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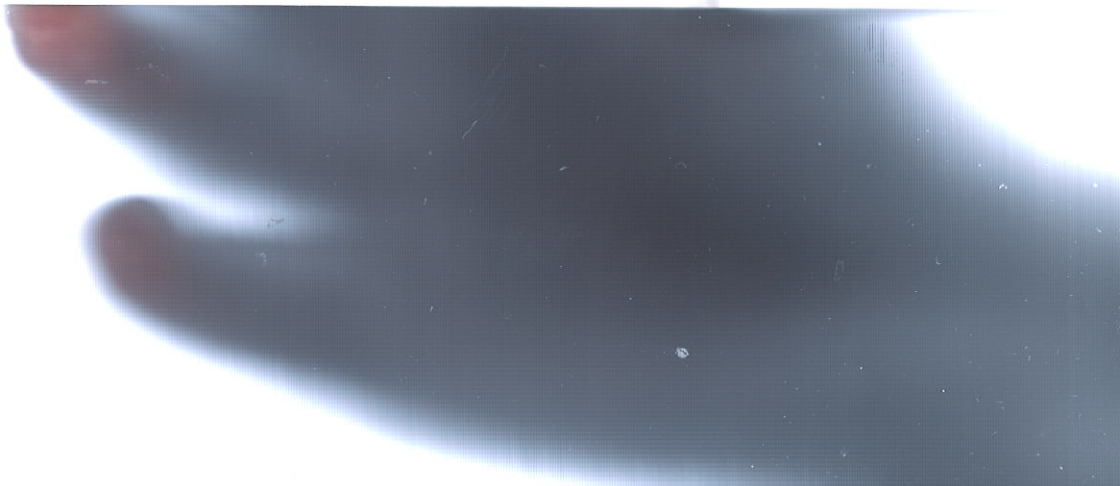
Apocalyptic Approaches to Scripture: The Disclosure of Heavenly Knowledge

There has been renewed interest in recent years in apocalyptic, or apocalypticism as it is now more often called, and its place in Second Temple Judaism and early Christianity. The words 'apocalyptic' and 'eschatological' have been used indiscriminately to describe Jesus' message. This oscillation is a good example of the way in which the treatment of apocalyptic has ended up as a discussion of eschatology, with well-defined characteristics. Indeed, it is probably fair to say that for many, apocalyptic is a type of eschatology which speaks of the imminent end of this world and the introduction from above, amidst cataclysmic disorders, of a transcendent realm.[1]

This eschatological orientation of the understanding of apocalyptic demands a little explanation. While all would recognize that apocalyptic derives from the Greek word *apokalypsis*, a word which is used to describe the disclosure of supernatural persons or secrets, the same word is also used to describe the religious perspective found in a number of writings including Daniel, Revelation, 1 and 2 Enoch, 4 Ezra, Syriac Apocalypse of Baruch, the Greek Apocalypse of Baruch, the Apocalypse of Abraham and the Testament of Abraham, all of which, with the exception of Revelation, are attributed to a hero of Israel's past. It is true that a dominant concern in the book of Revelation is with eschatology, expressed in imagery similar to that found in other apocalypses (e.g., Dan. 2.31ff.; 7.1ff.; 8.3ff. and 1 Enoch 85ff.) and with a belief in the manifestation of God's justice in human history (Rev. 19.11ff.; 22.20). The use of the word 'apocalyptic' to describe this cluster of ideas is widespread, and it is important to recognize this usage, in order to understand how apocalyptic has come to be used virtually as a synonym for eschatology.[2]

It has become very common to find the words 'apocalypse' and 'apocalyptic' used to describe the end of the world. At the heart of apocalyptic, it is argued, is its distinctive expression of the future hope. The belief that this view of the eschatological picture of Revelation is typical of other apocalypses has led to a definition of apocalyptic which concentrates on eschatological features like the doctrine of the two ages, a future realm of a transcendent kind, a divine irruption into history and a pessimistic attitude towards the present age. The origins of these beliefs are traced to several passages in the Bible (e.g., Isa. 24–7, Joel, the final chapters of Isaiah and Zechariah),[3] which seem to provide the antecedents of such an eschatology.



