

THE TYNDALE BIBLICAL THEOLOGY LECTURE, 1978

## THE VALUE OF APOCALYPTIC

By Stephen H. Travis

To take such an imprecise title as 'the value of apocalyptic' may seem impossibly rash. It is like talking about 'the value of motor cars', when everyone knows that there is a world of difference between a Rolls-Royce Corniche and a fourth-hand Morris Minor. Some cars have electrically operated windows, others hardly have windows. Some have twelve cylinders, others have to struggle up hills with two. To speak of 'the value of motor cars' looks like an impossible generalization. And yet it is not pointless to speak generally of the value of cars as compared with bicycles, or bulldozers. Similarly, I suggest, there is something to be said for attempting a general assessment of the significance of apocalyptic for biblical and Christian theology.

Nevertheless, we need to bear constantly in mind that there are Rolls-Royces and Morris Minors among the apocalyptic writings. There are varieties of date, historical background and theological outlook. There are profound books and less profound ones. There are problems about identifying which books are apocalyptic and which are not. Indeed, the very term 'apocalypse' is our term for these writings, and is never used by the Jewish apocalyptists before its use by the author of the New Testament Apocalypse.<sup>1/</sup> And since there is no

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1. The word 'revelation' (ἀποκάλυψις) appears in the titles of 2 and 3 Baruch, but in both cases the title is almost certainly a later Christian addition. See P. Vielhauer in E. Hennecke, *New Testament Apocrypha*, vol. 2 (ET, London: Lutterworth, 1965), 582.

clear recognition by the authors of 'apocalyptic books' themselves that their writings belong to a clear-cut literary genre, it is not surprising that they incorporate various literary forms and styles. Thus J. G. Gammie writes that one characteristic of apocalyptic - as exhibited, for example, in the Book of Daniel, which includes wisdom tales as well as visions of the future - is its ability to contain at least three or four sub-genres. 'Full recognition may be given to the variety of sub-genres within the book [of Daniel] without denying the overall classification "apocalyptic".' /2/

Nevertheless, there is broad agreement amongst scholars with D. S. Russell's opinion that the designation 'apocalyptic' may properly be given to the biblical book of Daniel, sixteen non-canonical books and a large number of the Qumran scrolls. /3/ And there is broad agreement, too, about certain distinctive literary and theological features which characterize

2. 'The Classification, Stages of Growth, and Changing Intentions in the Book of Daniel', *JBL* 95 (1976), 193. I would myself prefer to designate as apocalyptic only those parts of a book which are similar in form or content to the Johannine Apocalypse. On this basis, we would not call Daniel an 'apocalyptic book', any more than we call Mark's Gospel an apocalyptic book just because it contains Mark 13. But I suspect that Gammie's way of dealing with the variety is so widely approved that my 'purist' view is unlikely to gain acceptance.

I have discussed several issues relating to apocalyptic - including its origins, its place in the New Testament, and its use by modern systematic theologians - in *Christian Hope and the Future of Man* (Leicester: IVP, 1980), chapters 2-4.

3. *The Method and Message of Jewish Apocalyptic* (London: SCM, 1964), 37-40. The question whether other Old Testament books apart from Daniel are 'apocalyptic' has in recent years been thrown wide open, especially by P. D. Hanson's claim that several passages in the prophets, such as Is. 24-27, Zc. 9-14, are to be labelled 'apocalyptic'. See, e.g., his book *The Dawn of Apocalyptic* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975), and his article 'Apocalypticism' in K. Crim (ed.), *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible: Supplementary Volume* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1976), 28-34.

these works./4/ Not all these features are found in all the works, but they do exude the same general atmosphere. It is the theological features with which I am particularly concerned, though I shall not try to list them all here. I shall refer to some of them when I come to the main part of the argument below. And throughout the lecture I shall concentrate on apocalyptic *eschatology*, though I recognize that apocalyptic literature has other theological interests besides eschatology.

But I need to make two more introductory remarks which are important if we are to get our perspectives right. First, when we talk about distinctive features of apocalyptic, we are not talking about features *unique* to apocalyptic. Many of the distinctive features are developments of ideas already found in the later Old Testament prophets./5/ And many of them were to become the standard beliefs of the rabbis. That, incidentally, calls in question the common view that apocalyptists were always suspect sectarian groups on the edge of Jewish religious life./6/ Nevertheless, it is worth

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4. See the discussions in K. Koch, *The Rediscovery of Apocalyptic* (ET, London: SCM, 1972), 24ff; Russell, *The Method and Message of Jewish Apocalyptic*, 104ff; Vielhauer in Hennecke, *New Testament Apocrypha*, vol. 2, 582ff; L Morris, *Apocalyptic* (London: IVP, 1973), 34ff.
  5. This has been stressed recently by Hanson (see the works cited in n. 3 above). *Seder Olam Rabbah* 30 is evidence of a rabbinic belief that the apocalyptists were natural successors to the prophets: 'Up to this point [i.e., up to Alexander the Great] the prophets preached through the Holy Spirit. From then on, bow your ear and hear the words of the wise [i.e., the apocalyptic writers].'
  6. For the view that apocalyptic and Pharisaism are not mutually exclusive, see W. D. Davies, 'Apocalyptic and Pharisaism', in *Christian Origins and Judaism* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1962), 19-30; E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (London: SCM, 1977), 423f; D. Patte, *Early Jewish Hermeneutic in Palestine* (Missoula: Scholars Press, 1975), 140.

investigating in what direction the apocalyptists developed prophetic ideas, and asking what particular religious insights they made prominent.

