

# ON APOCALYPTICISM IN JUDAISM

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## 1. Introduction

Judaism, like many other religions which developed over a long period of time, is a complex phenomenon. It not only developed diachronically but also diversified itself synchronically, given the wide geographical dispersion of the Jews, as part of their diasporic plight. Any attempt to describe the main factors which contributed to the vitality of the constellation of practices, beliefs, and institutions that constitute Judaism, should take in consideration also the ongoing impact of messianic aspirations, prevalent in so many layers of Jewish people. This statement does not come to minimize the importance of other religious factors like the performance of ritual or the study of the Torah – in the wide sense of the word – neither the triggers created by interactions with various religious and cultural environments.

Messianism is not a homogenous phenomenon and its many forms differ from each other sometimes dramatically. Its history in the biblical times, and in the Qumran literature, shaped some other developments in the intertestamental period.<sup>1</sup> Here, we are not concerned with the huge diversity of messianic ideas and movements, but with one important component of some of them: apocalypticism.<sup>2</sup> This aspect of messianism was conceived of as a rather crucial one, and Gershom Scholem, whose deep affinities to the apocalyptic world we shall de-

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<sup>1</sup> Cf., e.g., John J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction in the Jewish Matrix of Christianity* (New York: Crossroad, 1987); and Collins, "The Place of Apocalypticism in the Religion of Israel," in P. D. Miller Jr., P. D. Hanson, and S. D. McBride, eds., *Ancient Israelite Religion: Essays in Honor of Frank Moore Cross* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), pp. 539-58. On different types of messianism in medieval and modern Judaism, see M. Idel, *Messianic Mystics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998); and Ravitzky, note 87 below.

<sup>2</sup> On the different meanings of apocalypse, apocalypticism, and apocalyptic, see Bernard McGinn, *Visions of the End* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979), pp. 1-36; John J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination* (New York: Crossroad, 1987), pp. 1-17; Paul D. Hanson, *The Dawn of Apocalyptic*, Rev. Ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), pp. 4-6. For the Middle Ages, see McGinn, *Apocalypticism in the Western Tradition* (Variorum, 1994), Essays I and II; the Introduction of the editors, J. Collins, B. McGinn, and S. Stein, to the three volumes of the *Encyclopedia of Apocalypticism* (New York: Continuum, 1998), pp. IX-XIII; and Joshua Bloch, *On the Apocalyptic in Judaism* (Philadelphia: JQR Monograph, 1952).

scribe later on, declared that, "When the Messianic idea appears as a living force in the world of Judaism...it always occurs in the closest connection with apocalypticism."<sup>3</sup> Elsewhere, when dealing with a more limited Jewish literature, the mystical one, he states that to the extent that messianism entered "as a vital force in the messianism of the mystics, it is permeated by apocalypse and it also reaches...utopian conclusions which undermine the rule of the Halakhah... in the days of redemption."<sup>4</sup>

How should we define apocalypticism? Was it indeed such a subversive power? More than anything else, apocalypticism is a vision of the world, that assumes an expectation of immediate and dramatic changes of the course of the world, which will lead to an improvement described as the end of the previous order, political, social, or religious and the installation of another, better one.<sup>5</sup> More evident in a religious type of world, which is easier predisposed in the belief of the existence of supernatural powers that may interfere with the ordinary events, my description of apocalypticism does not exclude the acute sense of an end even in a secular society, though this issue is not going to preoccupy us below. Apocalypticism often gravitates around powerful human protagonists, like the Messiah in Judaism, or Jesus Christ in Christianity, or around a powerful deity capable of and willing to intervene in the course of history or nature, or around a combination of the two entities. Indeed, the very recourse to terms like history and nature is to a certain extent problematic, as it assumes a dichotomy between divine will and another, independent order, in a manner that is often-times exaggerated or anachronistic. The order implicit in the existence of a supernal powerful will is therefore the sine qua non condition for the upheaval of the existing forms of order, which is equivalent to apocalyptic redemption. Unlike other forms of eschatology, apocalypticism believes in, expects, and sometimes even calls for a manifest revolution. Nevertheless, what is characteristic of the apocalyptic expectations, as I understand them, is the emphasis upon supernatural revolution, rather than natural evolution which exploits potentialities inherent in the ordinarily processes.

Much more a rupture than a continuation, apocalyptic salvation involves drastic restructuring that expresses a protest toward an existing order of things. Apocalypticism strives to solve the problem of a well-defined community, whether it is a tribe or a nation. Though it is definitely related to pondering on the human condition,<sup>6</sup> in Judaism it is more eminently connected to quandaries re-

<sup>3</sup> Gershom Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1972), p.

