Apocalypse in the History of Judaism: Continuities and Discontinuities

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There are two assumptions that guide the study of apocalyptic literature. The first contends that apocalypticism arose in ancient Judaism when prophecy ended, around the second century BCE. The second asserts that apocalypticism exhausted itself or was suppressed within rabbinic Judaism but continued in Christianity, as evidenced by Revelation and its prominence in the New Testament and later Christian reception. Both assumptions are false, but each contains a seed of truth.

What is apocalypse? In a pioneering study, *Apocalypse: The Morphology of a Genre* (1979), John Collins defined it as "a genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework, in which a revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient, disclosing a transcendent reality which is both temporal, insofar as it envisages eschatological salvation, and spatial insofar as it involves another, supernatural world." Such works develop elements of prophecy (revelation to a human recipient), wisdom (knowledge of transcendent reality), and eschatology (disclosure of the end of days), forerunners of which are found already in texts from the Hebrew Bible. To be sure, the human recipients in apocalyptic works were often figures associated with the past, such as Enoch or Ezra. But is there any prophetic or apocalyptic work that can be said with certainty to contain no trace of pseudepigraphy? In any event, the institution of prophecy may have ended, and some writers or interpretive communities may have felt it necessary to efface their own identities in order to present revelations as received by authoritative figures. But surely this was, as much as anything, the continuation of prophecy in the broader sense of revelatory communication. Apocalypse was only one among many ways in which Israel continued, even in the late Second Temple period and, indeed, after the destruction of the Temple, to express its encounters with divinity. The presence of both prophetic and apocalyptic features continued well beyond Second Temple period (see Michael Stone).

As for the supposed exclusion of apocalypse from rabbinic Judaism, Gershom Scholem, in his magisterial study, *Sabbatai Sevi: The Mystical Messiah* (1973), called this "one of the strangest errors of the modern *Wissenschaft des Judentums*," which "contributed much to the modern falsification of Jewish history and to the concealment of some of its most dynamic forces, both constructive and destructive." Many works from the late classical rabbinic corpus such as *Sefer Elijah* and *Sefer Zerubbabel*, as well as texts ascribed to R. Shimon ben Yohai, exhibit features of the apocalyptic genre defined by Collins, and discussed by many other scholars. There have been many episodes of Jewish apocalypticism, of which the Sabbatean movement and the recent fervor surrounding the death of the Lubavitcher Rebbe are two well-known examples, although, to be sure, there are many others.

Yet there is a seed of truth in the old assumptions. If apocalypse was not the end of prophecy, it did mark the transformation of revelatory encounter into an increasingly interpretive enterprise, citing and reworking earlier traditions in order to authorize specific teachings and in order to continue Israel's relationship with divinity. This interpretation is clear in texts such as 1QM (The War Scroll) and 4Ezra. Among the Dead Sea Scrolls are the Pesharim. Instead of producing new apocalyptic texts, these interpret old prophetic texts—such as Habakkuk, Isaiah, and Nahum—often in order to apply apocalyptic themes to contemporary events. It was a matter of urgent importance to situate the imperial power to which Jews were subject within apocalyptic schemes drawn from these prophetic texts such as Isaiah and Habakkuk and of course from the book of Daniel.

If apocalypse was not excluded from "normative" rabbinic Judaism, it was nevertheless marginalized. Some rabbinic traditions, notably the famous dictum of Mar Shmuel (BT Berakhot 34b) that the messianic days involve only the restoration of sovereignty, sought to decouple messianism from apocalypticism. Others, like the tradition attributed to R. Yonatan (BT Sanhedrin 97b), leave the linkage intact, but curse those who calculate the date of the Messiah's arrival. Moreover, when advocates of apocalypse sought to move into the center of Jewish concern, they had to stake their claims not on the basis of newly disclosed mediated revelations but on interpretations of what became a fairly standard collection of authoritative texts. As John Reeves has pointed out in his invaluable collection, *Trajectories in Near Eastern Apocalyptic: A Postrabbinic Jewish Apocalyptic Reader* (2005), the angel who appears to Zechariah in his proto-apocalyptic visions does not cite scripture but in later works like *Sefer Zerubbabel* and the *Secrets of R. Shimon ben Yohai*, the angel Metatron has become a master of scriptural interpretation (see the work of Martha Himmelfarb). Revelatory encounter continues, but it is now triply mediated: by the angel, by the human recipient drawn from the past, and by scripture. Within medieval Judaism, as Amos Funkenstein noted in *Perceptions of Jewish History* (1993), "apocalyptic images and motifs persisted as an integral part of messianic folklore," but "calculations of the end" were carried out by individual scholars or transmitted in relatively autonomous esoteric traditions that were only tangentially connected to mystical and Kabbalistic bodies of lore. If this marginalization of apocalypticism was overcome, it was only within antinomian communities such as the Sabbateans after their Messiah's conversion to Islam, and the Frankists—in short, groups that had themselves become marginal. Of course, it is the perceived threat to normative Judaism posed by such groups, along with Christianity, perhaps the first apocalyptic offshoot of Judaism, that can help explain rabbinic anxiety about apocalyptic elements of messianism. And it is the perceived threat of such groups to Judaism's reputation for rationality that explains the drastic underestimation of the historical importance of apocalypse by the pioneers of *Wissenschaft des Judentums.*

How much does it matter that the Hebrew Bible includes no apocalyptic work after Daniel, and that later apocalypses are found only in works marginal to the rabbinic corpus, such as the aforementioned *Secrets of R. Shimon ben Yohai* or *Pirqei de R. Eliezer*? Does this mean that, if we want to understand "normative Judaism," we need pay no attention to "noncanonical" texts such as Jubilees, the Enochic corpus, or 4Ezra?

This would be a misunderstanding of the relationship between scriptural and nonscriptural texts in Judaism. Insofar as scripture is authoritative in Judaism, it is also generative. But this generativity can also be perceived as a threat to its authority. The vitality of scripture finds new ways of expressing itself in texts that spell out the gap between scripture and interpretation such as pseudepigrapha, Midrashim (see S. Naeh, Tarbiz 66 [1997]), and in commentaries and Kabbalistic treatises. And the possibility that one of these expressions will threaten—or be perceived to threaten—the scripture that gave birth to it can never be eliminated. Scholem and Funkenstein both understood that apocalyptic texts and ways of thinking exemplify this point: they may fall just below the radar of normativity because of a potential threat that is in fact rarely actualized, yet they are nevertheless integral to the life of the Jewish tradition.

If we are to understand the authority of Scripture, Midrash, the Talmud, and even later mystical corpora, then we must also understand the traditions that these collections generate, along with the challenges to authority to which they sometimes give rise. Apocalyptic texts are key examples of marginal texts that arise from but that can also threaten the so-called canonical collections. The question still remains: how are we to acknowledge potentially subversive apocalyptic and esoteric texts as integral parts of a tradition that accords certain texts the status of scriptural authority?

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