

# THE NATURE OF THE JEWISH APOCALYPSE

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The Persian period is of great significance because it is called 'the child of prophesy' and because the Christians believe that the New Testament is a fulfillment of the Old Testament. However, the historical connection regarding certain beliefs in the Old Testament and the New Testament are not very clear. Here the apocalyptic literature with its eschatological and messianic beliefs can help us solve the problem. However, unlike the prophets, the writers of various apocalyptic literature were not theologians. Logic not being their best virtue or forte, they tended to be inconsistent with themselves and other apocalyptists. The apocalyptic literature was basically a cry for help of the oppressed who saw no hope for the suffering of Israel and was an appeal to the higher powers for the miraculous and immediate intervention of God.

Apocalyptic beliefs eminently suited the Christians also because of their belief regarding the imminent coming of the Messiah, the Messianic rule, the Last Judgment, the resurrection of the dead, the separation of the wicked and the righteous, etc. One can find its imprint in the New Testament. The Christians developed their own apocalyptic versions which though different from the Jewish ones, essentially belong to the same genre. Apocalyptic was not an imitation of or a substitute for prophesy but an offshoot of it, very much like an old wine in a new bottle in a new environment. However, whereas in the prophetic writings of the Old Testament, the triumph of God is seen within the present world order, in the apocalypse God's judgment takes place in a setting beyond time and above history, God intervening personally in the affairs of men and the world and opposing demonic forces and not just human armies. Apocalyptists believed that the time had come for the realization of the Old Testament prophesies but it will materialize not only beyond the understanding of the Old Testament prophets but of their own contemporaries as well. Despite its similarity to the Old Testament prophesy, the apocalyptic ultimately developed a character and personality of its own.

These scholars who examine the importance of the apocalyptic literature during the inter-testamental period, including the Dead Sea Scrolls, generally tend to see a precedence in the *Bundahishn* I.8, I.19, I.20 and other Zoroastrian apocalyptic literature. Thus, one such author, D.S. Russell, who is one of the authors most often quoted on this subject, "However, much the details of the two schemes may vary, this much seems plain, that the Jewish apocalptists were deeply

influenced by the Iranian conception of world-epochs and used it to develop, systematize and universalize the idea of the unity of history which they had already received from their prophetic predecessors in the Old Testament tradition. The extent of this influence will become even clearer when we come to consider more fully the apocalyptic conception of 'the last things.'<sup>1</sup>

Russell finds the change in the conception and development of angelology and demonology in the apocalyptic literature so significant that "it is extremely hard to believe that what we find in the apocalyptic books is simply the natural growth of ancient Jewish traditions, however intermingled these may have been in earlier days with foreign ideas from Babylonia and elsewhere. Scholars have differed in their estimates of the extent to which Persian thought has influenced apocalyptic ideas, but more are agreed that the influence existed and that in particular, the development of angelology and demonology is to be understood against the background of Persian teachings on this subject. ---We have (here) something strongly reminiscent of the religious outlook of the Zoroastrian faith. The picture of ranks of demons set out in descending order to be found frequently in the Persian system is common also among the apocalyptists, as, for example in the *Book of Enoch*. Corresponding to this is the picture of ranks of angels graded according to the authority they have been given." (pp. 257-8).

Russell believes that the practice of assigning personal names to angels by the Jews is a Zoroastrian influence as is the seven archangels of apocalyptic lore. He also points out that in both systems angels are supposed to rule over the natural phenomena and are also regarded as manifestation of the powers of nature. In the Zoroastrian as well as apocalyptic literature the angels preside over the seasons as well as over the calendar month named after them. Both refer to the guardian angels. (Fravashis of Yasht 13.1) of natural elements as well as of human beings.

"It is certain that there were borrowings in this realm from external sources," comments Russell, "but, as so often happens, these borrowings would be largely unrecognized as such by the borrowers and would be naturally accepted as part of the traditional faith of their fathers." (p. 262).

Russell states that a future hope of a coming kingdom wounded up with the restoration of David's line. "This was essentially a picture of an earthly kingdom, political in character, nationalistic in outlook and military in expression --- for the most part it was a hope for Israel alone

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1 Russell DS. *The Method & Message of Jewish Apocalyptic 200 BC -AD 100*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press; 1964, p. 229.

in a kingdom of this world.” (p.265).

Russell quotes Mowinckel's dictum: “Every eschatology includes in some form or other a dualistic conception of the course of history, and implies that the present state of things and the present world order, will suddenly come to an end and be superceded by another of an essentially different kind.” A doctrine of two ages - “this age” of sin and corruption and “the age to come” which will eradicate evil from the world. “It is to be observed that these two phrases have overtones of a cosmic character which they would never had had within, say, the context of Old Testament prophecy.” (p. 267).

As we have already seen the dualistic view of the world, typical of much of the apocalyptic literature, embodies a doctrine of two ages - “this age” versus “the age to come” which is however, explained by different writers in different ways. Apocalyptists were not interested in looking beyond the kingdom to come as the kingdom was to them an end in itself. Russell extensively details what different Jewish texts have to say about it. (pp. 286-297).

During the Greco-Roman period when the Jews felt oppressed, apocalyptic literature found a fertile ground to grow for the idea of the kingdom of God coming soon on earth as it was the only hope the oppressed Jews could turn to. But such a sentiment will be irrelevant in reformed Judaism which emphasized the Law of God mentioned in the Old Testament and obedience to the revealed will of God contained in the sacred writings. The rabbis realized the part the apocalyptic texts played in inspiring rebellions against the Roman rulers and perceived them as a possible challenge to their own authority as well. Moreover, the newly emerging Christian churches readily adopted many Jewish apocalyptic texts and ideas and the Romans destroyed the apocalyptic books they found dangerous to their authority.

“It is a debatable point among scholars in what specific ways and to what extent Persian influence made itself felt among the Jews,” ponders Russell, “but it can hardly be denied that the apocalyptic teaching, for example, concerning such matters as 'the two ages', the determinism of historical events, angelology and demonology, the notion of the final judgement and eschatological ideas generally owes much to this source.” (p. 19). But Russell asserts: “Even in the case of borrowings from Zoroastrianism, such is the genius of Hebrew thought and the strength of the Yahweh religion, that much of what was taken over was completely transformed and made to fit into the familiar pattern of Old Testament faith in the God of power and righteousness. In taking over such ideas from foreign sources the apocalyptists were nevertheless aware of their place within the prophetic tradition. --- Thus, Zoroastrian ideas of an eschatological kind were not superimposed on earlier Hebrew beliefs, but were incorporated into their interpretation and

understanding of ancient Scripture as part of its fulfillment in the working out of the purpose of God". Nevertheless, he concedes, "from the time of Daniel right through to the end of the first century A.D. There can be sensed a tension between this view (Old Testament view of the future hope) and the 'new eschatology' with its dualistic outlook and transcendental interpretation of God's purpose which was never really resolved within Judaism. This tension ---- is particularly evident in the relationship between the Messiah and the Son of Man. (p. 271).