

Trajectories in  
Near Eastern Apocalyptic  
*A Postrabbinic Jewish  
Apocalypse Reader*

*Edited by*  
JOHN C.  
REEVES

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## TRAJECTORIES IN NEAR EASTERN APOCALYPTIC

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*A Postrabbinic Jewish Apocalypse Reader*

JOHN C. REEVES



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## Preface and Acknowledgments

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In contemplating this work my original intent was to assemble an annotated English-language anthology of the influential apocalyptic compositions produced in the Near East by Jews, Christians, certain dualist groups, and Muslims over roughly the second half of the first millennium of the Common Era. This ambitious plan I inevitably but reluctantly had to surrender: the immense quantity of primary source materials—much of it still unpublished or largely inaccessible to many modern scholars—which would require close examination and comparative analysis was far too massive to handle responsibly within a single-volume format. This constrictive circumstance led me to narrow the book's scope to a more cohesive group of works; namely, the fascinating corpus of apocalyptic texts and traditions generated within Near Eastern Jewish scribal circles during late antiquity and the early Middle Ages.

I had initially sounded several of these texts while still a graduate student, nurtured then by a budding interest in what seemed to be the occurrence of verbal and thematic traces of Hellenistic and Roman-era pseudepigrapha like *Jubilees* and *I Enoch* among postrabbinic midrashic and mystical works. Although I found little in these particular apocalyptic texts to advance that peculiar interest, I did discover that they supplied heretofore unappreciated evidence about the rhetorical uses of a sacred scripture and that category's rise to ideological dominance in a wide variety of late antique Near Eastern religions. These apocalypses provide invaluable testimony for the unpacking of some of the historical and social factors that nourished the notion of a "textual authority," a concept whose illuminative force is best appreciated in the light of the increasingly competitive and eventually combative relationship that emerged among the different "scriptures" of Judaism, Christianity, Manichaeism, Zoroastrianism, and Islam.

There are some regrettable gaps in this volume's presentation of the Jewish apocalyptic tradition. Perhaps the most significant of these is my conscious decision to exclude (at least for the present) two later texts associated with the biblical character Daniel; namely, the works known as *Ḥazon Daniel* and *Ma'aseh Daniel*. Each of these medieval Jewish compositions, largely ignored by contemporary scholarship, requires fresh study in the light of our present understanding of the history of Jewish life in Byzantium and Iran respectively. The canonical book that



bears the name of Daniel exerted an enormous influence on the subsequent evolution of both Jewish and Christian eschatological literature during the Roman era. Daniel's reputation as a privileged seer of heavenly mysteries and a trustworthy prognosticator of earthly events made his figure a hugely popular one among the later Jewish, Christian, and Muslim traditionists and pseudepigraphers who were active within the Byzantine and Islamicate cultural orbits. A large number of allegedly Danielic "works" have been identified by bibliographers and manuscript catalogers, but only a small portion of this multilingual and interconfessional corpus has been published to date. To do proper justice to this specific trajectory of apocalyptic thought would entail (it seemed to me) yet another book-length study, a task I must postpone to another time.

Another theme worthy of deeper exploration involves the unpacking of the relationship of the apocalyptic mentality discussed herein to some of the disturbingly analogous formulations found among certain sectarian movements that arose within Islamicate Jewry, including most preeminently Karaism. The "scripturalist" orientation characteristic of both Karaite Judaism and these post-rabbinic apocalypses is simply a single instance of a lengthier series of possible social and conceptual interstices which merit a closer examination. The commentaries, treatises, and apologies produced by the early generations of Karaite ideologues throw the eschatological dimensions of Karaite hermeneutics and praxis into bold relief, and I suspect closer attention to the correspondences between the Karaite and postrabbinic apocalypses would yield significant rewards.

A final theme that warrants a more expansive treatment than I have been able to accomplish here involves a thorough examination of the intellectual and social dimensions of the complex conceptual and literary relationships which recognizably exist between apocalyptic texts like those discussed herein and those works comprising the roughly contemporary corpus of Jewish revelatory texts known as *Hekhalot* or mystical literature. The short excursus on the angelic figure of Metatron makes a feeble attempt to call attention to a few of these issues. Several scholars (e.g., Joseph Dan, Moshe Idel, Ithamar Gruenwald, Martha Himmelfarb) have remarked on and continue to probe various aspects of this general nexus, but it is the tip of a very large iceberg, and there is certainly much more that can be done in this area.

