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BOOK SECTION

Books on Apocalyptic

CHRISTOPHER ROWLAND

It is a sign of the times that there is a renewed interest in Jewish and Christian apocalyptic literature. The threats of ecological disaster or nuclear catastrophe have reawakened the apocalyptic tradition as a resource on all sides of the religious and political spectrum (see e.g. Alan Race, ed., *Theology against the Nuclear Horizon*, SCM Press 1988). There is now a wide variety of books on ancient apocalyptic which provide excellent introduction to the literature and its contents. Questions of interpretation and contemporary use is another matter, however. Most of us who write on the apocalyptic literature still find ourselves at a loss (to quote the German title of Klaus Koch's survey of the study of apocalyptic, *The Rediscovery of Apocalyptic*, SCM Press 1972) as to how to cope with its powerful symbolism.

In the last five years two excellent collections of translations of the Jewish apocalypses have appeared. The most complete is that edited by Jim Charlesworth, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, vol.1, Darton, Longman and Todd 1983. A more concise collection (though omitting the very important II Esdras or 4 Ezra is that edited by H. D. F. Sparkes, *The Apocrypha of the Old Testament*, Oxford University Press 1985). Some early Christian apocalypses are to be found surveyed or in their entirety (including the little known Ascension of Isaiah) in E. Hennecke (ed. W. Schneemelcher and R. Mcl. Wilson), *New Testament Apocrypha*, vol. 2, Lutterworth 1963. There is a useful summary of the contents of many of the Jewish apocalypses in George Nicklesburg's *Jewish Writings between the Bible and the Mishnah*, SCM Press 1981 (Nicklesburg is at present engaged in writing a full length commentary on the longest and oldest of the Jewish apocalypses, 1 Enoch, to be published by Fortress Press). Apart from the Shepherd of Hermas found in collections of the Apostolic Fathers a sample of the ongoing tradition of Christian apocalyptic writing outside the canon can be found in the Martha Himmelfarb's *Tours of Hell*, University of Pennsylvania Press 1983.

There has been a long tradition of study of apocalyptic within British biblical scholarship. The names of R. H. Charles (whose pioneering work of translating and editing the apocalypses paved the way for much of the work that followed), H. H. Rowley and D. S. Russell are all still to be found in contemporary discussions of the subject. Their view that apocalyptic is a development of prophetic hope in the direction of a belief in an otherworldly hope, catastrophic end to the present world, pessimism with regard to the present and imminent end to the present order, still undergirds much of the discussion of apocalyptic in the survey of J. J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination*, Crossroads 1985, and the influential study of apocalyptic origins by Paul Hanson (*The Origin of Apocalyptic*, Fortress 1975). The latter, who saw the emergence of apocalyptic eschatology in the attitudes of visionaries in the tradition of Second Isaiah who despaired of ever seeing their hopes fulfilled in the historical plane stands firmly within the Rowley/Russell tradition of interpretation which, in Rowley's

words, argued that:

the prophets foretold the future that should arise out of the present, while the apocalyptists foretold the future that should break into the present (*The Relevance of Apocalyptic*, Lutterworth 1947).

So the word 'apocalyptic' has been used to describe the beliefs concerning the arrival of a new age. It is seen merely as a form of eschatology which is to be distinguished from a this-worldly eschatology. Its characteristic features are a contrast between the present age and a new age of a transcendent kind, which breaks in from beyond through divine intervention and without human activity, and an imminent expectation of the coming of that new age.

This view also undergirds the understanding of apocalyptic which has been so prevalent in New Testament scholarship since the work of Johannes Weiss and Albert Schweitzer. The belief that Jesus expected the end of the world and a reign of God whose coming was dependent solely on God's initiative and not humanity's is one that is something of a commonplace in New Testament text books. The evidence from the apocalypses themselves, however, indicates that such a view cannot be easily substantiated. Indeed, the apocalypses, both Jewish and Christian, all look forward to the coming of God's reign on earth. Its arrival would be preceded by massive upheavals in the present world order but the process of its establishment would neither be sudden nor would it involve 'the end of the world'. Thus while Weiss and Schweitzer were right to call attention to the central role played by apocalyptic and eschatology in the formation of early Christianity they were mistaken in supposing that Jesus and the first Christians expected the end of the world and as a result showed little concern for this world. They may have looked forward to the end of the present world order but there is nothing to suggest that their hope was entirely or even wholly otherworldly. Among the most persistent critics of the scholarly consensus is Francis Glasson whose little book *Jesus and the End of the World*, Epworth 1980, contains a pertinent critique of certain aspects of Schweitzer's views. The issues are also touched on in Mark Corner and Christopher Rowland, *Liberating Exegesis*, to be published by SPCK towards the end of 1989. The problem is much bigger than merely the misunderstanding of the Jewish apocalypses and the New Testament. There are fundamental theological assumptions which undergird much of the discussion of eschatology which lead to a pervasive despair of human history as the appropriate arena for the manifestation of God's ultimate salvation whose roots lie deep within our post-Enlightenment culture. The studies of Nicholas Lash (*Easter in Ordinary*, SCM Press 1988) and in much more popular vein Robert McAfee Brown (*Spirituality and Liberation*, Spire 1988) will give some indication of the extent of the problem for Christian theology and the effects it has on the way Christian symbols are unwarrantedly kept distinct from the political processes in which we are all involved.

