

# The Signs of the Times

## Definitions

### Definitions of apocalypse. apocalyptic, apocalypticism ...

**APOCALYPSE** - a Greek word meaning "revelation", "an unveiling or unfolding of things not previously known and which could not be known apart from the unveiling". This word can also refer to the final book of the New Testament, Revelation, or to any revelation of the future, especially future violence or destruction.

**APOCALYPTIC** – (adjective as applied to art, language, culture, religion etc) – pertaining to the apocalypse.

**APOCALYPTICISM** – the belief system based around the Apocalypse and its prophecies which invariably involve struggle and conflict between good and evil in dramatic acts leading to the end of the world. This “end time” (Greek: eschaton) is when God will triumph and create a new and abundant age for the elect (the kingdom of heaven). In the Final Judgement and Resurrection of all, there will also be damnation, hell, and eternal punishment for unrepentant sinners. The devil is bound at this time prior to his eventual total destruction.

Examples of Jewish apocalyptic literature and their origins follow ...

## The Origins of Jewish Apocalyptic Literature

In depth study here:- <http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1835&context=etd>

(safe link: may be saved as a PDF, author: Sarah Robinson)

*Sarah Robinson's conclusions summarised, as augmented and endorsed by Fr Gregory: -*

## The Biblical Canon

1. The earliest and most thoroughgoing Jewish apocalyptic text we have is the so called “**Book of the Watchers**” (Enoch 1-36), written from the time of the Jewish deportation<sup>1</sup> to Babylon, a 70-year period of exile in three stages (609 BC - 597 BC – 587 BC). We shall consider Enoch after his biblically canonical contemporaries.

The sack of Jerusalem by the Babylonians included the destruction of the Temple. This was the time when Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Second Isaiah (Chapters 40-66) prophesied, a time of great social, political and religious stress; even a crisis of faith for Judah / Israel (Psalm 137).

**Such grave stress is frequently the context either to the rise or appropriation of apocalyptic thinking and prophecies in any age.**

2. There are apocalyptic elements in the visions of **Ezekiel**, particularly themes of election for the righteous and punishment for the wicked in a final conflict scenario (“Gog and Magog” - chapters 38 and 39). At the end of the exile, the return, the restoration and then the rebuilding of the temple (Nehemiah, Ezra) there seem to be two active and opposed parties. One in the Enoch and (broadly) Ezekiel tradition regarded the Exile as

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<sup>1</sup> These deportations were initially of rulers, elites and dispossessed military leaders. Some ordinary people were left behind to languish in a conquered and colonised Judah, bereft of their dignity and religious institutions; however, many others were deported at different times for a period of between 50 to 70 years

the end of the Davidic line and expectation, together with all those false shepherds of the old order. No wonder then that Enoch was so popular with the world denying, apocalyptic sect of the Essenes in Qumran! The true messianic restoration and fulfilment of Israel lay far off in the future when God Himself would rule with a new covenant, a new heart and His own personal rule. The other party, (Zadokite), being a more conservative priestly faction, expected “business as usual” after the return but with reforms that emphasised the purity of Israel and her ethical responsibilities. Clearly the Enoch / Ezekiel party would be closer to the apocalyptic future vision.

3. **Second Isaiah** (written during the Exile)<sup>2</sup> was built on Ezekiel’s vision for the final victory of God and the end of the old order, but now set on a much wider canvas of history, Here God is the Lord of creation and slayer of His enemies. He is the one who slaughtered the ancient monsters both mythic - Rahab, the Dragon - and actual – the Egyptians at the Exodus .... and he will redeem Israel finally.

*Awake! Awake! Clothe yourself in strength, arm of the Lord. Awake as in the past, in times of generations long ago. Did you not split Rahab<sup>3</sup> in two, and pierce the Dragon through? Did you not dry up the sea, the waters of the great Abyss, to make the seabed a road for the redeemed to cross? (Isaiah 51:9-10)*

Isaiah 42:6 however also reflected the concerns of the other party and the ones left behind during the exile. That the terms of the old covenant and its institutions would continue. It could be said retrospectively that the other worldly apocalyptic radical vision was ultimately that one that prevailed.

