CHAPTER 2

The Apocalypse and the Sage: Assessing the Contribution of John J. Collins to the Study of Apocalypticism

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Introduction

To invoke the title of a book by Klaus Koch, today we are no longer Ratlos vor der Apokalyptik. Koch's book was translated into English in 1972 with the title The Rediscovery of Apocalyptic. But a more literal translation would be “Puzzled by Apocalypticism.” And we are not ratlos before apocalypticism primarily because of John Collins. He is a prolific sage of apocalypticism, whose writings from the distant past contain privileged knowledge that we preserve and transmit in our own writings.

But we should not simply receive this disclosure of knowledge passively. We should critically engage what has been handed down to us. The operating metaphor is Ezra before the angel Uriel in 4 Ezra—Ezra has the chutzpah to ask questions about the special knowledge he receives, which forms the basis of a dialogue. In my reflection on Collins’ work in this essay, I would like to argue two main points. One, his two main studies on apocalypticism, issue 14 of Semeia (1979) and The Apocalyptic Imagination (first published in 1984), while they together form a set piece, have very different approaches to the material. The first is primarily a form critical study and the second is solidly historical critical. My second point regards what we as scholars should do with this difference. Collins put forward his understanding of the literary genre apocalypse in Semeia in a way that explicitly avoided historical considerations. His understanding of the genre apocalypse did not change in his subsequent scholarship. We need to be aware of this fact when we turn to his work to understand the apocalyptic tradition, as a historical and sociological phenomenon of ancient Judaism. Apocalypse and apocalyptic tradition are very different phrases—

“apocalypse” is a modern, form critical definition we impose on ancient texts to place them in intelligible categories, while “apocalyptic tradition” signals a more diachronic approach, utilized in order to understand the historical development of various tropes and ideas in antiquity.

The Scholarly Sitz im Leben of Semeia 14

Today Semeia 14, thirty-five years after its publication, is still cited frequently—a rare accomplishment in the world of academic publishing. This issue is typically invoked for its definition of the genre apocalypse. Collins was the editor of this volume, and the author of its introductory essay and its article on Jewish apocalypses.2 The contributors to Semeia 14, as part of their work for an SBL taskforce on genres, produced essays on apocalypses in various ancient contexts. The issue examines not only Jewish apocalypses, but also gnostic, Persian, rabbinic, and early Christian apocalypses.3 This material, originating from diverse cultural milieux, is bound together by a common definition of an apocalypse. This definition, first promulgated in Semeia 14 and then adopted verbatim in The Apocalyptic Imagination, is still very much in use today. According to this definition, an apocalypse is “a genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework, in which a revelation is mediated by an other-worldly 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.”4

Scholars who utilize this definition often cite Semeia 14, and appeal to it as an authoritative source, while doing nothing else with this volume. I could cite my work as an example.5 But Semeia 14 itself has its own context in the history of scholarship. According to Collins’ essay on Jewish apocalypses, studies of apocalypticism were dominated at the time by questions of influence, with


3 Collins was also the author of the article on the Persian apocalypses in this issue (pp. 207–17).
