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The Apocalyptic Scriptures

Introduction

One of the forms of biblical literature most difficult to interpret is the one which is called "apocalyptic." The name derives from the Greek verb *apokaluptein,* which literally means "to uncover, to unveil," and thus, "to reveal." An apocalypse (Greek *apokalupsis,* "revelation", "disclosure") is a book which contains the revelation of divine mysteries.

Two books in the Bible are apocalypses: Daniel in the Old Testament and the Revelation of John (sometimes simply called "The Apocalypse") in the New Testament. Chapters 7-12 of Daniel contain visions granted to Daniel, an exile in Babylon, concerning the future course of history and its consummation "at the end of the days" (Dan. 12:13). The New Testament Book of Revelation is the vision of the end-events given to John on the island of Patmos, as is indicated in the first verse of the book:

> The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show to his servants what must soon take place; and he made it known by sending his angel to his servant John... (Rev. 1:1)

Although only these two apocalypses were included in the biblical canon, many others were written in the Inter-Testamental Period and in the period of the early church. Among the Old Testament apocryphal writings that are apocalypses are such books as 2 Esdras (4 Ezra), 1 Enoch, 2 Enoch, 2 Baruch, 3 Baruch, the Assumption of Moses, the Apocalypse of Abraham, Sibylline Oracles 3-5. Christian writers also produced apocalypses, sometimes attributing them to one or other of the apostles.

But the description apocalyptic is not limited to apocalypses. There are passages in some of the Old Testament prophetic books that are rightly called apocalyptic: examples are Ezekiel 38-39, Isaiah 24-27, Zechariah 9-14. In the New Testament, apocalyptic is not confined to the book of Revelation. Mark 13, in which is portrayed Jesus teaching his disciples about the end–events, is called "the Synoptic Apocalypse" (cf. the parallels in Matthew 24 and Luke 21:5-36). Paul describes the end-events in apocalyptic terms (cf. for example, 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18; 1 Corinthians 15:51-52). As we shall see presently, the question which is most hotly debated among New Testament scholars is, to what extent is Jesus' preaching of the Kingdom of God to be interpreted in apocalyptic terms.

But how else is "apocalyptic" to be defined apart from its appearance in apocalypses? How can apocalyptic be distinguished from prophecy, when the term "prophecy" itself is often used to mean apocalyptic, as in the New Testament apocalypse (cf. Rev. 1:3)?

A useful distinction has been introduced by the American scholar Paul D. Hanson, who carefully differentiates the apocalypse as a literary genre from apocalyptic eschatology, which is itself to be distinguished from prophetic eschatology. Further, apocalypse and apocalyptic eschatology are to be distinguished from apocalypticism, which ensues when an apocalyptic community creates its own symbolic universe by which it receives its identity and meaning.[1]

Apocalyptic Eschatology

It is apocalyptic eschatology which makes its appearance in Old Testament prophetic books dating from the exile and post-exilic period. To understand this something must be said about the perspective of classical Old Testament prophecy.

Prophecy is primarily concerned with God's relationship with his chosen people Israel, although the prophets also address God's word to other nations as well. The prophetic word is always addressed to a particular historic situation. It is a clear word, meant to be understood by all. The word announced is God's word for the future—usually the immediate future. The message to Israel is either a message

1. Paul D. Hanson, "Apocalypticism," *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the* Bible, Supplementary Volume, pp. 28-34.

of impending judgment, because of Israel's sin, her rebellion against her covenant God, or a message of deliverance beyond that judgment. Evil is seen in prophecy as the result of human sin: Israel's disobedience of covenant law, or the foreign nations' disregard of what we today would call "human rights," or their pride in setting themselves above God. Basic to the prophetic perspective, however, is the conviction that God acts *within* human history, using historical agents (such as Assyria and Babylonia) to judge his people, but also using historical agents (such as Cyrus) to deliver his people once judgment has taken place. Thus God directs human history, although human action, such as the repentance of Israel, might result in the course of history being changed. History is not predetermined by God; human actions have historical consequences.

