

Early Ascent Apocalypses: Heavenly Ascent, Escape from Death, and Post-Mortem Judgment

1. Apocalyptic literature

Apocalypse: “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.” (John J. Collins, *Semeia* 14 [1979] 9). For the development of This genre of literature

Prehistory of apocalyptic literature:

- **Biblical prophecy:** This literature owes to biblical prophecy a concern for God’s activity in history, as here conceived in terms of the end of history. In apocalyptic literature (esp. historical apocalypses), ideas about collective eschatology (e.g., Last Judgement), of which we find the first seed in the writings of prophets like Isaiah, are greatly elaborated and developed. Moreover, apocalypses are typically written pseudonymously in the name of an ancient biblical figure, and these figures are usually modeled on the figure of the prophet, albeit with key features intensified: his oracles are intensified to include detailed predictions of the End of Time, and his visions are expanded to include not only dreams but also physical journeys up to heaven and to the far corners of the earth, guided by angels.
- **Wisdom tradition:** Apocalyptic literature also integrates the concern in the Jewish Wisdom tradition for ethics, knowledge, and the fate of the individual. The interest in cosmology and ouranology can be seen as an extension of the interest in Nature and celebration of God as Creator in the Wisdom literature. Moreover, many of the heroes of apocalypses are scribes and sages.

Subgenres of apocalyptic literature:

- **Ascent Apocalypse:** Subgenre of apocalyptic literature characterized by accounts of the heavenly ascent of human beings. Ascent apocalypses focus on the revelation of knowledge in spatial terms, including cosmology and ouranology. The earliest apocalypses belong to this type.
- **Historical Apocalypse:** Subgenre of apocalyptic literature characterized by predictions about history and the eschatological future. Historical apocalypses focus on the revelation of knowledge in temporal terms. Examples include Daniel and Revelation. These apocalypses typically include prophecy *ex eventu* (=predictions of events that have already happened by the time of the author, as placed in the mouth of a pseudonymous figure who lived earlier) and timetables of the last days. **Apocalyptic eschatology** is a term commonly used to describe any interest in the impending End of Time/Last Judgment similar to that found in historical apocalypses.

2. Death and the Afterlife in the *Astronomical Book* (AB) and *Book of the Watchers* (BW)

AB and BW both date to the third century BCE and are thus our oldest surviving apocalypses (as well as, quite likely, the two oldest Jewish texts known to us, outside of the Hebrew Bible). Key themes for death and afterlife = Enoch’s escape from death; Enoch’s heavenly ascent and the depiction of heaven as a Temple; Enoch’s journeys in heaven and earth and visit to the place of the punishment at the ends of the earth.

Contents and Date(s) of 1 Enoch

“1 Enoch” is a modern Western name for a collection of five early Jewish writings, which were written in Aramaic pseudonymously in the name of the biblical figure Enoch (who, according to Genesis, lived before the Flood) and which were popular among Second Temple Jews and early Christians alike (e.g., one is quoted in NT). The earliest among them predate the latest book in the Hebrew Bible (i.e., Daniel) and, in fact, seem to have influenced this book. In antiquity, these writings circulated separately, as well as being brought together in various collections. This particular collection of five is canonical within the Ethiopian Orthodox church, where it is called “The Book of Enoch the Prophet.” All these books thus survive in Ethiopic translations. In addition, very ancient Aramaic fragments of some of these writings were found among the Dead Sea Scrolls. Some also survive in Greek translation, as well as in quotations in Greek by Church Fathers.

Third century BCE

Astronomical Book (1 Enoch 71–82)
Book of the Watchers (1 Enoch 1–36)

Second century BCE

Book of Dreams (1 Enoch 83–90)
Epistle of Enoch (1 Enoch 91–107)

First century BCE/CE

Similitudes of Enoch (1 Enoch 37–71)

Short History of the Formation of Jewish and Christian Biblical Canon(s)

Sixth century BCE: The Torah (i.e., Pentateuch = first five books of the Hebrew Bible) was likely accepted as Scripture by all Jews by the time of the return from the Babylonian Exile, as clear in the book of Ezra.