While not denying the links between the apocalypses and the prophetic tradition, a group of us have questioned this understanding of apocalyptic. Instead of seeing it as a form of eschatology we have preferred to see it as a way of understanding God's purposes for humanity and the universe which depends ultimately on revelation. As such the literary genre of the apocalypse or revelation provides the clue for the understanding of the material included in

the apocalypses. The apocalyptists are not concerned with answering questions about the future but with the meaning of existence and the important part which theodicy plays in that process. Apocalyptic, therefore, is to be viewed as the form that prophecy took in the Hellenistic and Roman periods when pessimism about understanding the inscrutable ways of God led to a claim to divine revelation through vision and audition as the only way of giving meaning to an unjust and apparently meaningless history. I have argued an approach along these lines in *The Open Heaven. A Study of Apocalyptic in Judaism and Christianity*, SPCK 1982 as also has Michael Stone (though with different emphases) in his comprehensive survey of the apocalypses in M. Stone, ed., *Jewish Literature of the Second Temple Period*, van Gorcum 1984. His views are concisely summarised (along with some interesting and provocative views on ancient Judaism and early Christianity) in *Scriptures, Sects and Visions*, Blackwell 1982, parts of which are printed in P. Hanson, ed., *Visionaries and their Apocalypses*, London 1983. Another readable survey which takes account of this alternative trend is D. S. Russell's *From Judaism to Early Church*, SCM Press 1986.

Another significant development has been exploration of the connections between the apocalyptic literature of the Second Temple period and the Jewish mystical tradition. This has been traced in the classic study of Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, Schocken 1955, and more recently by Ithamar Gruenwald, *Apocalyptic and Merkavah Mysticism*, Brill 1978, and Rowland, *The Open Heaven*, SPCK 1982. Research in this area has raised questions about the caricatures of rabbinic Judaism with which Christian scholars have been accustomed to work and shown the importance of the understanding of the charismatic/mystical tradition within Judaism as a way of understanding the tensions which existed between messianic/charismatic Jews and others in the separation of the Christian church from synagogue Judaism. A classic study which casts considerable light on Christian origins is Gershom Scholem's study of the seventeenth-century Jewish messiah *Sabbatai Sevi*, Littmann Library 1973, whose significance is discussed by W. D. Davies in his *Jewish and Pauline Studies*, SPCK 1984.

Of greatest importance for those who have to preach on the biblical apocalypses, Daniel and Revelation, are the commentaries and books which will help to make sense of these books. Here the bulk of the material available concentrates on the attempts to make sense of their original setting and purpose. Such a task is not without its significance, of course, but that frequently only serves to increase the distance between ourselves and these strange products of our ancestors in the faith. Two commentaries which offer accessible ways into Revelation are those by John Sweet (SCM Press 1979) and G. Beasley Murray (New Century Bible 1974). John Collins' books *The Apocalyptic Vision of the Book of Daniel*, Scolars Press 1977, and his more recent *Daniel with an Introduction to the Apocalyptic Literature*, Eerdman 1984, offer introductions to Daniel. Three studies which attempt to wrestle with wider interpretative issues while being predominantly concerned with the original meaning of the text are Elizabeth Schuessler Fiorenza's *The Book of Revelation: Justice and Judgement*, Fortress 1985, the excellent chapter on Revelation in K. Wengst, *Pax Romana and the Peace of Jesus Christ*, SCM Press 1987, and Adela Yarbro Collins *Crisis and Catharsis*. It is now time for us to move away from the narrow focus on the original meaning of the text which is so typical of much of

our exegesis to encompass the questions of how we can use the book of Revelation. I have attempted this in a preliminary way in *Radical Christianity*, Polity 1988, and hope to extend this further in my commentary on Revelation for the Epworth Preachers' Commentaries. A good example of what can be achieved when this book is read within the context of a contemporary struggle may be found in Allan Boesak, *Comfort and Protest*, St Andrew's Press 1987. There is much use of the book of Revelation in the Basic Christian Communities in Latin America, where the popular commentary of Carlos Mesters has been very influential.