Despite these shortcomings, it is my hope that the present work will still prove useful to scholars and students of the history of Jewish literature in late antiquity and the early Middle Ages. I truly appreciate the patient forbearance displayed by Bob Buller and the editorial staff at the Society of Biblical Literature over the course of their lengthy wait for the completion of this volume. I am profoundly grateful to Mr. Herman Blumenthal (הרמן) and the Blumenthal Foundation for their generous financial support of the Jewish studies curriculum and my research efforts at the University of North Carolina, Charlotte. Finally, I would also like to acknowledge the following academic institutions which have graciously granted

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# Abbreviations

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## *Primary Sources*

‘ <i>Abod. Zar.</i>	‘ <i>Avodah Zarah</i>
ʾ <i>Abot R. Nat.</i>	ʾ <i>Avot de Rabbi Nathan</i>
<i>Ant.</i>	Josephus, <i>Jewish Antiquities</i>
<i>Apoc. Abr.</i>	<i>Apocalypse of Abraham</i>
<i>Apoc. El. (C)</i>	<i>Coptic Apocalypse of Elijah</i>
<i>Apoc. Paul</i>	<i>Apocalypse of Paul</i>
<i>Apoc. Ps-Ephrem</i>	<i>Syriac Pseudo-Ephrem Apocalypse</i>
<i>Apoc. Ps-Meth.</i>	<i>Syriac Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius</i>
<i>As. Mos.</i>	<i>Assumption of Moses</i>
<i>b.</i>	Babylonian Talmud (Bavli)
<i>B. Bat.</i>	<i>Baba Batra</i>
<i>B.J.</i>	Josephus, <i>Bellum judaicum</i>
<i>B. Meši‘a</i>	<i>Baba Meši‘a</i>
<i>B. Qam.</i>	<i>Baba Qamma</i>
<i>2 Bar.</i>	<i>2 Baruch (Syriac Apocalypse)</i>
<i>Ber.</i>	<i>Berakhot</i>
<i>Cant. Rab.</i>	<i>Canticles Rabbah</i>
<i>CD</i>	<i>Cairo Damascus Document</i>
<i>CMC</i>	<i>Cologne Mani Codex</i>
‘ <i>Ed.</i>	‘ <i>Eduyyot</i>
<i>1 En.</i>	<i>1 Enoch (Ethiopic Book of Enoch)</i>
<i>2 En.</i>	<i>2 Enoch (Slavonic Book of Enoch)</i>
‘ <i>Erub.</i>	‘ <i>Eruvin</i>
<i>Exod. Rab.</i>	<i>Exodus Rabbah</i>
<i>Frg. Tg.</i>	<i>Fragmentary Targum</i>
<i>Gen. Rab.</i>	<i>Genesis Rabbah</i>
<i>Ḥag.</i>	<i>Ḥagigah</i>
<i>HUC</i>	Hebrew Union College
<i>Ḥul.</i>	<i>Ḥullin</i>
<i>Jub.</i>	<i>Jubilees</i>

<i>Ketub.</i>	<i>Ketubbot</i>
<i>L.A.B.</i>	<i>Liber antiquitatum biblicarum</i> (Pseudo-Philo)
<i>Lam. Rab.</i>	<i>Lamentations Rabbah</i>
<i>Lev. Rab.</i>	<i>Leviticus Rabbah</i>
<i>Liv. Pro.</i>	<i>Lives of the Prophets (Vitae Prophetarum)</i>
<i>m.</i>	<i>Mishnah</i>
<i>Ma<sup>c</sup>aš. Š.</i>	<i>Ma<sup>c</sup>aser Sheni</i>
<i>Mak.</i>	<i>Makkot</i>
<i>Meg.</i>	<i>Megillah</i>
<i>Me'il.</i>	<i>Me'ilah</i>
<i>Mek.</i>	<i>Mekhilta</i>
<i>Menah.</i>	<i>Menahot</i>
<i>Midr. Tanḥ.</i>	<i>Midrash Tanḥuma</i>
<i>Midr. Tanḥ. Buber</i>	<i>Midrash Tanḥuma</i> (ed. S. Buber)
<i>Midr. Teh.</i>	<i>Midrash Tehillim</i>
<i>Ms.</i>	<i>Manuscript</i>
<i>Naz.</i>	<i>Nazir</i>
<i>Ned.</i>	<i>Nedarim</i>
<i>Num. Rab.</i>	<i>Numbers Rabbah</i>
<i>Pesaḥ.</i>	<i>Pesaḥim</i>
<i>Pesiq. Rab.</i>	<i>Pesiqta Rabbati</i>
<i>Pesiq. Rab Kah.</i>	<i>Pesiqta de Rab Kahana</i>
<i>Pirqe R. El.</i>	<i>Pirqe de Rabbi Eliezer</i>
<i>Prot. Jas.</i>	<i>Protevangeliium of James</i>
<i>Pss. Sol.</i>	<i>Psalms of Solomon</i>
<i>Q</i>	<i>Qur'ān</i>
<i>1Qap Gen<sup>ar</sup></i>	<i>Genesis Apocryphon</i>
<i>Qidd.</i>	<i>Qiddushin</i>
<i>1QIsa<sup>a</sup></i>	<i>Qumran Isaiah<sup>a</sup> scroll</i>
<i>1QM</i>	<i>Qumran War Scroll</i>
<i>11QMelch</i>	<i>Qumran Melchizedek</i>
<i>1QpHab</i>	<i>Pesher Habakkuk</i>
<i>Qoh. Rab.</i>	<i>Qohelet Rabbah</i>
<i>1QSb</i>	<i>Rule of the Blessings</i> (Appendix b to 1QS)
<i>Roš. Haš.</i>	<i>Rosh HaShanah</i>
<i>S. Eli. Zut.</i>	<i>Seder Eliyahu Zuta</i>
<i>S. 'Olam Rab.</i>	<i>Seder 'Olam Rabbah</i>
<i>Sanh.</i>	<i>Sanhedrin</i>
<i>Šabb.</i>	<i>Shabbat</i>
<i>Šeb.</i>	<i>Shevi'it</i>
<i>Šeqal.</i>	<i>Sheqalim</i>

