



Recent Studies in “Apocalyptic”

JAMES C. VANDERKAM

North Carolina State University, Raleigh, North Carolina

Though George Orwell’s 1984 would not be called an apocalypse under any standard definition of the term, his deeply pessimistic vision of the future reminds one in some ways of the ancient Jewish apocalypses. Orwell described the horrors of a future in which evil forces had usurped all power, while the Jewish seers painted graphic images of outlandish wickedness which, they believed, would characterize the end-time. The idiom of the ancient and modern writers differs, but the subject matter overlaps. The attempts of the apocalypticists to cope with a daunting future have aroused the interest and curiosity of Jews and Christians alike throughout the centuries and never more than today. One key to the perennial appeal of the apocalyptic literature is the fact that the writers did not stop with their frightening pictures of eschatological woe; on the contrary, they unveiled behind these pictures a larger scene which conveyed to their readers the ultimate triumph of God and his kingdom. In other words, they spoke words of comfort to the oppressed and summoned them to trust in an unconquerable divine sovereignty.

The ancient Jewish apocalypses have been subjected to innumerable studies in the last 35 years. Interest in them was revived by the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls (1947-56), and it continues to be encouraged by the ongoing process of identifying new manuscripts of previously known works in the older European libraries and in monasteries elsewhere in the Christian world. These finds have not only added extensively to the textual base of apocalyptic literature but have also, according to many, provided in the community that wrote the Dead Sea Scrolls the first known instance of a sectarian, apocalyptic community in action.

In this essay I will survey recent developments in the investigation of Jewish (and Christian) apocalypticism. The amount of material dictates, however, that the survey be confined to a few of the more significant issues that have been exercising contemporary scholars. The topics that have been selected for review are (1) definition of terms and (2) isolation of the source(s) from which

apocalyptic literature and theologies developed. Developments in each area will be summarized and evaluated.

I. DEFINITIONS

The word *apocalyptic* has generally been used rather loosely in academic writing. As John J. Collins has remarked: “the abstraction ‘apocalyptic’ hovers vaguely between literature, sociology, and theology.”¹ It functions as an adjective (apocalyptic books) or a noun (Jewish apocalyptic) and simply is not very precise. Several writers have been sufficiently annoyed by

this imprecision to suggest that the ambiguous “apocalyptic” be replaced by a set of more specific terms. Paul Hanson’s contribution to this process can be adduced as a convenient and fairly familiar example. He distinguishes three terms and defines them as follows.

A. Apocalypse. Hanson understands this word as the name for a particular literary genre which apocalypticists often employed as a vehicle for their messages.² The most famous case is the New Testament Apocalypse (or apocalypses) of John in which “(1) a *revelation* is given by God, (2) through a *mediator*..., (3) to a *seer* concerning (4) future events.”³ This kind of revelatory literature can also be found in, among other places, the visions of Daniel 7-12; 1 Enoch 83-90; 93:1-10 with 91:11-17 (both are parts of the Apocalypse of Weeks); 2 Baruch; and 4 Esdras. Apocalypses were not the only genre to which the writers of apocalyptic books had recourse, but they were popular and appropriate media for their messages.

B. Apocalyptic Eschatology. For Hanson, this phrase designates a “religious perspective”⁴ which might be adopted by various sorts of groups, each of which might formulate it differently. He claims that it is distinguished from the eschatology of the prophets particularly by its doubt that the Lord would effect his promises in this world and through mundane means.

Apocalyptic eschatology we define as a religious perspective which focuses on the disclosure (usually esoteric in nature) to the elect of the cosmic vision of Yahweh’s sovereignty—especially as it related to his acting to deliver his faithful—which disclosure the visionaries have largely ceased to translate into the terms of plain history, real politics, and human instrumentality due to a pessimistic view of reality growing out of the bleak post-exilic conditions within which those associated with the visionaries found themselves.⁵

Sociopolitical conditions after ca. 520 B.C. were such, Hanson thinks, that priests controlled the major institutions of society while the visionary successors of the prophets found themselves outside the power structures and quite in

¹John J. Collins, “Introduction: Towards the Morphology of a Genre,” *Apocalypse: The Morphology of a Genre*, ed. John J. Collins (*Semeia* 14; Missoula: Scholars, 1979) 3.

