

Compendia Rerum Iudaicarum ad Novum Testamentum

The Jewish  
Apocalyptic Heritage  
in Early Christianity

Edited by  
James C. VanderKam and William Adler

Van Gorcum  
Fortress Press

# The Jewish Apocalyptic Heritage in Early Christianity

**This One**



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Edited by  
James C. VanderKam and William Adler

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# Preface

Early Christians found themselves in a paradoxical relationship with Jews and Judaism. On the one hand, they saw the Jewish people, especially the religious leaders, as their staunchest opponents. Though they embraced the Torah and the Prophets, which the Christians believed spoke eloquently of Jesus the Messiah, they had rejected him and now opposed his followers. On the other hand, most of the very first Christians were themselves Jewish and almost all members of the church recognized in Judaism their deepest spiritual roots. As time passed, the percentage of Jewish Christians became negligible, but even when the Church had become almost entirely non-Jewish in membership the Jewish contribution to the new faith could hardly be denied.

One major component of that rich Jewish heritage was the broad, diverse apocalyptic tradition. There can be no doubt that many early Christian writers found Jewish apocalyptic texts, modes of thought, characters, and themes to be particularly valuable as they elaborated their theologies, cosmologies, and philosophies of history. The New Testament itself gives eloquent witness to the heavy influence from Jewish apocalypticism. Several passages in it qualify as apocalypses (e.g., the Synoptic apocalypses), and apocalypse as the name of a literary genre comes from the Greek title of the Revelation of John. But the legacy of the Jewish apocalypses by no means ended with the New Testament period; it continued in varied ways for centuries and has left a permanent imprint on Christian theology.

The Jewish and, to a lesser extent, the early Christian apocalypses have become the object of innumerable studies in recent decades. Scholarship in these areas has been reinvigorated in part by discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, among which significant portions of key apocalyptic books such as 1 Enoch were found, and by the Nag Hammadi codices in which several apocalypses appear. The apocalypses have been studied from diverse angles and with different scholarly methods. Thus textual, exegetical, and recensional issues have been addressed; and definitions of key terms, isolation of characteristic ways of thinking, and identification of possible social settings have all occupied much time and space in contemporary scholarship. It is fair to say, however, that amid this flurry of activity the Christian appropriation of Jewish apocalypticism has not received as much attention as it deserves or requires. The present book is offered as a contribution toward filling that need. The five essays in it have

been designed, not to offer comprehensive coverage of this massive topic, but more as a series of probes into important aspects of the early Christian employment, adaptation, and preservation of Jewish apocalyptic traditions. It seemed wise to select a limited number of significant topics and to pursue them – especially through major examples – in order to gain a greater understanding of the subject. In general, the essays cover the first three or four centuries of the Common Era, although in some cases it was necessary to move beyond these limits.

The introduction surveys ancient perceptions of the apocalypses as well as their function, authority, and survival in the early Church. The second chapter focuses on a specific tradition by exploring the status of the Enoch literature, use of the fallen angel motif, and identification of Enoch as an eschatological witness. A chapter is also devoted to Christian transmission of Jewish texts – a topic whose significance is more and more being recognized. 4-6 Ezra serve as examples of what could and did happen to such works as they were copied and edited. The use and influence of Jewish apocalyptic texts and themes among sectarian Christian groups in Asia Minor and especially Egypt form the subjects of the fourth chapter, while the fifth analyzes early Christian appropriation and reinterpretation of Jewish apocalyptic chronologies.

A word of thanks is due to the Board of Editors for their initiative to include this volume in Section III of the Compendia series, and to Professor Peter J. Tomson for his gentle guidance, prompting, and encouragement as the volume gradually took shape. Words of gratitude to the contributors are also in order. Each one of them has taken time from busy schedules to produce major new studies in areas in which they specialize. Thanks are also extended to the Rev. Les Walck for his important assistance at an early point in the research which lies behind chap. 2.

It is hoped that this volume will enhance the appreciation of the debt the Christian Church owes to its mother religion, and that it will stimulate added reflection on the complex cultural relationships in the early history of both religions.