<i>Sib. Or.</i>	<i>Sibylline Oracles</i>
<i>Sukk.</i>	<i>Sukkah</i>
<i>t.</i>	<i>Tosefta</i>
<i>T. Jud.</i>	<i>Testament of Judah</i>
<i>T. Levi</i>	<i>Testament of Levi</i>
<i>T-S</i>	<i>Taylor-Schechter</i>
<i>Ta<sup>c</sup>an.</i>	<i>Ta<sup>c</sup>anit</i>
<i>Tg.</i>	<i>Targum</i>
<i>Tg. Ket.</i>	<i>Targum Ketuvim (Writings)</i>
<i>Tg. Neb.</i>	<i>Targum Nev<sup>ʿ</sup>im (Prophets)</i>
<i>Tg. Onk.</i>	<i>Targum Onkelos</i>
<i>Tg. Ps.-J.</i>	<i>Targum Pseudo-Jonathan</i>
<i>Tg. Tosefta</i>	<i>targumic supplement</i>
<i>y.</i>	<i>Palestinian Talmud (Yerushalmi)</i>
<i>Yal. Šim.</i>	<i>Yalqut Šimoni</i>
<i>Yebam.</i>	<i>Yebamot</i>
<i>Zebah.</i>	<i>Zebaḥim</i>

### Secondary Sources

<i>AGJU</i>	<i>Arbeiten zur Geschichte des antiken Judentums und des Urchristentums</i>
<i>AJSR</i>	<i>Association for Jewish Studies Review</i>
<i>Aug</i>	<i>Augustinianum</i>
<i>Beck</i>	Pages 60–71 (lines 1–557) of <i>Des heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Sermones III</i> . Edited by Edmund Beck. CSCO 320, scrip. syri 138. Louvain: Secrétariat du Corpus SCO, 1972.
<i>BHM</i>	<i>Bet ha-Midrash: Sammlung kleiner Midraschim und vermischter Abhandlungen aus der jüdischen Literatur</i> . Edited by Adolph Jellinek. 6 vols. Leipzig, 1853–77; repr., Jerusalem: Bamberger & Wahrmann, 1938.
<i>BJS</i>	<i>Brown Judaic Studies</i>
<i>BSOAS</i>	<i>Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies</i>
<i>CH</i>	<i>Church History</i>
<i>CP</i>	<i>Classical Philology</i>
<i>CRINT</i>	<i>Compendia rerum iudaicarum ad Novum Testamentum</i>
<i>CSCO</i>	<i>Corpus scriptorum christianorum orientalium</i>