4. **Zechariah** is a post-exilic book, as is **Joel**. The first eight chapters of Zechariah strongly suggest that the apocalyptic concerns of this prophet reflect those of the priesthood that served the rebuilt temple. There is a radical dualism and eschatology here, Jerusalem or Babylon, make your choice! (Zechariah 2:6-9). God’s power is emphasised and that of the traditional monarchy eclipses. The messianic expectation becomes less focussed on a “king-like-David” and more on God Himself as the King. Earthly expectations become more pessimistic as disruptive heavenly interventions become more prominent. Once again, we see a drift in prophecy towards apocalyptic and a future orientated divine intervention in the affairs of men. “Living waters flowing out of Jerusalem, independent of time” is an apocalyptic vision we see not only in Zechariah 14:8 but also in Ezekiel 47, Joel 3:18, Enoch 26:1 and of course in the New Testament in the Apocalypse (Revelation) of St John. Chapter 22; even perhaps in the living water reference of John 4.

## Enoch

*“When Enoch had lived sixty-five years, he became the father of Methusaleh. Enoch walked with God after the birth of Methuselah three hundred years and had other sons and daughters. Thus, all the days of Enoch were three hundred and sixty-five years. Enoch walked with God; and he was not, for God took him.”*  
(Gen. 5:21-24)

You may read more about this fascinating figure and his importance to our topic (albeit not in the biblical canon ... except for the Ethiopian and Eritrean Orthodox Churches) here:- <http://book-ofenoch.com>

We shall consider Enoch 1 only.

### Enoch’s Importance for Apocalypticism

1. Enoch spans the period from the return from Babylon at the behest of the conqueror of Babylon, King Cyrus of Persia (539 BC) to Greek rule after Alexander the Great. It is the first genuinely apocalyptic work of Jewish sacred literature, a precursor for other biblical canonical texts, Daniel and the Apocalypse (Revelation) of

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<sup>2</sup> Isaiah is in (at least) 2 sections with different historical contexts. Isaiah 1-39 during the prophet’s lifetime can be dated to about 740 BC. His school of continuing disciples continued the prophecies into a later generation of exiles in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC.

<sup>3</sup> Or “sea monster” ... also “Leviathan.”

St John. Although not in the Chalcedonian Orthodox canon of Scripture, it is quoted both in the Bible (Jude 1:14-15) and by appreciative Fathers (St Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria and Origen). Christians usage, however, did exclude "The Book of Giants" which was accepted by the heretical dualist Manichaeans.

2. The Enochian apocalypses themselves are known as "The Astronomical Book" (1 Enoch 72-82), probably much altered, and "The Book of Watchers" (1 Enoch 6-19), arguably the oldest and the more interesting for our purposes here.
3. Although a good case can be made for Enoch supporting the radical post exilic tradition in Judaism that saw no hope in the religious establishment (indeed, he hardly mentions the Torah!), the reason why he was subsequently rejected by the Jews but appealed more to Christians might be found in his account of the origin of evil.

The "Watchers" (or the "awake ones") in Enoch are the fallen angels of Genesis who consort with human women, their progeny being the Nephilim, "the Giants." (Genesis 6:1-5). In Orthodox Judaism subsequently the cosmic and angelic dimension of the origin of evil is rejected in favour of the account of the perversity of disobedient men in breaking the covenants of God. Enoch, by contrast, has the immortality of the soul (1 Enoch 22), ascents to heaven, the development of evil angel teachings and apocalyptic conflicts. Those who would focus on this world are obviously not going to be very interested in such matters, regarding these concerns as undermining the challenges of the covenant and divine law in *this* life. It is easy to see why the Essenes at Qumran thought so highly of Enoch, bearing in mind their rejection of both the Temple with its priesthood and the synagogue with its rabbis. The Enochian tradition certainly also illumines the central tenets of Christian apocalypticism.

