

Old Testament History
by
Charles F. Pfeiffer

Part Eight
Between the Testaments:
The Hellenistic Period

CHAPTER 93

Rise of Apocalyptic Literature

During the last two centuries of this period and the first century of the Christian era, a species of literature developed among the Jews which is termed "apocalyptic." And "apocalypse" is an unveiling. The last book of the Bible bears that name. This type of writing is also found in various portions of the Old Testament prophetic books, including Isaiah, Ezekiel (38-39), Daniel, Joel, and Zechariah (12-14).

The chief noncanonical apocalyptic books are the writings ascribed to Enoch and Baruch, the Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs, and IV Ezra. They form a part of the body of ancient literature which is termed pseudepigraphal because of the fact that many of these writings were issued under an assumed name.

The apocalyptic portions of the Bible are actually a species of Biblical prophecy. They are a part of the "divers manners" (Heb. 1:1) used in the proclamation of religious truth by Israel's prophets.

During the two centuries before Christ, when the Jew was conscious of the fact that prophecy had ceased, and that the canon of Scripture was closed, he looked for no new spokesman to declare divine truth with authority -- at least until the Messiah should come. Thinkers, however, felt that they had a message for their generation. Sometimes these messages contained words and thoughts which had been popularly ascribed to some ancient worthy. In order to give a production the sanctity of age, and thus to insure a wide audience, the apocalypses of the two pre-Christian centuries were pseudepigraphal. The name of some ancient man of God, like Enoch, was assigned as the author of the writing. The writers doubtless believed that they were writing in the spirit of the earlier patriarch, and much of the material which they used was really old. We should not lightly charge these writers with "pious fraud," although we cannot accept the names assigned to their writings at face value.

Apocalyptic literature was both a message of comfort in days of trouble and an effort to

show how God had purposed to bring victory to His people, although they were in the midst of an apparently hopeless situation. The persecutions of Antiochus Epiphanes threatened the very existence of Israel as a people. It was in the consciousness of the sovereign purposes of God that Israel took hope.

The Old Testament prophets were largely preachers, delivering the Word of God by word of mouth to their generation. The apocalyptists wrote their messages. Their writings made frequent use of imagery. In this way they avoided possible reprisals from powerful individuals or groups attacked. Also they secured an impressive air of mystery which helped to reinforce the message.

Students of apocalyptic literature, both Biblical and non-canonical, note a constancy in the imagery. Nations are beasts which come out of the sea (Dan. 7:3; II Esdras 11:1; Rev. 13:1). There are seven heavens (Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs--Levi, iii; Ascension of Isaiah, vii-x). Frequent references are made to "horns," "heads," "watchers," and "the seven angels." In general, men are described as animals, nations as beasts, the Jews as sheep or cattle, and their leaders as rams or bulls.

The apocalyptic literature of the two centuries before Christ adapted the ideas and, in part, the imagery of the earlier prophetic literature to the needs of a new generation. An air of mystery surrounds many of these writings. They deal with the purposes of God, the "secrets" of heaven which are not known to the uninitiated. The knowledge of the divine will comes through vision or dream. The message is usually given in the first person. If Israel's prophet claimed direct revelation from God Himself, the apocalyptic writer claims to receive divine revelation mediately through an angel. The prophets had much to say about the present, but the chief concern of the apocalyptist was the future. The final consummation was regarded as imminent.

The coming Messiah is a recurrent theme for the apocalyptist. This concept finds its roots in the Old Testament. Nathan had spoken of the continuation and idealization of the Davidic line (II Sam. 7:12 ff., cf. Ps. 89). The Perfect Prince of the Apocalyptists was a scion of the house of David. The Psalms of Solomon (17:21 ff.) contain a prayer for a restored Davidic prince who will overthrow the Romans. References to a Messiah, or "Anointed One," from other lines also appear. The Testament of Reuben (6:7 ff.) speaks of a Messiah from the line of Levi, and the Damascus Zadokite fragments speak of a Messiah from Aaron (9:10). In the Similitude of Enoch, written before 63 B.C., the Messiah is called "The Anointed One," "The Righteous One," "The Elect," and "The Son of Man" (37-71). The latter title, so familiar to the reader of the New Testament Gospels, is apparently derived from Daniel 7:13. The apocalyptists frequently speak of the Messiah as the great Judge who will come in the clouds of heaven to punish the wicked and reward the righteous.

The concept of the Kingdom of God is the climax of apocalyptic literature. Sometimes this is presented as reserved for the Jews, or the righteous Jews only. Other writers envision

the Kingdom of God as including true worshipers of God from every nation.

The Kingdom of God in some writers is a period of divine rule on earth. This rule may last four hundred years, or one hundred years, or it may be eternal. If this Kingdom of God is temporary, it is followed by an eternal heavenly existence.

To those who look for a Kingdom of God in this world, the end of the present age means the end of evil in the world. The future age is earthly but not evil. Some, however, insist that the present world is inherently evil. They expect the world to be destroyed, or miraculously changed. The future age is then the heavenly world.

The glories of the Kingdom of God are described in bold language. The earth will be so fruitful that a single vine will bear 10,000 branches, each branch 10,000 twigs, each twig 10,000 shoots, each shoot 10,000 clusters, each cluster 10,000 grapes, and each grape will produce 225 gallons of wine!

To what extent were the apocalyptists influenced by outside sources? It is frequently suggested that Persian influences, particularly in angelology and the dualistic conflicts between light and darkness, account in large measure for the nature of apocalyptic. Greek and Egyptian contacts are also suggested. While the apocalyptic writers certainly assimilated material from the various cultures which surrounded them, there is no evidence of direct borrowing. It is best to see in the apocalyptic literature an echo of the prophetic writings, given shape by the sufferings under Antiochus Epiphanes. The Christian sees in the Messianic hope expressed in the literature of the first two pre-Christian centuries a providential preparation for the advent of Christ. Behind the extravagant symbolism, exaggerated nationalism, and laborious numerical calculations, he sees a confidence in the ultimate accomplishment of the divine purposes, and the advent of a righteous "son of David" through whom the purposes of God will be realized.

EPILOGUE

In the days of Herod the Great, in an obscure corner of the Roman Empire, in the city which had been the birthplace of King David a millennium earlier, Jesus the Messiah was born. History took little note of His life. Only a few devoted disciples openly espoused His cause. The religious leaders attributed the miracles He performed to Beelzebub, the Prince of the Devils. To the Roman officials He was an insurrectionist; to the Jews, a blasphemer. In the hour of His trial, his disciples forsook Him and fled. He was crucified as a malefactor, between two thieves.

Yet His life and His death introduce a new age. From apparent defeat came the triumph of victory. The death of the cross is heralded as the divinely provided atonement for sin. The resurrection brings the assurance of life everlasting.