Secondly, the term 'apocalyptic' has in recent years been used with reference to the crises of our modern world. E. Rovit writes: 'The metaphor of the Apocalypse is our best model for viewing our contemporary human condition. It alone gives us a large and flexible mythic form that is grand enough to allow a full expression of our agonies and aspirations. What other myth do we possess that is as responsive to the major cataclysms of twentieth century life and death?'/7/ We may welcome this acknowledgement of the significance of apocalyptic. But there immediately arises the danger that a superficial search for parallels will produce a distorted view of the similarities between ancient and modern apocalyptic, and that modern ideas and concerns will be read back into the ancient literature. This tendency is, I think, not altogether absent from D. S. Russell's recent book, *Apocalyptic: Ancient and Modern*./8/ We need frankly to acknowledge the strangeness and distance from us of so much that is characteristic of Jewish apocalyptic. But the most fundamental difference between ancient and modern apocalyptic is that most modern 'apocalyptic' (so-called) is God-less, and therefore pessimistic about any possibility of 'salvation' or a new beginning.

I wish now to deal with my subject in three sections. First, I shall look at the value of Jewish apocalyptic for its original authors. Secondly I shall examine the place of apocalyptic in the thought of Jesus. And finally I shall arrive at some conclusions about the enduring contribution of apocalyptic to Christian theology.

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7. 'On the Contemporary Apocalyptic Imagination', *The American Scholar* 37 (1968), 463.
  8. London: SCM, 1978. His drawing of parallels between the modern world and the situations addressed by the Jewish apocalyptists is illuminating, but a little overdone.

*I The Value of Jewish Apocalyptic for Its Authors*

A crucial concern of the apocalyptists was the problem of *theodicy*. Whether or not P. D. Hanson and M. Hengel are right in the details of their reconstructions of the growth of apocalypticism within 'disenfranchized' communities and pious conventicles segregated from the official cult community,<sup>9/</sup> it is clear that their sense of alienation reached a crisis-point at the time of Antiochus IV's oppression in the 160s B.C. D. N. Freedman sees apocalyptic literature as 'born of crisis - from the start it was underground literature, the consolation of the persecuted'.<sup>10/</sup> Its authors were reacting to the question: How can God be said to be working out his saving purposes when the subjection of his faithful people goes on unabated? How is faith to react when the imperfections of the present time become intolerable?

The problem of theodicy is also evident in the apocalyptists' sense that their function was to interpret the message of the prophets, in a period when truly prophetic activity had ceased.<sup>11/</sup> So, for example, Daniel 9:2 interprets the 'seventy years' of Jeremiah. They were especially concerned with the continued non-fulfilment of earlier prophetic predictions - predictions of a Golden Age ushered in by 'the day of Yahweh', promises that evil and oppression would end, that the

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9. Hanson, 'Old Testament Apocalyptic Re-examined', *Interpretation* 25 (1971), 474; Hengel, *Judaism and Hellenism* (ET, London: SCM, 1974) vol. 1, 180. Cf. W. Schmithals, *The Apocalyptic Movement* (ET, Nashville: Abingdon, 1975), 45f; O. Plöger, *Theocracy and Eschatology* (ET, Oxford: Blackwell, 1968), 26-52.
  10. 'The Flowering of Apocalyptic', in *Journal for Theology and the Church* (abbreviated henceforth as JTC) 6 (1969), 173. Cf. J. G. Baldwin's comments on the link between apocalyptic and adversity from Ezekiel onwards in *Daniel: an Introduction and Commentary* (Leicester: IVP, 1978), 52.
  11. Cf. Vielhauer in Hennecke, *New Testament Apocrypha*, vol. 2, 595f; Patte, *Early Jewish Hermeneutic in Palestine*, 171.

nations would flock to Jerusalem, that a God-sent deliverer would reign for ever, that in a new heaven and a new earth righteousness and peace would rule. For them these were not academic questions; they were urgent problems demanding solutions if the ways of God were to be vindicated.

In their interpretative work they believed themselves to be recipients of divine revelation. Whereas the rabbis saw themselves as interpreters of a body of revelation given in the past to Moses, some apocalyptic writers speak explicitly of revelations additional to those given in the Pentateuch. In Jubilees 32:21f, for example, there is reference to seven 'heavenly tablets' given to Moses, though Exodus 31:18 mentions only two: God has revealed not only his moral and ritual demands but also the secrets of world history, including the future. These 'heavenly tablets' with secrets of the future, were revealed to Moses, but remained sealed until the last generation - the generation of the apocalyptists./12/

However, if we grant that the apocalyptists were concerned with theodicy, and believed themselves to have new insights into the purposes of God, we must ask what they actually proclaimed as God's message to their situation. In a nutshell, they proclaimed a transcendent eschatology, whereas the prophets offered an eschatology on the plane of history. And this distinction is enough to discredit apocalyptic completely in the eyes of many theologians.

