

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

PayPal

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *Journal of Biblical Literature* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_jbl-01.php

WHY NOT PROPHETIC-APOCALYPTIC?

GEORGE ELDON LADD
FULLER THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

TO determine our Lord's attitude toward the subject of apocalyptic is one of the really urgent tasks at the present time confronting New Testament scholars. . ."¹ This task is part of the larger one of determining the place and the character of apocalyptic in biblical religion as a whole.

The word "apocalyptic" has a twofold reference, but unfortunately few of the discussions of apocalyptic clearly differentiate between the two uses of the word. It designates a body of literature, and it describes the kind of eschatology which is usually found in the apocalyptic writings.

Strictly speaking, "apocalyptic" is a literary genre which contains revelations, real or alleged, of the spiritual world and of the future kingdom of God. *Αποκαλυψις* means "revelation" or "disclosure" and is found in the apocalyptic literature only in the NT Apocalypse where it designates the unfolding of future events seen by John in visions. Modern scholarship has applied the word to the book written by John and also to the entire corpus of ancient Jewish and Christian apocalyptic writings. As the word indicates, the main characteristic of these books is the claim that they contain revelations received through the media of dreams, visions, or journeys to heaven, in which the secrets of the invisible world and of the future are disclosed. The chief interest of these books is the solution of the problem of why the righteous are suffering, and when and how the deliverance of the kingdom of God will come. Some of the writings usually included in the genre of apocalyptic are not apocalypses at all. The Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs in form are a group of prophecies, and the Psalms of Solomon are similar to the wisdom writings; while the Sibylline Oracles, as the name suggests, imitate a Greek form of oracular poetry.

The question of the other formal characteristics of apocalyptic literature and the transition from the prophetic form to the distinctly apocalyptic cannot here be discussed. Dreams, visions, and other supernatural disclosures played a large role in the prophetic writings, and a sharp line cannot be drawn between the two kinds of literature. Our present concern is not so much with the literary form as with the broader

use of the word which describes the kind of eschatology which is generally associated with these books and to which the designation "apocalyptic" is given.

It is widely held that the eschatology of the apocalyptic writings not only represents a further development of prophetic eschatology but is different in kind. The eschatology of the prophets is usually described as this-worldly, arising out of the flow of history. History is the vehicle of the kingdom; God will act through historical personages, nations, and events to accomplish his redemptive purpose. The messianic personage, when one appears, is a king of the seed of David who will arise from among men to rule over the restored earthly kingdom.

The "prophetic" hope of an earthly kingdom within history was not realized; and the post-prophetic eschatological literature postulated a kingdom different in kind. The apocalyptic writers came to despair of history. The sufferings of God's people were so inexplicable that they concluded history was utterly abandoned to evil and could no longer be the vehicle of the kingdom. Salvation would come only beyond history, in a transcendental world which would be inaugurated by a cosmic catastrophe terminating history and introducing an entirely different order of existence. This apocalyptic eschatology in its most developed form is basically dualistic. Existence is divided into two ages which are fundamentally different both as to their ethical character and their very mode of existence. In the coming age, not only will righteousness prevail, but earthly historical existence will be displaced by a transcendental heavenly world. This transcendental kingdom will be ushered in by a pre-existent, supernatural, heavenly Son of man who will come from heaven to judge the wicked and to bring the righteous into the kingdom of glory. In this apocalyptic eschatology, the kingdom is entirely beyond history in a new and different world.²

This is the background for NT thought as it is usually sketched; and certain questions are raised: Was Jesus' eschatology apocalyptic in character? If so, what is the relationship between his apocalyptic view and the prophetic eschatology? Is Jesus to be classed with the Jewish apocalypstists rather than with the OT prophets?

The two most unambiguous answers to the first question are an emphatic No, and an equally unqualified Yes. The so-called "liberal" interpretation asserted that Jesus' religion was neither eschatological nor apocalyptic. The apocalyptic terminology is only the husk which contains the kernel of his pure spiritual religion which has to do with

¹ John Wick Bowman, *The Religion of Maturity* (New York and Nashville, 1948), p. 235.