Nowhere is the prophetic perspective of God acting within human history seen more clearly than in prophetic teaching concerning the goal of history, eschatology. Prophetic eschatology sees God acting *within* history and through historical agents to establish his reign of peace and justice, in which all men will serve him in obedience. Some well-known examples of prophetic eschatology are given in Isaiah 2:2-4 (cf. Micah 4:1-4) and Jeremiah 31:31-34. Some of the Judean prophets give expression to the hope of the coming of an ideal king of the line of David, who will come within history and establish a just rule (for example, Isaiah 9:2-7; 11:1-9; Micah 5:2-4). Although mythological elements sometimes enter into these pictures, such as Zion becoming the highest of all mountains in Isaiah 2:2 (Micah 4:1), or the restoration of nature to the situation of Paradise in Isaiah 11:6-9, it is nonetheless a this-worldly picture. It is eschatology, not in the sense of being the absolute end of time and history, but of being the goal within history to which Yahweh is guiding history.[2]

In apocalyptic eschatology, the this-worldly, historical orientation of prophecy is lost. In apocalyptic eschatology God is not pictured as acting within history through historical agents to judge evil in order to bring about salvation; judgment—which is both the destruction of evil and the establishment of God's justice—and redemption are both described in other-worldly, mythic terms, with cataclysmic events occur-

2. On the legitimacy of the use of the term "eschatological" to describe this element in the teaching of the prophets, see Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, II (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1965), pp. 114-15.

ring both on earth and in the heavens (cf. Jeremiah 4:23-27; Ezekiel 47; Isaiah 51:9-11). Salvation means deliverance out of the present world into a new world.

A recent work by Paul Hanson, *The Dawn of Apocalyptic*, attempts to account for the rise of apocalyptic eschatology out of prophetic eschatology. Hanson puts forth an impressive case for his hypothesis that apocalyptic eschatology derives out of—and indeed, ultimately replaces—prophetic eschatology. Basic to his hypothesis is his definition of prophetic eschatology:

> . . . A religious perspective which focuses on the prophetic announcement to the nation of the divine plans for Israel and the world which the prophet has witnessed unfolding in the divine council and which he translates into the terms of plain history, real politics and human instrumentality. . .[3]

Apocalyptic eschatology, on the other hand, is

> . . . a religious perspective which focuses on the disclosure (usually esoteric in nature) to the elect of the cosmic vision of Yahweh's sovereignty—especially as it relates to his acting to deliver his faithful—which disclosure the visionaries have largely ceased to translate into the terms of plain history, real politics and human instrumentality due to a pessimistic view of reality growing out of the bleak post-exilic conditions within which those associated with the visionaries found themselves.[4]

To put it another way, the prophetic task is to translate the divine vision into historical reality. Thus, prophetic eschatology saw Yahweh's restoration of his people within this world. But in the disappointing situation of the post-exilic period, prophetic optimism failed, and there emerged in its place—gradually, to be sure, but inexorably—apocalyptic eschatology, which could conceive of that restoration only on the cosmic level of myth. No longer was the attempt made to translate the vision into historical terms. Yet, Hanson points out that even in apocalyptic eschatology events of the end-time do follow a historical

3. Paul D. Hanson, *The Dawn of Apocalyptic* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), p. 11.

4. *Ibid.*, pp. 11-12.

sequence; the historical framework is not completely lost. It is only in Gnosticism that the return to the mythic viewpoint is complete.[5]

The perspective of apocalyptic eschatology begins to appear in Old Testament prophetic books from the last years of the kingdom of Judah onward. The crisis brought about by the disintegration of the state under neo-Babylonian pressure, its fall with the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple in 586 B.C., and the exile of many Judeans to Babylon, seem to have provided the circumstances for the birth of the viewpoint of apocalyptic eschatology to replace the earlier one of prophetic eschatology. Even in the post-exilic period, with the restoration of Jews to their homeland, apocalyptic eschatology did not die away. The mundane reality of the return from exile did not live up to the expectations raised by the glorious prophecies of salvation given in Isaiah 40-55 and elsewhere. In this situation there were those who kept the prophetic hopes alive by transferring them from the realm of this world, where their fulfilment seemed doubtful to an other-worldly realm.

Apocalypses

In the third century B.C., the first apocalypses appear: books which contain the revelation of divine mysteries. The revelation is usually given in the form of visions or dreams to an Old Testament figure (or, in the Christian era, sometimes to a New Testament apostle); occasionally the seer himself proclaims the revelation in the form of oracles. The mysteries revealed in apocalypses are of many kinds: the secrets of the heavens and the earth, including astronomical, meteorological and calendrical information, or descriptions of heaven and the underworld; information about angels and demons; stories about the origin of evil; a description of the divinely predestined course of history, often couched in symbolic forms; and a narration of the events at the end of history, such as the final battle between good and evil, the resurrection of the dead, the final judgment, the punishment of the wicked and the reward of the righteous. Indeed, most of the apocalypses are written in the full conviction that the end of history and the establishment of the reign of God are very close at hand. Further, the apocalypses tend to be dualistic: many of them see the power of God and his angels being opposed by Satan and his angels. Human history is seen as being in the hands of evil powers. However, God will bring history to an end

5. *Ibid.*, p. 28.

and inaugurate his reign. In some works this reign is depicted as occurring on a renewed earth; in others, it is expected to be in heaven.