Most modern assessments of apocalyptic treat its attitude to history as the crucial test of acceptability. The claim is frequently made that whereas the prophets affirmed God's saving activity in history, the apocalyptists could envisage the possibility of salvation only by abandoning history and pinning their hopes on a totally new era brought about through God's intervention./13/ And if the claim is

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12. Patte, *ibid.*, 150-2, 205.
  13. Cf. G. E. Ladd, 'Apocalyptic and New Testament Theology', in R. J. Banks (ed.), *Reconciliation and Hope* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1974), 291-3.

true, it is implied, so much the worse for apocalyptic. This negative conclusion is based mainly on four prominent aspects of apocalyptic thought.

1. *Pessimism* about the course of history. This is evident in the apocalyptists' theory that in this age the world is not ruled by God but is given over into the control of demonic forces (e.g., the 'princes' of Dn. 10-12; 1 Enoch 89:61 and *passim*); and in the fact that they have no political programme and very little ethical exhortation. They thus assume no responsibility for history.<sup>14</sup> The glorious age to come will not arise out of history but will break into it from beyond.

2. The course of history is *predetermined* (e.g. Dn. 11:36; 2 Esdras 4:36f; 6:1-6). 'The dynamic of a history which is the living out of a genuine covenant relationship yields to the inflexibility of a history which becomes a timetable of cosmic events.'<sup>15</sup> Many apocalypses express this conviction by their systematic arrangement of history into fixed periods. By the pseudonymous device of presenting their historical surveys as predictions of an ancient sage, they are able to give the impression that all history conforms to God's predetermined plan, and that the imminent climax of history has been revealed to them. History from creation to end is surveyed in 1 Enoch 85-90, in the 'Ten Weeks' Apocalypse' (1 Enoch 93:1-10; 91:12-17) and 2 Baruch 53-74. Other passages present surveys of shorter periods, e.g., from the Exile to the end (Dn. 2,7,8-12; 2 Baruch 36-40; Test. Levi 16-18). Thus the apocalyptists have systematized what the prophets glimpsed: the whole of history, of which Israel is only a part, is the sphere of a coherent divine plan.

This might be thought to indicate that the apocalyptists have a very positive view of history. But many scholars argue quite the opposite. W. R. Murdock, in an important critique of the Pannenberg circle's interpretation of apocalyptic, argues that, since many of the surveys only cover recent history and the time of the readers is always located just before the eschaton,

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14. Cf. Schmithals, *The Apocalyptic Movement*, 45f, 80f.  
 15. Hanson, *Interpretation* 25, 478f.

the purpose of the surveys is not to present a theology of history but to promote imminent expectation of the end of history. The historical surveys are subservient to the dualistic distinction between the present age - when evil forces rule - and the age to come. Therefore God does not reveal himself in history, according to the apocalyptists, but in their apocalyptic literature. /16/

3. There is a sharp *dualism* between the present evil age and the age to come (e.g. 2 Esdras 7:50). /17/ Since there is no continuity between the two ages (2 Baruch 31:5), history is meaningless: it is not going anywhere.

4. The belief in an *imminent* end of this age - a belief which persisted from Daniel (e.g. Dn. 12:11) right through to 2 Baruch in the late first century A.D. (e.g. 2 Baruch 85:10), despite its non-fulfilment - also betrays an abandoning of responsibility and hope for the present historical age. All hope is focussed on the coming glory of God, which will wipe away history. /18/

All of this seems to leave room for only one answer to von Rad's question 'whether apocalyptic literature had any existential relationship with history at all, since it had abandoned the approach by way of saving history. This question', he writes, 'must be directed to the very conception from which apocalyptic literature gains its splendour, that of the unity of world history'. Again he asks 'whether history has not been excluded from the philosophy which lies behind this gnostic idea of epochs that can be known and calculated, a philosophy which has dispensed with the phenomenon of the contingent'. Such features 'mark the great gulf which separates apocalyptic literature from prophecy'. /19/

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16. 'History and Revelation in Jewish Apocalypticism', *Interpretation* 21 (1967), 170f, 180-6.
  17. Vielhauer in Hennecke, *New Testament Apocrypha*, vol. 2, 588f.
  18. Vielhauer, *ibid.*, 590-3.
  19. *Old Testament Theology*, vol. 2 (ET, Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1965), 304-6.



The arguments appear impressive. And yet I believe it is possible to give a much more positive and sympathetic assessment of apocalyptic's view of history and eschatology. The following points are particularly important./20/

1. The negative assessment which I have described derives largely from proof-texts taken from later rather than earlier apocalypses. The very fact that an early writing like Daniel combines its apocalyptic visions with the stories about the loyalty to God displayed by Daniel and by the three men indicates an unwillingness to abandon history.

2. The negative view betrays a lack of sympathy for the desperate circumstances of the apocalyptists and their problem of theodicy. They did not begin with a dogma that God cannot act in this world, but with an observation that since the fall of Jerusalem God seemed to have been relatively inactive in history. It was *this* period of history, not the whole of history, of which they took a negative view. *This* is the period covered by Daniel's four world empires.