*James C. VanderKam  
William Adler*

## Chapter One

# Introduction

*William Adler*

### *Jewish Apocalypses in Christian Settings*

Recent work on the Jewish apocalypses has devoted considerable energy to the kinds of Judaism that gave birth to this literature, and its social setting and function. Virtually every Jewish party or sect has at one time or another been identified as possibly responsible for its composition. One reason for the lack of success in locating the apocalypses has to do with the conditions under which these works survive. Because most of the Jewish apocalypses received a generally unfavorable reception in post-70 Judaism, there does not exist a developed tradition of Jewish interpretation to contextualize these documents or provide a framework for their analysis.<sup>1</sup>

Like much Jewish literature of the second temple period, the apocalypses owe their survival almost entirely to early Christianity. In most cases, the extant Christianized form of a Jewish apocalypse is the product of a long prior history of transmission, the particulars of which can be quite murky. Since the Christian groups who copied and transmitted the Jewish apocalypses are either unknown or removed from the conventional avenues of research pursued by the student of early Judaism, the function of these documents for the religious communities that preserved them is often a matter of speculation. It is true that the discovery of fragments of Jewish apocalypses at Qumran has partially filled the vacuum. But these fragments are minuscule in comparison with the vast number of apocalyptic texts preserved by the early Church. And the relationship of these compositions to the sectarian writings of Qumran is still unclear.<sup>2</sup> Theorizing about the social setting and function of the Jewish apocalypses must at some point acknowledge the fact that the context in which these apocalypses survive is a Christian one.

<sup>1</sup> On rabbinic views toward apocalyptic literature, see Saldarini, 'Apocalypses and "Apocalyptic"': id, 'Apocalyptic and Rabbinic Literature'; Ginzberg, 'Some Observations'.

<sup>2</sup> See Martineez, *Qumran and Apocalyptic*; Collins, 'Was the Dead Sea Sect an Apocalyptic Movement?'; id, *Apocalyptic Imagination*, 115-141; Stegemann, 'Die Bedeutung der Qumranfunde'; Stone, 'Apocalyptic Literature', 423-27.

## *The Christian Use of the Jewish Apocalyptic Tradition*

### APPROACHES TO THE QUESTION

Although formally recognized, the Christian environment in which the Jewish apocalypses were preserved is often treated as a regrettable accident of history standing in the way of the recovery of the original text in its earliest setting. The numerous demonstrably Christian apocalypses that appeared after the first century have also suffered relative neglect.<sup>3</sup> The late date and derivative character of many of the Christian sources partially explain this disinterest. But it also has to do with a widespread preconception that 'real' apocalypses originated in a discrete and identifiable movement in early Judaism and Christianity, a defining characteristic of which was a 'radical eschatologization of the understanding of one's history'.<sup>4</sup>

Because there is broad consensus that primitive Christianity took root on the same soil that produced the Jewish apocalyptic literature, specimens like the 'synoptic apocalypse' and the Book of Revelation are generally understood as products of the same movement. But despite their generic affinities with their Jewish counterparts, the Christian apocalypses that appeared after the first century tend to be treated as step-children, heirs to the form but not the 'thought-world' of their Jewish prototypes. Typically, they are dismissed as a kind of literary epiphenomenon, not reflective of genuine apocalyptic thinking, but rather a product of other religious impulses in late Antiquity. It is surely significant in this regard that the Book of Revelation, the one Christian apocalypse to receive more than its fair share of attention, is almost invariably compared with Jewish, not Christian, works of the same literary genre.<sup>5</sup>

This supposition of a coherent ideology and movement defined by its radically dualist eschatology has decisively shaped the study of the apocalyptic literature, both Jewish and Christian. Until recently, the Jewish apocalypses have functioned mainly as an aid for better understanding the eschatological proclamations of Jesus and the early Church. Insofar as the use of the Jewish apocalypses as 'background literature' refracts the investigation of them through the lens of material in the New Testament, it can sometimes lead to overarching and misleading assertions about the 'basic character of Jewish apocalyptic'.

<sup>3</sup> For a survey of the contents of the later Christian apocalypses one still finds Weinel, 'Die spätere christliche Apokalyphtik', now 70 years old, cited as the standard work on the subject. For pre-fourth century apocalypses, see A. Y. Collins, 'The Early Christian Apocalypses'. Schüssler Fiorenza, 'The Phenomenon of Early Christian Apocalyptic' is more concerned with methodological issues than specific texts.

<sup>4</sup> See K. Müller, 'Die Ansätze der Apokalyphtik', 32. This position was defended recently by U. Müller, 'Apocalyptic Currents', 284.

<sup>5</sup> As Klaus Koch notes (*Rediscovery of Apocalyptic*, 19f) Jewish apocalypses are considered by many scholars to be 'much richer in content and show a greater depth of thought'.

































































































































































































































































































































































































































































































































































































































