The viewpoint of the apocalypses, therefore, is strikingly different from that of prophetic literature, sketched earlier. The apocalypses are concerned not primarily with Israel, but with God's plan for world empires; indeed, for the whole cosmos. The message of the apocalypses is not meant for all; it is a revelation of divine mysteries in symbolic language, which only the initiated can understand. The this-worldly orientation of prophecy is missing in the apocalypses, which are permeated by the point of view of apocalyptic eschatology. History is not the arena where men can obey or disobey God as they choose, nor is it the arena of their salvation. Rather, the apocalypses tend to see history as being under the control of Satan and his angels, the hosts of evil. God has permitted this to happen, for he has predetermined the course of history, which is often divided into stages, each one worse than the one before it. The course of history is often described in terms of bizarre symbolism. It purports to be "prophecy," the revelation of coming events given to the Old or New Testament seer in whose name the book is written. It is, in fact, "prophecy after the event," with the author of the apocalypse describing past history up to his own time; the author then attempts to predict the coming eschatological final events. (As an example, Daniel 11:2-39 presents history in the form of "prophecy"; from 11:40 on, however, the second century B.C. writer attempts genuinely to predict what will happen—and errs in the process!).

The end is usually described as preceded by a time of troubles on earth and of signs in the heavens. Then God will bring an end to history. Satan and his hosts will be defeated by the angels of God, even as on earth the unrighteous will be conquered. The Messiah and a messianic age may or may not be a part of the picture; the scenario of end-events in an apocalypse is not a fixed one. Usually included in the picture are the resurrection of the dead, the final judgment, the condemnation of wicked people and angels to punishment, and the reward of the righteous, with life either in a completely renewed earth or in heaven with God. This salvation, however, is not for all Israel it is for the elect, the righteous within Israel. The message of the apocalypses is a simple one: the saints of God are exhorted to stand firm in their faith, enduring their present trials, for deliverance is at hand.

While apocalyptic eschatology developed out of prophetic eschatology, some of the other features of the apocalypses may have developed under external influences. As stated already, cosmic dualism is a feature of many of the apocalyptic books, with God and his angels arrayed against Satan and his angels, Satan being allowed to reign by God until finally being subdued. This dualism has often been compared with the dualism of the Persian religion, Zoroastrianism. In Zoroastrianism there are two co-existing, co-eternal deities: Ahuramazda, the god of light, responsible for good, and Angramainyu, the god of darkness, responsible for evil. At death each human is judged by weighing his or her evil deeds, with heaven or hell as the outcome of the decision. At the close of the world struggle Ahuramazda will triumph, all souls will be purified by fire, and a new heaven and a new earth will come into being. Zoroastrianism also has an advanced angelology and demonology. Many scholars believe that the tenets of this faith may have influenced Jewish religious thought during the two centuries the Jews were under Persian rule (539-332 B.C.).

The earliest apocalypses known to us are two portions of the book of Enoch (1 Enoch or Ethiopic Enoch), a composite work consisting of five separate writings. The Book of Watchers (Enoch 1-36) and the Astronomical Book (Enoch 72-82) come from the third century B.C. In these works Enoch undertakes journeys to heaven where, in addition to seeing the throne of God, he gathers much astronomical, meteorological, botanical and calendrical knowledge. This type of material has many affinities with Mesopotamian wisdom.[6]

The concept of world periods, found in many apocalypses, appears in Hellenistic religion. Hesiod, a Greek poet of the eighth century B.C., speaks of succeeding ages of gold, silver, bronze and iron (cf. the image seen in Nebuchadnezzar's dream, *Daniel* 2:31-33).

Whatever their origin, most of the elements of apocalypses came together in the book of Daniel, written around 165 B.C., at the time of Antiochus Epiphanes' persecution of the Jews. It is in Daniel that for the first time, as far as we know, apocalyptic eschatology was combined with the formal elements of apocalypses first found fully developed in the Enoch literature of the preceding century. From

6. On this literature, see Michael Stone *Scriptures, Sects and Visions* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), pp. 31-35; 39-43.