3. Because they believed God had acted in the past they hoped for his action in the future, though their present experience made the hope of total transformation the only appropriate expression of faith in a God who rules history. Hence the centrality of their doctrine of two ages, with its radical discontinuity between the present age and the age to come./21/ But - to repeat - the present age is not for the apocalyptists totally evil and bereft of God's activity. The present age includes Israel's past, where God was certainly active, according to Daniel 9 and 1 Enoch 85-90. As for the future, the common generalization - that apocalyptists envisaged the age to come or the messianic kingdom in a

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20. I am here indebted to R. J. Bauckham, 'The Rise of Apocalyptic', *Themelios* 3.2 (January, 1978), 10-23.
21. This aspect of apocalyptic thought is particularly stressed by Ladd (see the whole article cited in n. 13 above) and Vielhauer (as in n. 17 above).

transcendent world discontinuous with this world - is quite misleading. There was a variety of expectations, and a number of apocalypses from Daniel onwards seem to expect an earthly-historical kingdom, though in conditions of blessedness which make it radically different from the present age. As late as 2 Esdras and 2 Baruch (both after A.D. 70) the tension between an earthly and a totally transcendent kingdom remains unresolved, as can be seen from the 'compromise' solution in which they envisage a temporary earthly kingdom followed by an eternal transcendent one./22/

4. R. J. Bauckham also suggests that the early apocalyptists may not have been so 'quietist' as is normally supposed. Since 1 Enoch 90:8-18 regards the Maccabean victories as the beginning of God's eschatological victory, it seems likely that apocalyptic hope mobilized support for the Maccabees. /23/ Transcendent eschatology, far from emptying history of divine action, can help interpretation of God's action in history. And it can cause people to participate in the struggles of history precisely because it enables them to understand historical events as provisional realizations of God's eschatological promises.

5. It is true that some apocalyptists, with their schematizations of world history, speak of history as predetermined in a manner quite different from the prophetic conception, in which God makes continually fresh decisions (cf. Je. 18:7-10). Yet the apocalyptists' viewpoint remains quite different from a pagan resignation to Fate./24/ Like the predestinarian language of the New Testament, it is an expression of faith in the grace of God. It actually counters fatalistic despair in the face of the negative

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22. See Russell, *The Method and Message of Jewish Apocalyptic*, 266-271, 285-297.

23. *Themelios* 3.2, 21f. Bauckham's related argument (*ibid.*) from Dn. 11:34 is more speculative.

24. Bauckham, *ibid.*, 22f; Hengel, *Judaism and Hellenism*, vol. 1, 195, 209.

experience of history. We should note also that alongside the determinism of Daniel 11 there is Daniel 9, with its conviction that God judges his people for their rebellion and responds in mercy to their repentance and to the prayers of intercessors like Daniel. And in Daniel 2:21 there is the thoroughly prophetic idea that it is God 'who removes kings and sets up kings'. Thus, another function of this determinism is to relativize the power of pagan empires. We see that conviction powerfully expounded in the NT Apocalypse.

6. The image of apocalyptic writers as men juggling with numbers in order to calculate that the end of this age is imminent, is a serious distortion of the truth. Lars Hartman has pointed out that such forecasts are not as widespread as is often supposed.<sup>/25/</sup> The only text which really answers the question 'How long?' with a year and a date is Daniel. But even here the three different numbers of days given in Daniel 8:14 and 12:11,12 - not to mention the 70 weeks of years in chapter 9 - do not yield easily to the attempts of scholars to interpret them literally.<sup>/26/</sup> A symbolic interpretation is more likely, and the emphasis is on endurance through suffering to the end, without any date being fixed. And since Daniel's timetables were understood in three quite different ways by the monks of Qumran, by 'many of the wise men' referred to by Josephus, and by Josephus himself, it is questionable whether the primary motive of the timetables was precise prediction of the end.<sup>/27/</sup> Similarly, the less precise timetables in the Assumption of Moses and the Apocalypse of Abraham, and the schematizations of history in other documents, offer no clear basis for calculation. Their function is to encourage endurance

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25. 'The Functions of Some So-Called Apocalyptic Timetables', *NTS* 22 (1976), 1-14.
  26. Cf. Baldwin, *Daniel*, 209f.
  27. Hartman, *NTS* 22, 7. On the interpretation of Daniel at Qumran, see F. F. Bruce, 'The Book of Daniel and the Qumran Community', in E. E. Ellis and M. Wilcox (edd.), *Neotestamentica et Semitica* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1969), 221-235.

and hope in the God who does not abandon his people. 'The timetables were aimed' says Hartman, 'less at the brain than at the heart and hands'./28/ And Daniel's promise of an imminent 'end' indicates that the Jews' deliverance from Antiochus was an act within history of the eschatological God./29/ In other words, the language of imminence serves a purpose not entirely different from that of similar language in the New Testament. To that topic we shall return.

7. If the apocalyptists went beyond the prophets in asserting that the meaning of history cannot be found within history, that is a gain, not a loss, for theology. A transcendent eschatology is required for a satisfactory theodicy. Wolfhart Pannenberg comments: 'In some sense atheism has a point in arguing that the world ought to be different if there were a God who cares for man and even for every individual ... Only the full manifestation of God's kingdom in the future ... can finally decide about the reality of God.'/30/

Having discussed the apocalyptists' attitude to history, we may now deal briefly with some other aspects of their thought. First, we should acknowledge that it was the apocalyptists who brought to prominence in Israel the belief in resurrection and judgement after death. It is curious how some scholars who regret the apocalyptists' abandonment of history in favour of transcendent eschatology should apparently give them no credit even for their affirmation of these beliefs which have been so central in the Judeo-Christian tradition. These convictions - thrust upon them as they looked for the justice of God in the face of extreme sufferings - were a very significant affirmation that the meaning of human existence cannot be discovered entirely within earthly

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28. NTS 22, 14.