²Paul D. Hanson, “Apocalypticism,” *Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible; Supplementary Volume*, ed. Keith Crim (Nashville: Abingdon, 1976) 29.

³Paul D. Hanson, “Apocalypse, Genre,” *ibid.*, 27.

⁴P. Hanson, “Apocalypticism,” 29.

⁵Paul D. Hanson, *The Dawn of Apocalyptic: The Historical and Sociological Roots of Jewish Apocalyptic Eschatology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975) 11-12.

capable of doing anything about it. They became more and more skeptical that the glorious visions of prophets like the Second Isaiah would be fulfilled under these regrettable earthly conditions; hence, they began to look for their realization in a transformed, supramundane setting. Hanson does not claim that apocalyptic eschatology is the only strand found in apocalyptic books, but he does consider it the dominant one. It “constitutes the heart of the major apocalyptic compositions.”⁶

C. Apocalypticism. Hanson suggests that this term be used to refer to the sociological condition that results when a group makes apocalyptic eschatology its ideology. It designates a

“symbolic universe in which an apocalyptic movement codifies its identity and interpretation of reality.”⁷

These distinctions, especially the first two, have elicited further discussion. Several scholars have subsequently treated in more detail what characterizes apocalypses, while others have raised searching questions about the central place that Hanson has assigned to apocalyptic eschatology.

Collins, who headed the Apocalypse Group of the Society of Biblical Literature’s Genre Project in which Jewish, Christian, Gnostic, Greco-Roman, and Persian apocalypses were studied, has formulated a more detailed definition of *apocalypse* and has drawn up a complicated grid of characteristics found in the examples. His definition of *apocalypse* reads:

“Apocalypse” is 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.⁸

It should be noted that Collins’ definition does not limit the content of apocalypses to disclosures about the future; for him, apocalypses tell about a greater reality, whether temporal or spatial. With this broad understanding of content he is able to number some 15 Jewish compositions—all dating from between 250 B.C. and 150 A.D.—among the apocalypses.⁹ Jean Carmignac, the editor of *Revue de Qumran*, also construes apocalyptic contents broadly in his definition of what he labels “l’Apocalyptique”: it is a “...genre littéraire qui présente, à travers des symboles typiques, des révélations soit sur Dieu, soit sur les anges ou les démons, soit sur leurs partisans, soit sur les instruments de leur action.”¹⁰

These two attempts to free the genre *apocalypse* from a necessary connec-

⁶Ibid., 8.

⁷P. Hanson, “Apocalypticism,” 30. In this context mention should also be made of the terminological observations of Michael Stone, “Lists of Revealed Things in the Apocalyptic Literature,” *Magnalia Dei: The Mighty Acts of God*, ed. F. M. Cross, W. E. Lemke, and P. D. Miller (Garden City: Doubleday, 1976) 439-43.

⁸J. Collins, “Introduction,” 9. For his grid, see his essay, “The Jewish Apocalypses,” *Apocalypse 28* (cf. pp. 5-8). In it he distinguishes manners of revelation, content (including temporal and spatial axes), paraenesis by the revealer (rare in Jewish apocalypses), and concluding elements.

⁹J. Collins, “The Jewish Apocalypses,” 22, 28.

¹⁰Jean Carmignac, “Qu’est-ce que l’apocalyptique? Son emploi à Qumrân,” *Revue de Qumran* 37 (1979) 20. See also James Barr, “Jewish Apocalyptic in Recent Scholarly Study,” *Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library* 58 (1975) 14-19; and Klaus Koch, *The Rediscovery of Apocalyptic* (Studies in Biblical Theology, Second Series 22; Naperville: Allenson, 1970) 18-35.