165 B.C. to the Bar Kochba Revolt (A.D. 132–135), a period of three centuries, Jewish apocalypses appear. After that time, rabbinic Judaism discouraged the form. The literary form of apocalypse continued, however, in the Christian church even into the Middle Ages. The later Christian apocalypses, however, tended to be limited to descriptions of the Anti-Christ, the judgment, and the next world.

Apocalypticism

It has been observed that the appeal of apocalyptic was—and still is—to the alienated: those who feel powerless, who are excluded from the mainstream of society, or those whose own structures of society and institutions have been destroyed, and who have had an alien way of life imposed upon them. In such situations apocalypticism may appear: communities which derive their identity and meaning from their apocalyptic world-view, which they accept as their reality.

Hanson has suggested that those responsible for apocalyptic eschatology in the post-exilic period were visionaries who were opposed to and felt that they were oppressed by the priestly group in charge of the temple and of the civic government.[7] In the second century B.C. the active persecution of Jews and the forced imposition of Hellenism upon them by Antiochus Epiphanes led some Jews—those addressed by the book of Daniel—to look up to God to intervene quickly to bring an end to the evil they were enduring, and to usher in His heavenly Kingdom. It did not happen in that way. Other Jews, led by the Maccabees, rebelled, and eventually established an independent Jewish kingdom. But this was not God's kingdom either. It fell, under the weight of corruption and internal rivalries, to the Romans in 63 B.C.

Even before this happened, another group of Jews, the Essenes, created a community at Qumran permeated by apocalypticism. Led by priests of the Zadokite line of the Aaronic priesthood, who were alienated because the Hasmonean rulers, who were of a non-Zadokite priestly line, had taken the high-priesthood upon themselves, this group withdrew into the wilderness near the Dead Sea some time during the last 30 years of the second century B.C., in an attempt to

7. Hanson, "Apocalypticism," p. 32.

literally fulfil the words of Second Isaiah : "in the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord" (Isaiah 40:3). They were expecting the great eschatological battle to occur, as detailed in their most famous apocalyptic work, "The War of the Sons of Light and the Sons of Darkness," in which not only the "Sons of Darkness" on earth, the Gentiles, would be destroyed by the true Israel, but the heavenly hosts of Belial, prince of evil, would be defeated by the heavenly hosts led by the archangel Michael. This apocalyptic group, which also had adherents elsewhere in Palestine, was scattered from Qumran in A.D. 68, when the Roman Tenth Legion moved into the area; its scrolls were hidden in caves, to be discovered nearly nineteen centuries later.

In the last decade of the first century A. D., persecution of Christians by the Roman emperor Domitian is usually seen as the setting out on account of which the New Testament Apocalypse, the book of Revelation, arose. The group to whom this apocalypse was addressed looked for their deliverance in God's great act of cosmic redemption.

Apocalypticism may have contributed to the outbreak of the Second Jewish Revolt in A.D. 132. Although other factors were involved, such as Hadrian's prohibition of circumcision throughout the Roman Empire and his proposal to build a new city, Aelia Capitolina, on the ruins of Jerusalem, with a temple to Jupiter on the site where the Jewish temple had been, there were some Jews who saw the revolt as the beginning of the apocalyptic end-events. They believed the leader of the revolt, Simon bar Kosiba, to be the Messiah, and gave him the name Bar Kochba, "Son of the Star," a messianic title. After the failure of this revolt in A.D. 135, rabbinic Judaism discouraged apocalyptic speculation.

Apocalyptic in Early Christianity

One of the difficult problems faced by modern New Testament scholarship is to assess the degree to which Jewish apocalyptic eschatology and Jewish apocalypticism influenced Jesus and the early Christian movement. The many apocalypses of the Inter-Testamental period make it clear that apocalyptic ideas were current in the Judaism of the first century A.D. The Essenes were the only bearers of the perspective of apocalyptic eschatology; some of that perspective was also in Pharisaic teaching concerning the resurrection of the dead and reward and punishment in the world to come.

Apocalyptic eschatology certainly appears to be the point of view from which John the Baptist preached repentance: "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" (Matthew 3:7; Luke 3:7). According to Matthew, his message was "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matthew 3:2). He spoke of the one coming after him: "His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the granary, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire" (Matthew 3:12; Luke 3:17). That John may have had some connection with the Essene movement, and thus with its apocalyptic perspective, is a possibility; it cannot, however, be demonstrated.

