

# THE ZOROASTRIAN ELEMENTS IN JEWISH AND CHRISTIAN APOCALYPTIC

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After suffering severely under the Roman Rule, the people of Israel looked beyond history to some kind of miraculous intervention by YHWH for the gross suffering and injustices suffered by them. The need for divine intervention had reached such a level of urgency that it had become the need of the hour. Apocalyptic literature is often spoken of as a literature of despair. During this period Israel came under Hellenistic rule and Hellenism. Hellenism, however, had by then ended up as a very syncretistic system which had adopted many concepts and traditions of the older religions of the west and after Alexander's eastern conquests opened the door for "a Greek philosophical blend of Iranian esotericism with Chaldean astrology and determinism". (S.B. Frost, *Old Testament Apocalyptic*, 1952, p.75). D.S. Russell has studied this subject extensively (*The Method and Message of Jewish Apocalyptic, 200 BC-AD 100*, The Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1964) and so it is worth quoting his finds here. "It is a debatable point", he says, "among scholars in what specific ways and to what extent Persian influence made itself felt among the Jews, but it can hardly be denied that the apocalyptic teaching, for example, concerning such matters as the two ages, the determination of historical events, angelology and demonology, the notion of the final judgment and eschatological ideas generally owes much to this source" (p. 19). Russell also traces this influence in I Enoch as do many other scholars as already noted.

As regards the argument that apocalyptic was a fringe movement and does not represent the essential Judaism, it has twofold misunderstanding: Not only was there no essential in the sense of 'authoritative' Judaism during this period, there was also not sharp and clear-cut distinction between the Judaism of Galilee and that of Jerusalem itself. "There seems little reason to doubt that far from being an alien or 'sectarian' element on the extreme borderline of Judaism representing a reactionary 'fringe', apocalyptic was a significant part of the accepted Jewish tradition and represented one important aspect of its life and faith" (p. 23).

Many scholars have maintained that rabbinic Judaism had nothing to do with the ideas mentioned in the inter-testamental period of 200 B.C. to 100 A.D. Even though this period falls outside the scope of his book, Russell succinctly addresses this argument. He finds no evidence to support this view and points out that the Book of Daniel and other canonical books represents the apocalyptic tradition quite well. In the

rabbinic writings themselves, and moreover, in many Jewish liturgical texts, allusion is made not unsympathetically to ideas and beliefs made popular by the apocalyptic books. They (express belief) in such things as the heavenly bliss of the righteous, the resurrection of the dead, the heavenly banquet, the coming judgment, the fires of Gehenna, the angelic destruction of Jerusalem and the coming of the New Jerusalem, the advent of the Messiah, the travails of the messianic age, wonders and portents heralding the last days and so forth.

Citing J. Bloch's on the apocalyptic in Judaism and H. Danby's works, Russell maintains that even in the Talmud a few very prominent Tannaim and the Amoraim teachers evince deep interest in the apocalyptic traditions as well as speculations (p.31). There are indications that not a few prominent teachers among both the Trannaim and the Amoraim, were deeply interested in the secret lore and occupied themselves with apocalyptic speculations.' It is significant that Rabbi Judal, ('the Prince'), for example, who was openly opposed to such matters as angelology and esoteric mysteries and was determined to exclude these from his final recession of the Mishnah, nevertheless permitted the inclusion, for example, of a specifically apocalyptic passage recorded in *Sotah* 9.5 in which the signs of the coming of the Messiah area described. This small 'rabbinic apocalypse' is attributed to none other than Rabbi Eliezer the Great, the disciple of Rabbi Johanan ben Zakkai.

