

The Revelation and Jewish Apocalyptic

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Professor Ladd, who holds the Chair of New Testament History and Biblical Theology at Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, California, is widely known for his contributions to eschatological study, some of which have been reviewed appreciatively in this QUARTERLY. We are glad to publish this article from his pen, in which he undertakes to establish the distinctiveness and superiority of the New Testament Book of Revelation over against the bulk of Jewish apocalypses.

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Since the appearance of Friedrich Lücke's comparative study of the Apocalypse and the other apocalyptic writings,¹ critical scholarship has been dominated by the assumption that the Revelation of John is to be understood in the same terms as the prolific Jewish apocalyptic writings. Indeed, the word "apocalypse" is taken from the Revelation and applied to the entire class. A warning against this approach was sounded by Professor Zahn. "...Common sense and an uncorrupted taste rebel at placing in the same literary group [as that of the Jewish apocalyptic writings] the Revelation of John, although it be the one from which the group has been named."² A careful comparison of the canonical Apocalypse with the similar Jewish writings reveals certain striking differences which set the Revelation apart by itself. It is our purpose to point out some of these differences.

First, the author designates his book a prophecy,³ intending apparently thereby to class his work with the Old Testament prophetic writings. The Jewish apocalyptic writings do not possess this sense of bearing a prophetic character. Indeed throughout the period when they were produced, Judaism was conscious that the voice of living prophecy had been stilled.⁴ The authority of the scribal teaching gradually replaced the word of the prophets.

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It is easy to imagine what burning excitement flamed across the countryside when a new prophet in the person of John the Baptist appeared with a prophetic message of authority. The production of our New Testament literature is due to the revival of the prophetic gift in the primitive church; and the Revelation of John is one of the last productions of this new succession of the prophets. The Jewish apocalyptic writings were produced among other reasons to try to fill the gap created by the cessation of the authentic prophetic word.

Second, Jewish apocalyptic is pseudonymous while the Revelation bears the signature of its author, John. Since the voice of prophecy was stilled, the apocalypses reached into antiquity to use the name of some ancient worthy, probably to help validate and authenticate the material contained in the writings.⁵ The author of the Revelation merely signs his name: "John

¹ Friedrich Lücke, *Versuch einer vollständiger Einleitung in die Offenbarung des Johannes* (2 Aufl.; Bonn, 1852).

² Theodor Zahn, *Introduction to the New Testament* (Edinburgh, 1909), Vol. III, p. 387.

³ Rev. 1: 3, 22: 7, 10, 18, 19.

⁴ See I Macc. 4: 46, 14: 41; also George Foot Moore, *Judaism* (Cambridge, Mass., 1927), Vol. 1, p. 421.

⁵ We should acknowledge that this conclusion is not universally accepted by students of apocalyptic.

to the Seven Churches that are in Asia" (1: 4). He is a man so well-known throughout Asia that his very name serves to authenticate the character of his book. Either history has completely lost sight of this obviously well-known and influential figure, or else he is the Apostle John. Tradition asserts the latter, and there is no overwhelming reason for denying the validity of the tradition.

Third, John's method of treating his forecasts of the future is radically different from that employed by many of the Jewish apocalyptists. The latter traced the course of history from ancient times down to their own day, and the modern interpreter can usually follow rather easily the outlines of the historical narrative. At this point the narrative usually becomes confused, and the interpreter is unable to identify historical personages and events. The author has come to his own time and expects the intervention of God in the immediate future. John on the other hand does not reach into the past to retell the story of God's dealings with Israel and to include in the symbolic language of apocalyptic the story of the coming of Christ and the rise of the Christian Church. This would have been the usual apocalyptic method. On the contrary, John takes his stand among his own contemporaries; and without reconstructing history in the guise of prophecy, he outlines the consummation of God's redemptive purposes—events which are thrown almost exclusively into the future. John uses the prophetic rather than the apocalyptic method.