Second century BCE: The latest book in the Hebrew Bible, the book of Daniel, dates to this time. Although Jews seem commonly to have accepted a core of texts as Scripture (likely: Torah + Prophets), the boundaries of the biblical canon remained open in the Second Temple period, and we find no attempt to list specific books as biblical vs. non-biblical. The Dead Sea Scrolls, for instance, show that a number of books later omitted from the Jewish biblical canon (including early Enochic apocalypses discussed above) functioned as Scripture within the Qumran community.

First century CE: It is only after the Destruction of the Second Temple (70 CE) that we begin to find Jewish attempts to make lists of biblical books and thereby to articulate a *closed* biblical canon. By the time of the Mishnah (ca. 200 CE), the Jewish biblical canon (=Hebrew Bible/Tanakh) seems to have been established, at least among Rabbinic Jews. Some debates, however, continued about the inclusion of some books (e.g., Song of Songs, Esther), whereas some Jews also continued to use other books as Scripture (i.e., Wisdom of ben Sira). We do not find a full and final list, with divisions into the three parts of the present Jewish biblical canon (Torah, Prophets/Neviim, Writings/Ketuvim) until the Babylonian Talmud (ca. 500/600 CE).

Second century CE: All the books now in the NT were composed by the mid-second century. The terms OT and NT, however, didn't yet exist as names for collections of books, and Christians continued to use a range of scriptures, both Jewish and Christian. They drew on a broad range of Jewish writings. They also used many Gospels, Acts, apocalypses, etc., later excluded from the NT. Some of these continued to be transmitted within Christian tradition; these are sometimes called "NT Apocrypha." Others were lost and are only known to us because of the modern unearthing of buried texts (e.g., the so-called "Gnostic" texts discovered at Nag Hammadi).

Fourth century CE: In 367 CE Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria, drew up an official list of the texts in the OT and NT. The OT was larger than the Jewish biblical canon (i.e., Hebrew Bible) inasmuch as it included those texts now labeled "Apocrypha." This list was influential in the Roman Empire and conforms to the present-day Catholic biblical canon. In other churches and locales, however, different biblical canons were used. Ancient churches such as the Ethiopian, Eastern Orthodox, and Slavonic retain these larger canons to this day. Due to Western biases, scriptures contained in these OT canons that are not in the Catholic OT are now often called by the derogatory term "OT Pseudepigrapha" (lit. false writings).

Sixteenth century CE: The Protestant Reformation sparked new debates about the scope of the Christian biblical canon. Luther, for instance, even questioned the contents of the NT, attempting (unsuccessfully!) to argue for the removal of the books of Hebrews, James, Jude, and Revelation. Protestants adopted a different OT biblical canon than Catholics, appealing to the precedent of Jerome who had argued in the fifth century (unsuccessfully) for the limitation of the Christian OT to only those books in the Jewish biblical canon. Protestants called the omitted books "Apocrypha" (lit. hidden things). At the Council of Trent (1545-1563), Catholics decided to keep these books in the OT canon but called them "deuterocanonical."

Scripture: Term used to denote books that function as religiously authoritative within a community, which are often deemed revealed or inspired.

Canon: Term used to denote a closed set of scriptures which are granted a unique and exclusive level of religious authority. It is possible, then, to have Scripture without a Canon but not the converse.

"Apocrypha"/Deuterocanonical books: A modern term for early Jewish scriptures (written in the Second Temple period) which are in the Catholic biblical canon but not in the Protestant and Jewish biblical canons. By analogy, texts similar in genre and date to the books now in the NT, which were used by some early Christians as Scripture, are sometimes called "NT Apocrypha."

"OT Pseudepigrapha": A modern term that encompasses [1] early Jewish scriptures (written in the Second Temple period) which are not in the Catholic, Protestant, or Jewish biblical canons, but are in the canons of other churches, and [2] other books that are similar to them in content, genre, and date.

