
Prophecies and Riddles: Jewish Prophetic and Apocalyptic Traditions

Among students of both Testaments, Jewish apocalyptic remains an unsolved riddle.

—Paul D. Hanson

Five thousand years ago, in Mesopotamia, the people who lived there told the story of a young warrior-king called Ninurta, who was also the god of thunderstorms and floods. Ninurta received word that the plants and stones of the mountains had declared Azag, a mountain-dwelling monster, king, and that the monster was now plotting to take over Ninurta's kingdom. Ninurta marched on the monster, but lost the first round when Azag kicked up a dust storm that drove Ninurta's forces back. Ninurta then called on his father for advice. He advised Ninurta to send down a rainstorm to settle the dust. This worked. Ninurta defeated Azag and then released the waters of the

river Tigris that had been trapped in the ice of the mountains. The waters revived the people and saved them from destruction.

The story of Ninurta is what scholars have called a “combat myth,” common in Mesopotamia in the third millennia BCE.¹ In these myths, a crisis grips the land, usually in the form of a threatening monster. A warrior king is called in to avert or mitigate the crisis. He does battle against the evil force. His victory establishes his power and authority and brings good gifts to the people. Scholars believe that the warrior myths offer the deepest roots of the Jewish eschatological tradition and ultimately the Christian tradition. In Israel, people began to attribute this story not to a warrior-king, but to God Godself, who does battle with the people’s enemies and attains a cosmic victory over the forces of chaos and evil.²

The Day of the Lord

Beginning in the eighth century BCE, a new version of the tradition emerged. This projected the great battle into the future, when God would ultimately defeat the forces of evil. In addition to the victory, God would judge the people of the earth and deliver them to their ultimate fate. The prophet Amos (active during the reign of Jeroboam 786-746 BCE) declared that “the end,” when this battle would take place with its subsequent judgment, was at hand. He warned the people that the end would bring about “the day of the Lord,” and they had been duly warned.

Alas for you who desire the day of the Lord!
Why do you want the day of the Lord?
It is darkness, not light;
as if someone fled from a lion,
and was met by a bear;

or went into the house and rested a hand against the wall,
 and was bitten by a snake.
 Is not the day of the Lord darkness, not light,
 and gloom with no brightness in it? (Amos 5:18-20)

Other prophets expanded the concept of the day of the Lord into a cosmic catastrophe followed by the ultimate judgment. The crisis will affect every aspect of life, especially the sun and the stars, which Isaiah prophesies “will not give their light. . . . I will make the heavens tremble and the earth will be shaken out of its place at the wrath of the Lord of hosts, in the day of his fierce anger” (Isa 13:10, 13).

In the next two hundred years after these words were written, the people of Israel did experience an “earth-shaking” catastrophe: the defeat of the kingdom of Israel by the Babylonians and the period of exile in Babylon. This period continued the prophetic tradition, and it told the story both backward and forward, sometimes telling the people that their own behavior brought down the wrath of God and sometimes projecting that wrath into the future, as a warning. But the tradition also depicted good news. God’s judgment would also bring justice, defeat the people’s enemies, and restore the kingdom of Israel.

The tradition further developed to imagine that when God’s victory comes, death would be finally defeated, the dead would rise from the earth, the kingdom would be restored, and the people would experience a new beginning and a time of peace and prosperity. In chapters 38–39 of Ezekiel, we see the pattern crucial to Jewish and Christian prophetic texts. First a threat arises. In Ezekiel, the threat is named “Gog,” a king in the land of Magog. He threatens the people with destruction, rising up from “the remotest part of the north.” God’s “wrath is aroused.” Like a yet more cosmic Ninurta, God will use

“torrential rains and hailstones, fire and sulphur” against Gog and defeat him. In a bloody feast afterward, the people will “eat the flesh of the mighty, and drink the blood of the princes of the earth. . . . You shall eat fat until you are filled, and drink blood until you are drunk, at the sacrificial feast that I am preparing for you” (Ezek 39:18-19).

