1. Introduction

During the last century most followed A. Schweitzer (and J. Weiss) in thinking that Jesus expected a dramatic divine intervention—the essence of apocalypticism, through the agency of the glorious and heavenly Son of Man, that would bring in the utterly otherworldly Kingdom of God known also from Jewish apocalypses.\(^1\) However, there have always been dissenters and now there are many, especially in North America, who reject the notion that Jesus was an apocalyptic visionary. The dispute depends to a great degree on the understanding of Jewish apocalyptic literature and thought with which individual scholars operate. A survey of the history of study of the Jewish material illuminates the disagreements among Jesus historians and an appreciation of recent advances points towards resolutions of contested issues.

2. The History of the Study of Apocalyptic

The last book in the New Testament canon is called an “apocalypse (ἀποκάλυψις).” This is usually taken not just as a reference to a particular literary genre, but as a statement about the specific content of the book. Whilst the book contains “words of prophecy” (1:3, cf. 22:7, 10, 18–19), rather than ordinary prophecies of events within history, the book reveals the very end of history. Accordingly, most have thought that the word “apocalypse” means a piece of literature with a particular kind of eschatology, an “apocalyptic eschatology,” and that this eschatology is attested in contemporaneous ancient Jewish texts.

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with a visionary form (in particular: *1 Enoch, 2 Enoch*, Daniel, *4 Ezra, 2 Baruch, Apocalypse of Abraham*).

After the initial impetus set by Weiss and Schweitzer it is possible to discern two distinct phases of apocalyptic scholarship. The first phase continues up until the 1970’s and is coterminous with the New Quest of the historical Jesus. It is marked by synthetic treatment of the literature, some debate over interpretive issues, but broad consensus on the nature of apocalyptic. During this period there are some differences between the approaches taken in Germany and in the English-speaking world. In Germany, where the Bultmann school is prevalent, there is a tendency towards systematization of apocalypticism as a distinct religious worldview. English scholarship tends to be more descriptive, more sympathetic to the theology of the individual texts and less keen to see in them a sharply distinct religious system.

During this phase an “apocalypse” is seen as a piece of literature that has at its core a particular kind of eschatology—“apocalyptic eschatology”—around which there is a distinctive theology—sometimes called “apocalypticism.” In turn, such texts and their theology are thought to emanate from a particular social context: one of crisis. An “apocalyptic eschatology” is set against the prophetic hopes of the Old Testament. “The prophets foretold the future that should arise out of the present, while the apocalypticists foretold the future that should break into the present… The apocalypticists had little faith in the present to beget the future.”

Israel’s prophets have a largely parochial vision: they expect God to act for Israel and against the surrounding nations. Apocalyptic texts, by contrast, reveal a cosmic vision in which all humanity and all of creation is climactically brought under God’s hand of judgement. Inspiration for these theological novelties is widely reckoned to come from sources outside the immediate Israelite context, in particular from Persian Zoroastrianism.

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