² Cf. R. Bultmann, *Das Urchristentum im Rahmen der antiken Religionen* (Zürich, 1949), pp. 88-96; "History and Eschatology in the New Testament," *New Testament Studies*, I (1954), 5-7. One must always bear in mind that some apocalypses have no messianic personage.

the soul of man, its relationship to God, and the ethic of love. The "liberal" Jesus shared nothing with Jewish apocalyptic but thought forms which are quite without relevance for the essence of his spiritual message. The antithesis of this position is the consistent eschatology of J. Weiss and A. Schweitzer who insisted that Jesus' message was nothing but a piece of Jewish apocalyptic and is to be interpreted not as a spiritual religion of the inner man but as a proclamation of a catastrophic end of human history and the inauguration of the transcendental kingdom of God.

A mediating position has recognized the centrality of the eschatological concepts in Jesus' teaching but has attempted to reinterpret them in terms of a present crisis of religious experience when God confronts the individual soul, rather than of the future apocalyptic crisis of human history and the end of the world. This is the "realized eschatology" of C. H. Dodd which bears affinities to the existential eschatology of Rudolf Bultmann;³ but Dodd himself has admitted that he has undervalued the futuristic element in Jesus' eschatology, and there is arising a reaction to his radical reinterpretation of eschatology.

Other recent scholars have attempted to set Jesus' teaching against the background of prophetic eschatology rather than the apocalyptic type. Goguel suggests that apocalyptic is eschatology which is characterized by signs permitting precise calculation of the time of the end. Since Jesus made no effort to estimate when the kingdom would appear or to describe the signs of its coming, his teaching cannot be called apocalyptic.⁴ W. G. Kümmel works out this distinction at considerable length.⁵ While this is true as far as it goes, it fails to reach to the heart of the problem.

Professor Waterman carries out a variant of the thesis of two kinds of eschatology in a rather radical manner.⁶ Prophetic eschatology is

³ While Bultmann may be classed with the proponents of consistent eschatology (cf. his *Theology of the New Testament* [New York, 1951], I, 4 ff.), yet ultimately he stands apart from them, for he holds that "Jesus . . . rejects the whole content of apocalyptic speculation" (italics in original). "The real significance of the Kingdom of God for the message of Jesus does not in any sense depend on the dramatic events attending its coming, nor on any circumstances which the imagination can conceive. It interests him not at all as a describable state of existence, but rather as the transcendent event, which signifies for man the ultimate Either-Or, which constrains him to decision" (*Jesus and the Word* [New York and London, 1934], pp. 39, 40 f.). This is existential eschatology, not consistent eschatology.

⁴ M. Goguel, *The Life of Jesus* (New York, 1945), pp. 312 f. Erich Dinkler makes a similar distinction although without contrasting the terms eschatology and apocalyptic. Cf. *The Idea of History in the Ancient Near East*, ed. R. C. Dentan (New Haven and London, 1955), pp. 176 ff., 193.

⁵ *Verheissung und Erfüllung* (2nd ed.; Zürich, 1953), pp. 81-97.

⁶ Leroy Waterman, *The Religion of Jesus* (New York, 1952), pp. 15-113.

universalistic and ethical; apocalyptic eschatology is essentially nationalistic and rigidly particularistic. These two kinds of eschatology are mutually exclusive. While the gospels interpret Jesus as an apocalypticist, this is impossible because Jesus' teaching is essentially ethical. He could not have been an apocalypticist since apocalyptic is by definition not ethical in character. Waterman concludes that Jesus moved in the ethical, prophetic tradition, but the church misinterpreted him as an apocalypticist. However, to the present writer, Waterman fails to demonstrate that apocalyptic eschatology and prophetic eschatology are mutually exclusive; it is an unproved assumption.

The difficulty of successfully and consistently carrying out the usual distinction between prophetic and apocalyptic may be illustrated by T. W. Manson's recent volume.⁷ In an earlier study,⁸ Manson sketched the generally accepted distinction between the prophetic and apocalyptic eschatology outlined above. In *The Servant-Messiah*, following the usual theory that dualistic eschatology was borrowed from the East, he ventures the interesting suggestion that the word "Pharisee" originally meant "Persian" and was applied to this sect by the more conservative Sadducean critics because the Pharisees accepted the dualism of Persian Zoroastrianism.⁹ However, the theory seems to be placed under great stress when Manson analyzes this so-called Pharisaic dualistic eschatology as it appears in the Psalms of Solomon and the Assumption of Moses. In these writings, he finds what is essentially a prophetic eschatology of an earthly kingdom, historical in character, which is the fulfilment of the prophetic expectation of the Golden Age, even though this conclusion requires a questionable symbolic interpretation of the language of the Assumption of Moses. If the sharp distinction between prophetic and apocalyptic eschatology is valid, and if the Pharisees' theology was basically dualistic as Manson asserts, their eschatology, which Manson thinks is found in the Assumption of Moses and the Psalms of Solomon, ought to be of the transcendental, otherworldly kind. Manson's failure to carry out this theory consistently suggests that the two kinds of eschatology are not basically two divergent types of thought, and that they are by no means mutually exclusive.