tion with the future lead naturally to a consideration of Christopher Rowland’s recent book, *The Open Heaven*.¹¹ In this substantial volume he appears to work with Hanson’s first two categories but understands them in radically different senses. He sacrifices precision by using *apocalypse* to refer to entire books (even composite ones like 1 Enoch) rather than more tightly defined units within them. Thus he suggests that apocalypses consist of a claim to revelation together with

“visions and other revelations...sandwiched between legends and other paraenetic material” (51). This statement would not, it seems, exclude books such as 1 Isaiah or Ezekiel from the ranks of the apocalypses. However, Rowland’s more intriguing contribution comes in his understanding of *apocalyptic*. In his usage it stands roughly in the place occupied by Hanson’s apocalyptic eschatology, but Rowland vigorously denies that there is either a distinctive apocalyptic eschatology or that any sort of eschatology constitutes the essence of apocalyptic thought. “To speak of apocalyptic...is to concentrate on the theme of the direct communication of the heavenly mysteries in all their diversity” (14). Eschatological matters are just one kind of mystery and hardly the dominant one.

Rowland thinks that the Mishnah (Hagigah 2:1) gives a negative summary of the four principal subjects that occupied the seers:

Whoever gives his mind to four things it were better for him if he had not come into the world—what is above? what is beneath? what was beforetime? and what will be hereafter?¹²

In each of these areas of speculation the overriding concern of the seers was to elucidate the present—which was dominated by evil and suffering for the righteous—by situating it within a broader setting which included the unseen realm of the divine. Even those apocalyptic texts which survey the past and envisage the culmination of history in the final judgment have the present in view: “Apocalyptic is concerned to understand how the present relates with both the past and the future” (189).

Rowland’s effort to demote eschatology and promote heavenly secrets with relevance for the present may seem peculiar, since the notions of “apocalyptic” and eschatology are virtually synonymous for many. One should recall that it was precisely the eschatological side of “apocalyptic” that led scholars such as Albert Schweitzer to declare apocalyptic and the Jesus who proclaimed it strangers to modern times. Rowland undermines that verdict by downplaying the seers’ concern with the end and by stressing their purpose of consoling their communities.

Rowland is correct in some important senses. The apocalypticists were interested in the structure and workings of the universe, in moral exhortation, and in nurturing faith. But all of this does not alter the fact that the texts regularly picture the seers with their gaze fixed on the end and with their minds at work decoding scriptural hints about the future. Their other interests are subsumed

¹¹Christopher Rowland, *The Open Heaven: A Study of Apocalyptic in Judaism and Early Christianity* (New York: Crossroads, 1982). The numbers in parentheses in the following paragraphs are page numbers in this book.

¹²Translation of H. Danby, *The Mishnah* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1933) 213.

under eschatology. A text such as the Apocalypse of Weeks (1 Enoch 93:1-10; 91:11-17), which devotes three of its ten-week periods to eschatological times, serves as an appropriate reminder of the crucial role played by eschatology in the apocalypses. Apocalyptic eschatologies seem to have come to the fore in compositions that were written around the time of Antiochus IV Epiphanes (175-64 B.C.), the Seleucid monarch who attempted to abolish the practice of Judaism. It is doubtful whether any text which antedates this period (e.g. 1 Enoch 1-36; 72-82)

should be labelled an *apocalypse*.

II. SOURCES

Something as complicated and diverse as Jewish apocalyptic literature and thought is bound to be the product of many formative influences. But when one asks what was the most important source for this phenomenon, the number of candidates is quickly reduced. Experts have been debating for a long time which of two entities was the most significant influence: biblical prophecy or biblical wisdom.

A. Prophecy. A prominent representative of the prophetic-source theory is D. S. Russell whose influential work has proved most valuable since its publication 20 years ago.¹³ He writes:

Its [i.e., apocalyptic's] roots were widespread and drew nourishment from many sources, prophetic and mythological, native and foreign, esoteric and exotic, but there can be no doubt that the tap root, as it were, went deep down into Hebrew prophecy, and in particular the writings of the post-exilic prophets whose thought and language provided the soil from which later apocalyptic works were to grow. (88)

Russell has in mind especially the prophetic material in Ezekiel 38-39; Zechariah; Joel 3; and Isaiah 24-27. An important example of a prophetic motif that was to be elaborated in the apocalyptic literature is the Day of the Lord. The apocalypticists, according to Russell, transformed this day of divine visitation on Israel or its historical enemies into a time of universal judgment (94). While the prophets had located God's acts of judgment in history, the seers moved them to a "setting beyond time and above history" (95). Russell also draws attention to the latter's concern with unfulfilled prophecies of hope and to their efforts at comforting their fellows. Russell and Hanson obviously agree in fundamental ways regarding the development of apocalyptic thought from a prophetic base.