But how far was Jesus himself influenced by this perspective? He, too, preached the message, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven/God is at hand" (Matthew 4:17; Mark 1:15). This is the same message John gave, according to Matthew (compare 4:17 with 3:2). The Synoptic Gospels agree that much of his teaching concerned the kingdom. Is the meaning of Jesus' message different from that of John's?

It was Johannes Weiss who, towards the end of the 19th century, in his book *Jesus' Proclamation of the Kingdom of God,* put forward the thesis that the concept of the kingdom of God, as found in Jesus' teaching, was of apocalyptic origin. A few years later Albert Schweitzer went even farther than Weiss. Schweitzer maintained that Jesus was " . . . determined in His thought, speech and action by His expectation of a speedy end to the world, and of the supernatural Messianic Kingdom which would thereupon be revealed."[8]

Very few scholars were willing to follow Schweitzer, however. As Klaus Koch points out, there emerged the theory of "a non-apocalyptic Jesus and his apocalyptic church," a theory which is maintained by many New Testament scholars to this day.[9] Many have attempted to see Jesus as the heir of prophetic eschatology, not apocalyptic eschatology.

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8. Albert Schweitzer, *My Life and Thought,* trans. by C. T. Campion (London: Guild Books, 1955), p. 40.
9. Klaus Koch, *The Rediscovery of Apocalyptic,* trans. by Margaret Kohl (Studies in Biblical Theology, Second Series, 22; London: SCM Press Ltd., 1972), p. 59. It is worthwhile to note the title of Koch's chapter which traces Continental New Testament scholarship on this subject: "The Agonised Attempts to Save Jesus from Apocalyptic."

Can this legitimately be done? It might be noted that the two strongest links between Jesus and the tradition of apocalyptic eschatology are provided by Jesus' use of the concept of "the kingdom of God" and by his use of the title "Son of man." However, many New Testament scholars have denied to Jesus the "Son of man"-sayings which refer to the Son of man as a coming, apocalyptic figure, attributing these to the early church, leaving to Jesus only those utterances where the phrase is simply a surrogate for "I myself". Further, the phrase "the kingdom of God" is not a familiar apocalyptic concept. Actually, the term "kingdom" is seldom used in the Inter-Testamental period to refer to God's eschatological reign, either directly, or through His Messiah, or through His people (as occurs in Daniel and in the Qumran literature). Yet, it does seem to occur often enough so that the phrase "the kingdom of God" in Jesus' mouth would have suggested to anyone who knew Jewish apocalyptic literature, or even the single book Daniel, the eschatological reign of God. Possibly Jesus chose this little-used concept in order to fill it with the meaning that he himself wished it to signify.[12] Certainly in the teaching of Jesus it appears as a reality which is not only future but present as well (note particularly Luke 17:20-21, where Jesus seems to counter the usual apocalyptic expectation as expressed by the Pharisees). Thus, while Jesus does use apocalyptic eschatology, he uses it in a new way. He is claiming that his proclamation of the kingdom of God is God's final summons to humanity.

Paul, from whom come the earliest documents of the New Testament, certainly seems to be influenced by the perspective of apocalyptic eschatology. In his letters is demonstrated how the early church, faced with the necessity of taking Jesus' death and resurrection into account in its preaching, understood these events. While Jesus' death could be interpreted as an atoning sacrifice for sin, his resurrection became his exaltation to heaven as the eschatological Saviour. The "Day of Yahweh" of Old Testament prophecy and apocalyptic

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10. So Philipp Vielhauer, "Apocalyptic in Early Christianity," in Edgar Hennecke and Wilhelm Schneemelcher, eds., *New Testament Apocrypha*, II (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1965), p. 608.

11. See my study: Theodore N. Swanson, "The Kingship of God in Inter-Testamental Literature," *The Bangalore Theological Forum*, XII (No. 1, 1980), pp. 1-25.

12. *Ibid.*, pp. 23-24.

became transformed into the day of our Lord Jesus Christ when Christ would come as eschatological Saviour and Judge. The kingdom of God of Jesus' preaching became transformed into the expectation of Christ's Parousia. With these changes, the door was opened for the influx of apocalyptic notions. There did develop "the apocalyptic church."