4. Cf. also Scholem, *Kabbalah* (New York: Dorset Press, 1987), pp. 68, 71-72.

<sup>4</sup> G. Scholem, *'Od Davar* (Tel Aviv: 'Am 'Oved, 1986), pp. 234-35 (Hebrew).

<sup>5</sup> For more on apocalypticism in Judaism, with an emphasis on the axes of time and place, topics that are not dealt with here, see M. Idel, "Jewish Apocalypticism 670-1670," *Encyclopedia of Apocalypticism*, ed. B. McGinn, Vol. II, pp. 204-37.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. especially John J. Collins, "Apocalyptic Eschatology as the Transcendence of Death," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, 36 (1974), pp. 21-43; Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending*:

lated to the specific vicissitudes of a certain group of people. From many points of view this is an escapist approach, especially because of the reliance on the intervention of a superior active power. One of the most common components of an apocalyptic mode of approaching existence is the dramatic rupture alongside the ordinary line of time envisioned as related to the eschaton. Regular time is conceived of as symbolic of the common and problematic sort of order that should be transcended by attaining a new kind of order. This rupture in the realm of time is often intertwined with a corresponding rupture on the geographical level, when the end of time will involve also a dislocation of masses. The arena of the eschaton is rarely identical to that of ordinary life. In some forms of apocalypticism, the restructuring of the two parameters is accompanied by a deepening of religious life, or of intellectual activity. A spiritually more intensive life is eventually envisioned either as the goal of apocalypticism, or as its by-product.

Most of messianic dramas related to the advent of the Messiah, or Messiahs, consist in a sequel of events, some of them having distinct apocalyptic features: natural disasters, mass religious conversions, bloody wars ushering in mass murder, death of messianic figures, etc. These upheavals were conceived of as being so painful that rabbinic figures confessed that they would prefer not to live to see them. Here, the apocalyptic nature of the eschaton is so strong that it deters people from even wishing to witness the advent of the messianic age, and therefore, we may assume that terror of apocalypticism deterred people from wishing to partake in the eschatological process.<sup>7</sup>

## 2. Sources of Jewish Apocalypticism

I would venture to say, following Whitehead, that if European philosophy may be described as a series of footnotes to Plato, Jewish and Christian apocalypticism may be conceived of as a handful of footnotes on the apocalyptic visions of Daniel. The content of this second-century B.C.E. enigmatic book, perhaps the most enigmatic part in the whole Biblical corpus, has tantalized generations of Jewish and Christian authors who attempted to explore the "messages" alluded to by the alleged sixth-century prophet. This is also the case of John's apocalypse. To a great extent, Jewish apocalyptic writings are indebted to various hints related to the future history of the Jews and of the Gentile empires in gen-

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*Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (London: Oxford University Press, 1966), p. 22; Bernard McGinn, *Apocalyptic Spirituality* (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), pp. 10, 13.

<sup>7</sup> Israel Levi, "Apocalypses dans le Talmud," *Revue des Etudes Juives*, 48 (1880), pp. 108-14; Anthony Saldarini, "Apocalyptic and Rabbinic Literature," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, 37 (1975), pp. 348-58; Saldarini, "The Use of Apocalyptic in the Mishnah and Tosefta," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, 39 (1977), pp. 396-409.

eral, spread over the obscure verses of this book. The mysterious figures, beasts, reigns, invited plenty of allegorical interpretations, which attempted to find out the precise dates and protagonists of the end. Indeed, the Book of Daniel combines several aspects of apocalypticism that may appear separately, though they are part of the apocalyptic complex: the nature of the apocalyptic events, the protagonists of the apocalyptic drama, and the feeling that there is a precise date, or dates, of that drama and its place or places.

The other main source for many late-antiquity and medieval discussions of the drama at the end of time is the exodus from Egypt, which has been envisioned as the prototype for the events of the redemption. While the role of Moses was now played by the future Messiah, the ancient Pharaoh was allegorically conceived of as representing powers of evil, while the exodus from Egypt was understood as adumbrating the return of the Jews to their homeland.<sup>8</sup>

Apocalyptic literature is mainly a religious phenomenon whose impact on the monotheistic religions is due to its first literary expression in the intertestamental period. Apparently of Iranian extraction, it has been appropriated in specific political and religious circumstances, those of prolonged expectations for the return of the Israelite king and to the events connected to his, oftentimes miraculous, return. In many cases, details of these eschatological events are reported as a revelation from above, a topic inherent in the very etymology of the term apocalypticism; but the revelatory aspects are less evident in discussions concerning apocalypticism. Though rooted in earlier forms of literature, its impact in the general economy of the biblical literature is small, though the dense discussions in the Book of Daniel, written in the East, are paramount. Nevertheless, with the passage of time, the topic gradually grew, though it never attained a status similar to other main topics in Judaism, like the legalistic and the interpretive projects.