29. Cf. G. B. Caird, 'On Deciphering the Book of Revelation: III. The First and the Last', *ExpT* 74 (1962-63), 84; and J. E. Goldingay, 'The Book of Daniel: Three Issues', *Themelios* 2.2 (January, 1977), 47.

30. 'Can Christianity do without an Eschatology?', in G. B. Caird et al., *The Christian Hope* (London: SPCK, 1970), 31.

life and history.

Secondly, the apocalypticist's vision takes in supernatural and cosmic dimensions. God's saving purposes - at least according to some earlier apocalypticists - involve Gentiles as well as Israelites. Certainly the final judgement involves all men. The inbreaking of the new age will involve dissolution and recreation of the whole cosmos. And the actors in the drama are not only God and men, but angels, demons and anti-Christ./31/

Thirdly, there is the question of how interested they were in ethics. Criticism of apocalyptic literature for its lack of ethical exhortation in comparison with the prophetic literature tends to go along with disparagement of its attitude to history. In defence of apocalyptic, we may observe:

(a) Throughout the literature there are exhortations to loyalty and righteousness, even though these qualities are not often spelt out in terms of individual sins and acts of righteousness, as they would be in Pharisaic literature./32/

(b) Some documents combine an apocalyptic perspective with detailed moral instruction (e.g. Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs) or with an explicitly rigorous attitude to the law (e.g. the Qumran Scrolls).

(c) The lack of ethical detail in many apocalypses may be accounted for by their literary genre. We have learnt in the NT not to expect the same kind of material in an epistle as in a gospel. Similarly, it is not necessarily the function of an apocalypse to give detailed ethical instruction.

(d) The historical milieu of the apocalypses makes it hardly surprising that we do not find the same measure

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31. Vielhauer in Hennecke, *New Testament Apocrypha*, vol. 2, 590; J. D. G. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament* (London: SCM, 1977), 314f.
  32. Examples of ethical exhortation are 1.Enoch 92, 94-105; 2 Baruch 77:1-7.

of ethical preaching as in the pre-exilic prophets. Which of us, if writing to friends suffering persecution, would spend most of our time on moral exhortation? But we might try to encourage them to faithfulness and endurance, as the stories in Daniel 1, 3,6 do.

Finally, we may note one particularly complex issue which time does not allow us to discuss. There is still something to be said, as Barnabas Lindars has shown, for the view that 'apocalyptic speculation includes the idea that an individual will act as God's agent at the coming judgement'. He may be spoken of as a celestial Messiah, says Lindars, noting that 'apocalyptic, in the main, does not look for political solutions but to the direct intervention of God in the affairs of the day'.<sup>33/</sup>

These, then, are some of the issues and insights which mattered to the Jewish apocalyptists. Sometimes they expressed themselves crudely. Some of them were led into unfruitful speculation. Sometimes they adopted attitudes unworthy of worshippers of the God of Israel. I have been concerned neither to gloss over these weaknesses, nor to draw attention to them. My intention has been to study what really mattered to the apocalyptists at their best, because it is there that we are most likely to find resources which were of value to Jesus and the NT writers, and may continue to be of value for us. And my findings have suggested that the particular historical circumstances of the apocalyptists triggered off the development of a transcendent eschatology, with a belief in life after death and judgement after death. Yet these convictions did not cause them completely to abandon attempts to give positive theological significance to the present course of history.

## *II Apocalyptic, Jesus and Early Christianity*

Ever since Johannes Weiss and Albert Schweitzer produced their picture of a thoroughly apocalyptic Jesus, scholars have busied themselves with what Klaus Koch calls

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33. 'Re-enter the Apocalyptic Son of Man', *NTS* 22 (1976), 60. See Lindars' article for references to literature expressing other views.

'agonised attempts to save Jesus from apocalyptic'./34/ Among contemporary scholars, for example, E. Schweizer says that Jesus was not an apocalypticist, in that he spoke with great caution about the future; he did not describe the bliss of the elect or the torments of the damned; he did not calculate the date when God's rule will begin; he was not world-denying./35/ E. Käsemann - with considerable passion - argues that both John the Baptist and the early post-resurrection Christian community were apocalyptic in outlook; but sandwiched between them was Jesus who proclaimed 'the immediate nearness of God' in a non-apocalyptic way, and was opposed to apocalyptic teaching on ethics and the law, the nature of God and calculations about the time of the end./36/ And most of the scholars who have been most vigorous in their criticism of Käsemann have denounced him not because he claims Jesus was non-apocalyptic, but because he admits *too much* apocalyptic influence in the post-resurrection church./37/

However, the strong influence of Jewish apocalyptic thought on Jesus seems to me inescapable. James Dunn among others has pointed out numerous apocalyptic features in his teaching./38/

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34. *The Rediscovery of Apocalyptic*, 57.
  35. *Jesus* (ET, London: SCM, 1971), 23-25.
  36. 'The Beginnings of Christian Theology', *JTC* 6, 40; and 'On the Topic of Primitive Christian Apocalyptic', *ibid.*, 115f. The same articles appear, in a different translation, in Käsemann's *New Testament Questions of Today* (ET, London: SCM, 1974), where the corresponding page references are p. 101 and p. 122 respectively.
  37. Cf. the articles by G. Ebeling and E. Fuchs in *JTC* 6.
  38. See Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament*, 318-322. Dunn does not argue these points at length, and certainly some of them are controversial. But, taken together, they do seem to me to add up to a very plausible case for the view that apocalyptic thought had decisive influence on Jesus' message.