Among the ablest discussions of this problem are those of John Wick Bowman who distinguishes between the prophetic and apocalyptic along the lines of the historical and the transcendental but in a less rigid and exclusive manner. Bowman holds that Jesus moved in the prophetic rather than the apocalyptic tradition, and that the kingdom of God must be realized on the plane of history, within time, not on a

⁷ *The Servant-Messiah* (Cambridge, 1953).

⁸ *The Teaching of Jesus* (Cambridge, 1935), pp. 253-58.

⁹ P. 19.

heavenly plane in a transcendental world beyond history.¹⁰ Yet Bowman sometimes suggests that the prophetic and apocalyptic eschatologies are not necessarily mutually exclusive. He points out that the two canonical apocalypses move in the prophetic tradition and therefore rightly find their place in the canon; and he affirms that apocalyptic religion must be judged by the norm of the prophetic moral and spiritual religion.

This is a fruitful suggestion which Bowman fails to carry out, and which he later appears to discard.¹¹ However, may there not be a thoroughly prophetic apocalyptic? Furthermore, may there not be a genuine apocalyptic element which is an *essential* element of prophetic religion, both in the prophets and in the teachings of Jesus? This is the main thesis of the present paper. We are quite ready to agree with Bowman that an apocalyptic which is wholly unable to interpret the Sermon on the Mount realistically and to find a real place for a Christian ethic on the plane of history is hostile to the true prophetic spirit.¹² But is there any reason why there may not be an apocalyptic eschatology which interprets the Sermon on the Mount realistically?

In support of our thesis that there is a prophetic-apocalyptic eschatology, we would suggest three propositions which can here be little more than stated without elaboration or adequate defense. The *first*

¹⁰ *The Religion of Maturity*, pp. 228, 231, 248.

¹¹ Bowman's position is not altogether clear at this point. At a number of places he recognizes an inescapable genuine eschatological residuum, which in terms of the thesis of the present paper would be described as apocalyptic (cf. *The Intention of Jesus* [Philadelphia, 1943], pp. 61, 151, 153; *The Religion of Maturity*, pp. 57 f., 255). In other places he appears to deny either the actual existence of such an apocalyptic element in Jesus' teaching, or else its relevance for Jesus' essential message and its relevance for contemporary Christian thinking. "Again, the church needs no more of the religion of the throne. For her function is, not to judge the world, but with her Lord and under his leadership to effect its salvation" (*Maturity*, p. 310). Bowman's insistence that the kingdom is to be realized on the plane of history in the present (*Maturity*, p. 257), and his interpretation of the Son of man motif as an apocalyptic *form* or *shell* while the *content* or *kernel* was not apocalyptic but the prophetic concept of the Suffering Servant (*Intention*, pp. 148, 153) suggest that his understanding of the kingdom is limited to the activity of the kingdom through the church and needs no apocalyptic consummation of any kind. For a repeated distinction between the apocalyptic shell and the prophetic kernel — a distinction which, incidentally, reminds one of Harnack's terminology — see *Theology Today*, XI (1954), 176. Bowman's more recent book, *Prophetic Realism and the Gospel* (Philadelphia, 1955), does not solve the problem, but if anything, renders it more acute, for he makes the contrast between prophetic and apocalyptic more absolute than in his earlier books. His chapter on the "Last Things" leaves *history* without a goal. "The theatre burns down: so the actors wrap themselves in their cloaks and go home!" Such words leave Bowman open to the criticism that though the individual has a destiny, human history does not.

¹² See *The Religion of Maturity*, p. 290.

is that the basic elements of an apocalyptic eschatology are present in the OT prophets and are essential to their view of history.