The evidence indicates a vital connection between prophecy (itself a diverse phenomenon) and both (1) the genre apocalypse and (2) apocalyptic thought. An apocalypse as defined above resembles the reports about visions in Zechariah 1-8 and in parts of Ezekiel. In their theologies the apocalypticists evidently borrowed and revamped prophetic themes such as the Day of the Lord when they wrote about the final struggle against evil and God's universal judgment. Moreover, one finds in Ezekiel (e.g., chapter 16) symbolic rather than literal accounts of Israel's history; these seem to be one kind of forerunner to the

¹³D. S. Russell, *The Method and Message of Apocalyptic* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1964). The numbers in parentheses in the following are page numbers in this volume.

apocalypses with historical surveys. The prophets also looked into the heavenly world where they witnessed the proceedings of the divine council (Isaiah 6; 1 Kings 22; etc.); these visions appear to be antecedents of apocalyptic descriptions of the heavens and journeys through them. There are marked differences of course (for example, the prophets do not claim to have entered heaven as Enoch, for one, does in the vision in 1 Enoch 12-15), but many points of contact with prophecy are unmistakable.

B. Wisdom. Once one has isolated the prophetic contributions to the world of the apocalypticists, much still remains that defies explanation from this source alone. In an effort to account for these additional elements scholars have often turned to Israel's wisdom traditions as a major influence. Gerhard von Rad was a powerful but somewhat radical spokesman for this position in that he not only argued for wisdom as a source but also excluded prophetic influence.

The decisive factor, as I see it, is the incompatibility between apocalyptic literature's view of history and that of the prophets. The prophetic message is specifically rooted in definite election traditions. But there is no way which leads from this to the apocalyptic view of history, no more than there is any which leads to the idea that the last things were determined in a far-off past.¹⁴

It is ironic that where Hanson, Russell, and others have seen continuity between prophetic and apocalyptic interpretations of history, von Rad perceived a dichotomy. He observed that several of the most prominent seers were wise men in a technical sense (Daniel, Ezra, Enoch). He was not unaware, of course, that large differences separated the wise authors of books such as Proverbs from the apocalyptic seers, but he believed that at a later time in history the sages broadened their areas of interest and adopted a more pastoral orientation.¹⁵ In the later German editions of his *Old Testament Theology* he further clarified his position by explaining that the apocalypticists were not the heirs of all wisdom traditions. They confined themselves more to the sapiential fields of dream interpretation, signs, and oracles.¹⁶

Von Rad overstated the contrast between apocalyptic and prophetic notions of history, but there was more to his wisdom-source theory than may at first appear. H. P. Müller has provided the needed precision for von Rad's thesis by demonstrating that the seers did not carry on the functions of the practitioners of courtly or pedagogical wisdom (apparently the main kinds in the Old Testament). Rather, they inherited the mantle of the diviners whose principal duty was to read the future from enigmatic or encoded sources such as dreams, the patterns of oil poured on water, or the livers of sheep.¹⁷ Müller argues that a

¹⁴Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology* (2 vols.; New York: Harper & Row, 1962-65) 2.303.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 307.

¹⁶G. von Rad, *Theologie des Alten Testaments* (Einführung in die evangelische Theologie 1; 2 vols.; 5th ed.; Munich: Kaiser, 1968) 2.331. See also his *Wisdom in Israel* (Nashville and New York: Abingdon, 1972) 263-83.