Questions of contemporary usage remind us that the apocalyptic tradition has been a potent resource for social change throughout the history of the church. That story is graphically (though unsympathetically) told in Norman Cohn's *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, Paladin 1957. Medieval apocalyptic can be glimpsed in Bernard McGinn's *Apocalyptic Spirituality*, SPCK 1979, and *Visions of the End*, Crossroads 1979. The contribution of Joachim of Fiore's interpretation is summarised in Marjorie Reeves, *Joachim of Fiore and the Prophetic Future*, SPCK 1976, and forms the backdrop of Umberto Eco's well-known novel *The Name of the Rose*. Later periods are covered in C. Hill, *The Antichrist in Seventeenth Century England*, Oxford University Press 1971, and K. Firth, *The Apocalyptic Tradition in Reformation Britain*, Oxford University Press 1979 (a reminder that apocalyptic symbolism was not merely a resource for those involved in social change but also the politically conservative). Those who have never read Christopher Hill's brilliant study of radical movements at the time of the Civil War in England will find *The World Turned Upside Down*, Penguin 1972, essential reading for understanding the roots of a radical religious and political tradition in English life. Other books which deserve mentioning are C. Patrides and J. Wittreich, *The Apocalypse in English Renaissance Thought and Literature*, Manchester University Press 1984 (with an indispensable survey of ancient commentaries and books on the Apocalypse), R. Bloch, *Visionary Republic*, Cambridge University Press 1985 (on the influence of eschatological and utopian ideas on early North America polity) and D. V. Erdman, *Blake: Prophet against Empire*, Columbia University Press 1969.

In his sociological study of the relationship between early Christianity and millenarian movements in *Kingdom and Community*, Prentice Hall 1975, John Gager makes some interesting points about the links between the thought-world of apocalyptic and its social setting (reproduced in Hanson, *Visionaries and their Apocalypses*). Too little attention has been paid to the question of the relationship between ideas and the socio-economic setting in which they are produced and developed. Initial attempts to wrestle with this question are to be found in the large-scale collection of essays edited by David Hellholm, *Apocalypticism in the Mediterranean World and the Near East*, Mohr 1982. Too often, however, it is supposed that those who entertain apocalyptic ideas must always be marginal figures. The history of interpretation as well as contemporary usage among wealthy North American fundamentalists indicates that this is by no means always the case (a point well captured in A. Mojtabai's book *Blessed Assurance* 1987). When I look back at *The Open Heaven*, published seven years ago, it is this area above all which I think constitutes the greatest omission in that book. If I were writing now, I would want to take full account of the sociology of knowledge (e.g. Karl Mannheim's *Ideology and Utopia*,

Routledge, 1960, which includes a discussion of the mind-set of the apocalypticist/chiliasm, particularly as it has been refined in the writing of those who have used the work of Antonio Gramsci and the Frankfurt School. One significant study which should be compulsory reading for all those who want to understand the making and evolution of early Christian theology is Stuart Hall's essay 'Religious Ideologies and Social Movements in Jamaica' in R. Boccock and K. Thompson, *Religion and Ideology*, Manchester University Press 1985. His treatment of the formation of Rastafarian ideas has many ramifications for our understanding of the formation, development and persistence of apocalyptic protest movements.

In a fragile world where the gaps between rich and poor grow greater, the stark contrasts which characterise the apocalypses and their uncompromising call to repentance and commitment to God's final reign of peace and justice evoke a more ready response. The fear of disaster and the profound unease with contemporary arrangements mean that this tradition will increasingly become a battle-ground in the ideological struggles. In such circumstances the watchword of eschatology, 'be vigilant', demands care, wisdom and critical insight to lay bare, in the true apocalyptic spirit, the interests of the powerful in oppressing the millions who have no helper. For this reason, if no other, it is time that concerned Christians awoke to the potential of the apocalypses both as instruments of comfort and hope and critical realism about the world in which we live. One thing we cannot do is allow them to become the sole preserve of those who now wield power in favour of the minority and thereby impoverish ourselves and the potential in God's word to challenge the principalities and powers.