After Gog is utterly destroyed, God then promises to restore the people of Israel:

Now I will restore the fortunes of Jacob, and have mercy on the whole house of Israel; and I will be jealous for my holy name. They shall forget their shame, and all the treachery they have practiced against me, when they live securely in their land with no one to make them afraid, when I have brought them back from the peoples and gathered them from their enemies' lands, and through them have displayed my holiness in the sight of many nations. Then they shall know that I am the Lord their God because I sent them into exile among the nations, and then gathered them into their own land. I will leave none of them behind; and I will never again hide my face from them, when I pour out my spirit upon the house of Israel, says the Lord God. (Ezek 39:25-29)

The prophecy of Gog (which plays an important role in later Christian eschatology, as we shall see) sets out clearly the pattern for both Jewish and Christian eschatology. There will be a great crisis, greater than the world has ever known. Out of this crisis will come a tremendous battle. This battle will lead to the ultimate victory of God and then to the restoration of God's people. Also layered in the story that Ezekiel tells is the painful exile of the people. They have suffered greatly, the prophet acknowledges, but God has not forgotten them. God's great restoration, the Great, Divine Clean Up, is promised and is in the future.

Ezekiel wrote this prophecy in the face of the Babylonian

exile in the sixth century, after the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem. Throughout the entire prophetic text, Ezekiel's vision is connected with longing for political and national restoration. Just before this vision of Gog, Ezekiel is taken to a valley that is full of dry bones. As Ezekiel walks among the scattered human bones, God asks him, "Can these bones live?" God commands Ezekiel to "prophesy to these bones," and as Ezekiel tells the bones of God's intention, there is a noise, a "rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone." Breath then comes into the bones, and a great multitude stands before Ezekiel. God tells Ezekiel that this multitude is the restoration of Israel. God says, "I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel" (Ezek 37:1-12).

The experience of exile and subsequent rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem around 518 BCE, while Israel was still under Persian rule, created an outpouring of Jewish literature and an expansion of its forms. During this time, Jewish eschatological thinking and writing flourished. Several theories and constellations of beliefs existed simultaneously and were often expressed in the same documents. It is in this period that the distinction between the prophetic and apocalyptic strains of eschatology became increasingly pronounced. Many passages in Isaiah, for example, point to the renewal of the earth through the moral practices of the people, while texts like Daniel emphasize an otherworldly culmination of history.

Through this kind of prophecy, Jewish thought developed the idea of the **messianic age**—a time when life on earth would be especially blessed. This time was prophesied to arise through the coming of a **messiah**, a person who would save the people from their suffering. When this savior comes, God will give the people "new heavens and a new earth." In the

renewed city of Jerusalem, “no more shall there be in it an infant that lives but a few days or an old person who does not live out a lifetime. . . . They shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit . . . for like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be” (Isa 65:17-25). During this time, special rules will apply to human life. The fruit of the earth will be especially plentiful. Sickness and death will be little known. The lion will lie down with the lamb. But the vision is fundamentally earthly, if also utopian. The prophets saw that these things will take place on earth, not in an extra-earthly realm like heaven.

The Resurrection of the Dead

Enfolded into this idea of a messianic age was the notion of the resurrection of the dead. At the end of the present age, an event that the prophets continued to call “the day of the Lord” or simply “that day” would transform and reverse the relationship between death and life. In order to restore Israel once and for all, the past also must be fully redeemed, and thus, the righteous dead would need to rise in order to join in the new age. Historian Claudia Setzer reminds us that the resurrection of the dead was not a theory that ancient people had or an argument they made. Instead it was a profoundly communal vision about the nature of righteousness and God’s promises. It was often contained in poetic and apocalyptic texts, a way of saying that material reality does not always tell the truth about deeper realities.³ This does not mean that the resurrection of the dead was “only” a metaphor or that ancient people did not actually believe in it. Instead, resurrection was a powerful, intensely concentrated symbol of the special

identity of the people of God and of the power of God to transcend reality as we know it.

Texts from this period vary in their treatment of resurrection. For some, resurrection is only of the righteous, who are then invited to participate in the pleasures of the messianic age. For others, both the righteous and the unrighteous will be resurrected—and this is a matter of ultimate justice. In the general resurrection, the righteous are restored in order to receive their rewards and the unrighteous in order to receive their punishment. The idea of a location for hell or Gehenna was not universal, but it began to be articulated in the post-exilic period as part of a broader conversation about reward and punishment and just recompense.⁴ For Jews, resurrection was critical to judgment because a person was a unity: both body and soul.⁵ A soul couldn't be judged separate from a body any more than a body could be judged separate from a soul. If divine justice was indeed to take place, it had to take place through the soul *and* the body, in its unity.