Excerpts from the Book of the Watchers (trans. R.H. Charles)

[Chapter 14] 1 The book of the words of righteousness, and of the reprimand of the eternal Watchers in accordance 2 with the command of the Holy Great One in that vision. I saw in my sleep what I will now say with a tongue of flesh and with the breath of my mouth: which the Great One has given to men to 3 converse therewith and understand with the heart. As He has created and given to man the power of understanding the word of wisdom, so hath He created me also and given me the power of reprimanding 4 the Watchers, the children of heaven. I wrote out your petition, and in my vision it appeared thus, that your petition will not be granted unto you throughout all the days of eternity, and that judgement 5 has been finally passed upon you: yea (your petition) will not be granted unto you. And from henceforth you shall not ascend into heaven unto all eternity, and in bonds of the earth the decree 6 has gone forth to bind you for all the days of the world. And (that) previously you shall have seen the destruction of your beloved sons and ye shall have no pleasure in them, but they shall fall before 7 you by the sword. And your petition on their behalf shall not be granted, nor yet on your own: even though you weep and pray and speak all the words contained in the writing which I have 8 written. And the vision was shown to me thus: Behold, in the vision clouds invited me and a mist summoned me, and the course of the stars and the lightnings sped and hastened me, and the winds in 9 the vision caused me to fly and lifted me upward, and bore me into heaven. And I went in till I drew nigh to a wall which is built of crystals and surrounded by tongues of fire: and it began to affright 10 me. And I went into the tongues of fire and drew nigh to a large house which was built of crystals: and the walls of the house were like a tessellated floor (made) of crystals, and its groundwork was 11 of crystal. Its ceiling was like the path of the stars and the lightnings, and between them were 12 fiery cherubim, and their heaven was (clear as) water. A flaming fire surrounded the walls, and its 13 portals blazed with fire. And I entered into that house, and it was hot as fire and cold as ice: there 14 were no delights of life therein: fear covered me, and trembling got hold upon me. And as I quaked 15 and trembled, I fell upon my face. And I beheld a vision, And lo! there was a second house, greater 16 than the former, and the entire portal stood open before me, and it was built of flames of fire. And in every respect it so excelled in splendour and magnificence and extent that I cannot describe to 17 you its splendour and its extent. And its floor was of fire, and above it were lightnings and the path 18 of the stars, and its ceiling also was flaming fire. And I looked and saw therein a lofty throne: its appearance was as crystal, and the wheels thereof as the shining sun, and there was the vision of 19 cherubim. And from underneath the throne came streams of flaming fire so that I could not look 20 thereon. And the Great Glory sat thereon, and His raiment shone more brightly than the sun and 21 was whiter than any snow. None of the angels could enter and could behold His face by reason 22 of the magnificence and glory and no flesh could behold Him. The flaming fire was round about Him, and a great fire stood before Him, and none around could draw nigh Him: ten thousand times 23 ten thousand (stood) before Him, yet He needed no counselor. And the most holy ones who were 24 nigh to Him did not leave by night nor depart from Him. And until then I had been prostrate on my face, trembling: and the Lord called me with His own mouth, and said to me: 'Come hither, 25 Enoch, and hear my word.' And one of the holy ones came to me and waked me, and He made me rise up and approach the door: and I bowed my face downwards.

[Chapter 15] 1 And He answered and said to me, and I heard His voice: 'Fear not, Enoch, thou righteous 2 man and scribe of righteousness: approach hither and hear my voice. And go, say to the Watchers of heaven, who have sent thee to intercede for them: "You should intercede" for men, and not men 3 for you: Wherefore have ye left the high, holy, and eternal heaven, and lain with women, and defiled yourselves with the daughters of men and taken to yourselves wives, and done like the children 4 of earth, and begotten giants (as your) sons? And though ye were holy, spiritual, living the eternal life, you have defiled yourselves with the blood of women, and have begotten (children) with the blood of flesh, and, as the children of men, have lusted after flesh and blood as those also do who die 5 and perish. Therefore have I given them wives also that they might impregnate them, and beget 6 children by them, that thus nothing might be wanting to them on earth. But you were formerly 7 spiritual, living the eternal life, and immortal for all generations of the world. And therefore I have not appointed wives for you; for as for the spiritual ones of the heaven, in heaven is their dwelling. 8 And now, the giants, who are produced from the spirits and flesh, shall be called evil spirits upon 9 the earth, and on the earth shall be their dwelling. Evil spirits have proceeded from their bodies; because they are born from men and from the holy Watchers is their beginning and primal origin; 10 they shall be evil spirits on earth, and evil spirits shall they be called. [As for the spirits of heaven, in heaven shall be their dwelling, but as for the spirits of the earth which were born upon the earth, on the earth shall be their dwelling.] And the spirits of the giants afflict, oppress, destroy, attack, do battle, and work destruction on the earth, and cause trouble: they take no food, but nevertheless 12 hunger and thirst, and cause offences. And these spirits shall rise up against the children of men and against the women, because they have proceeded from them.