¹⁷Hans-Peter Müller, "Mantische Weisheit und Apokalyptik," *Supplements to Vetus Testamentum*, Vol. 22 (Leiden: Brill, 1972) 268-93. See also his essay "Magisch-mantische Weisheit und die Gestalt Daniels," *Ugarit-Forschungen* 1 (1969) 79-94.

number of apocalyptic traits can be explained as a result of mantic influence, among which he lists the eschatological orientation, determinism, the seers' enlightenment or authorization, encoding reality in symbols, and possibly pseudonymity. The book of Daniel offers an interesting picture of the development from mantic concerns (Daniel's interpreting of dreams and the enigmatic inscription on the wall) in chapters 2-6 to full-blown apocalypses in chapters 7-12. Müller has concentrated on the Danielic material, but it can be shown that the Enoch traditions, too, have a close historical connection with divination.¹⁸

One need not accept all of the influences that Müller sees, but at the least one can say that the diviners and apocalypticists were both at heart concerned with learning the future by interpreting (or having interpreted for them) messages which could not be read by the unlearned

or uninitiated. Both were learned decoders of the future, however different the future with which they were concerned might be.

Consequently, there are strong reasons for maintaining that prophetic forms and themes, as well as the arts and interests of the diviners, have left their strong impress on the Jewish apocalyptic phenomenon. The answer to the question of sources—prophecy or wisdom—is thus not an either-or but a both-and.

This survey of recent studies on the apocalyptic literature should not end without mention of a series of Akkadian texts—most dating from Persian or Greek times—which hold some promise of being the closest Near Eastern parallels to the Jewish apocalypses with historical surveys (e.g., Dan 11:3-45). These are the so-called “Akkadian prophecies”—each of which, according to A. K. Grayson, consists

...in the main of a number of “predictions” of past events. It then concludes either with a “prediction” of phenomena in the writer’s day or with a genuine attempt to forecast future events. The author, in other words, uses vaticinia ex eventu to establish his credibility and then proceeds to his real purpose, which might be to justify a current idea or institution or, as it appears in the Dynastic Prophecy, to forecast future doom for a hated enemy.¹⁹

There is reason to believe that the Akkadian prophecies, in their predictive statements, betray influence from divinatory language and thought much as the Jewish apocalypses reveal borrowings from mantic sources. It is unfortunate that the Akkadian prophecies have been preserved only in fragments, but what is there is proving most suggestive. In fact, one of the texts—the Dynastic Prophecy mentioned above by Grayson—voices opposition to the rule of the

¹⁸See my *Enoch and the Growth of an Apocalyptic Tradition* (Catholic Biblical Quarterly Monograph Series 16 [forthcoming]). In this book I have traced the influences of divination on the Jewish traditions about Enoch.

¹⁹A. K. Grayson, *Babylonian Historical-Literary Texts* (Toronto Semitic Texts and Studies 3; Toronto/Buffalo: University of Toronto, 1975) 6. See also the comments of W. G. Lambert, *The Background of Jewish Apocalyptic* (The Ethel M. Wood Lecture, 1977; London: Athlone, 1978); G. Hasel, “The Four World Empires of Daniel 2 Against Its Near Eastern Environment,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 12 (1979) 17-30; and J. C. VanderKam, *Enoch and the Growth of an Apocalyptic Tradition*, chapter 3.

Seleucid regime, it appears; the same is true of the earliest Jewish apocalypses. In other words, similar political conditions led some Jewish and Babylonian writers to compose a protest literature in much the same form.

The Akkadian prophecies remind one that, while Jewish apocalypticism can profitably be investigated as an inner-Jewish development, one gains a clearer perspective on it by seeing it in its entire Near Eastern and Hellenistic environment. Apocalypticism was an international phenomenon then just as the study of it is today.²⁰

²⁰Cf., for example, J. Collins, “Jewish Apocalyptic against its Hellenistic Near Eastern Environment,” *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 220 (1975) 27-36. Many more of the apocalyptic texts will be available when *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, ed. James Charlesworth (Garden City: Doubleday) appears. Volume 1 is scheduled for publication in 1983 with volume 2 to follow in 1984.