1. Jesus used the language of the two ages./39/ E.g., Mark 10:30 - there is no disciple 'who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, ... and in the age to come eternal life'. His more characteristic phrase, 'the kingdom of God' is not a regular apocalyptic phrase. But Jesus does seem to use it as a way of referring to the age to come - an age distinct from this age which can come only by the activity of God (Mt. 6:10). Between the present age and the age to come, highlighting the discontinuity between them, will be the final judgement (Mt. 19:28).

2. Like the apocalyptists, Jesus saw the present age as deeply influenced by demonic powers (e.g., Mk. 3:22-26; Mt. 4:1-11). Men, including Israel, and human cities, including Jerusalem, stand ripe for the judgement of God (e.g. Lk. 13:1-5).

3. Jesus expected a time of eschatological trial before the End. E.g., Mark 10:39 - 'the cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized'. Indeed, he seems to have understood his own death as part of the sufferings which would prelude the coming of the kingdom of God (Mk. 14:22-25).

4. He said that the life of the age to come would necessarily be preceded by resurrection (Mk. 12:25). And he spoke of his own vindication in terms of resurrection (Mk. 8:31; 9:31; 10:34) - that is, as part of the beginning of the resurrection of the dead ushering in the new age./40/

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39. See also Ladd in Banks (ed.), *Reconciliation and Hope*, 289.

40. It is possible to understand Jesus' predictions of his resurrection as influenced mainly by Ho. 6:2, and therefore as implying that he expected in his resurrection to fulfil the hope of Israel's restoration, since 'Jesus is Israel' (see R. T. France, *Jesus and the Old Testament* (London: Tyndale, 1971), 54f); and this could imply that Jesus made no connection between his own resurrection and a general resurrection of the dead as conceived by the apocalyptists. But since Jesus believed that his death would prelude the coming of the kingdom of God, and spoke of the kingdom's coming as imminent, and since belief in a general resurrection was becoming



5. He spoke of the end of this age and the coming of the kingdom of God as being imminent (Mk. 9:1; 13:30; Mt. 10:23).

6. He described the end in supernatural and cosmic terms (e.g., Mk. 13:24-27).

7. He saw the end events as climaxing in the coming from heaven of himself as Son of Man, deliberately echoing the apocalyptic language of Daniel 7./41/

8. Jesus' very term, 'kingdom of God' underlines his belief both in its transcendent character and in the sovereign control of God which will bring it about. It is his version of the so-called determinism of the apocalyptists.

If these points hold true, then apocalyptic ideas were of crucial importance for Jesus' understanding of his message. And even if critical questions are raised about the authenticity of some of the sayings, it is extremely unlikely that more than a handful of them are inauthentic, since they express ideas which are widespread and deep-rooted in the gospel tradition.

Now, of course, apocalyptic thought is not the only background to the teaching and mission of Jesus. In his teaching there are, for example, elements from the wisdom tradition of Judaism. Some of it reflects the style and interests of the rabbis, some of it the popular pietism of Palestine. All of it is pervaded by the influence of many parts of Scripture, including particularly the Psalms and Deuteronomy. Also, where Jesus took up apocalyptic ideas, he did not simply take

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40 Contd.

increasingly accepted in Jesus' time, it is very likely that Jesus did envisage his resurrection as part of the general resurrection. Early Christians such as Paul certainly saw it this way (1 Cor. 15: 20-23), and there is no obvious reason why they should not have derived this belief from Jesus himself.

41. Cf. Lindars, *NTS* 22, 65.

them over unchanged./42/ Often he modified them, charged them with new meaning,

Yet none of this justifies us in concluding, as some scholars do, that Jesus was anti-apocalyptic, or that he reverted from apocalyptic back to prophetic conceptions. For the crucial question is: When Jesus modified apocalyptic, *in what direction* did he modify it? All the indications are that where Jesus modified apocalyptic ideas it was because of his conviction that in him 'the apocalyptic expectation had entered a phase of decisive fulfilment'./43/ This is clear from the following examples.

1. Whilst it would be linguistically impossible for Jesus to say that 'the age to come' has already dawned, he does say that about his equivalent phrase, 'kingdom of God'. 'If I by the Spirit of God cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you' (Mt. 12:28). In a host of images he declares that the salvation of the new age is already available. The harvest has come, the new wine is offered, the bread of life is given, the peace of God is offered. What prophets and kings longed to see, Jesus' disciples see./44/ As David Flusser says, Jesus 'is the only Jew of ancient times known to us, who preached not only that men were on the threshold of the end of time, but that the new age of salvation had already begun'./45/

2. Although he saw people as subject to the power of Satan, Jesus also declared that his coming meant the beginning of victory over Satan (Mt. 12:28; Mk. 3:22-27). The single gospel reference to what looks like an

42. For example, his description of the world to come is much more restrained than that in many apocalypses. Cf. J. Jeremias' comments on apocalyptic features absent from Mark 13 (*New Testament Theology*, vol. 1 [ET, London: SCM, 1971], 125).

