

## ESCHATOLOGY



Mark 13:24 "(And) Jesus said, 'In those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in clouds' with great power and glory. Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.'"

Today is the first Sunday of the season of Advent, and for most Christians Advent is simply a time of preparation for the birth of Jesus at Christmas. Thus, the liturgical color is now a days often blue, hinting at the Virgin Mary and the Gospel nativity narratives. But more traditionally, Advent was a penitential season in the life

of the Church, with the liturgical color of purple, like in Lent, as you may remember from when you were young. Traditionally, Advent was a season that reflected upon the end of world, upon the last days, full of apocalyptic language and foreboding like in our Gospel reading today.

Eschatology is the Greek word that literally translates to "words about the last things." And perhaps not surprisingly, the traditional sermon topics for the four Sundays of Advent in the Medieval Church were all eschatological in nature. The four traditional subjects for preaching during the Sundays in Advent were 1) first, death, 2) then, judgment, 3) then, hell, and 4) finally, the Second Coming. Perhaps I should start preparing such a sermon series like that for next year which would be filled with scripture readings like ours today, with predictions about a war in heaven, about the stars falling from sky and darkness covering the earth, and about one like a Son of Man descending from the clouds in glory to gather up the elect.

Where on earth do these thoughts and images come from, and what are we to make of them today? Well, historically speaking there was a lot of interest in such eschatological things in the two centuries before the birth of Jesus and for several centuries thereafter. This was the time of the writing of the four Books of Esdras, and the additions to the Scroll of Daniel, and Ezekiel, and most especially the writing of the Book of Enoch, what my seminary professor

described as the 'most important book that didn't make it into the Bible.'

As a historian, I suspect these apocalyptic themes were derived from the sense of endless oppression of the people of God in the Middle East during those centuries. No sooner had the Jewish exiles been freed from their captivity in Babylon and allowed to return to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem, then Alexander the Great of Macedonia came marching in to conquer their lands again. And no sooner had the Maccabee brothers led a successful revolt against the Greeks in 167 B.C.E. Then the Roman armies came in and oppressed them once more.

So, the Jewish people again and again and again longed for salvation and an escape from this cycle of oppression. Many Jews imagined a new King, like David, indeed a son of David, to unite the nation, to defeat their enemies, and to rebuild their land to its glory as in the days of yore. Others imagined the need of some kind of divine figure to save them, an anointed one, a Messiah, a Prince of Peace, as prophesied by Ezekiel and Isaiah and Daniel to inaugurate the Kingdom of God, and peace on earth and goodwill among mankind. Others imagined one like the Son of Man mentioned in the Book of Enoch, a cosmic figure to come rescue them at the end of time. Other Jews simply took up arms against the oppressors, like the zealots in Jesus' day.

Thus in the days before the birth of Jesus, many religious Jews actually moved out into the wilderness to await the great day of the Lord, so sure were they that the end of the world was near, groups like the Essenes, like the followers of John the Baptist, like those at Qumran, and others, all waiting the end days and the coming of one like the Son of Man, a phrase that even appears regularly in our Gospels. Indeed, the Jewish Book of Enoch is quoted by name in the New Testament letter of Jude (1.14-6), and quoted as authoritative scripture, and its language is reflected not only in the Revelation of St. John the Divine, but in some of the words of John the Baptist, and in some of the words of Jesus, especially those before the High Priest. Copies of the Book of Enoch, of Daniel, of the books of Esdras, of Ezekiel, were all found among the Dead Sea scrolls.

And these hopes and these longings of so many were sadly again and again crushed by the Romans in the so-called Jewish-Roman wars. In 66 C.E. there was the famous great Jewish revolt in the city of Jerusalem, which lasted several years, which led to the destruction of the Jewish Temple in 70 A.D., and which really only ended a few years later with the massacre at Masada. Then again in 115 of the Common Era, there was the so-called Kitos War, where major uprisings by Jews throughout the Middle East spiraled out of control, resulting in a widespread slaughter of the remaining Roman garrisons and Roman citizens by Jewish rebels, which were then put down by the Roman legions two years later. Then in 132 of the Common Era, there was

another uprising, called the Bar Kochba Revolt, whose leader was called the Messiah by many, where the rebels did manage to establish and maintain a Jewish state for about three years, but the Emperor Hadrian organized six Roman legions that led to the complete destruction of the city of Jerusalem, stone by stone, the city which was then rebuilt as the Roman city of Aelia Capitolina, where Jews were thereafter legally forbidden to enter the city upon penalty of death, and where thus the center of Jewish life moved out to the great diaspora, under the influence of Rabbinic Judaism with its focus on the Torah, and not the Temple or Jerusalem or the Messiah.

Christians too struggled with these revolts in the first two centuries of the Common Era. The Book of Revelation is clearly John the Divine's effort to make sense of the Jewish revolt of 70 A.D. But Christians generally did not participate in the Bar Kokhba revolt, and there was thus great division between the Jews and Christians because of this, as the two groups began to move apart as separated brethren. But besides the Revelation of St. John the Divine, there were other Christian apocalyptic texts popular in the early Church at this time along with their Jewish predecessors, books like the Shepherd of Hermas, or the Revelation of St. Peter, which was quoted authoritatively by the Church Fathers, and included in some early New Testament listings. Remember all that during this time, Christians were brutally persecuted again and again in the Roman Empire, until the year 313 of the Common Era, when Emperor Constantine declared

Christianity an accepted religion in the Empire, which brought an end to the Roman persecutions of Christians. And with the Jews now in diaspora for many years, and Christians now officially accepted in Roman society, interest in eschatology waned. We have all grown tired of waiting for the end of the world, or the Second Coming. So that we might focus instead upon living lives worthy of the glory of God, as Jesus commended us to do.

Now as an early church historian, the question I struggle with is whether Jesus himself promoted these eschatological themes, or whether these images and themes were simply a projection of the later Gospel writers, especially after the revolt of 70 A.D., to help explain what happened in Jerusalem and why, and who Jesus really was, and whether we would ever see him again! In my reflections, at least, Jesus' teachings and parables seem focused more on how we are to live our lives now, focused more on breaking down the barriers that divide us, with loving one another, even our enemies, turning the other cheek, taking care of the poor and needy, the orphans and the widows, and were not focused on the end of the world.

So perhaps it is not a surprise that the season of Advent has changed over the years and become more of a preparation for the birth of our Messiah than for the last days. For I am reminded of last week's Gospel parable of the sheep and the goats, which concludes when the people asked, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take

care of you?' Then Jesus answered them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.' So let us all prepare for the coming of Christmas by feeding the hungry, welcoming the stranger, clothing the naked, visiting the imprisoned, and tending to those who are sick and suffering. For therein, I believe, lies the reason meaning of Christmas! Amen.