We can see how the idea of resurrection had developed from Ezekiel's vision. There the resurrected were a "multitude," but a few hundred years later, they had become more specific beings, morally righteous or morally unrighteous; and their resurrection depended not so much on their national identity, but on specific acts of justice and mercy, like feeding orphans and widows and caring for strangers.⁶

Often in the prophetic texts, divine judgment is figured as "recompense," which is an image of financial transaction. People will get the reward they deserve. Payment, reward, loss, and compensation are the kinds of images that the prophets often conjure up when speaking of the judgment and the final rendering of God's justice.⁷ While there is some individuality

allowed in these images, they often also speak of the people of Israel being judged for its collective deeds on the day of judgment. God punishes and rewards the nation for its deeds in relation to its covenant. This judgment takes place in historic time, not beyond it. It is a result of history and takes place within history.⁸

Zoroastrianism

The period of exile in Babylon had brought new eschatological possibilities into Jewish culture. While apocalyptic texts like Daniel show some connection with their prophetic predecessors, they also are quite different.⁹ The apocalypses show considerable influence from Persian culture, specifically from Zoroastrianism. Zoroastrianism is a religion that developed in Persia, and was based on the teachings of a prophet named Zarathustra who is thought to have lived during the second millennium BCE. Zarathustra taught many things that became integrated into Jewish culture during the period of exile. For example, the Hebrew Bible never mentions demons, but by the time of the New Testament, these spiritual beings, common in Zoroastrianism, had become an ordinary and accepted part of life. Zarathustra also taught that the world would have an end, that this end would be preceded by a final battle with a moral reckoning, and that the wicked would be banished forever.¹⁰ This understanding of history was an important part of canonical apocalyptic texts like Daniel, and extra-canonical apocalypses like 4 Ezra, 2 Baruch, and others.

We can't say exactly what Judaism borrowed from Zoroastrianism or vice versa. We can say that Jewish apocalypticism was deeply influenced by Zoroastrianism, and likewise Zoroastrianism by Judaism, while they lived side by

side.¹¹ Among the ideas that Zoroastrianism helped bring into fruition in Judaism, one is especially important. During the Babylonian Exile, Jewish writers and thinkers began to conceive of history as a whole. Especially in the context of writing apocalypses, they began to conceive of history as completed in stages. Daniel, for example, prophesies the four kingdoms, which is close to the periodization of the Persian *Bahman Yašt* in which history is imagined as a tree with four branches.¹² This conception of history as a unity is what Gerhard von Rad has called apocalypticism's "special splendor."¹³

The apocalyptic texts that emerged in the late Second Temple Period (after the second temple was built in Jerusalem around 518 BCE and before it was destroyed by the Romans in 70 CE) emphasized ongoing revelation. They offered a worldview in which God continued to speak to his people and to reveal to them his plans. These plans of God existed "over and above received tradition and human reasoning." They suggested that human events were controlled by unseen, supernatural agents and that human life culminated in a grand *denouement*, divine judgment, in which the righteous at last receive their reward and the wicked are punished.¹⁴

Greek Influence

At the same time that reward and punishment and the meaning of history were being worked out in relation to resurrection and the messianic age, Jewish culture was also coming into increasing contact with Greek culture. Nikolai Berdyaev has characterized the difference between the two cultures in this way: for Greeks, the world was a cosmos. For Hebrews, it was a history.¹⁵ One version is relatively static:

beings are assigned places within a hierarchy. The other version is progressive and narrative, a story about God's particular work with a particular people.

The contact between Jewish and Greek cultures helped to define the concept of the immortal soul.¹⁶ For many Greek intellectuals, the idea of the immortal soul was a clear reason not to fear death. The person was not a unity of body and soul, but more truly a soul wearing, briefly, the cloak of the physical body. Death simply meant the removal of this cloak. This idea took root in Jewish culture, but became connected with the question of ultimate justice and righteousness. Might it be that the righteous would go to be with God in the divine realm? How this fit with the notion of resurrection was by no means fully worked out. Some texts, like Pseudo-Phocylides (written somewhere between 100 BCE and 100 CE), have resurrection of the dead and the immortality of the soul side by side, without any attempt to resolve what might seem like a contradiction.¹⁷

