ten "weeks" (93:1-10; 91:12-17) and fragments of an *Apocalypse of Noah* (chapters 106-107), other fragments of which may be traced in earlier sections of the corpus. The various parts were probably composed within the last two centuries B.C. Some of the earlier parts are presupposed by references in *Jubilees* and the *Testaments*.

Enoch, who walked with God and was ultimately translated by him to his heavenly dwelling-place (Gen. 5:21-24), was plainly a suitable recipient both of revelations of the divine purpose for future ages and of the mysteries of outer space. Moreover, his career was brought into close connection with the "sons of God" or fallen angels of Genesis 6:1-4, on whom he passes sentence in 1 Enoch 16:3f. This feature in 1 Enoch has made its mark on some of the later New Testament books. We may think, for example, of the "spirits in prison" of 1 Peter 3:19 (where, however, we should reject the conjectural emendation which makes Enoch the preacher) and the allusions to the "angels that sinned" by leaving "their own position" in 2 Peter 2:4 and Jude 6. In Jude 14f., indeed, we find a straight quotation from 1 Enoch 1:9.

But the section of 1 Enoch which is most relevant to the study of the Gospels is that called the *Similitudes*, a separate composition in which the fallen angels do not figure. It may be significant that, while fragments of all the other main sections of 1 Enoch have been identified among the Qumran texts, no fragment of the *Similitudes* has been found. This might point to a later date for the *Similitudes* than for the earlier sections.

¹⁵ The long expected volume of *Discoveries in the Judaean Desert* containing these fragments (edited by J. T. Milik) has now reached an advanced stage of production.

In the *Similitudes* God, the "Lord of spirits," appears as "one who had a head of days" or, more briefly, "the Head of days." This designation is patently derived from Daniel 7:9, where Daniel sees the "Ancient of days" whose hair is "like pure wool." Daniel's "one like a son of man" who is brought to the Ancient of days on the clouds of heaven is more precisely defined in the *Similitudes* as "the Son of Man who has righteousness" (46:3), apparently identical with the being otherwise called the "Anointed One" (Messiah) of the Lord of spirits (48:10; 52:4), the "Righteous One... whose elect works hang upon the Lord of spirits" (38:2), and the "Elect One of righteousness and faith" who has "his dwelling-place under the wings of the Lord of spirits" (39:6f.). This Son of Man "was named before the Lord of spirits, and his name before the Head of days... before the sun and the signs were created, before the stars of heaven were made" (48:2f.). He is to be a support to the righteous and a light to the nations (48:4), but the executor of divine judgment on the ungodly (48:8-10).

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Both in the *Similitudes* and in the teaching of Jesus, Daniel's "one like a son of man" has become "the Son of Man"; yet the one cannot easily be pronounced dependent on the other. The Son of Man in Jesus' teaching, who suffers many things and is set at naught, is a concept peculiar to Jesus himself, expressing his own understanding and fulfilment of the prophetic and apocalyptic scriptures. It may be, however, that the *Similitudes* have influenced the language in which parts of Jesus' teaching are recorded in the Gospel of Matthew, especially when the Son of Man is depicted as "sitting on the throne of his glory" (Matt. 19:28; 25:31; cf. 1 Enoch 61:8; 62:2). But when, as in the Matthaean parable of the sheep and the goats, the Son of Man dispenses judgment from "the throne of his glory," the criterion by which the nations are judged cannot be paralleled from the *Similitudes*.

On the other hand, the *Similitudes* cannot be reasonably regarded as composed under Christian influences: this seems plain from the unexpected denouement of the Son of Man visions in 1 Enoch 71:1ff., where Enoch, on his translation to heaven, is greeted by God: "Thou art the Son of Man who art born for righteousness." Perhaps the Son of Man in the *Similitudes* may be understood in terms of corporate personality, of the community of the righteous which can be individualized from time to time in someone who is preeminently righteous, as Enoch was in his generation.

APOCALYPTIC IN THE ROMAN PERIOD

Most of 1 Enoch is probably to be dated in the period of the Hasmonaean regime, but explicit references to contemporary persona or events are rare. It is quite otherwise with the revival of apocalyptic after the Roman occupation of Judaea in 63 B.C. If the men of Qumran regarded the Romans as a scourge in God's hands to punish the Hasmonaeans for their usurpation of the high-priesthood, the pious circle from which the Psalms of Solomon emerged (c. 50 B.C.) ascribed the same role to them because the Hasmonaeans "laid waste the throne of David" (17:8) but foresaw the destruction of the Romans and the "redemption of Jerusalem" (cf. Luke 2:38) by the coming Messiah of David's line, for whose speedy advent ardent prayer ascended.

