

**Projeto de Estudos Judaico-Helenísticos - PEJ**

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**"JEWISH APOCALYPTIC LITERATURE: AN INTRODUCTORY  
TALK"**

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## Resumo / abstract

When the word “apocalypse” or “apocalyptic” comes to the fore in any context, people usually associate it with a group of concepts - the end of the world, catastrophies, fundamentalism or plain prophecy.

In a sense, they are right - a great deal of apocalyptic literature was indeed concerned with the end of the world, with final judgment, signs of impending doom or fulfilment of prophecies. However, in Antiquity the word had a much more limited meaning: *apokalyptō* (in Greek) as it appears, for example, in the writings of the first-century Jewish historian Flavius Josephus, means simply “disclose” or “reveal” hidden things - even physical objects. It was never used in Antiquity in the cataclysmic sense it gained afterwards.

Still, “apocalyptic”, both in Antiquity and in the modern world, has to do with “revealing” things - both past and future, regarding this world and the world beyond. This is a good starting point.

Inside this brief introduction to the theme, certain issues must be overlooked for practical reasons. So, this talk aims to draw some general outlines on the subject, and also allow you to follow a step-by-step example, as we make a very small “exegesis” of some parts of a very important apocalypse, the *Fourth Book of Ezra* (4Ezra).



## **Jewish apocalyptic literature: an introductory talk**

One of the most important things to bear in mind is that the absolute majority of apocalypses is non-canonical. This means that for a long time the following confusing terminology was used by Catholic scholars on one hand and Protestant ones, on the other:



<b>Catholic definition</b>	<b>Protestant definition</b>
Deutero-canonical (no original in Hebrew)	Apocrypha (no original in Hebrew)
Apocrypha (“falsely attributed” - but this has a misleading connotation, since some of them, including 4Ezra, were part of the Vulgate)	Pseudepigrapha (“falsely attributed as written”). This was, in the end, the accepted scholarly terms and is the one universally used.

On the “generic” side, most of the problems surrounding our theme can be summarized as follows:

1. Apocalypses are non-canonical (with the exception of Daniel in the Old Testament and Revelation in the New);
2. “Apocalyptic” was, in Antiquity, never considered as a genre in its own right;
3. “Apocalyptic” must not be misunderstood as a synonym for “eschatology”, although both share common traits;
4. The theme of the voyages to the world beyond can be a literary *topos* (i.e. non-apocalyptic authors like Lucian of Samosata and Julian, the Apostate have made use of the same themes);
5. Dating of apocalyptic texts can be very problematic, much as the original language of composition (see item on “Dating” below).

So, the definition most accepted by scholars would be a good point to start.

This is the taxonomy proposed by Daniel Hellholm (ed.). *Apocalypticism in the Mediterranean World and the Near East*. Tübingen: Mohr, 1983: “apocalyptic” can be considered, then:

- a. Regarding the literary framework: narrative;
- b. Kind of text: revelatory;
- c. Genre: apocalypse;
- d. Sub-genre: apocalypse with otherworldly journey or historical;
- e. Individual text: 1En, 2Br etc..

*‘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*<sup>1</sup>.

Taking these basic assumptions, we shall now move into issues like preservation, languages and inspiration and see how they can be observed in a “proper” apocalypse - and a very important one, for that matter.

## **Conservation**

Most apocalypses have been preserved in all ancient languages but Hebrew (the so-called “Hebrew Apocalypse of Enoch” or 3En is an exception - and a misnomer as well).

They have been preserved essentially by Christians, although they are to a great extent traceable to a Jewish origin. Interpolations are sometimes evident (e.g. 4Ezra 1-2 and 15-16, sometimes called respectively 5 and 6Ezra). It appears that after the failure of the Bar-Kochba Revolt (132-135 CE), which had some messianic hopes placed on its leader, Rabbinic Judaism “cut” its ties with apocalyptic, grossly speaking. So, apocalyptic texts, much as the Septuagint, would become the inheritance of Christianity.

New Testament apocalyptic, however, is comprised by a different type of apocrypha, that deals with issues different from the ones sketched in our taxonomy. As a guideline, it seems safe enough to consider “Old Testament” apocalypses those whose “heroes” are OT characters whereas “New Testament” apocalypses deal with NT characters and are all non-canonical.

## **Dating**

Jewish apocalyptic presents the problem of pseudonymity - i.e. the texts are *never* “signed” or rightly attributed to the hero they pretend to be speaking about, or in whose mouth the “real” author voiced his own opinions.

Nonetheless, it is safe to say that:

- a. Jewish apocalypse is an after-Exile product (i.e. after the Fifth Century BCE);
- b. It has roots in prophecy but...