Some of this apocalyptic teaching is found in Paul's writings. In what is probably the first of his letters, 1 Thessalonians, he passes on "the word of the Lord" to answer a question concerning those who died before the Lord's coming (1 Thess. 4:15-17). This is probably a "non-genuine" saying of Jesus which shows how the Parousia came to be described in apocalyptic terms. Likewise, 1 Corinthians 15:51-52 employs colourful apocalyptic imagery. That Paul himself is profoundly influenced by this apocalyptic eschatology is apparent throughout his works. He did believe in the Parousia and the fullness of salvation to be close at hand (cf. Romans 13:11-14; 1 Thess. 5:1-11).

Is apocalyptic at the centre of Pauline thought? In a recent book, *Paul the Apostle*, J. Christiaan Beker makes the claim that it is.[13] As reviews of the book have shown, however, other scholars, while acknowledging that apocalyptic is present in Paul as a part of his basic theological structure, do not admit that apocalyptic is *the* central theme in Paul.[14]

In the Synoptic Gospels, there are many apocalyptic sayings attributed to Jesus, perhaps including among them the sayings concerning the coming of the Son of man (if they are to be denied to Jesus!). Perhaps the one which excites the greatest interest, however, is the Synoptic Apocalypse of Mark 13. A Jewish or Jewish-Christian apocalypse may have provided the basis for this chapter, combined with some genuine words of Jesus (such as vv. 2, 28-29), and worked into its final form by the evangelist himself. The evangelist places this composition immediately before the passion history. The effect of this is to demonstrate that the apocalyptic events were not future, but had already begun. The passion of Jesus, as well as the persecution of

13. J. Christiaan Beker, *Paul the Apostle: The Triumph of God in Life and Thought* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980).

14. See, for example, the review by Robin Scroggs, " 'Apocalyptic' as the Center of Paul's Gospel," *Interpretation*, 36/1 (1982), pp. 74-77.

Christians in the evangelist's own time, are to be seen as the birth-pangs of events of the end-time.

As time passed, however, and the Parousia was delayed, the early Church adjusted theologically to that fact. This is witnessed by the way the Synoptic Apocalypse is employed in Matthew and in Luke.

As it appears in the context of Matthew 24-25, the Synoptic Apocalypse has attached to it a description of the final judgment (25:31-46). The church addressed by Matthew is a Jewish-Christian congregation which holds to the Law and regards itself as the true Judaism. In this church the followers of Jesus are distinguished from the Scribes and Pharisees by their adherence to the new righteousness, which is the standard by which the church will be judged by the Son of man in the coming judgment. Although Matthew, like Mark, is convinced that the eschatological events have already begun with the death and resurrection of Jesus, he does not believe that the end will come until the Gospel has been proclaimed to all nations. Thus, the church must be a missionary church before the Parousia can occur. Compared to Mark, therefore, in Matthew the expectation of the imminent Parousia recedes. Yet the church is expected to watch out for the coming of the Son of man who will first judge the church, and then put the nations to shame and save the elect from all over the world.

In the Lukan version of the Synoptic Apocalypse (Luke 21:5-36), the close connection of the apocalyptic discourse to the passion narrative which is found in Mark and Matthew is not present. For Luke the apocalyptic events are still in the future, and have not already begun. Before the Parousia comes there must be the period of the Gentiles, the period of the church. This period of the church is not a part of the end-events, as in Matthew, but an independent period in the history of salvation. In this way Luke accounts theologically for the delay of the Parousia.

In the Gospel of John, probably dating from the last decade of the first century, and thus the last of the four Gospels to be written, two different forms of eschatology are found side by side. The viewpoint of apocalyptic eschatology is present, with salvation viewed in the future. Depicted as future realities are judgment (12:48), eternal life (12:25), resurrection (6:39-40, 54), the parousia (14:3, 18, 28) and the tribulations which will signal the beginning of these events (chaps.