Both the Amoraim and the Tannaim teachers were interested in pursuing the apocalyptic tradition as well as speculations and Russell quotes J. Block (*On the Apocalyptic in Judaism*, p.79F) to support this statement. "Nowhere do we find among them that acrimony which is to be found directed against, say, the gospels and other Christian writings" (p.31). Nevertheless interest in apocalyptic lost its significance in the mainstream Judaism as some of its concepts were not compatible with the "purity" of Judaism such as the theological problems the concept of dualism posed to the Judaeen concept of monotheism. Moreover, as Russell points out, apocalyptic served the Jewish nation's need when its very exsistence was threatened with its reassuring theme the kingdom of God was at hand but the need for it was outgrown in the later times.

However those apocalyptic works that survived "were most highly valued among the Christians". With the Greek replacing the Aramaic as the language of early Christianity, the apocalyptic writings spread over a large area. With the exception of the Book of Daniel, "the tradition of apoclyptic is, in fact, Christian and not Jewish "and it gave additional coherence and strength to various hopes held by the church". "Their Teaching", notes Russell, concerning the two ages, the imminent coming of the Messiah, the messianic kingdom, the woes of the last days, the judgment of the world, the resurrection of the dead, the future

lot of the wicked and the righteous — all these would have a familiar ring and would in turn influence Christian thinking deeply. Their imprint is obvious on the beliefs of the Early Church and on the New Testament writings themselves” (p. 34).

While some of Jewish apocalyptic books “were taken over just as they stood but others were edited by the Christian church so as to adapt them to reflect its own doctrines, such as the *Sibylline Oracles*, or the *Testaments of the XII Patriarchs* or the *II Esdras*. “But not only did the Christian Church adopt the old apocalyptic writings in their original or revised forms”, observes Russell, “they also produced new ones of their own which, together with those of Jewish origin, continued to exercise a considerable influence. There are differences between Jewish and Christian apocalyptic, and yet they are essentially one; they represent a single type of literature with no serious break between them at all, at least where form and presentation are concerned. Indeed, so alike are they that in certain instances it is difficult, if not impossible, to distinguish between them” (p. 35).

Russell holds the canonical *Book of Revelation* as the most significant Christian apocalypse in which some scholars detect “a Jewish nucleus in Christian Guise”. Apart from the fact that it depicts Jesus the Messiah as the meaning and end of all history, he finds the significant features of Jewish apocalyptic all through it — fantastic imagery, symbolic language, angelic powers of evil, the resurrection, the judgment, the messianic kingdom, the world to come” (p. 35).

Apocalypse of Peter left a deep mark on medieval theology with its description of the torments of hell and the punishment of the wicked, — an echo of the *Arda Viraf Nameh* of the Zoroastrians. “So popular did some of these writings become that they made claim for a time to canonical authority in certain sections of the Church”. They did bear much significance with the New Testament but ultimately they fell out of favor and with few exceptions disappeared as valued writings of the Christian Church (p. 35).

The entire message of the apocalyptic — “the Golden Age, the Day of Judgement, the overthrow of evil, the transcendent Messiah, the Two Ages, rewards and punishment, even the doctrine of the resurrection and the life to come is an attempt to bring to the point of fulfillment the prophetic message” (p. 184).

The apocalyptic and the Qumran Covenanters both believed the end of time was near and both believed in the unfulfilled prophecy as a mystery or secret (*Raz*) whose interpretation they had been assigned by God to make known. As *Raz* is originally a Persian word as already pointed out by me on the basis of evidence provided by Shaul Shaked, it suggests some Persian influence. Indeed Russell supports this when he

states that apocalyptists, more than the Old Testament resorted quite regularly to Persian and Babylonian sources for the free use of cosmic mythology and symbolism. However, most often they tried to give new significance to the foreign ideas. He quotes F.C. Porter as that “the Jews knew how to borrow what they like and used it as they liked. They knew how to appropriate foreign mythological figures without the mythology and even dualistic conceptions, and could build a Babylonian story of creation into their system and the Persian idea of a ruling evil spirit, without giving up their monotheism”. (*The Message of the Apocalyptic Writers*, 1905, p.59). Russell provides instances of the apocalyptic writers completely changing the meaning of what they borrowed (pp. 186-7).