The developments of apocalypticism in Judaism represent a combination between a gradually growing role of the redeeming figure within a more complex process, the messianic one, which includes in many cases apocalyptic components. Jewish apocalyptic themes as incorporated in the Talmudic and Midrashic literatures are almost always related to a more comprehensive topic, messianism. Since the belief in the advent of the messianic is the main focus of the discussion, apocalypticism can be seen as one possible components of messianism, though not tantamount to this broader phenomena. Though it is only very seldom in Jewish sources that there are non-messianic forms of apocalypticism, the only two significant exceptions being the cosmic cycles according to astrological and Kabbalistic speculations, it is easier, though rare again, to find messianic scenarios that are totally devoid of apocalyptic motifs. The focus of the

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. Baruch Bokser, "Messianism, The Exodus Pattern, and Early Rabbinic Judaism" in James H. Charlesworth, ed., *The Messiah: Developments in Earliest Judaism and Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), pp. 239-58.

messianic scenarios is not the description of the apocalyptic sequences in themselves; they serve as preludes for the description of the advent of the Messiah and of the messianic age.

In the early medieval period, however, a series of short treatises dealing with the messianic drama were composed, most of them pseudepigraphical, attributed as they are, for example, to the biblical figure of Zerubabel, or to the early rabbinic author R. Shimeon bar Yohai. The most famous and widely influential on a whole range of medieval messianic figures is the *Sefer Zerubabel*. These writings were collected and edited with a critical apparatus in Yehuda Even Shemuel's basic anthology *Midreshei Ge'ulah*, the "*Midrashim of Redemption*."<sup>9</sup> They elaborate upon the signs preceding the coming of the Messiah, the terrible wars and the death of the Messiah ben Joseph, the arrival and final victory of the Messiah ben David. Though written during a period of several hundred years, between the seventh and twelfth centuries, this literature is relatively unified from the conceptual point of view. It is mythical in its approach to reality: God and the Messiah are conceived of as paramount factors capable of disrupting the course of nature and of history, and as actually doing it. Strongly oriented toward a redemption that will take place in both time and space, it has an obvious restorative nature, which includes the rebuilding of the temple, the descent of the pristine city of Jerusalem from above, and the victory of Judaism as an universal religion.<sup>10</sup> The main target of the whole process is the redemption of the chosen among the people of Israel; individual spiritual redemption does not play any role in this more popular form of Jewish literature. The apocalyptic material collected by Even Shemuel, thought modest in quantity, has nevertheless exercised a considerable influence on the popular imagination of both apocalypticism and messianism.

In the Middle Ages, Jewish apocalypticism had been influenced also by both Muslim and Christian forms of apocalypticism. So, for example, we find numerous themes dealing with Christian apocalypticism in late-fifteenth-century Kabbalistic corpus named *Sefer ha-Meshiv*,<sup>11</sup> while the Muslim impact is more diffuse but found in a greater variety of cases.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Yehudah Even Shemuel, ed., *Midreshei Ge'ullah: Pirquei ha-'Apocalypsah ha-Yehudit*, 2nd Ed. (Jerusalem: Mossad Bialik, 1954). Some of the apocalyptic material has been translated into English by Raphael Patai, *The Messiah Texts* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1979), *passim*.

<sup>10</sup> Cf., e.g., *Sefer Eliahu*, in Even Shemuel, ed., *Midreshei Ge'ulah*, p. 48.

<sup>11</sup> M. Idel, "The Attitude to Christianity in *Sefer ha-Meshiv*," *Immanuel*, 12 (1981), pp. 77-95; and *Messianic Mystics*, pp. 118-20. For the possibility that Christian themes influenced some elements in *Sefer Zerubabel*, see Joseph Dan, "Armilus: The Jewish Antichrist," in P. Schaefer and M. C. Cohen, eds., *Toward the Millennium: Messianic Expectations from the Bible to Waco* (Leiden: Brill, 1998), pp. 85-86, 93-95.

<sup>12</sup> Israel Friedlander, "Shiitic Influence in Jewish Sectarianism," in Marc Saperstein, ed., *Essential Papers on Messianic Movements and Personalities in Jewish History* (New York: New York

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