The religious outlook called apocalyptic is by no means as widespread and clear-cut as is often supposed, however. What is more, the distinction between the apocalypse as a literary genre and apocalyptic as a pattern of thought has led to considerable confusion.[4] Some have rightly questioned whether apocalyptic as usually defined finds its best expression in the apocalypses.[5] The eschatology of the apocalypses only occasionally corresponds to the 'apocalyptic' type (i.e. other-worldly and dualistic). Our understanding of the pattern of eschatological ideas usually identified as apocalyptic may better be categorized by some other term (for example, transcendent eschatology), thus reserving the word apocalyptic to describe the distinctive religious outlook of the apocalypses themselves, which is focused on the revelation of divine secrets.[6] When one investigates the eschatology of the apocalypses, it becomes clear that what are often regarded as typical features of apocalyptic are by no means common. What is more, actual teaching about the content of the future hope, for example the character of the new age, the origin and activity of the Messiah, the organization of the messianic community etc., are frequently passed over with little explanation. While the apocalyptists may devote much attention to the progress of history leading up to the new age, there is an evident reluctance to speculate about its character. The conviction about a glorious future for the people of God is there, but its character is hardly ever elaborated in detail.

A survey of the contents of the apocalypses would reveal a wide range of topics. Important in many apocalypses is an interest in details of the heavenly world (Dan. 7.9; 1 Enoch 14.8ff.; 71; Apoc. Abr. 18ff.; Test. Levi 2f.; Greek Baruch; Rev. 4; Ascension of Isa. 6ff.), astronomy (1 Enoch 72ff., Slav. Enoch 23), the course of Jewish history (Dan. 8; 1 Enoch 85ff.; 91.12ff.; 93; Test. Levi 16ff.; 4 Ezra 11f.; Syr. Baruch 35ff.; 53ff.; Apoc. Abr. 27ff.) and human destiny (Apoc. Abr. 20ff.; 4 Ezra 3.4ff.; Syr. Baruch 48). All these issues correspond roughly with the revealed things which are at the heart of apocalypticism.[7] Of course, all these topics were, for one reason or another, of immense interest to all Jews, and it would be wrong to suppose that interest in history, eschatology, astronomy and cosmology is by any means confined to the apocalypses only. What is distinctive about the use of this material in the apocalypses is that it is offered to the apocalyptic seer as a *revelation direct from God.* It is not the product of human observation or even the application of conventional exegetical techniques to Scripture. What we have expressed in the apocalypses is the conviction that God has spoken directly to the seer, whether by means of vision or angelic pronouncement. As a result, the divine truth can be apprehended by the seer and by all those to whom the seer chooses to make known this knowledge.

The fact that there is a lack of detail about the hope for the future, an interest in other subjects and an emphasis on the revelation of divine mysteries suggests that apocalyptic cannot be regarded as merely a science of the

end, in which heavenly journeys and other revelations serve only as a convenient backdrop for eschatological information. The evidence from the apocalypses themselves indicates that we should not regard their function as merely the fanciful speculations of those whose interest was solely in eschatological matters. The emphasis on the revelation of God and the divine purpose for the cosmos as a whole should be seen as an attempt to answer the crisis facing the Jewish tradition at the time of the apocalyptists. Knowledge of God's saving purposes, which according to some apocalypses were on the point of being realized, would offer hope (Dan. 12.6; 4 Ezra 14.10; Syr. Baruch 85.10). The use of apocalyptic provided an authoritative statement of belief which, while rooted in Scripture, avoided the human limitations present in conventional exegesis by recourse to the direct disclosure of heavenly knowledge.

In considering apocalypticism we are dealing with a religious current in Judaism (and for that matter in the Hellenistic world generally), which spans a long period of time. Even if we date the earliest parts of 1 Enoch to the third century BCE[8] (and they are probably much older) and the latest apocalypses at the end of the first century CE, we are speaking of a period of 300 years or more. The changing circumstances probably affected the choice of material for inclusion in the apocalypses and the form which the visions took. In the three apocalypses written in the aftermath of the First Revolt (4 Ezra, Syr. Baruch and Apoc. Abraham), for example, we find a particular concern for the destiny of Israel together with impassioned pleas for an explanation of the suffering of the people of God.[9] Concern in detail with astronomical data is manifested in the Enochic literature (e.g., 1 Enoch 72ff.), though there is occasional evidence that other apocalyptists may also have been interested in this subject (Syr. Baruch 48.1ff.). Likewise the dominant concern with eschatology in Daniel and Revelation is not typical of other apocalypses. The origin of Daniel in its present form during the crisis provoked by the action of Antiochus Epiphanes probably explains the single-minded preoccupation with suffering, martyrdom and eschatological vindication.[10] The dominance given to the revelation of the course of human history leading up to the establishment of the kingdom of God is without parallel in other Jewish apocalypses.[11]