For over forty years (37 B.C.—A.D. 6) the Romans governed Judaea indirectly, through Herod the Great and his son Archelaus. Towards the end of this period appeared the

Assumption of Moses, an apocalypse which opens with a charge by Moses to Joshua, in which the fortunes of Israel are forecast down to the time of writing. References to Herod and his sons, and to the repression of Jewish risings which followed Herod’s death in 4 B.C., are clear enough; a time of persecution under “the king of the kings of the earth” (8:1) will ensue, and then the kingdom of God will be manifested, with the abolition of evil and the exaltation of Israel. The incident of Jude 9 (the controversy between the devil and Michael about Moses’ body, at its assumption into heaven) belonged apparently to the end of the work, which has been lost.

The reduction of Judaea to the status of a Roman province in A.D. 6 was marked by the revolt led by Judas the Galilean (cf. Acts 5:37) which is

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commonly looked upon as the start of the Zealot movement. Apocalyptic fever mounted throughout the following decades, not least within that movement, and one of the factors which precipitated the outbreak of war against the Romans in A.D. 66, as we are told by both Jewish and Roman writers, was the currency of an ancient oracle which declared that *at that very time* world sovereignty would be exercised from Judaea.¹⁶ The writers who report this concluded, in the light of the sequel, that the oracle pointed to Vespasian, commander-in-chief of the Roman army in Judaea, who became Roman Emperor in A.D. 69. But the Jewish insurgents thought that it pointed to the downfall of the Roman Empire and the inauguration of the reign of the saints. It is fairly certain that the oracle in question was Daniel’s prophecy of the seventy heptads (Dan. 9:24-27). Jacob’s prediction about Judah’s sceptre (Gen. 49:10) and Balaam’s “star” oracle (Num. 24:17) may have been associated with it, but neither of them has the explicit time note of which our authorities speak. Similarly, when Josephus hailed Vespasian as world ruler,¹⁷ he probably identified him with “the prince who is to come” of Daniel 9:26.

Other apocalyptic expectations of the same period are hinted at by Josephus, including one about two martyrs who would suffer for their testimony during Jerusalem’s supreme distress: he interprets it of two former high priests whose dead bodies were publicly exposed,¹⁸ while it is given a distinctive reapplication in Revelation 11:1-13.

But Jerusalem fell in A.D. 70 and the Second Jewish Commonwealth fell with it. A new perspective in Jewish apocalyptic was dictated by the catastrophe, as may be seen in the Apocalypses of Ezra and Baruch, both of which date from the closing decades of the first Christian century.

The *Apocalypse of Ezra* (2 Esdras 3-14) comprises seven visions, allegedly granted to Ezra “in the thirtieth year after the destruction of our city” (3:1). The first vision proclaims that, when the foreordained total of the righteous is complete, the coming age will dawn and righteousness will be vindicated. The second vision gives the assurance that the righteous who die before that age dawns will suffer no disadvantage in comparison with those who will be alive at the time (cf. 1 Thess. 4:15). The third vision teaches that the distresses of this age must be endured if the bliss of the coming age is to be enjoyed, and that the coming age will

¹⁶ Josephus, *BJ* vi. 312f.; Tacitus, *Hist.* v. 13; Suetonius, *Life of Vespasian*; 4.

¹⁷ *BJ* iii. 401 f.

¹⁸ *BJ* iv. 314-318.

be preceded by a messianic reign of 400 years. The messianic reign will be followed by seven days of annihilation; then come the resurrection, the new creation and the last judgment. For Ezra and the elect minority a paradise of immortality is assured. The fourth vision depicts the desolate city of Jerusalem transformed into the heavenly city. In the fifth vision the Roman eagle is reprobated by the lion of the tribe of Judah. In the sixth vision a man rises from the sea and stands on Mount Zion; he destroys his enemies with his fiery breath and gathers the exiled tribes of Israel. God calls him "my son" (13:32), a title which he has given to the Messiah in the third vision (7:29)

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and gives again in the seventh vision to a heavenly being with whom Ezra will live after his translation to heaven (14:1-48).

