

The Eschatology of the Dead Sea Scrolls

by Randall Price

The more than 800 documents discovered in caves in the vicinity of the Dead Sea have been commonly referred to as the Dead Sea Scrolls. This material is composed of biblical texts, commentaries on biblical texts, apocryphal and pseudepigraphal texts, sectarian and ritualistic documents, and apocalyptic literature. Every book of the Old Testament is represented, except Esther, although there is evidence it too was known. The community that preserved this collection (generally thought to have resided at the site of Qumran in the Judean desert) represented a type of Messianic Judaism more closely related to early Jewish Christianity than the Jewish sects encountered in the New Testament.

The eschatology of the sect was consistent with mainstream Judaism, but where more traditional groups played down apocalyptic expectations, they were the sect's characteristic feature. This led Israeli scholar Shemaryahu Talmon to classify them as "the most decidedly millenarian movement in Second Temple Judaism and possibly in antiquity altogether, Christianity included." Their apocalyptic literature presents not only the eschatological perspective the community, but perhaps that of an earlier post-exilic community as well. As such, it offers us an unparalleled glimpse into the eschatological setting of Jesus and the New Testament writers, who while not dependent upon such literature, wrote within a context that was familiar with this world view.

Their eschatological interpretations are preserved in commentaries they wrote on Old Testament books (e.g. Psalms, Prophets) and in their sectarian documents (e.g., Damascus Document, War Scroll). The form of their interpretation is called *peshet* because this noun is used frequently in the scrolls themselves for the "interpretation" of a *raz*, an Aramaic term for "mystery." The *peshet* developed through the prophetic influence of the Book of Daniel as a special means of reconstructing the hidden history revealed to the prophets concerning the end of time, but reserved in mystery form for the generation upon whom the end would come.

The sect's eschatology is derived from its understanding of human history as being built up in stages determined by God and linked together to move toward an inevitable goal, the eschaton. This defined order of the ages that unfolds progressively and successively in predetermined periods of time. The order of these ages according to 4Q180 (The Ages of Creation) consecutively enumerates these periods beginning with the time prior to the creation of man (cf. CD 2:7; 1QS 3:15-18; 1QH 1:8-12). The history of mankind is traced from the Creation (1QS 4:15-17) and leads up to the eschaton or the "latter generation" or the "end-time," finally culminating in the "Latter Days" (QpHab 4:1-2, 7-8, 10-14; cf. 2:5-7). This culminating period also looks forward in its description of this age ending the era of wickedness as "the decreed epoch of new things" (1QS 4:25; cf. Dan. 9:26-27; 11:35-36; Isa. 10:23; 28:22; 43:19). The dividing point of this order of the ages is the destruction of the First Temple (586 B.C.), with ages preceding it termed "the generations of wickedness," and those that follow after (the post-destruction/post-exilic period) as "the generations of the Latter Days."

The present age of wickedness will escalate until the final conflict between the "sons of darkness" and the "sons of light." According to the War Scroll the final age was to be preceded by a period of tribulation or "birth pangs [of the Messiah]" (1QH 3:7-10), which "shall be a time of salvation for the People of God ..." (1QM 1). Central to this coming age of conflict is the image of eschatological evil rulers and deceivers (counterparts to the true Messiah). In Dead Sea texts which depict this period of great spiritual

declension of Israel, the apostasy is said to be spearheaded by a figure referred to as "Belial" and a "son of Belial." The term appears also in the New Testament at 2 Cor. 6:15. In other texts, this figure is called "son/man of sin" (cf. CD 6:15; 13:14; 1QS 9:16; 10:19). This expression is quite similar to an expression found in the Pauline description of the eschatological desecrator, the Antichrist, in 2 Thess. 2:3b. It is complemented by another term "son of iniquity" in 1QS 3:21, which is comparable to the phrase "the man of lawlessness" paired with "man of sin" in 2 Thess. 2:3. Even the phrase "the mystery of lawlessness," found only at 2 Thess. 2:7, has an almost identical expression at Qumran: "the mystery of iniquity" (1QH 5:36; 50:5. In addition, Hebrew University professor of Second Temple Judaism, David Flusser claims to identify an Antichrist figure (a wicked king who calls himself the "son of God") in the late first-century B.C. Aramaic pseudo-Daniel fragment 4Q24. In his opinion it proves that the idea of Antichrist is pre-Christian and clearly of Jewish origin.

According to the scrolls, the present age was also to see the imminent visitation of Elijah as the precursor of Messiah (4Q521) and the advent of the Messiah. The Messiah of the Dead Sea Scrolls is clearly eschatological. His coming is at "the end of days," and is royal (Davidic), priestly (Aaronic), and prophetic (Mosaic) in nature. It may be that the sect envisioned two or three messiahs, and such interpretive confusion is understandable in light of the developing messianism of Second Temple Judaism. Nevertheless, the application of Old Testament messianic texts in the Scrolls appears to have predominately combined the messianic offices in one person, and this is the Jewish theology reflected in the Gospels (cf. Matt. 2:4-6; 22:42; Mk. 14:61; Lk. 2:25-38; 3:15; Jn. 6:14; 7:27, 31; 12:34).

After the Messiah had defeated all of Israel's enemies, and slain the wicked (the correct interpretation of 4Q285) in the great 40 year (Gog and Magog) war (cf. 1QM; 4QpIsa^a 7-10; 22-25; 4QpIsa^b 2:1; 4Cantena^b 3:7-8), at the Day of the Lord (4Q558), a time of redemption would come with a universal peace; men would live a thousand generations, evil would be destroyed, and an ideal world will come about. The sect apparently expected to build an interim Third Temple in Jerusalem at some point and had blueprints preserved in a Temple Scroll (11QT). Perhaps the means to build this Temple was to be funded from a vast treasure (considered Temple treasure), which they hidden throughout the Land. The locations for this treasure they preserved with a catalogue of items on a Copper Scroll (3Q15). They also held that a final Temple (the "New Temple") would be built by Messiah for the Age to Come (cf. Zech. 6:12-13).

One problematic characteristic of their eschatology was their conviction that the precise dates of prophetic events could be determined. They believed that their "Teacher of Righteousness" was inspired by the Holy Spirit to properly discern the hidden timetable of the Last Days. Just as Daniel had reinterpreted Jeremiah's prophecy of the seventy-year exile (Jer. 25:1) to encompass the greater "seventy weeks of years" (Dan. 9:24-27), so the "Teacher of Righteousness" reinterpreted various prophetic passages from the Old Testament and reapplied them to the situation of his day. Based on this method of interpretation, they expected the coming of the Messiah would take place between 3 B.C.E. and 2 A.D. When their predictions failed, the Community seems to have not attempted further calculations, but apparently reformulated their earlier expectations to accommodate a divine postponement or delayed judgment, although some may also have adopted a more militaristic posture that saw the urgent need for intervention to bring about the next age.

The Dead Sea Scrolls offer to us a window into the eschatological world-view of Jesus and the New Testament. Their eschatology followed a literal interpretation of prophetic texts, a numerological calculation of temporal indicators in judgment pronouncements, and understood a postponement of the final age while not abandoning their hope of it. In many ways their eschatology was not dissimilar from modern Christian premillennialism, and reveals that as a system of interpretation, premillennialism is more closely aligned to the first-century Jewish context than competing eschatological systems.

Bibliography

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