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Fourth, an even more striking difference is found in the pessimistic character of the Jewish apocalypses in contrast with that of the Revelation. We must define what we mean by pessimism, for some students of apocalyptic insist that it is unfair to use this adjective of the Jewish writings.⁶ It is, of course, obvious that the Jewish apocalypses in the last analysis are anything but pessimistic. The future belongs to God; and God's purposes ultimately will not be frustrated. The Jewish apocalyptic literature thus formulates a meaningful philosophy of history.⁷ We therefore use the word "pessimistic" in a qualified sense to refer not to the ultimate issues of history but to its contemporary character. The Old Testament prophets looked forward to a consummation of history when God would bring His redemptive purpose to a glorious fulfilment and His kingdom would be perfectly realized on the earth. This messianic age would be inaugurated by the mighty manifestation of divine power either with or without a messianic agency. However, God was not only the God of the future; He was also God of the present. God's hand was to be seen moving in the events of contemporary history where He was also working out His redemptive purposes with reference to His people Israel. God would not only bring an ultimate salvation to His people, but God was also active in history to bring redemptive blessings and deliverance to His people before the final consummation.

Jewish apocalyptic writings have lost the sense of the presence of the divine activity. The redemptive blessings are thrown exclusively in the future. Some day, to be sure, God will act and save His people. However, no relief or deliverance can be expected in the present before the apocalyptic kingdom comes. God has withdrawn His hand and has surrendered the present age to the enemies of His people and to the forces of evil. The most vivid illustration of this pessimism is found in the dream visions of Enoch where, after the Babylonian Captivity, God withdrew His personal leadership of His people, forsook the Temple, and turned the fortunes

⁶ See H. H. Rowley, *The Relevance of Apocalyptic* (2 ed.; London, 1947), p. 36f.

⁷ See F. C. Burkitt, *Jewish and Christian Apocalypses* (London, 1914).

of Israel 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.⁸ The explanation of the undeserved sufferings of the righteous during the Persian and Greek periods is

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found in the withdrawal of God from the scene of history 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. It is because of this unrelieved despair for the present that we feel we are justified in designating Jewish apocalyptic as pessimistic. The Apocalypse of Ezra illustrates the depth of this utter despair. At times the author feels it would have been better if the human race had not been created at all.⁹ So desperate is the human plight that the brute beasts are more fortunate than men.¹⁰ The author wishes that he had not been born rather than have to endure the sufferings for which he has no explanation.¹¹

Over against this pessimism we find a very different emphasis in the canonical Apocalypse. While persecutions and evils are to afflict God's people to the end of the age, and even to wage a last fearful concentrated assault against the church before the end, this is not because God has withdrawn or because this age has been relinquished to Satan and the powers of evil. There is no such despair of history in the Revelation. On the contrary, history has become the scene of the divine redemption. In the vision of the heavenly throne-room, John beholds a sealed scroll in the hand of God, a scroll which is not identified, but which we may assume contains the divine purpose for human history. Both to men and to angels, the destiny of mankind is a closed and sealed book. John wept that no one was found worthy to open the scroll or to look into it. His grief was assuaged when he was told, "Weep not; lo the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals" (Rev. 5: 5). Then John sees a familiar figure. It is the Lamb still bearing the marks of slaughter. The Lamb who is also the Lion of the tribe of Judah was the one who could open the book and bring God's redemptive purposes for men to their divine consummation. In this manner, history and eschatology are inseparably linked in the Revelation. The consummation of history is in the hands of Him who appeared in history as the Lamb of God who taketh away the sin of the world. God's redemptive purposes which will be consummated in the future Kingdom have also entered into history in the person of Jesus. History—Jerusalem

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—Golgotha witnessed the redemption which will be consummated in the apocalyptic fulfilment.

A further evidence that history is still the scene of the divine redemptive activity may be found in the probable meaning of the first seal. We recognize that the interpretation of this seal is difficult and one cannot be dogmatic. However, there is good reason for thinking that

⁸ Enoch 89: 56-75.

⁹ IV Ezra 7: 116.

¹⁰ IV Ezra 7: 64.

¹¹ IV Ezra 4: 12.

the first seal symbolizes the conquest of the gospel in the present age. The white horse certainly reminds us of the victorious coming of Christ.¹² It is true that the other seals involve evils; but this fact does not demand that the first seal also represent an evil force. It has frequently been pointed out that a certain parallelism exists between Revelation 6 and Matthew 24. In Revelation 6 are represented in symbolic language the forces of war, famine, death, and persecution. All of these are included in our Lord's forecast in the course of the age in Matthew 24: 5-13. Jesus also affirms, "This gospel of the kingdom will be preached throughout the whole world, as a testimony to all nations; and then the end will come" (v. 14). The course of the age is not to be one of unrelieved evil. In addition to wars, famines, death and persecution, the gospel is to move throughout all the earth bringing the message of salvation to all men. This parallelism suggests the meaning of the first seal in Revelation. The gospel goes forth victoriously in conquest. This interpretation does not imply that the conquest is so complete that the whole world is subdued by the gospel; but it does indicate a victorious mission. The Word of God is to accomplish that which God intends when it is faithfully proclaimed. The mission of the church is not one for defeatists. The age is not the scene of unrelieved evil. The gospel of redeeming grace, the good news of the Lamb of God who takes away sins, is to move throughout the nations of earth, everywhere winning victories and bringing men into the realm of the redemptive blessings. Again, history is the scene of God's redemptive activity.