[Chapter 16] 1 From the days of the slaughter and destruction and death of the giants, from the souls of whose flesh the spirits, having gone forth, shall destroy without incurring judgement -thus shall they destroy until the day of the consummation, the great judgement in which the age shall be 2 consummated, over the Watchers and the godless, yea, shall be wholly consummated." And now as to the watchers who have sent thee to intercede for them, who had been aforetime in heaven, (say 3 to them): "You have been in heaven, but all the mysteries had not yet been revealed to you, and you knew worthless ones, and these in the hardness of your hearts you have made known to the women, and through these mysteries women and men work much evil on earth." 4 Say to them therefore: " You have no peace."

[Chapter 17] 1 And they took and brought me to a place in which those who were there were like flaming fire, 2 and, when they wished, they appeared as men. And they brought me to the place of darkness, and to a mountain the point of whose summit reached to heaven. And I saw the places of the luminaries and the treasuries of the stars and of the thunder and in the uttermost depths, where were 4 a fiery bow and arrows and their quiver, and a fiery sword and all the lightnings. And they took 5 me to the living waters, and to the fire of the west, which receives every setting of the sun. And I came to a river of fire in which the fire flows like water and discharges itself into the great sea towards 6 the west. I saw the great rivers and came to the great river and to the great darkness, and went 7 to the place where no flesh walks. I saw the mountains of the darkness of winter and the place 8 whence all the waters of the deep flow. I saw the mouths of all the rivers of the earth and the mouth of the deep.

[Chapter 18] 1 I saw the treasuries of all the winds: I saw how He had furnished with them the whole creation 2 and the firm foundations of the earth. And I saw the corner-stone of the earth: I saw the four 3 winds which bear [the earth and] the firmament of the heaven. And I saw how the winds stretch out the vaults of heaven, and have their station between heaven and earth: these are the pillars 4 of the heaven. I saw the winds of heaven which turn and bring the circumference of the sun and 5 all the stars to their setting. I saw the winds on the earth carrying the clouds: I saw the paths 6 of the angels. I saw at the end of the earth the firmament of the heaven above. And I proceeded and saw a place which burns day and night, where there are seven mountains of magnificent stones, 7 three towards the east, and three towards the south. And as for those towards the east, was of coloured stone, and one of pearl, and one of jacinth, and those towards the south of red stone. 8 But the middle one reached to heaven like the throne of God, of alabaster, and the summit of the 9,10 throne was of sapphire. And I saw a flaming fire. And beyond these mountains is a region the end of the great earth: there the heavens were completed. And I saw a deep abyss, with columns of heavenly fire, and among them I saw columns of fire fall, which were beyond measure alike towards 12 the height and towards the depth. And beyond that abyss I saw a place which had no firmament of the heaven above, and no firmly founded earth beneath it: there was no water upon it, and no 13 birds, but it was a waste and horrible place. I saw there seven stars like great burning mountains, 14 and to me, when I inquired regarding them, The angel said: 'This place is the end of heaven and earth: this has become a prison for the stars and the host of heaven. And the stars which roll over the fire are they which have transgressed the commandment of the Lord in the beginning of 16 their rising, because they did not come forth at their appointed times. And He was wroth with them, and bound them till the time when their guilt should be consummated (even) for ten thousand years.'