4. As we might expect, there are connections in 1 Enoch going back to the Exile and Mesopotamian themes of cosmology, divine secrets, dualism and immortality. Scholars have also noted the permanent legacy of Babylonian exile in the development of Jewish angelology, demonology and even divination! (There is much more detail for this in Robinson's work).

## Finally, the Prophet Daniel

The Prophecy of Daniel, (like that of Enoch) spans many generations and historical circumstances. By the time the corpus of these writings achieved their final forms, they could be read as a critique of any oppressive and ungodly human institution. In Daniel, this broad sweep of history includes both Nebuchadnezzar, the invading King of Babylon (587 BC) and, much later, the Greek Seleucid King Antiochus Epiphanes IV (215 BC to 164 BC) who set up a silver statue of himself to be worshipped in Jerusalem, the "abomination of desolation" (Daniel 11). Apocalyptic literature judges this world as wholly corrupt and so, in turn, looks to another yet to come. The Maccabean revolt follows the other trajectory of reclaiming the Temple from the pagans. Both approaches are legitimate in Judaism.

## Conclusion: Implications for Judaism at the time of Christ

Clearly, the eschatological themes of the New Testament writings have apocalypticism inextricably woven into them and most of this material is pre-figured in the post exilic apocalyptic writings of the Old Testament and in 1 Enoch. The Judaism we see at the time of Christ is manifestly not remotely the same as the Talmudic Judaism we know today. However, its various sectarian forms emerging from the Old Testament era, especially after the Exile to Babylon, are indispensable elements of a Christian eschatological hope that is, in part at least, indelibly apocalyptic in character. This other worldly disruptive vision of God's dramatic intervention in the affairs of men will never sit easily with a religion that has "settled in" to this world.

But, herein lies a problem that we shall now address. What if self-appointed prophets of the Apocalypse are leading people astray? How is the truth of the realisation of the Apocalypse to be discerned in the atmosphere of societal stress that so often generates it and refuses those checks and balances insisted upon by the Church? It was, after all, not only the Jews that had problems with 1 Enoch. Parts of the Christian east did not accept the Apocalypse of St John as canonical Scripture until the 5<sup>th</sup> Century and to this day it is not read in the public worship of the Orthodox Church. Now we have the global pandemic of Sars-2 / COVID-19 and once again, the apocalyptic perspective has kicked back into life with all its parasitic conspiracy theories and persecution complexes. Is apocalypticism more trouble than it is worth, or can it be rescued from this morass of superstition, false alarms and dubious prophecies?

## Timeline of Apocalyptic Fervour as triggered by World Events

There is a clear pattern in Christian history of apocalyptic expectations being driven by world events. These are some of the more significant examples.

| Dates   | Apocalypticism and its References   | World Events  |
|---|---|---|
| Circa 95 AD                                     | Revelation (Apocalypse) of St John<br>More information: <a href="https://tinyurl.com/ybh8yutx">https://tinyurl.com/ybh8yutx</a>   | Either the persecutions of Nero or Domitian. The pagan Roman Empire is associated with the Beast or Antichrist.   |
| 950 AD  | The monk Adso predicted the fall of the Carolingian Dynasty as the millennium approached in 950AD. Apocalyptic fever was mild but there were preachers who promoted it, notably Aelfric, Abbot of Eynsham. Much later accounts refer to comets appearing in the sky, but these are disputed.  | The approach of 1000 AD and the political instability of the Carolingian monarchs.  |
| 12 <sup>th</sup> and 13 <sup>th</sup> centuries | Joachim of Fiore (1130-1202) supposed that 1200 would usher in a new age of the Spirit among many trials. He was condemned as a heretic but nonetheless influenced some Franciscans. Frederick II (1220-1245) was characterised as the Antichrist.  | The Crusades were fully deployed and exhausted Europe. The heretical Cathars (Albigensians) overran southern France. Political turmoil and religious corruption generated expectations of divine intervention.  |
| 15 <sup>th</sup> and 16 <sup>th</sup> centuries | Many of the Protestant Reformers revived the doctrine of chiliasm which the early church had eventually rejected.<br><br>Thomas Munzter (1489-1525) and the Anabaptists expected a revolutionary overthrow of the present corrupt order to establish a chiliastic Christian utopia.<br><br>(Post millenarianism - 1000 years peace before the second coming of Christ).<br><br>The Lutheran Augsburg Confession (1530) rejected this teaching, not least because Luther depended on the support of German princes sympathetic to his reforms. | Political turmoil in northern Europe as emergent nation states in Europe confronted and challenged the secular power of the papacy.<br><br>The Roman Catholic Church was identified by many Protestants as the Whore of Babylon (Revelation 17:5) and the Pope was the prophesied Antichrist. |
| 17 <sup>th</sup> and 18 <sup>th</sup> centuries | The Fifth Monarchists of the Puritan Commonwealth in England were active from 1649 onwards until their suppression after the Restoration. They believed that a  | Monarchies in Europe, hitherto reasonably secure in their constitutions, start to destabilise as Rome's authority weakened in   |