One common feature of the Jewish apocalypses is the fact that they are pseudepigrapha (i.e., writings falsely attributed to another person, normally a figure of antiquity). Pseudepigraphy is not peculiar to the apocalypses; the practice probably already had a long history in the prophetic tradition.[12] But while pseudonymity is a common feature of the apocalypses, the figures chosen and the revelations attributed to the various figures show some variation. Whereas Enoch and Abraham, Levi and Isaiah are allowed to ascend to heaven during their lives and return to tell of their experiences, the same cannot be said of Ezra and Baruch in 4 Ezra and Syriac Baruch respectively,

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though Greek Baruch does speak of Baruch's heavenly ascent. Ezra and Baruch ascend to heaven at the time of their deaths (Syr. Baruch 13.3; 25.1; 46.7; 76; 4 Ezra 14.9) but not before. Indeed, in 4 Ezra the author seems to go out of his way to play down the heavenly ascent and the disclosures which result from it (4.8).[13] The choice of Baruch and Ezra as recipients of divine revelation is entirely appropriate when one considers that those who had either lived through the catastrophe of the destruction of the First Temple or participated in the rebuilding afterwards appropriately speak for those going through similar experiences after 70 CE.

Even if pseudepigraphy was a very common literary convention, we should not exclude the possibility that it served as a means of enhancing the authority of the revelations committed to writing. To see the use of pseudepigraphy in this light leaves open the possibility that the apocalypses are not merely literary creations following a conventional pattern (though this may be true in some cases) but include the relics of actual experiences by unknown visionaries. In suggesting this it is appreciated that one is entering the realm of speculation. Study of apocalypticism has not always done justice to the possibility, particularly when we remember how significant a part the mystical element played in the religion of antiquity.[14] Although it is impossible to prove this, the apocalypses are more than the expression of literary convention; their very nature argues strongly that they reflect the actual experiences of the apocalyptic writers themselves.[15]

There is much in the apocalypses to suggest that there is no fundamental opposition to the Torah (e.g., *Jub.* 23.26ff; 4 Ezra 3.19; 7.17ff.; 9.31ff.; 1 Enoch 93.6; 99.14; Syr. Baruch 38.2; 59.2). Rather, apocalypticism should be seen as part of Scripture study which took its start from precisely those passages which deal with the hidden mysteries of heaven and earth rather than the application of biblical principles to everyday concerns as set out in the Bible.

It has been asserted that there was a polarization in Judaism between apocalypticism and Pharisaism.[16] Apocalyptic is regarded as the science of the end or an understanding of the whole of history leading up to the kingdom of God, whereas what dominates the study of the Scribes and their rabbinic successors is the science of the Torah. The latter is centred on the practical details of everyday existence, not the fanciful speculations of eschatology. Far from being the product of fringe groups in Judaism, however, apocalyptic may well have been the esoteric tradition of the Scribes.[17] Apocalypticism was not an interpretation of the Jewish tradition which was an alternative to other interpretations. Rather, we should regard it as the common property of all groups at the period (something which is suggested by the evidence from the Dead Sea Scrolls and the greater appreciation of the mystical and esoteric in emerging rabbinic Judaism).

There is, in the apocalypses, interest in the mysteries of cosmology,

astronomy, history as well as eschatology. Such interests did in fact form part of later rabbinic tradition, but there seems to be a hint already in the Mishnah that speculative interests, perhaps of an esoteric character, already existed in the Second Temple period.[18] The passage is to be found at *mHagigah* 2.1:

> The forbidden degrees may not be expounded before three persons, nor the Story of Creation before two, nor the Chariot before one alone, unless he is a Sage that understands of his own knowledge. Whosoever gives his mind to four things it were better for him if he had not come into the world – what is above, what is beneath, what was beforetime, and what will be hereafter. And whosoever takes no thought for the honour of his Maker, it were better for him if he had not come into the world. (Mishnah, tr. H. Danby)

