Jewish Apocalyptic Literature in the Armenian Tradition

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1 Introduction

When we examine studies of the apocalyptic literature, we are always amazed by the range of works and types of writings that are included in this category. Thirty-five years ago, the Society of Biblical Literature held a series of meetings on the genre apocalypse, and the results of this research were embodied in No. 14 of the journal Semeia, edited by John J. Collins.¹ Collins has been one of the most indefatigable workers at the apocalyptic literature in the last decades and in this volume he produced a definition of “apocalypse” which reads as follows:

“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.²

It will readily be observed by anyone consulting Semeia 14 that this definition took into account an analysis of literature claimed to be apocalyptic from many Ancient Near Eastern cultures (Jewish, Early Christian, Gnostic, Greek and Latin, Rabbinic literature and mysticism, and Persian). Its focus on Jewish material dealt chiefly with documents written before ca. 120 CE.

After the time of the Hadrianic revolt, the writing of apocalypses ceased among the Jews for several hundred years. Or, to put it more accurately, if there were apocalypses written by Jews between the events of Hadrian’s time and mid-first millennium or the Arab conquest of the Near East, such works have not survived other than a few fragments cited in Rabbinic literature. Jewish apocalypses of the second part of the first millennium CE share certain features caused inter alia by a process of partial overlap, and very many of those elements distinctive of Jewish apocalypses of this period are also found in contemporaneous Christian texts. Thus, for example, works connected with Daniel

¹ Collins 1979.
² Collins 1979, 9 and 22.
are found in Hebrew (from the Cairo Geniza), in Greek (the so-called Diegesis of Daniel), and in Armenian (“The Seventh Vision of Daniel”), in Arabic and so forth. Our commission, however, is to discuss the earlier Jewish texts, and so we will pass to the (somewhat oddly-dubbed) ‘classical’ Jewish apocalypses, which are in fact those works by which the genre was defined in the modern discourse. For, although Collins drew on analyses of many apocalypses in different traditions of the Ancient Near East, the organizing categories were drawn from the Bible and particularly from the two apocalypses contained by the Bible—Daniel in the Old Testament and Revelation or the Apocalypse of John in the New.

In 1952, in his book *Old Testament Apocalyptic*, Stanley Bryce Frost discussed all the quite numerous passages in the Hebrew Bible that served as a basis or sources for various apocalyptic conceptions. Such are the eschatological passages of Isaiah 24–28, Ezekiel 38–39 and others. Yet these passages, although they contain many of the building blocks from which apocalyptic literature was constructed, lack the systematic literary and conceptual structures that characterize Jewish apocalypses of the last three centuries BCE and the first century CE.

Apocalypses, a name drawn from the name of the Book of Revelation, i.e., Ἀποκάλυψις Ἰωάννου, involve the revelation of secrets of time (eschatology) and of place (cosmology) usually by means of a heavenly mediator or mystagogue, often called ‘angelus interpres’. Typical of apocalyptic literature as distinct from its predecessor, prophecy (in this we take a clear stance on a contentious subject) is the reintroduction of the mythical dimensions of time and place. The action does not happen only in this world and in this time, but it is viewed as taking place beyond this world and beyond this time. Thus, there are heavenly ascents of the seer, the narrative of his visions of the denizens of the heavens, or of the underworld, and revelations about the course of history and of the events at the end of time and their heavenly dimension.

2 Jewish Apocalypses in Armenian

Certain of the Jewish apocalypses were translated into Armenian, in our view some of them in the fifth century, at the time of (and perhaps as part of) the translation of biblical and associated writings into Armenian. The demonstrably oldest known Armenian version of a Jewish apocalypse is 4 Ezra, which appears in Armenian biblical manuscripts usually entitled Քերգեզ Եզրեիլ (3rd Book of Ezra) or, in the Miscellany of Mxit’ar Ayrivanec’i (M1500), Եզր Սաղաթիէլ (Ezra Salat’iel [Salathiel]). The Armenian version of this work is