15 and 16). Alongside these passages, though, are other passages which seem to say that these future expectations are already realized by Christians in their present relationship with Christ. Thus, depicted as present realities are judgment (3:18; 9:39), eternal life (3:36; 5:24), resurrection (5:21, 24, 26) and the defeat of the "ruler of this age" (12:31). This is the point of view that contemporary theologians would call "realized eschatology." One way to account for the presence of these two viewpoint side by side is to theorize that the evangelist preserved the apocalyptic eschatological viewpoint that he received in the traditional materials that he used in writing the Gospel, but that, in view of the delay of the Parousia, he himself reinterpreted the eschatological promises as being realities in the present experience of believers.[15]

The Revelation of John is the only apocalypse which found acceptance in the New Testament canon as a separate book (although in the Eastern church, it had difficulty in attaining to the status of Scripture; only in the fourth century, under the influence of the Western church, did it begin to be recognized as Scripture in the East.) It probably comes from Asia Minor, and is to be dated at the beginning of the persecution of Domitian (A.D. 95). Its purpose is to encourage the Christians undergoing persecution for their faith to stand firm. Yet, it also witnesses to the fact that the Jewish–Christian circles in Asia Minor from which it comes found their universe of meaning in apocalyptic, and the author of the book was undoubtedly trying to win support for their ideas. This is not simply apocalyptic eschatology; this is apocalypticism.

Space forbids analysis of the book here. Notice should be taken, however, of the fact that the book is thoroughly dualistic. Satan, who is not even mentioned in the Synoptic Apocalypse, is the real opponent of Christ and his church. The Anti–Christ (who is apparently described in 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12) appears; here he is to be interpreted as the emperor himself. A false prophet also appears (16:13; cf. Mark 13:22; Matthew 24:24). The Parousia is described as a battle with and conquest of these evil powers. Two apocalyptic ideas unique to the New Testament appear in Revelation: the idea of a millennium, a thousand-year reign of Christ that takes place between the Parousia

15. On this point see Robert Kysar, *John, The Maverick Gospel* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1976), pp. 86-93.

and the final battle, and the idea of two resurrections, one of only the righteous before the millennium (20:4-6); the second of all the dead after the millennium (20:12-15). The idea of a millennium stems from the combination of the prophetic eschatological hope of a Messiah in history with apocalyptic eschatological ideas. The idea is also found in Jewish apocalyptic (cf. for example, 2 Esdras 7:28ff., where the Messiah reigns for 400 years, then dies. After seven days of primeval silence there occurs the general resurrection and judgment. In rabbinic writings the idea of a 1,000 year reign of the Messiah is also found).

Other Christian apocalypses were written, among them such works as the final chapter of *The Didache, The Shepherd of Hermas, The Ascension of Isaiah, The Apocalypse of Peter* (which supplies vivid descriptions of heaven and hell), 5 and 6 Ezra, the Christian Sibyllines (Michelangelo painted five Sibyls in the Sistine Chapel as counterparts to the prophets), *The Book of Elchasai, The Apocalypse of Paul, The Apocalypse of Thomas,* and many others.[16]

Apocalyptic in the History of the Church

Apocalyptic ideas have continued to influence Christian thought. Indeed, some are a part of orthodox Christian teaching. The coming of Christ to judge the living and the dead, His everlasting kingdom, the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come are beliefs incorporated into the ecumenical creeds of the church.

But other apocalyptic ideas have continued to circulate. In particular, the ideas sparked by Revelation 20 have had an interesting history. Millenarianism is the belief in a thousand year period which will ensue upon Christ's return when he will reign together with the saints who will be raised at the first resurrection. This belief, also called chiliasm (from Greek *chiliad,* which, like Latin *millenarius,* means "1,000"), is derived from a literal reading of Revelation 20 (although Revelation 20:4, which states that only those beheaded for their testimony to Jesus and for the word of God will be raised, is not usually interpreted literally!). This belief existed in crude form in the second century (Papias was an enthusiastic chiliast) and continued to be found in the Western Church until the latter part of the fourth century. In

16. Texts of most of these writings can be found in Hennecke and Schneemelcher, eds., *New Testament Apocrypha,* II.

the Eastern Church, chiliasm had less influence, since anything other than a belief in Christ's second coming and a literal hell for sinners was looked down upon as being of Jewish origin. It was Augustine who discredited millenarianism in the Western Church, by teaching that the thousand-year reign of Christ was the period from his resurrection to his return, and that the church is Christ's Kingdom. Augustine taught that the first resurrection takes place at baptism; the second resurrection will take place in the resurrection of the body at the end of the world. Thereafter the doctrine was little emphasized in Catholic theology, which concentrated eschatological teaching upon the future of the individual. However, there was a widespread popular belief in the final years of the 10th century that the coming of the year 1000 would bring Christ's second coming; the approach of the year 2000 will probably bring similar expectations.