In the first century CE, this made for increasingly elaborate understandings of life after death. A wide variety of intertestamental texts offered suggestions for how long the dead will remain dead until the resurrection, and where exactly their souls are located in the meantime. In one Jewish text from the first or second century CE, the writer says that the souls of the dead are kept in four hollow places at the end of the earth. The souls of the righteous are separated from the souls of sinners and treated differently. The souls of the righteous have light and are located near a spring of water. The souls of sinners suffer continual torment, even before the final judgment. The book goes on to describe how the righteous will be raised from the dead and will live on the abundant earth where they will have thousands of children.¹⁸

Jewish Futures

In the era before the emergence of Christianity, there was no one Jewish belief about the future and the afterlife. Various ideas carried forward into the first century with a complicated mix of earthly and heavenly kingdoms, bodies and souls, catastrophic and restorative futures. At the same time that this expansion of the questions of the afterlife was taking place, apocalyptic texts, with specific revelations about the future, were also being produced in Jewish culture and in the cultures within which Judaism was embedded.

From this overview, we can see that the Jewish context into which Jesus began to speak his own eschatological ideas was rich and diverse. Eschatology had rapidly diversified in the centuries before the birth of Jesus and had gained rich new genres, like the apocalypse, to express eschatological ideas. Judaism was in conversation with all of the cultures around it, predominantly Persian and Greek, and was developing its eschatology alongside, in contradistinction to, and in conjunction with other eschatologies. The experience of exile, return, and life under repressive regimes had shaped Jewish eschatology significantly, and given the Jewish people a passion for ultimate justice and for a day of reckoning when God's kingdom would at last be known through all the earth. The story of crisis and victory inherited from the ancient myths remained central, but it no longer belonged to a mythic past. It was firmly cast into the future and belonged in the hands of God. Jewish tradition developed polemical and imaginative modes. It also increasingly saw human history as a God-ordained unity. This would have long-lasting effects on its Christian inheritors and interpreters.

Notes

1. Richard J. Clifford, "The Roots of Apocalypticism in Near Eastern Myth," in *The Encyclopedia of Apocalypticism*, vol. 1, ed. John J. Collins (New York: Continuum, 1998), 3–38.
2. John J. Collins, "From Prophecy to Apocalypticism: The Expectation of the End," in *The Encyclopedia of Apocalypticism*, vol. 1, ed. John J. Collins (New York: Continuum, 1998), 129. We see this myth alive in the Psalms, such as Psalm 96 and Psalm 98.
3. Claudia Setzer, *The Resurrection of the Dead in Early Judaism and Early Christianity* (Boston: Brill, 2004), 12.
4. *Ibid.*, 16.
5. Robert Jewett, *Paul's Anthropological Terms: A Study of Their Use in Conflict Settings* (Leiden: Brill, 1971), 447.
6. Deut 16:14; Isa 10:2; and Jer 49:11 are examples of Hebrew Bible texts that spell out the specific nature of righteousness.
7. David W. Kuck, *Judgment and Community Conflict: Paul's Use of Apocalyptic Judgment Language in 1 Corinthians 3:5–4:5* (Leiden: Brill, 1992), 43.
8. *Ibid.*, 45.
9. Collins, 134.
10. Paul G. Kreyenbroek, "Millennialism in the Zoroastrian Tradition," in *Imagining the End: Visions of Apocalypse from the Ancient Middle East to Modern America*, ed. Abbas Amanat and Magnus Bernhardsson (London: Tauris, 2002), 54–55.
11. See Mitchell Reddish, ed., *Apocalyptic Literature: A Reader* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1990), 33; and Setzer, 10.
12. Collins, 142; and Hans Schwarz, *Eschatology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 59.
13. Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, trans. D. M. G. Stalker (New York: Harper, 1965), 2:304.
14. Collins, 157.
15. Nikolai Berdyaev, *The Beginning and the End*, trans. R.M. French (London: Bles, 1952), 197.

16. Colleen McDannell and Bernhard Lang, *Heaven: A History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 16.
17. Setzer, 17.
18. This summary is drawn from Adela Yarbro Collins, “The Apocalypse of John and Its Millennial Themes,” in *Apocalyptic and Eschatological Heritage: The Middle East and Celtic Realms*, ed. Martin Macnamara (Dublin: Four Courts, 2003), 52–54.