In the second part of the Mishnah we find a dire warning against those who would occupy themselves in subjects which, according to Ecclesiasticus 3.21, are difficult for humans to comprehend. The four prohibited topics represent the major concerns of the apocalyptists. The Jewish apocalypses contain speculation about heaven, hell and human destiny, as well as the mysterious workings of human history as it moves towards the new age. The final threat in the Mishnah is a thinly veiled warning to those whose theological interests led them to speculate in such a way that they would dishonour God.[19]

Two of the restrictions mentioned in the Mishnah concern Genesis 1 and Ezekiel 1. Here are two passages from Scripture which open the door to speculation about the creation of the world and the God who created it. They are passages which students studied regularly and which pointed him not so much to his obligations and how they could be fulfilled, as to the nature of God and the creation. In the light of the sophistication of the exegetical methods applied to the Scriptures to enable the will of God in specific situations to be discerned, the hints found in passages like Genesis 1 and Ezekiel 1 could lead expositors to visions, as they sought to understand the process of creation and the immediate environs of the Creator. These passages (to which we might add others like Isaiah 6.1ff.) offered the exegete a glimpse into another world, a disclosure of the way things were before the universe existed, and the nature of God who sat enthroned in glory on the cherubim chariot above the firmament.

We know from later Jewish texts that cosmogony and theosophy played a very significant part in rabbinic theology. A glance at *bHagigah* 12aff. will indicate that by this time the mystical lore based on Genesis 1 and Ezekiel 1 was fairly extensive. The work of Gershom Scholem has done much to expose the history of Jewish mysticism from its obscure beginnings during the period of the Second Temple through the age of the *hekaloth* texts (which

describe the mystical ascent through the heavens via the celestial doorkeepers) to the *Kabbalah* itself. While the literary remains are extensive enough to establish the contours of this speculative interest in the fourth and fifth centuries CE, the character of the mystical lore in the age of the Second Temple and just after is unclear. We find that names like R. Yohanan ben Zakkai (*bHagigah* 14b) and R. Akiba (e.g., in *bHagigah* 14b–15b) are linked with it. This suggests at the very least that later interpreters considered that the mystical tradition should be associated with the heart of early rabbinic Judaism rather than be regarded as the interest of a peripheral group. It seems likely, however, that the evidence may allow us to assume that this interest did form part of the religious beliefs in the Second Temple period, a fact that has been confirmed by the material from the Dead Sea Scrolls, known as The Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice (4 *Q* 400–407). The paucity of information about the mystical involvement of late first century and early second century CE rabbis does not allow us to reconstruct with any degree of certainty the character of this mystical interest. There are hints that visions of Ezekiel's chariot may have been involved (*tMegillah* 4.28; *bMegillah* 24b), though it has to be admitted that the evidence does not allow us to do any more than put this forward as a tentative suggestion.[20]

This interest in passages of Scripture which might enable the expositor to gain further information about God and the divine ways is not confined to the rabbinic tradition. In several places in apocalyptic literature there is evidence that the apocalyptists were also interested in the first chapter of Ezekiel (Dan. 7.9; 1 Enoch 14.20; Rev. 4; 4 *Q* 405 20 ii 21–2; Apoc. Abraham 17f.) and the first chapter of Genesis (*Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum* 28; 4 Ezra 6.38ff.; *Jub.* 2.2ff.; Slav. Enoch 25f.).[21] Consideration of the use made of Ezekiel 1 in the apocalypses leads to the suggestion that these passages, one of which (1 Enoch 14) may go back to the beginning of the second century BCE or before. Here at least is evidence that apocalyptists were not merely interested in eschatology, nor did they regard the throne-vision merely as a convenient backdrop for eschatological teaching. Rather, the interest in God's throne is already a matter for mediation in its own right.

In these cases the basis of the apocalyptic vision is Scripture itself. The vision takes its origin from the insight already communicated in the biblical passage, however further it may take it. Examples of Scripture being the basis for apocalyptic visions and pronouncements can be found elsewhere, for example Daniel 7 in 1 Enoch 46, 4 Ezra 12–13, Revelation 13, Jeremiah 23 in Daniel 9, Genesis 6 in 1 Enoch 6.1ff. The use of Scripture in the apocalypses is a subject which is only just being investigated in any detail.[22]