43. Bauckham, *Themelios* 3.2, 22.

44. Cf. Jeremias, *New Testament Theology*, vol. 1, 106-8.

45. Jesus (ET, New York: Herder & Herder, 1969), 90.

apocalyptic vision experienced by Jesus is a vision about this victory - 'I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven' (Lk. 10:18). Thus Jesus' ability to take a less pessimistic view of the present course of history was not due to a rejection of apocalyptic and reversion to a prophetic attitude. It arises from the conviction that in him apocalyptic hopes are reaching fulfilment. And his world-affirming attitude, demonstrated in his table-fellowship (Mk. 2:18-22; Lk. 7:31-35), is motivated not so much by a delight in the natural world as God's creation, as by his sense that the eschatological time of salvation has dawned. His table-fellowship anticipates the messianic banquet (cf. Mt. 25:10).

3. Jesus' ministry to Gentiles, despite his declaration that the primary target of his mission is Israel, is another indication that the eschatological time of salvation has begun to find fulfilment (Mk. 7: 24-30; Mt. 8:5-13). He offers no encouragement to hopes of a nationalistic future for Israel.

4. His self-designation as Son of Man brings into focus his acceptance of apocalyptic hopes, and his conviction that those hopes were entering the stage of fulfilment through his own mission of suffering, which would lead to vindication by God (following the pattern of Daniel 7).

The basic structure of Jesus' thinking, then, owes much to Jewish apocalyptic. But, as Cullmann argued, the crucial difference is that the mid-point or hinge in the story of redemption has shifted from the end of the present age to the historical mission of Jesus./46/

Now, despite the note of decisive fulfilment, Jesus did not regard the apocalyptic hope as having been totally fulfilled in his ministry. He anticipated in apocalyptic terms his death and vindication, the destruction of Jerusalem and the parousia of the Son of Man. This brings us to the problem of his apparent expectation of the imminent end of this age.

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46. See especially *Christ and Time* (ET, London: SCM, third edition, 1962), 121-174.

First, I wish to pick up a point raised by Jeremias. /47/ He argues that in the synoptic gospels there are not one but two apocalypses. There is Mark 13 which, despite some differences from the usual perspectives of Jewish apocalyptic, offers a series of signs which must take place before the end comes. And there is Luke 17: 20-37, which simply says: no one knows the date; it will come suddenly, when no one expects it. The two approaches, says Jeremias, are incompatible. And it is 'beyond question' that the Lukan passage represents Jesus' attitude. Mark 13 is largely the creation of an over-apocalyptic early church.

It seems to me that Jeremias makes the distinction altogether too sharply. I referred earlier to Hartman's contention that where Jewish apocalypses speak of the imminence of the end, they do so not primarily out of an interest in calculating dates. Rather they are concerned to encourage faith and endurance. This motive is considerably clearer in Mark 13 than in the Jewish apocalypses. Much of Mark 13, unlike the Jewish apocalypses, is cast in the imperative form. This highlights its function of encouraging not speculation but watchfulness - of strengthening faith and warning the disciples what will be their lot as followers of Jesus. /48/ If there is truth in this assessment, then the two apocalypses are not contradictory but complementary.

But we still have to deal with those specific sayings in which Jesus apparently delimits the time of the end to the imminent future. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that Jesus taught that the end of the age was to be expected soon, and that he did not encourage his disciples to contemplate the continuance of history for hundreds of years./49/ On such grounds it is often

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47. *New Testament Theology*, vol. 1, 122-6.
  48. Cf. C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Gospel according to St Mark* (Cambridge: University Press, 1959), 388.
  49. See, e.g., W. G. Kümmel, 'Eschatological Expectation in the Proclamation of Jesus', in J. M. Robinson (ed.), *The Future of our Religious Past* (ET, London: SCM, 1971), 29-48, and his conclusion on pp. 47f.

alleged that Jesus was mistaken, but such a statement is quite misleading. For it leaves out of account the fact that the problem of imminence in the message of Jesus is the same problem as is found right through biblical prophecy and biblical apocalyptic. John Goldingay has recently drawn attention to this, echoing some earlier comments of G. B. Caird./50/ Numerous Old Testament prophets utter promises of salvation or warnings of judgement in a manner which suggest that the day of fulfilment is imminent. Daniel sees the kingdom given to Israel within a declared number of days. Paul seems to presuppose that the eschaton is just round the corner. The Christ of John's Apocalypse addresses the church at Sardis as though his parousia is imminent (Rev. 3:3)./51/ In a literal and final sense, none of these prophecies were fulfilled. But the fact that this pattern is a repeated phenomenon through the Bible suggests that to label the prophecies as mistaken is too simple a solution. It is preferable to see each crisis, each judgement, each blessing which followed the words of the prophet as a partial realization within history of the ultimate triumph of God. So the imminence language of Jesus is a declaration that the age of decisive fulfilment has really dawned, the kingdom of God is being manifested here and now, and the present manifestations are a guarantee of God's ultimate victory through Christ./52/ I am not of course suggesting that Jesus would have articulated his expectation in these terms. He would have articulated it in the way he did articulate it - in the language of imminence. But I am suggesting that in the context of biblical theology that is what his expectation means.