CSEL	Corpus scriptorum ecclesiasticorum latinorum
DJD	Discoveries in the Judaean Desert
<i>EI</i> <sup>2</sup>	<i>The Encyclopaedia of Islam</i> . New edition. 12 vols. Leiden: Brill, 1954–2002.
<i>EncJud</i>	<i>Encyclopaedia Judaica</i> . 16 vols. Jerusalem: Keter, 1971.
<i>EncQur</i>	<i>Encyclopaedia of the Qurʾān</i> . Edited by Jane Dammen McAuliffe. Leiden: Brill, 2001–.
Finkelstein	<i>Sifre Devarim</i> . Edited by Louis Finkelstein. Repr., New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1969.
GCS	Die griechische christliche Schriftsteller der ersten [drei] Jahrhunderte
GRBS	<i>Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies</i>
<i>Hen</i>	<i>Henoch</i>
Horovitz	<i>Sifre de-bey Rav . . . Sifre ʿal Sefer Bemidbar</i> . Edited by H. S. Horovitz. Repr., Jerusalem: Wahrmann, 1966.
Horovitz-Rabin	<i>Mekhilta de-Rabbi Yishmael</i> . Edited by H. S. Horovitz and I. A. Rabin. Repr., Jerusalem: Wahrmann, 1970.
HSM	Harvard Semitic Monographs
<i>HTR</i>	<i>Harvard Theological Review</i>
HUCA	<i>Hebrew Union College Annual</i>
<i>IOS</i>	<i>Israel Oriental Studies</i>
Ish-Shalom (Friedmann)	<i>Midrash Pesiqta Rabbati</i> . Edited by Meir Ish-Shalom (Friedmann). Vienna: Joseph Kaiser, 1880.
JAOS	<i>Journal of the American Oriental Society</i>
<i>JE</i>	<i>The Jewish Encyclopedia</i> . Edited by Isidore Singer. 12 vols. New York and London: Funk & Wagnalls, 1901-06.
<i>JJS</i>	<i>Journal of Jewish Studies</i>
<i>JNES</i>	<i>Journal of Near Eastern Studies</i>
<i>JQR</i>	<i>Jewish Quarterly Review</i>
<i>JSAI</i>	<i>Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam</i>
<i>JSJ</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of Judaism in the Persian, Hel- lenistic, and Roman Periods</i>
JSOTSup	Journal for the Study of the Old Testament: Supple- ment Series
<i>JSQ</i>	<i>Jewish Studies Quarterly</i>
<i>JSS</i>	<i>Journal of Semitic Studies</i>
<i>JTS</i>	<i>Journal of Theological Studies</i>
LCL	Loeb Classical Library

Lieberman	<i>The Tosefta: According to Codex Vienna, With Variants . . .</i> Edited by Saul Lieberman. 2d ed. 4 vols. Repr., New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1988-95.
Luria	<i>Sefer Pirqey Rabbi Eliezer ha-Gadol</i> . Edited by David Luria. Warsaw, 1852; repr., Jerusalem: [n.p.], 1970.
Mandelbaum	<i>Pesiqta de Rav Kahana</i> . Edited by Bernard Mandelbaum. 2d ed. 2 vols. New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1987.
Margulies	<i>Midrash Wayyikra Rabbah</i> . Edited by Mordecai Margulies. 2 vols. Repr., New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1993.
MGWJ	<i>Monatschrift für Geschichte und Wissenschaft des Judentums</i>
NHMS	Nag Hammadi and Manichaean Studies
OCP	<i>Orientalia christiana periodica</i>
OrChrAn	<i>Orientalia christiana analecta</i>
OTP	<i>Old Testament Pseudepigrapha</i> . Edited by James H. Charlesworth. 2 vols. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1983-85.
PAAJR	<i>Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research</i>
Reinink	<i>Die syrische Apokalypse des Pseudo-Methodius</i> . Edited by G. J. Reinink. 2 vols. CSCO 540-541, scrip. syri 220-221. Louvain: E. Peeters, 1993.
REJ	<i>Revue des études juives</i>
SAC	Studies in Antiquity and Christianity
SBLEJL	Society of Biblical Literature Early Judaism and Its Literature
SBLTT	Society of Biblical Literature Texts and Translations
Schäfer	<i>Synopse zur Hekhalot-Literatur</i> . Edited by Peter Schäfer. TSAJ 2. Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1981.
Schechter	<i>Massekhet Avot de-Rabbi Natan</i> . Edited by Solomon Schechter. Vienna: Ch. D. Lippe, 1887.
ScrHier	Scripta hierosolymitana
Ṭabarī, <i>Taʿrīkh</i>	<i>Taʿrīkh al-rusul waʿl-mulūk</i> . Edited by M. J. de Goeje et al. 15 vols. Leiden: Brill, 1879-1901.
Theodor-Albeck	<i>Midrash Bereshit Rabba</i> . Edited by J. Theodor and H. Albeck. 3 vols. Repr., Jerusalem: Wahrman, 1965.
TSAJ	Texte und Studien zum antiken Judentum



Weiss	<i>Sifra de-bey Rav: hu' sefer Torat Kohanim</i> . Edited by I. H. Weiss. Repr., New York: Om, 1946.
WUNT	Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament
ZA	<i>Zeitschrift für Assyriologie</i>
ZDMG	<i>Zeitschrift der deutschen morgenländischen Gesellschaft</i>
Zuckerman del	<i>Tosephta, Based on the Erfurt and Vienna Codices</i> . Edited by M. S. Zuckerman del. New edition. Jerusalem: Wahrman Books, 1970.