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<sup>1</sup> John J. Collins. *Daniel, with an Introduction to Apocalyptic Literature*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1984. P.4.



- c. ...also in wisdom literature and...
- d. ...in Zoroastrian notions that do not appear anywhere else in the Old Testament;
- e. Finally, it had its heyday between the Maccabean Revolt (167-164 BCE) and the Bar-Kochba Revolt (132-135 CE).
- f. Abandoned by distraught Jews, apocalyptic became more and more Christian heritage and helped shape many of the features of Christianity as we know it.

### **A practical example: passages of the *Fourth Book of Ezra***

Chapters selected from the RSV, 1977 edition with apocrypha (a different translation from that of Charlesworth in the “Bibliography”)

**4Ezra 3:1-2** - <sup>1</sup> *In the thirtieth year after the destruction of our city, I Salathiel, who am also called Ezra, was in Babylon. I was troubled as I lay on my bed, and my thoughts welled up in my heart,* <sup>2</sup> *because I saw the desolation of Zion and the wealth of those who lived in Babylon.*

[“supposed” setting of the apocalypse; “Babylon” should mean “Rome”, and the setting of the destruction of the First Temple is a veiled reference to the destruction of the Second - this suggests the dating to be after 70 CE]

**4Ezra 4:1-12** - <sup>1</sup> *Then the angel that had been sent to me, whose name was Uriel, answered* <sup>2</sup> *and said to me, ‘Your understanding has utterly failed regarding this world, and do you think you can comprehend the way of the Most High?’* <sup>3</sup> *Then I said, ‘Yes, my lord’. And he replied to me, ‘I have been sent to show you three ways, and to put before you three problems.* <sup>4</sup> *If you can solve one of them for me, I also will show you the way you desire to see, and will teach you why the heart is evil’.* <sup>5</sup> *I said, ‘Speak on, my lord’. And he said to me, ‘Go, weigh for me the weight of fire, or measure for me a measure of wind, or call back for me the day that is past’.* <sup>6</sup> *I answered and said, ‘Who of those that have been born can do this, that you ask me concerning these things?’* <sup>7</sup> *And he said to me, ‘If I had asked you, ‘How many dwellings are in the heart of the sea, or how many streams are at the source of the deep, or how many streams are above the firmament, or which are the exits of hell, or which are the entrances of paradise?’* <sup>8</sup> *Perhaps you would have said to me, ‘I never went down into the deep, nor as yet into hell, neither did I ever ascend into heaven’.* <sup>9</sup> *But now I have asked you only about fire and wind and the day, things through which you have passed and without which you cannot exist, and you have given me no answer about them!’* <sup>10</sup> *And he said to me, ‘You cannot understand the things with which you have grown up; <sup>11</sup> how then can your mind comprehend the way of the Most High? And how can one who is already worn out by the corrupt world understand incorruption?’* *When I heard this, I fell on my face* <sup>12</sup> *and said to him, ‘It would be better for us not to be here than to come here and live in ungodliness, and to suffer and not understand why’.*  
[parallel to wisdom literature, especially Qohelet and Job; the seer is faced with



issues he cannot understand, but God does/ note also introduction of the supernatural mediator, in this case Uriel]

**4Ezra 13:43; 14:39 - 13:43** - <sup>43</sup> And they went in by the narrow passages of the Euphrates river; **14:39** - <sup>39</sup> *Then I opened my mouth, and behold, a full cup was offered to me;*

[evidence that transliterated words came straight from Greek; an underlying Greek text appears here and there; “Eufraten”, “calix” and many others could be quoted. This is especially true of the Latin version and the Coptic fragment]

**4Ezra 9:22-28; 12:51; 14:37-44 - 9:22-28** - <sup>22</sup> *‘So let the multitude perish which has been born in vain, but let my grape and my plant be saved, because with much labor I have perfected them. <sup>23</sup> But if you will let seven days more pass - do not fast during them, however; <sup>24</sup> but go into a field of flowers where no house has been built, and eat only of the flowers of the field, and taste no meat and drink no wine, but eat only flowers, <sup>25</sup> and pray to the Most High continually - then I will come and talk with you’. <sup>26</sup> So I went, as he directed me, into the field which is called Ardat; and there I sat among the flowers and ate of the plants of the field, and the nourishment they afforded satisfied me. <sup>27</sup> And after seven days, as I lay on the grass, my heart was troubled again as it was before. <sup>28</sup> And my mouth was opened, and I began to speak before the Most High, and said, [...] **12:51** - <sup>51</sup> But I sat in the field seven days, as the angel had commanded me; and I ate only of the flowers of the field, and my food was of plants during those days. **14:37-44** - <sup>37</sup> So I took the five men, as he commanded me, and we proceeded to the field, and remained there. <sup>38</sup> And on the next day, behold, a voice called me, saying, ‘Ezra, open your mouth and drink what I give you to drink’. <sup>39</sup> Then I opened my mouth, and behold, a full cup was offered to me; it was full of something like water, but its color was like fire. <sup>40</sup> And I took it and drank; and when I had drunk it, my heart poured forth understanding, and wisdom increased in my breast, for my spirit retained its memory; <sup>41</sup> and my mouth was opened, and was no longer closed. <sup>42</sup> And the Most High gave understanding to the five men, and by turns they wrote what was dictated, in characters which they did not know. They sat forty days, and wrote during the daytime, and ate their bread at night. <sup>43</sup> As for me, I spoke in the daytime and was not silent at night. <sup>44</sup> So during the forty days ninety-four books were written.*