[Chapter 19] 1 And Uriel said to me: 'Here shall stand the angels who have connected themselves with women, and their spirits assuming many different forms are defiling mankind and shall lead them astray into sacrificing to demons as gods, (here shall they stand,) till the day of the great judgement in 2 which they shall be judged till they are made an end of. And the women also of the angels who 3 went astray shall become sirens.' And I, Enoch, alone saw the vision, the ends of all things: and no man shall see as I have seen.

[Chapter 20] 1,2 And these are the names of the holy angels who watch. Uriel, one of the holy angels, who is 3 over the world and over Tartarus. Raphael, one of the holy angels, who is over the spirits of men. 4,5 Raguel, one of the holy angels who takes vengeance on the world of the luminaries. Michael, one 6 of the holy angels, to wit, he that is set over the best part of mankind and over chaos. Saraqael, 7 one of the holy angels, who is set over the spirits, who sin in the spirit. Gabriel, one of the holy 8 angels, who is over Paradise and the serpents and the Cherubim. Remiel, one of the holy angels, whom God set over those who rise.

[Chapter 21] 1,2 And I proceeded to where things were chaotic. And I saw there something horrible: I saw neither 3 a heaven above nor a firmly founded earth, but a place chaotic and horrible. And there I saw 4 seven stars of the heaven bound together in it, like great mountains and burning with fire. Then 5 I said: 'For what sin are they bound, and on what account have they been cast in hither?' Then said Uriel, one of the holy angels, who was with me, and was chief over them, and said: 'Enoch, why 6 dost thou ask, and why art thou eager for the truth? These are of the number of the stars of heaven, which have transgressed the commandment of the Lord, and are bound here till ten thousand years, 7 the time entailed by their sins, are consummated.' And from thence I went to another place, which was still more horrible than the former, and I saw a horrible thing: a great fire there which burnt and blazed, and the place was cleft as far as the abyss, being full of great descending columns of 8 fire: neither its extent or magnitude could I see, nor could I conjecture. Then I said: 'How 9 fearful is the place and how terrible to look upon!' Then Uriel answered me, one of the holy angels who was with me, and said unto me: 'Enoch, why hast thou such fear and affright?' And 10 I answered: 'Because of this fearful place, and because of the spectacle of the pain.' And he said unto me: 'This place is the prison of the angels, and here they will be imprisoned for ever.'

[Chapter 22] 1 And thence I went to another place, and he mountain [and] of hard rock. 2 And there was in it four hollow places, deep and wide and very smooth. How smooth are the hollow places and deep and dark to look at. 3 Then Raphael answered, one of the holy angels who was with me, and said unto me: 'These hollow places have been created for this very purpose, that the spirits of the souls of the dead should 4 assemble therein, yea that all the souls of the children of men should assemble here. And these places have been made to receive them till the day of their judgement and till their appointed period [till the period appointed], till the great judgement (comes) upon them.' I saw (the spirit of) a dead man making suit, 5 and his voice went forth to heaven and made suit. And I asked Raphael the angel who was 6 with me, and I said unto him: 'This spirit which maketh suit, whose is it, whose voice goeth forth and maketh suit to heaven?' 7 And he answered me saying: 'This is the spirit which went forth from Abel, whom his brother Cain slew, and he makes his suit against him till his seed is destroyed from the face of the earth, and his seed is annihilated from amongst the seed of men.' 8 The I asked regarding it, and regarding all the hollow places: 'Why is one separated from the other?' 9 And he answered me and said unto me: 'These three have been made that the spirits of the dead might be separated. And such a division has been made (for) the spirits of the righteous, in which there is the bright spring of 10 water. And such has been made for sinners when they die and are buried in the earth and judgement has not been executed on them in their 11 lifetime. Here their spirits shall be set apart in this great pain till the great day of judgement and punishment and torment of those who curse for ever and retribution for their spirits. There 12 He shall bind them for ever. And such a division has been made for the spirits of those who make their suit, who make disclosures concerning their destruction, when they were slain in the days 13 of the sinners. Such has been made for the spirits of men who were not righteous but sinners, who were complete in transgression, and of the transgressors they shall be companions: but their spirits shall not be slain in the day of judgement nor shall they be raised from thence.' 14 The I blessed the Lord of glory and said: 'Blessed be my Lord, the Lord of righteousness, who ruleth for ever.'