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## Introduction

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THE “APOCALYPTIC IMAGINATION,” to lift a useful rubric given currency by John J. Collins,<sup>1</sup> is an incredibly fluid and fertile mentality. Usually but mistakenly confined by modern biblical scholars to marginalized groups of Jewish nationalists and Christian triumphalists resident in or contiguous to Eretz Israel during the two or three centuries surrounding the Roman sack of Jerusalem, it actually operates more or less continuously within the broader ethnic or religious frameworks of the wider Near East, and it surges during those centuries which most historians identify as marking the gradual transition from late antiquity to the early medieval era. During the seventh and following centuries of the Common Era, a number of Jewish, Christian, dualist, and Muslim circles revel in what they perceive to be a deliberately scripted concatenation of natural disasters, military campaigns, historical crises, and oracular utterances. Their collation produced a massive corpus of linguistically diverse yet thematically interlocked narrative emplotments of the episodes and characters whose historical manifestations allegedly signal the triumph of their respective political and religious interests amidst the final days of the present terrestrial order.

Figured as a mentality, the apocalyptic mode of thought is not sterile. It is relentlessly reactive and generative, since by definition it is set in motion by processes whose grounding and authority lie beyond the natural world. The notion of *apokalypsis* signifies an act whereby something previously unknown and which cannot be generated by normal means of research or ratiocination is suddenly uncovered, literally unveiled, for the mind of a percipient. The preeminent characteristic of apocalyptic thought and its concrete realization in discourse—the verbal expression of such thought—is thus its *revelatory* basis, its claim to a certainty or set of truths that are immune from the erosive forces of social domination and corruption, material poverty, and philosophical skepticism. Possessing an unimpeachable authority and intellectual significance, it often forces its conceptual articulation among a wider audience by exploiting those favored vehicles of communication with which a culture expresses its constitutive identity, values,

<sup>1</sup> John J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction to Jewish Apocalyptic Literature* (2d ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).

and aspirations. In the centuries prior to and encompassing the coming of Rome, there were a number of ways in which this task could be and was accomplished; for example, through royal or societal elite proclamation and epigraphic commemoration, behavioral mimesis, oracular pronouncement, figurative illustration, written composition, or oral catechesis of apprentices, students, disciples, or neophytes. For the Abrahamic religious communities of Near Eastern late antiquity, the vehicle par excellence for such dissemination would be the sacred writing or book.

The type of knowledge that is communicated in apocalyptic writings is fundamentally esoteric: its content, character, and essential qualities lie concealed from most members of the social order and rely for their wider dissemination on the willingness of those privileged to receive such knowledge to share it with a broader public. The notion of “privilege” is in fact a key one, since an initial—or what is represented as an exclusive—access to this otherworldly wisdom distinguishes both the producer and the producer’s circle of consumers as enjoying the special favor of the deity. Explicit restrictions regarding publication or popular access are occasionally asserted in apocalyptic texts, but this element is certainly a rhetorical ploy that had no practical implementation, for the warnings actually function as a sign to later readers that they, like the author, could be counted among the elect of God.<sup>2</sup> The structures of apocalyptic thought and discourse are thus consonant, as David Frankfurter has insightfully observed, with the conceptual and literary conventions employed in gnostic forms of religiosity.<sup>3</sup> Gnosis might even be arguably viewed as the dominant category for Near Eastern apocalypticism, for it necessarily expands the dimensional field of revealed information to include matters pertaining to cosmology, uranography, angelology, physical science, anthropogony, historiosophy, and eschatology. This is a welcome hermeneutical development inasmuch as apocalyptic thought is often confined by modern scholars to the articulation of speculative or symbolic scenarios about what will supposedly transpire at the end of time. While some or even most of the revealed information might focus on an outline of future events and cosmic woes, it need not do so. The critical criterion is the supernatural mediation of a definitive knowledge—a knowledge, moreover, that permits a properly nuanced evaluation of the larger forces and tensions at work in the contemporary social order. Apocalyptic therefore cannot be simply equated or conflated with literary compositions that discuss the “last days” or the eschaton.

Many students of apocalyptic texts, perhaps even the vast majority, situate their genesis and their perennial appeal within a localized malaise or disillusion

<sup>2</sup> E.g., Dan 12:4, 9–13; 4 Ezra 12:36–38; 14:44–48.