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|  | <p>millennial new world order was being established in the fall of kings, the 5<sup>th</sup> King being the soon to come, the “King Jesus.” The Great Plague and Fire of London (1666) with its obvious satanic numerology continued to fan the flames of apocalypticism for a while.</p>  | <p>the face of the Reformation. Wherever Protestant monarchs prevailed however, apocalyptic fervour died down.</p>  |
| <p>19<sup>th</sup> and the 20<sup>th</sup> century before the Second World War</p> | <p>Premillenarianism is a teaching that Christ will come again soon and after this there will be 1000 years of peace and human flourishing before the Last Judgement.</p> <p>This teaching gained ground in the UK and the US in the teaching of John Nelson Derby (1800-1882) and Edward Irving (1792-1834) and continued into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It generated a profusion of heterodox Protestant sects that have thrived on different chiliastic interpretations.</p> <p>Premillenarian apocalypticism is generally politically conservative and critical of human institutions, but under the influence of the Enlightenment it has also retained a certain optimism about human society liberated from its oppressors.</p> <p>This is a useful resource covering the history of modern US chiliastic thought: <a href="https://tinyurl.com/yb6sybat">https://tinyurl.com/yb6sybat</a></p>   | <p>The French Revolution in 1789 ushered in a 100-year period of revolution and political instability in Europe and America, eventually also penetrating Russia.</p> <p>Apocalyptic ideas thrived in a time of great political, social and economic change.</p> <p>This Premillenarian variant of Apocalypticism was generally not antagonistic to the idea of progress. Its own revolutionary expectation of divine disruption was indeed congenial to the idea of a new world order.</p>  |
| <p>The Cold War to the Present Day</p>   | <p>Chiliasm in the post war era has grown wilder and wilder in its descriptions of the End Times. Billy Graham, William Miller, Hal Lindsey and many others have preached such nightmarish visions but we have also seen a ‘democratisation’ of apocalypticism into the culture itself with cult figures such as Marilyn Manson pursuing successful careers on the back of these popular movements.</p> <p>A new breed of right wing evangelicals has also thrived on the idea that we are now seeing the Signs of the End Times, some even welcoming the prospect of nuclear Armageddon, others proposing that true believers will escape all of this through the Great Rapture, (the “Left Behind” novels have popularised this).</p> <p>The media have both reflected and driven this paranoia through the depictions of apocalyptic supernatural horror, (The Omen, Rosemary’s Baby), and standard SF and religious End Time dramas.</p> <p>A pew survey in 2010 revealed that 41% of Americans expect Christ to return before 2050! Apocalypticism is alive and well in the US and to a more limited extent in the UK.</p> <p>Today we also have social media providing a platform for anyone to disseminate conspiracy theories, persecution narratives and the anti-science hysteria of the anti-vaxx</p> | <p>There are just a few of the events of our times that have driven and continue to drive apocalypticism: -</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The development of nuclear weapons, the dropping of the Bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the nuclear arms race and the Cold War.</li> <li>2. Second Millennium fever, (which came and went).</li> <li>3. The rise of political and Islamist extremism and terrorism.</li> <li>4. Polarisation in western politics based on wars of class, race, gender and sexuality.</li> <li>5. Global warming and the rise of Extinction Rebellion and eco-terrorism.</li> <li>6. The rejection of science in the fundamentalist embrace of fideism (faith only, not reason).</li> <li>7. COVID-19 pandemic paranoia thriving on an existing profound distrust</li> </ol> |

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|  | movement, all of which can be seen as “spin-offs” of Protestant millenarianism. | of political institutions, Big Pharma and science. |
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## Why the Orthodox?

Why have large parts of Orthodoxy been corrupted by these chiliastic preoccupations, particularly since the Second Ecumenical Council rejected the whole notion behind them? We all may have our own theories. Here are some of mine. I have no doubt that they will offend many, but it is how I see things after 25 years in this Church.

1. **A distrust of the west as a feature of Church history and mentality, particularly since the Fourth Crusade.**

This was reinforced by the Fall of Constantinople (the Christian East being effectively abandoned by the west), western Latin incursions into Orthodox lands both religious (Uniatism) and military (Napoleon, Hitler) and the legacy of the Cold War, sustained of course by both western paranoia about Russia and Soviet ideology. It is interesting for example how many Christians in Russia now view Marx ... as a western infiltrator and disrupter of Holy Mother Russia, aided and abetted by Germany!

2. **An inferiority complex in the face of western technological advances and economic dominance.**

“Catching up with the west” has been a political program in Russia from Peter the Great to Joseph Stalin. Greece threw off the Turkish Yoke but was in no position to recapture its former glory. Understandably, it threw in its lot with the European Union only to find itself ripped off by foreign bankers and its destiny firmly in the grip of Germany. The west’s meddling in the Middle East since the 19<sup>th</sup> century added further to these humiliations. What better way to seek solace but in apocalyptic fantasies of the recovery of Hagia Sophia in Istanbul (still wistfully called Constantinople) and in the demonisation of the west and all its bitter fruits?

3. **The selective rejection of modernity and the intellectual enfeeblement of its contemporary thinkers.**

This I think is the most important factor in Orthodoxy’s vulnerability today to apocalyptic and obscurantist thinking; a rejection of the modern world. Of course, this is a selective rejection because many of the fruits of modernity are still eagerly embraced. No, many Orthodox do not reject modernity wholesale but rather they cherry pick what they like and reject what they do not.

For example, most will readily go into hospital for a heart bypass operation but if an Athonite elder, even a saint, has told them (allegedly) that they must not be vaccinated against COVID-19 because they will be marked with the sign of the Beast, then they will not get vaccinated. In apocalyptic thinking, the things of this world always take second place and conciliarity vanishes as an Autumn mist.

The sensationalism and popularity of apocalyptic spiritual paranoia has also often intimidated teachers and hierarchs of the Church into compliance and this has enfeebled their teaching role and responsibilities in the Church. When they are not preoccupied fighting their age-old turf wars between themselves, they might just squeeze in enough time for a bout of ‘spoon wars’ in the pandemic issues of the administration of Holy Communion. No wonder the secular world looks us with amused contempt! However, that itself is proof to the purveyors of apocalyptic conspiracy theories that the world really is in the grip of Zionists, Marxists and demon infested Atheists, all enemies of the Church. Take your pick!

Am I an optimist in the face of all this nonsense? For sure. I believe in God and in the ultimate victory of his truth. I believe that He guides his Church and that this Church, for all its faults is the one instituted by Christ Himself. However, that does not mean that it is in rude health at the moment. It manifestly is not.

So, that is how I read the “signs of the times” ... as a warning. Honour this world into which our Lord was incarnated and for which He died and rose again. That is my version of apocalyptic hope; world embracing, not world denying.