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50. *Themelios* 2.2, 47. For Caird's article, see n. 29 above.
51. On the 'double eschatology' of Revelation, see G. B. Caird, *The Revelation of St John the Divine* (London: A. & C. Black, 1966), 49, 207f, 235-7; G. E. Ladd, article 'Apocalyptic' in E. F. Harrison (ed.), *Baker's Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1960), 53.
52. A similar, though not identical, point is made by Jeremias, *New Testament Theology*, vol. 1, 139.

### III The Permanent Significance of Apocalyptic

Jesus, then, fits within the framework of Jewish apocalyptic. And yet at the same time he breaks it, precisely because he moves in the realm not merely of expectation but of expectation coming to fulfilment. What then may we say for ourselves about the value of apocalyptic as it is mediated to us through Jesus? I suggest a negative conclusion and six positive ones.

Negatively, I suggest that we have sound exegetical and theological reasons for criticizing the modern 'apocalypticist' who believes that scripture offers material by which dates can be calculated and the end of the age predicted. In adopting this approach he is seeking a precision which goes beyond anything claimed by his ancient counterparts. He is indulging in what Charles Davis has called a 'lust for certitude',/53/ which discredits the tradition of the ancient apocalypticist who hung onto his faith in the face of enormous odds. He is sidestepping the call to watchful endurance and moral action which characterizes biblical apocalyptic./54/

Positively, we may acknowledge first our debt to the apocalypticists' transcendent eschatology, with its insistence that the meaning of history can only be found beyond history, and that a human being can only find ultimate value for his life in a resurrection beyond death. The importance of this for theodicy - not only in the time of the ancient apocalypticists but for our time - has been argued by John Hick in *Evil and the God of Love*./55/

Secondly, we may be grateful for the apocalypticists' doctrine of final judgement./56/ It asserts the

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53. *The Temptations of Religion* (London: Hodder, 1973), 11.

54. Cf. Russell's criticisms of Hal Lindsey in *Apocalyptic: Ancient and Modern*, 63f.

55. Macmillan, London (1966). See especially 373-400.

56. Russell dares even to assert that 'the doctrine of the last judgement is the most characteristic doctrine of Jewish apocalyptic' (*The Method and Message of Jewish Apocalyptic*, 380).

ultimate triumph of God and the vindication of his purposes. It declares that men are accountable to God for their actions, and therefore their actions have value and significance. It proclaims the relativity of all human judgements before the day of judgement. It is interesting how often in 1 Corinthians Paul counters the attitudes and arguments of the Corinthians with this note of future judgement. Human assessments, human convictions, human achievements must not be absolutized in the light of that day (1 Cor. 3:8,13-17; 4:5; 6:13?; 9:24-10:13; 11:27-32).

Thirdly, apocalyptic literature looks at society from the bottom up. It is the literature of the underdog, the powerless, challenging the assumptions and the self-image of the powerful. There is a book by William Stringfellow called *An Ethic for Christians and other Aliens in a Strange Land*.<sup>57/</sup> It reflects, against the background of modern American society, on the Book of Revelation, particularly the passages about Babylon standing under the judgement of God. It shows how the message of John's Apocalypse passes judgement on the values which powerful societies and powerful groups within society idolize - military prowess, material abundance, technological sophistication, imperial grandeur, high culture, racial pride, and so on.

Fourthly, the belief that human life and history is moving towards a goal beyond death and beyond history enables the believer to give a proper evaluation to the present.<sup>58/</sup> He does not devalue the present, because it is the sphere in which the kingdom of God has dawned. But he does not over-value it, because it is not his ultimate goal. This matter of perspective is fundamental for Christian spirituality and ethics.

Fifthly, apocalyptic has a message for the man without power who feels oppressed by the way things are in society and sees no hope of changing them. He cannot shape history, anything he can achieve is quite trivial.

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57. Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1973. I owe my acquaintance with this book to Russell, *Apocalyptic: Ancient and Modern*, 64-67.

58. Cf. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament*, 339.

The message is that, like Daniel and the three men, he should seek to obey God and exalt his honour./59/ He is granted the assurance that though he may not be able to shape history, it is never trivial to live with integrity in God's world and in loyalty to God's will.

Finally, and paradoxically, apocalyptic brings a new sense of responsibility towards the world, because it feeds hope for the transformation of the world. Social action, according to Norman Young, 'becomes pointless without this apocalyptic vision because there are no grounds in past history for expecting a lasting change for the better in human affairs. Only belief in God as one who breaks in against the possibilities resident within human history can provide the hope that makes any present reforming action worth the effort'./60/

### Conclusion

At the heart of the apocalyptic faith is its movement towards the future. But in Christian apocalyptic that future is dominated by the Son of Man who has already set in motion the process of fulfilment on which the apocalypticist's hope is set. It is the hope of the appearing of this Son of Man which provokes us to ask, with Käsemann, 'whether Christian theology can ever survive in any legitimate form without this theme'./61/

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59. Cf. W. Zimmerli, *Man and his Hope in the Old Testament* (ET, London: SCM, 1971), 149f.
  60. *Creator, Creation and Faith* (London: Collins, 1976), 72. Cf. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament*, 339. A similar emphasis is characteristic of J. Moltmann, e.g., *Theology of Hope* (ET, London: SCM, 1967); and C. E. Braaten, e.g., *Christ and Counter-Christ* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1972).
  61. *New Testament Questions of Today*, 107. I find this translation more felicitous than the translation of the same passage in JTC 6, 46.