When we come to ask about the pseudonymous authorship of the apocalyptic visions and their relationship to biblical antecedents, we have to face the fact that our knowledge of the origin and composition of the apocalypses is very rudimentary. Are we dealing with purely literary compositions, or

have we to do on occasion with the relics of actual visionary experiences? The material occasionally has been subject to later editorial revision: 4 Ezra 11–12 is a good example. Nevertheless, the occasional interest in fasting and other preparations for visions (Dan. 10.2f.; Apoc. Abr. 9; 4 Ezra 12.50) suggests that it would be rash to rule out the possibility of some kind of mystical praxis and its results being contained in the apocalypses.[23]

The discovery of the Enoch fragments in Cave 4 at Qumran has pushed back the origin of this work well into the third century BCE. Hints like Zechariah 13.2ff. suggest the latter of the two alternatives above. What is more, the visionary character of Zechariah 1–8 already points in the direction of later apocalyptic visions.[24] Thus that quest for higher knowledge, so characteristic of apocalyptic, can be grounded in Scripture in the claims of the prophets to direct, visionary experience and to knowledge of the debates in the heavenly court.

To do justice to apocalyptic, however, we cannot ignore that quest for knowledge of things earthly and heavenly, which in part at least is characteristic also of the Wisdom tradition.[25] As we have already noted, the links are particularly close in parts of 1 Enoch which gives evidence of a definite interest in the created order, though with the important difference that the information in 1 Enoch comes *through revelation* (e.g., 1 Enoch 72.2). There *are* significant differences between the apocalypses and the Wisdom literature. Nevertheless, there is affinity of certain parts of the apocalypses, particularly parts of Daniel, with mantic Wisdom, which was concerned with the interpretation of dreams, divination, mysterious oracles and the movements of the stars.[26] Even within the biblical tradition, however, there is a closer link with the Wisdom tradition than is often allowed.[27]

The questioning spirit of the biblical wisdom tradition and the interpretation of dreams and visions are antecedents, which should not be ignored in our attempt to elucidate apocalyptic origins. Thus it would be wrong to assert that apocalypticism has its origin either in prophecy or in Wisdom, for both have contributed much to apocalyptic. Rather, it is a case of elements of prophecy and Wisdom contributing to an outlook which set great store by the need to understand the ways of God. Apocalyptic approaches Scripture with the conviction that the God who is revealed in the pages of the sacred writings may be known by vision and revelation. The interpretation of Scripture offered the opportunity to plumb the depths of some of the most profound divine mysteries, often only hinted at darkly in the sacred text. The yearning for this knowledge is akin to some of the passionate searching apparent in the book of Job, though the conviction that God is revealed to chosen agents lies at the heart of the prophetic experience. The apocalyptists were not content with answers to mundane questions and pressed on in search of divine knowledge. Indeed, they were probably the ones castigated in Ecclesiasticus 3.21ff:

> Do not pry into things too hard for you or examine what is beyond your reach. Meditate upon the commandments you have been given; what the Lord keeps secret is no concern of yours. Do not busy yourself with matters that are beyond you; even what has been shown you is above human grasp. Many have been led astray, by their speculations, and false conjectures have impaired their judgement. (cf. 34.1ff. New English Bible translation)

There are many indications that it was a significant component of the early Christian outlook.[28] Visions of a type found in the apocalypses are evident in early Christian literature and serve to initiate the careers of key figures (Mark 1.10; Gal. 1.12, 16; cf. Acts 9; 26.19). The heart of the early Christian message was in fact eschatological: the coming of the promised Messiah and the pouring out of the prophetic Spirit. But if this is the content of the message, the means by which individuals were enabled to reach this conviction can best be characterized as apocalyptic. Apocalypticism provided the vehicle of eschatological conviction, therefore. This may be most clearly seen in the book of Revelation itself. The message is communicated by means of an apocalypse, a revelation from Jesus Christ (Rev. 1.1). This is the guarantee of its authenticity (22.15) and authority. Thus what we find in early Christianity is apocalyptic functioning as the basis for the eschatological convictions belonging to the key figures in its early history.[29]

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Schools of Thought: An Introduction to Sectarianism in the Second Temple Period

Discussion of Jewish sects demands that the commentator explain the way in which he or she is using a term which has become important in the sociology of religion. The following typology outlined by Bryan Wilson indicates the importance of making distinctions among the various kinds of sects.[1] He offers a sevenfold classification of sects which define the group in relation to the world, its customs and beliefs. These include: