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Natalie Latteri

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Jewish Apocalypticism: An Historiography

Natalie E. Latteri

Sometime in the 1st century A.D. somewhere in the Hellenistic world, a Jewish luminary joined a long tradition by penning a religious treatise pseudonymously under the name of the antediluvian patriarch, Enoch, who Scripture holds “walked with God.”¹ In what later scholars would categorize as the second book of *1 Enoch*, the author recorded three parables which were allegedly transmitted through his descendant, Noah. These parables contain imagery and motifs common to those found in many Near Eastern religions of the ancient world to describe theological, philosophical, and scientific mysteries revealed through the aid of angels. Some motifs include: the divisions of heaven and the throne-room of the Lord of spirits (God); the causes of evil and of suffering; and the underlying forces of every natural phenomenon.²

The revelation of esoteric knowledge is only one feature of this complex treatise. The parables also contain prophecy, a call to reform, and a scenario of the final stage of humanity. They foretell of a Day of Judgment in which the wicked and powerful of the world would be destroyed and wiped from the face of the earth after a period of subjection to the elect – those who had previously been oppressed and suffered as a result of their fidelity to the “Lord of spirits,” and who would, after the Day of Judgment, dwell harmoniously and prosperously with their recently resurrected cohorts under the rule of the Elect One.³

1 There is much debate as to the dating of the Enochic corpus. I have relied on claims that *1 Enoch* 37–71 originated between 40–70 A.D. See Collins (1984, 143); Gen. 5:24.

2 These mysteries are described in various sections interspersed throughout the parables. For a description of heaven, see *1 Enoch*, chps. 39–40; of natural phenomena, see chps. 41, 57, 59; of the origin of evil and suffering, see Chps. 39, 53 for an allusion to the story of the Watchers found in the first book of *1 Enoch*; and, see chp. 68 for an allusion to both the Watchers and the Genesis story of Eve’s temptation in the Garden of Eden. Imagery or symbolism included here which is common to canonical texts includes the Leviathan and Behemoth, found in 58:7–8 here and in Job 40:15–24; and reference to the Ancient of days and Son of man, found in 46:1 here and in Dan. 8:17 and 7:13, respectively.

3 The Day of Judgment and socio-religious and political revolutionary motifs dominate *1 Enoch* and it would be too arduous to give an account of every indication of these. Resurrection of the dead, however, is mentioned only once in book 2 and its location is worth noting: *1 Enoch* 60:7.

In addition, the parables indicate varied names, the nature, and the further function of, the Elect One: the “Elect” or “Concealed One,” also known here as the “Son of man,” the “Messiah,” and the “Son of woman,” existed before creation as abstractions – righteousness, wisdom, and judgment.⁴ The period preceding his earthly incarnation, it was said, would be full of travails but, once born, this Messiah would serve as a merciful “light of nations” and a support for the holy while simultaneously meting out punishment for the deserving and favor for God’s elect.⁵ He, it was foretold, would not only annihilate the previous era, but also usher in a new, everlasting one of peace.⁶

Sometime during the 4th through 7th centuries A.D., another pseudonymous account was rendered in the Mediterranean Basin by an inventive Jew who went by the name of Zerubbabel.⁷ The author of the *Sefer Zerubbabel* (Book of Zerubbabel) most likely borrowed themes from the Hebrew canon, the Talmud, and Aggadah regarding expectations of the Messiah(s) and the character and function of angels. His prophecy claimed to have originated approximately a millennium earlier than it circulated – that is, during the period of Babylonian Exile (c. 587–538 B.C.), just prior to the pious biblical character Zerubbabel’s laying of the foundation of the Second Temple.⁸

In brief, the *Sefer* relates that Zerubbabel was borne on the wind to the city of Nineveh, where he encountered an unknown man and the angel of the Lord, Michael, who explained what had transpired in Jewish history throughout the ages and what would come to pass in the final era. Michael informed Zerubbabel that the man before him was none other than Menahem ben ‘Amiel, the Messiah of the Lord. When asked to give a further account of the Messiah, Michael told Zerubbabel that Menahem, although born in the time of David and descended from the monarch’s royal lineage, was concealed by the Lord until the appointed time for the restoration of Israel.

4 ¹ *Enoch* 48:5; 46:1; 51:4; 61:9.

5 ¹ *Enoch* 61:7; 48:3. For comparison of “the birth pangs of the messiah” within the Hebrew canon, see Isa. 13:6–8.

6 ¹ *Enoch* 61:17.

7 Although scholars predominantly date the *Sefer Zerubbabel* to the 7th century due to what some regard as allusions to battles between Islamic forces and Byzantine rulers, Joseph Dan provides a convincing interpretation of how the motifs found therein, particularly that of the Antichrist, could have been in circulation even in the 4th century. However, he concedes, more work needs to be done. Joseph Dan (1998, 100–101); See Israel Lévi (1920, 129–160).

8 For the brief biblical account of Zerubbabel, see Ezra 3–5.