Finally, Jewish apocalyptic may be characterized as ethically passive. The Old Testament prophets were much concerned with the future day of redemption; but their concern was not so much directed to that future day for its own sake as for its bearing upon the present spiritual condition of God's people. Eschatology is important primarily because of its impact and its influence upon the present. Micah looks forward to a glorious messianic age

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when God's reign shall be established over all the nations in peace and prosperity (4: 1-5). The remnant of Jacob will dwell in the land safe from her adversaries and the Gentile nations will feel the wrath of God's vengeance (5). This glorious destiny of God's people does not mean however that they may now relax into moral and spiritual carelessness in a sense of utter security on the assumption that, because they are God's people, their destiny is assured. On the contrary, "The Lord has a controversy with His people and He will contend with Israel" (6: 2). The promise of the future is viewed in the light of the present demand of God for correct ethical and religious conduct. The blessings of the future are designed to reinforce the present moral demand. God requires justice and mercy, and a humble walk before Him (6: 8). In spite of the fact that Israel is God's people, He will not overlook their wickedness but will render desolation upon them for their sins (6: 9-16).

This strong note of ethical warning is notably absent in the Jewish apocalyptic literature. The assumption of the apocalyptic writers is that Israel is righteous. God's people have received the law. They are suffering, but their sufferings are not deserved. These undeserved judgments of God plunged the apocalyptists into despair for the present age. Ultimate salvation is guaranteed, but suffering is the only prospect for the present, a suffering which is unmerited. Therefore God's people need only to resign themselves to their present fate and to suffer patiently in the expectation of the imminent eschatological salvation. Almost no ethical exhortation is to be found in the entire corpus of noncanonical Jewish apocalyptic literature

¹² Rev. 19: 11.

with the exception of Enoch 92-105 and The Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs. It is significant however that these two books lack many of the usual characteristics of the apocalyptic genre. In fact, the Testaments are not properly apocalypses at all but are in form a group of prophecies containing much ethical exhortation as well as eschatological material. Noncanonical apocalyptic is little concerned with ethical conduct. It is assumed that God's people keep the law. They are righteous; future salvation is theirs.

The Revelation of John stands in sharp contrast with the Jewish literature at this point, illustrating its prophetic character. The message of the book is indeed one of a certain future salvation; but this salvation is not something which can be taken for granted, "Remember then from what you have fallen; repent and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your

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lampstand from its place unless you repent" (Rev. 2: 5). This demand for repentance addressed to the churches is a recurring emphasis in the seven letters.¹³ Furthermore, while the message of the book emphasizes the awfulness of the divine judgments against sin, several passages suggest that they are not merely punitive but have a merciful purpose. "The rest of mankind who were not killed by these plagues, did not repent of the works of their hands... nor did they repent of their murders or their sorceries, or their immorality or their thefts" (9: 20). After the plague of the fourth bowl, we are told that men cursed the name of God, "and they did not repent and give Him glory." Again, after the fifth bowl, "they cursed the God of heaven for their pain and sores, and did not repent of their deeds" (16: 9, 11). Surely we are to understand that these judgments are designed in part to drive men to their knees before God in repentance of their evil deeds. It is in this vein that the Revelation draws to its close with the invitation, "And let him who is thirsty come, let him who desires take the water of life without price" (22: 17). The Apocalypse has a great moral purpose. The coming judgments and deliverances are designed not merely to comfort the churches lest they be lulled into a sense of self-complacency because they comprise God's people. The divine judgments will fall upon the professing churches unless they maintain a right relationship with their God; and the door is ever open for the unrighteous to turn from their sins and to find grace and forgiveness at the hands of a merciful God.

It has not been our purpose to imply that the Apocalypse has nothing in common with Jewish apocalypses, but to suggest that there are good objective reasons for the inclusion of the apostolic writing in the corpus of the canonical prophetic Scriptures.

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¹³ Rev. 2: 15, 21, 22; 3: 3, 19.