<sup>3</sup> David Frankfurter, “The Legacy of Jewish Apocalypses in Early Christianity: Regional Trajectories,” in *The Jewish Apocalyptic Heritage in Early Christianity* (ed. James C. VanderKam and William Adler; CRINT 3.4; Assen: Van Gorcum; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 150–62.

spawned by the social and historical realities of cultural oppression and subjection. According to this view, social or ethnic persecution and national crisis supply the soil from which apocalyptic springs, and apocalyptic texts are thus reduced to a type of “resistance literature.”<sup>4</sup> This regrettable interpretative tendency emerges all too readily from an overly insular reading of early Jewish and Christian apocalypses, which limits their production and appeal to marginalized “sects” or disenfranchised “minority” groups in opposition to the dominant power structures. There is no clear evidence that compels acceptance of apocalyptic as a genre of literary expression that was cultivated exclusively by dissidents, and there is some evidence that speaks against such a simplistic reduction. While some apocalypses admittedly do breathe an atmosphere of factional or cultural hostility,<sup>5</sup> there are others that are designed as vehicles for communicating the material and hence ideological supremacy of the ruling powers. Emperors and caliphs could manipulate and wield the language and imagery of apocalyptic as adroitly as the learned scribe or sage.

### *Entre écriture et apocalypse?*

Gilbert Dagron subtitled his important survey of the tense relations between Jews and Christians in the East during the first half of the seventh century “Entre histoire et apocalypse.”<sup>6</sup> His dialectical pairing of the terms “history” and “apocalyptic” illustrates the tyranny of an unexamined premise that underlies almost all modern study of apocalyptic texts; namely, that apocalypses can be read most profitably as a species of historiography. References to battles, the naming of rulers, cities, or nations, cryptic descriptions of the rise and fall of certain figures, and numerical counting formulas are to be read as direct reflections of the author’s historical context and concerns, and can thus be utilized as empirical evidence for establishing the putative chronological and geographic provenance of a given work. This largely reflexive type of exegesis is very popular among modern scholars who devote themselves to the study and interpretation of apocalyptic literature, and its results are often used as determinatives for reconstructing the his-

<sup>4</sup> E.g., Averil Cameron and Lawrence I. Conrad, “Introduction,” in *The Byzantine and Early Islamic Near East, I: Problems in the Literary Source Material* (ed. Averil Cameron and Lawrence I. Conrad; Princeton: Darwin Press, 1992), 21–22. See the important critique of the influential ideas of Philip Vielhauer (among others) relative to early Christian apocalypticism supplied by William Adler, “Introduction,” in *Jewish Apocalyptic Heritage*, 3–8.

<sup>5</sup> Hence John Wansbrough’s characterization of apocalyptic as a “type of polemical literature”; see his *The Sectarial Milieu: Content and Composition of Islamic Salvation History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 115–16.

<sup>6</sup> Gilbert Dagron, “Introduction historique: Entre histoire et apocalypse,” *Travaux et mémoires* 11 (1991): 17–46.

tory of the transmission of particular texts, smaller constituent units of texts, or even the structural conventions and motifs employed by the texts. On the face of it, as presented, there seems little about this strategy with which one need quarrel. Apocalyptic texts, like all cultural products, are artifacts integrally embedded within their material circumstances, and so one might legitimately expect to discern the reverberations of past and current events within the linguistic coding of the inscribed page. Moreover, the dizzying sequence of political transition and change in the Near East during the first half of the seventh century—the rapid Sasanian conquest and roughly two-decade-long subjection of Christian Syria, Palestine, and Egypt, abetted by the partisan unrest in Constantinople and Asia Minor surrounding the violent accessions of Phokas (602) and Heraclius (610); a suddenly resurgent Byzantine *reconquista* culminating in the triumphant march of Heraclius into Jerusalem (630), but which in turn was almost immediately trumped by the humiliating rout of both Byzantines and Sasanians before the Muslim onslaught beginning around 632; and the swift destruction of the Sasanian empire and the effective expulsion of Byzantine hegemony from the Near East—must have impressed many contemporaries as ominously close to programmed schemes of social and religious turmoil as sketched by scriptural sources like the biblical book of Daniel and its Christian imitators. It would be foolish to deny that historical events play a role in the construction of apocalypses. There are verifiable reasons why Rome bears the moniker of “the evil empire” (המלכות הרשעה) or why a particular Arab ruler might be described as a “friend of Israel” (אויב ישראל) or as “one who waged war on the descendants of Esau” (עושה מלחמה עם בני עשו). Oppression, hardship, and perseverance under adverse circumstances were the tangible conditions of life for Jews under both Christian and Muslim rule, and being one of the approved cultural expressions of those experiences (among others), apocalyptic literature reflects the emotional peaks and valleys engendered by the seemingly hostile forces of history.