[inducting processes; 4Ezra is very unusual but somewhat spectacular in this respect, using practices that strongly resemble Persian apparent usage of hallucinogens to induct altered states of consciousness. The reference to the “seventy books” that are hidden may imply a symbolic number or may be a reference to the Septuagint, also reportedly translated by 70 or 72 sages]

**4Ezra 2:44-47** - <sup>44</sup> *Then I asked an angel, ‘Who are these, my lord?’ <sup>45</sup> He answered and said to me, ‘These are they who have put off mortal clothing and have put on the immortal, and they have confessed the name of God; now they are being crowned, and receive palms’. <sup>46</sup> Then I said to the angel, ‘Who is that young man who places crowns on them and puts palms in their hands?’ <sup>47</sup> He answered and said to me, ‘He is the Son of God, whom they confessed in the world’. So I began to praise those who had stood valiantly for the name of the*



*Lord.*

[clear indication that these passages are Christian interpolations; Christ does not appear anywhere else in the hard “core” of the book, chs.3-14]

**4Ezra 12:11-12** <sup>11</sup> *The eagle which you saw coming up from the sea is the fourth kingdom which appeared in a vision to your brother Daniel.* <sup>12</sup> *But it was not explained to him as I now explain or have explained it to you.*

[here apocalyptic makes an exegesis of itself: the reference to Daniel (in its current form, a product later than or contemporary to the Maccabean Revolt) makes it clear that 4Ezra is later]

**4Ezra 12:13-28** <sup>13</sup> *Behold, the days are coming when a kingdom shall arise on earth, and it shall be more terrifying than all the kingdoms that have been before it.* <sup>14</sup> *And twelve kings shall reign in it, one after another. [...]* <sup>16</sup> *This is the interpretation of the twelve wings which you saw.* <sup>17</sup> *As for your hearing a voice that spoke, coming not from the eagle's heads but from the midst of his body, this is the interpretation:* <sup>18</sup> *In the midst of the time of that kingdom great struggles shall arise, and it shall be in danger of falling; nevertheless it shall not fall then, but shall regain its former power.* <sup>19</sup> *As for your seeing eight little wings clinging to his wings, this is the interpretation:* <sup>20</sup> *Eight kings shall arise in it, whose times shall be short and their years swift; [...]* <sup>22</sup> *As for your seeing three heads at rest, this is the interpretation:* <sup>23</sup> *In its last days the Most High will raise up three kings, and they shall renew many things in it, and shall rule the earth* <sup>24</sup> *and its inhabitants more oppressively than all who were before them; therefore they are called the heads of the eagle.* <sup>25</sup> *For it is they who shall sum up his wickedness and perform his last actions.* <sup>26</sup> *As for your seeing that the large head disappeared, one of the kings shall die in his bed, but in agonies.* <sup>27</sup> *But as for the two who remained, the sword shall devour them.* <sup>28</sup> *For the sword of one shall devour him who was with him; but he also shall fall by the sword in the last days.*

[there is no complete agreement on the meaning of this passage, but most scholars agree that the “eagle” is a veiled reference to the Roman Empire and the three heads, to the Flavian dynasty. In turn, this suggests a date after the destruction of the Temple, together with the whole setting of the text in the ruins of Jerusalem]

## Conclusion

From the passages selected above in an important and well-spread apocalypse (4Ezra is found in Latin, Syriac, Arabic - 2 versions, Hebrew - translated from Latin, at a very late date, Armenian, Coptic fragments, Ethiopic, and Greek fragments), we hope to have had a brief but significant overview of the core issues related to Jewish apocalyptic literature. This talk was intended as a mere “appetizer”, and those interested in deeper study will find much more in the selected bibliography at the end of this paper.



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