Specialists in the study of the prophetic literature are increasingly recognizing that the expectation of the kingdom of God in the prophets is essentially an eschatological hope. In the words of John Bright, "History is and remains eschatologically orientated. At the end of history is the Kingdom of God."¹³ One of the earliest illustrations of this is the eschatology of Amos 8 8-9, 9 5-6. C. R. North has insisted that the apocalyptic language of Amos cannot be dismissed as mere poetic exuberance. The Day of the Lord will bring a judgment which will involve far more than an act of God within history. Amos seems to envisage convulsions of nature on something like a cosmic scale which involves genuine eschatology. To quote North, "Yahweh is the 'Lord of the end of things.'"¹⁴ Georges Pidoux speaks of this passage in terms of the end of the world.¹⁵ The underlying theology of apocalyptic eschatology is a view of the world in which the kingdom of God can be realized only by an inbreaking of the divine world into human history. The necessity for such an apocalyptic consummation is found in the effect of man's sin upon the physical world. Redemptive history conceives of the earth as the divinely ordained scene of human history and as participating to a real degree in the fate of mankind. The physical world, with man, has fallen under the doom and decay of sin, and therefore in its present condition cannot be the scene of the perfected kingdom of God. A radical transformation is necessary, and the new transformed age of the kingdom will be so different from the present age as to constitute a new order of things. Such a transformation cannot be produced by the normal flow of historical events but only by the direct action of God. *This is the essence of the apocalyptic view of history* and is to be found as early as Amos.

Stanley Frost's study¹⁶ of the several types of the coming age supports our thesis. He finds four types of the kingdom of God which he calls the Better Age, the Golden Age, the Future Age, and the Age to Come. The first type, the Better Age, is a kingdom arising out of history; it played a very small role in prophetic thought. The fourth type, the Age to Come, involves a heavenly transcendental order which is practically discontinuous with the present age. This is the kind of kingdom

¹³ *Interpretation*, V (1951), 11.

¹⁴ *The Old Testament Interpretation of History* (London, 1946), pp. 126 f.

¹⁵ *Le Dieu qui vient* (Paris, 1947), p. 17.

¹⁶ *Old Testament Apocalyptic* (London, 1952). For a summary of his views, see pp. 236 ff. Speaking of the passages that deal with the Day of the Lord, H. H. Rowley says, "All think of it as the time of the divine breaking into history in spectacular fashion" (*The Faith of Israel* [London, 1956], p. 179).

usually associated with apocalyptic eschatology. However, it is found only in the Second and Fifth Books of I Enoch, according to Frost.

The second and third types, which predominate in the prophetic literature, anticipate a kingdom of a more or less earthly character but one which is not produced by historical events; the kingdom comes only by "a cataclysmic irruption into history, and its finality is such that there are no after-events. History is indeed at an end" (p. 48).

The necessity for such a supernatural intervention to inaugurate the kingdom is the basic factor in apocalyptic eschatology. The inferences which were later developed about the contrasting character of this age and the coming age are logically deduced from this fundamental prophetic interpretation of history.

Our *second* proposition is that prophetic-apocalyptic religion is to be contrasted with a non-prophetic apocalyptic which largely characterizes the eschatology of the Jewish apocryphal literature. Its non-prophetic character may be here illustrated at two points. First, it is basically pessimistic as to the character of present history. The prophetic conviction that God was acting both in present history and in the eschatological consummation for the salvation of his people is radically modified so that salvation becomes exclusively an object of hope. The prophetic concept that evil has radically affected this world is extended to the point where it was thought that God had practically withdrawn his aid from his people. The present age is quite given over to evil. A vivid illustration of this is found in the Dream Visions of Enoch in which, after the Babylonian captivity, God withdrew his personal leadership of Israel, forsook the temple, and turned the fortunes of the nation over to seventy shepherds. When reports of the wicked conduct of these shepherds in permitting fearful evils to befall Israel were brought to God, he laid them aside and remained unmoved and aloof (Enoch 89 56-75). The explanation of the suffering of the righteous during the Persian and Greek periods is the withdrawal of God and the abandonment of his people to the mercy of faithless angels. Furthermore, no deliverance is to be expected until the coming of the messianic era; God is no longer redemptively active in history.