Nevertheless, and in spite of the observations just expressed, it is imperative that greater care be taken in order to avoid the practice of reading the language of an apocalypse as if it were simply supplying descriptive “facts” about the milieu from which it emerges. The product of the apocalyptic imagination when it is exercised within and for the sake of a literate milieu is a specific type of written narrative that employs a distinctively *formulaic* set of conventions, tropes, and figures. Central to the argument of the present essay, and indeed to the larger work it serves to introduce, is the notion that late antique Near Eastern apocalyptic literature is most properly understood when it is framed as a closed *textual* universe of discourse. Apocalyptic texts of this period, whether produced by Jews, Christians, or Muslims, feature a distinctive phonology, vocabulary, and syntax that, while retaining certain dialectical variations, are still easily recognizable as a discrete *langue*. The basic structural undercarriage of this particular grammar of linguistic markers and signs is not the linear march of time and the fluctuating events that

fill it, but rather the relatively stable verbal expression of what was widely perceived within discrete religious communities as a uniquely authoritative revelation of the deity. In other words, sacred scripture (*écriture*) supplies both the raw material and the ultimate rationale for the conceptual elaboration of late antique Near Eastern apocalyptic.

Fluency in this particular mode of discourse would seem to presuppose the notion of a fixed scriptural canon, an authoritative collection of writings codifying the central myths, practices, and values of a religious community. It is probably not coincidental that the growing popularity of apocalyptic books within Near Eastern religions is roughly synchronous with the emerging dominance of written texts among polytheist, dualist, and monotheist forms of religiosity in late antiquity. During the early centuries of the Common Era, the favored means of the authoritative transmission of core teachings or truths gradually but inexorably shifts in Judaism, Christianity, Zoroastrianism, and diverse pagan currents from orality to textuality and from the spoken word to the immutable book. Such books, whether stemming from a Sibylline oracle or the God of Abraham, are the visible and enduring precipitate of an encounter between an inspired seer or prophet and the divine world. One might term this development a “textualizing of authority.” The veracity or the trustworthiness of particular teachers or doctrines became tied to “scriptural” registration, preferably one that located the archetype of the scripture in heaven itself. As the authority of written scripture waxed, a spectrum of interpretive readings and exegetical teachings grew up around the sacred text in order to provide guidance regarding communally endorsed meanings—Zand, midrash, commentaries—and those parascriptural expressions that were most widely endorsed also eventually achieved written form.

This seismic shift in the understanding of the cultural locale of authority becomes most readily apparent when one compares the form and structure of the early Jewish apocalypses authored during the Hellenistic and Roman imperial periods to those produced approximately half a millennium later during the turbulent transition from Sasanian and Byzantine to Muslim rule. Works like *Daniel*, *1 Enoch*, the *Qumran War Scroll*, or *4 Ezra* rarely cite or even refer to the biblical text. Several scholars have made the point that these early apocalypses are largely self-authenticating: the revelatory event itself supplies the necessary validation for the information that is revealed to the seer or prophet.<sup>7</sup> The angel who appears to the seer embodies divine speech, an equation that is glaringly apparent in the proto-apocalyptic visions of Zechariah where the angelic intermediary will eerily and suddenly metamorphose into the deity himself. Neither God nor the angel appeals to scripture to bolster or supplement their cause. By contrast, later Jewish

<sup>7</sup> Adler, “Introduction,” 19–21; see also Michael E. Stone, “Apocalyptic Literature,” in *Jewish Writings of the Second Temple Period: Apocrypha, Pseudepigrapha, Qumran Sectarian Writings, Philo, Josephus* (ed. Michael E. Stone; CRINT 2.2; Assen: Van Gorcum; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 428–29.

apocalyptic works like *Sefer Zerubbabel* or the *Nistarot (Secrets) of R. Šimʿōn ben Yoḥai* are thoroughly awash with scriptural diction and citation. The revealing agent, who in both of these instances is identified as the angel Metatron—an entity whose supernal credentials and status in Jewish mystical literature are functionally equivalent to that of God himself—defers to the Bible as the paramount authority to which all external circumstances are subservient. In the Jewish apocalyptic mentality of late antiquity, written scripture becomes the source of revelation. It acts as a surrogate for the Divine Revealer who once spoke and brought the universe into being.<sup>8</sup>

This enhanced role for the Bible in the perception, mapping, and reading of mundane events is not limited to Jewish contexts. It indeed is quite visible within all those religious communities that align themselves among the heirs of the Abrahamic legacy, including most importantly those who eventually coalesce under the banner of the radically monotheist religious movement that became Islam. Biblical characters, narratives, or conceptual complexes figure in almost every page of the Qurʾān, and early traditionists like Kaʿb al-Aḥbār (d. 656) and Wahb b. Munabbih (d. ca. 728) furnished nascent Islam with a rich assemblage of parascriptural interpretative materials. The interest shown by the Prophet and the initial caliphs in Jerusalem and its *sancta* underscores the esteem with which early Islam invested the terrestrial location of the earlier *scriptural* revelations associated with Abraham, Moses, and Jesus. Subsequent textualizing of the Prophet’s revelation in scriptural form, whatever the precise historical lineaments of that process, cemented its authority and simultaneously aligned its discourse with and distinguished it from that of the earlier scriptures.