Millenarianism, however, continued to maintain an underground existence, occasionally surfacing. Joachim of Fiore (d. ca. 1200) calculated that the reign of God would come in 1260; his commentary on Revelation influenced Franciscan piety, but also provided ammunition for the Hussites and Anabaptists, who claimed that Christ could not be lord of a church which had become conformed to the world. Therefore, they concluded, Christians had to await Christ's lordship in a new age.

In the sixteenth century Luther rejected chiliasm; however, he eagerly awaited the last day on which Christ would finally overcome Satan. Among other reformers, however, millenarianism revived, and is very much a living belief among many Christians today, especially among those who accept the verbal inspiration of Scripture. Among present-day millenarian movements are Seventh Day Adventists and Jehovah's Witnesses who, although having their origin in North America, have sought to extend their beliefs throughout the world.[17]

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17. It might be well to quote the statement of the Holy See in 1944: "The system of a mitigated millenarianism cannot be taught without danger to the faith" (AAS 36, 1944, p. 212; D 2296, DS 3838, quoted in Estevān Bettencourt, "Millenarianism," *Sacramentum Mundi: An Encyclopedia of Theology*, ed. by Karl Rahner, et al. (Bangalore: Theological Publications in India, 1975), pp. 43-44.

Apocalyptic Today

As mentioned earlier, apocalyptic ideas are still prevalent in the Christian church, sometimes institutionalized in sects and denominations, such as Jehovah's Witnesses and the Seventh Day Adventists, but also present as a theological strain cutting across denominational lines. Those Christians who are fascinated by "prophecy," by which they mean the attempt to find contemporary history foretold and to discern the future on the basis of passages in the prophets, such as Ezekiel 38-39, or by means of the books of Daniel and Revelation, are actually dealing with apocalyptic, not prophecy. Those Christians who emphasize the Second Coming of Christ, and who calculate the nearness of that event on the basis of the "signs of the times"—earthquakes, wars and political occurrences involving the state of Israel—are the apocalyptists of today.

Further, there is a sort of secular apocalypticism advocated by those who see the structures and institutions of society as irreformable, and thus advocate — and sometimes work for — their overthrow, in the expectation that out of the ashes a new, ideal society will emerge.

There is merit in apocalyptic. It is one of the many theological strains present in Scripture, and should be taken seriously as such. It originated as a Word of God, a Gospel – good news – directed to people of faith suffering persecution for their faith: the book of Daniel was directed to Jews suffering persecution in the second century B.C.; Revelation was directed to Christians suffering persecution in the first century A.D. It is still a Word of God today, especially appreciated by Christians who in our day suffer persecution, or who have seen their worlds collapse around them. For the message of apocalyptic is one that Christians need to be reminded of again and again, especially when it seems as if the evil of humans has the upper hand: it declares that the ultimate victory belongs to God. It declares also that in spite of the darkness that surrounds us, God's light will shine forth. The kingdom, the power and the glory are His.

Apocalyptic also reminds us that we do not build or bring in the kingdom of God by our own efforts. Any society that humans build, no matter how good the intentions, is flawed by evil, by human sin. It is God who, in His time, will bring His kingdom. But apocalyptic does not, as is often claimed, thereby necessarily promote withdrawal from the world. There is an ethical stance to apocalyptic, illustrated

by the stories of Daniel 1-6 and the Letters to the Seven Churches in Revelation 1-3: it is exhortation to live the life of the coming kingdom here and now. If we believe that God's reign will prevail, we have the responsibility to live, even in a flawed society, as citizens of that coming kingdom. Indeed, we have the responsibility to seek to shape society, insofar as it is humanly possible, in the light of that coming kingdom. This stance spares us the sinful pride of thinking that we, by our efforts, build the kingdom; but it also spares us from cynicism and disillusionment when, because of human sin, our efforts fall short — as they will — of attaining the goal which is God's alone to give.

There are dangers to apocalyptic. There are Christians who get so wrapped up in calculating the time of the end, or in trying to see contemporary history reflected in the bizarre symbolism of the apocalyptic visions — efforts which are futile and self-defeating — that they neglect weightier matters of the Christian faith and life. It is possible to become so other-worldly in one's Christian orientation that one is no earthly good! We are called as servants of the God who, as the prophets saw, acted in history on our behalf, even to the extent of entering human history in Jesus. Our call is to serve Him within history. If fascination with apocalyptic, or an apocalyptic point of view, detracts us from creative and redemptive involvement in history, in acting as Jesus did, with and on behalf of our fellow humans, then apocalyptic itself has become a hindrance to the Christian life.