Non-prophetic apocalyptic is also characterized by ethical passivity. The main use made by the prophets of their eschatological message was to lay upon the people ethical demands for repentance and righteous conduct. Their eschatology, even when it is apocalyptic, is ethically orientated. This is a missing note in non-prophetic apocalyptic. Bowman points out that the apocalyptists had more in common with the scribes than with the prophets because they failed to sound forth stern warnings against sin.¹⁷ The righteous in Israel are sacrosanct; yet they are expe-

riencing terrible sufferings in the present age. This is not due to God's judgments because of their sins but to the evil character of the age and the withdrawal of God. Ultimate salvation is guaranteed. The righteous need only courage to suffer patiently in view of imminent eschatological salvation. With the exception of Enoch 92-105, there is almost no ethical exhortation in the entire corpus of non-canonical apocalyptic literature, and it is notable that this material lacks many of the usual characteristics of the apocalyptic genre. Non-prophetic apocalyptic is little concerned with ethical conduct. God's people keep the Law; they *are* righteous; future salvation is theirs.

Our *third* proposition is that Jesus' eschatological teaching is both eschatologically apocalyptic and ethically prophetic; it is, in short, prophetic-apocalyptic. The key to this solution of the problem is the dynamic concept of the kingdom of God, long recognized, but seldom adequately applied to the interpretation of the gospels. The kingdom of God is God's kingly rule. The fullest manifestation of God's kingdom awaits the future apocalyptic consummation in the age to come. This age is characterized by evil, radical evil. The final salvation both of man and of the world will be accomplished only by a glorious manifestation of God's power establishing a new order of things. Only by an inbreaking of the divine world, effecting a redemption of both man and the physical world, will the kingdom come. This expectation Jesus held with the apocalyptists; but both Jesus and the apocalyptists derived it from the world view of the prophets.

It is not at all clear, however, that Jesus' view of this apocalyptic consummation should be described as "beyond history." The eschatological expectation reflected in the Sermon on the Mount seems to envisage solid earthly existence. This is a question of such extensive ramifications that we can here only mention it, for everything depends upon one's definition of "history."

At two crucial points, however, Jesus' eschatological teaching shares essential prophetic elements which Jewish apocalyptists had lost. First, Jesus had not only an optimistic view of the future; his optimism invaded the present. The very core of his message about the kingdom of God is that the powers of the future eschatological reign have entered into history in advance of their apocalyptic manifestation and are at work now in the world in a hidden form within and among men. This is the "mystery of the kingdom." The present age is evil; the kingdom in its fulness is eschatological and belongs to the age to come. But the present age is not abandoned to evil. On the contrary, God has manifested his kingly power in the present for man's salvation, to bring to him in advance the blessings of the future kingdom. The present age has become the scene of the activity of God's kingdom. The powers of the age to come have invaded the present evil age. Henceforth, God's

¹⁷ *The Religion of Maturity*, pp. 197 f.

kingdom is present and active in history, in and through the new people of God who experience the power of the kingdom.

Secondly, since the kingdom has entered the world, though in a hidden form, Jesus' message embodies a genuine prophetic ethic. The ethic of the Sermon on the Mount is both an ethic of preparation for the kingdom and of realization of the kingdom. It portrays the kind of man who will enter the future eschatological kingdom. But it is also the ethic of the kingdom, the reign of God; and men will enter the future kingdom because they have been confronted by the kingdom in the present and have embraced its reign in their lives. A radical decision is demanded and a radical ethic required — an ethic as radical as the will of God itself. The Sermon on the Mount describes the righteousness of the man who has decided for the kingdom and abandoned himself in complete submission to its reign in his life. The conduct of the sons of the kingdom is to be conformed to the kingdom of God, not to the world. In an evil world they are to be examples of kingdom righteousness.

Thus the kingdom of God has a twofold manifestation: in the apocalyptic consummation and in the historical mission of Jesus and the church. These two are not antithetical nor mutually exclusive, for they are both manifestations of the kingly power of the one God in carrying out his soteriologic purposes for man and the world. The meaning of the kingdom of God is therefore to be found within history itself, in the coming of the kingdom of God into the midst of the stream of history in the person of Christ; but the resolution of the problems of history will be found only in the age to come when the kingdom of God attains its glorious consummation. This is not to say that the age to come carries us "beyond history" in the biblical sense of the word, but it does carry us to a new level of historical experience which will transcend anything the race has previously known. But this new order is not discontinuous with the present; it will be the glorious triumph attained by the powers of the kingdom of God which were resident in Jesus. The present kingdom is the future kingdom in veiled form; the future kingdom is the present kingdom in glorious manifestation.