What has been up to now largely unappreciated is the crucial role that the Bible, as opposed to the Qurʾān, plays in the early Muslim appropriation of an apocalyptic discourse. However, according to Uri Rubin, early Muslim collections of hagiographic and didactic sources “seem to indicate that Muslim reliance on the Bible began much earlier than is usually assumed by Islamicists”<sup>9</sup>—and, we might add, “biblicists.” Early Jewish and Christian notices of Islam make no mention of a distinctive Muslim scripture,<sup>10</sup> but instead criticize Muslim scholars for

<sup>8</sup> One logical implication of this argument: early Jewish apocalyptic works failed to ground themselves in Bible because there was no canonical entity extant in their eras (roughly 300 BCE to 100 CE) that would have corresponded to modernist notions of the “Bible.” For further discussion of this particular point, see James E. Bowley and John C. Reeves, “Rethinking the Concept of ‘Bible’: Some Theses and Proposals,” *Hen* 25 (2003): 3–18.

<sup>9</sup> Uri Rubin, *The Eye of the Beholder: The Life of Muhammad as Viewed by the Early Muslims* (Studies in Late Antiquity and Early Islam 5; Princeton: Darwin Press, 1995), 22.

<sup>10</sup> “It is, however, worth recalling that those sources which may with some assurance be dated before the end of the second/eighth century . . . contain no reference to Muslim scripture” (Wansbrough, *Sectarian Milieu*, 58).

their alleged inability to find biblical warrant for the revelatory claims of Islam. When a number of biblical proof texts are accordingly produced, Jewish and Christian scripturalists attempt to undermine these Muslim readings of the Bible. The Bible thus emerges as the crucial battleground for textual and social authority.

### *The Messianic Dimensions of Isaiah 21:6–7*

A recurrent claim advanced by Muslim exegetes is that the advent of Muhammad and his climactic position as “seal of the prophets” are already presaged in the earlier scriptures revealed to the Jews and the Christians; namely, the *Tawrāt* (Torah) and the *Injīl* (Gospel), the qur’ānic terms for the two major divisions of the Christian Bible. Among the texts typically referenced in such discussions is a particularly intriguing oracle found in the book of Isaiah (21:6–7). That text in its Masoretic recension reads as follows:

כי כה אמר אלי אדני לך העמד המצפה אשר יראה יגיד וראה רכב צמד  
פרשים רכב חמור רכב גמל והקשיב קשב רב קשב

For thus did my Lord say to me: “Go, station the watchman. Let him report what he sees. And should he see chariotry of a team/pair of horses/riders, chariotry of asses, chariotry of camels, he must pay careful attention, a lot of attention.”

Insight into the Muslim parsing of this biblical oracle into a prefiguration of the future appearance of Muhammad first emerges from an early tradition relayed by Ibn Ishāq (d. 767) reporting how the “People of the Book” (a qur’ānic appellation for religions possessing a sacred scripture, usually shorthand for the Bible) anticipated the advent of a prophet “whom Jesus announced would be riding a camel” (*rākib al-jamal*). Suliman Bashear’s recent exhaustive analysis of this theme locates another testimony to this same tradition in the collection of prophetic legends ascribed to ‘Umāra b. Wathīma (d. 902), where it is reported that Ibn Ishāq transmitted a tradition which stated that “Isaiah was the one who entrusted the children of Israel with the matter of Jesus and Muhammad . . . (saying) ‘there will come to you the one with the camel, meaning Muhammad (upon whom be peace!).’”<sup>11</sup> The curious confusion in attribution between “Jesus” (*‘Īsā*) and “Isaiah” (*Ša‘yā*) is one that is easily accomplished in an Arabophone environment;

<sup>11</sup> Suliman Bashear, “Riding Beasts on Divine Missions: An Examination of the Ass and Camel Traditions,” *JSS* 37 (1991): 37–75, slightly emended quotation cited from p. 41. For the Arabic text, see Raif Georges Khoury, *Les légendes prophétiques dans l’Islam: Depuis le Ier jusqu’au IIIe siècle de l’Hégire = Kitāb bad’ al-ḥalq wa-qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā’* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1978), 300 (text).



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