The *Apocalypse of Baruch* records a series of visions which insist that under Roman rule life will become increasingly difficult for the righteous and iniquity will abound. The messianic woes are impending; the present age is near its end. But the righteous man must maintain obedience to the law; such obedience will bring happier times. The Messiah will appear; he will destroy Antichrist and judge all nations. In the messianic age joy and fertility will know no limit; the heavenly Jerusalem will be revealed and the holy vessels, safely hidden away for centuries, will be restored. Then the Messiah will experience a glorious epiphany; the righteous will be raised from the dead and their resurrection will seal the doom of the ungodly. Baruch himself is promised that he will be translated without undergoing death.

With these last two apocalypses we may compare and contrast the New Testament Apocalypse. It also was composed in hard times, when it was not impossible that all the faithful followers of Jesus would suffer martyrdom. Yet its dominant note is one of hope and victory: the outcome of the struggle between the saints and the persecutors is not in doubt, even if, for a limited period, the persecuting power triumphs over them. For the decisive battle has been fought and won once for all: the Lamb has conquered, and conquered in being slain:¹⁹ so also his faithful followers achieve their conquest "by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death" (Rev. 12:11). This confidence gave many Christians the necessary courage to endure under successive persecutions for the next two centuries and more.

The Apocalypses of Ezra and Baruch are not devoid of hope: their authors know that God will vindicate his cause and his people some day. But there were many in Israel who reckoned that excessive confidence in apocalyptic expectation had led to frightful disaster, and apocalyptic thenceforth played a diminishing part in mainstream Judaism. The imaginative genius which had found expression in apocalyptic visions tended from now on to be channeled into mystical speculation like that of the *Zohar*.

THE ABIDING MESSAGE OF APOCALYPTIC

Perhaps the most permanently valuable lesson to be learnt from Jewish apocalyptic is that God is the Lord of history, that (in the words of the earliest Jewish apocalypse) "the Most High rules the kingdom of men, and gives it to whom he will" (Dan. 4:25). "The ultimate secrets of history," says Ethelbert Stauffer, "were entrusted to the prophet Daniel and his

¹⁹ Rev. 5:5.

apocalyptic successors.”²⁰ If Schiller was right in his insight that the history of the world is the judgment of the world, it is because the Lord of history is the Judge of all the earth who vindicates the cause of righteousness and truth and makes his judgments known within history as well as beyond it.

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Jesus was not himself an apocalyptic, not even in the discourse which predicts the fall of the Jerusalem temple and attendant world convulsions on the eve of the coming of the Son of Man “in clouds with great power and glory” (Mark 13:5 ff.). But it was the popular expectations generated by apocalyptic visions that provided the setting for much of his message. The new kingdom for which many of his hearers were so ardently looking had indeed drawn near, he assured them, but the character of that kingdom and the conditions for sharing in it were quite different from what most of them had been taught to envisage.

In the first decade of this century Albert Schweitzer could write, in his best known book, that John the Baptist and Jesus were not “borne upon the current of a general eschatological movement. The period offers no events calculated to give an impulse to eschatological enthusiasm”²¹ This was a surprising statement even at the time it was made: the Roman occupation of the Holy Land was in itself more than sufficient to generate eschatological enthusiasm and apocalyptic visions. But today, far from hearing “silence all around,” as Schweitzer did then, we are conscious of the eager excitement attested in the Qumran literature and elsewhere, forming the environment in which first John and then Jesus discharged their respective ministries.

The term “apocalyptic” has now passed into the vocabulary of journalists and others, who tell us that we are living in apocalyptic days. The outlook which they thus describe is one not of a good time coming but of hardships, not to say catastrophes, ahead. If the gospel was first proclaimed by Jesus against a wave of misguided optimism, it may have to be proclaimed in the near future against a wave of misguided pessimism. The Christian knows that the Lord of history manifests his lordship not so much by abrupt intervention in the Course of events as by overruling the course of events for the accomplishment of his purpose of mercy for mankind—an accomplishment already guaranteed by the crowning mercy of the redemptive triumph of the Son of Man.

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²⁰ E. Stauffer, *Christ and the Caesars*, E.T. (London, 1955), p. 101.

²¹ A. Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, E.T. (London, 1910), p. 368.