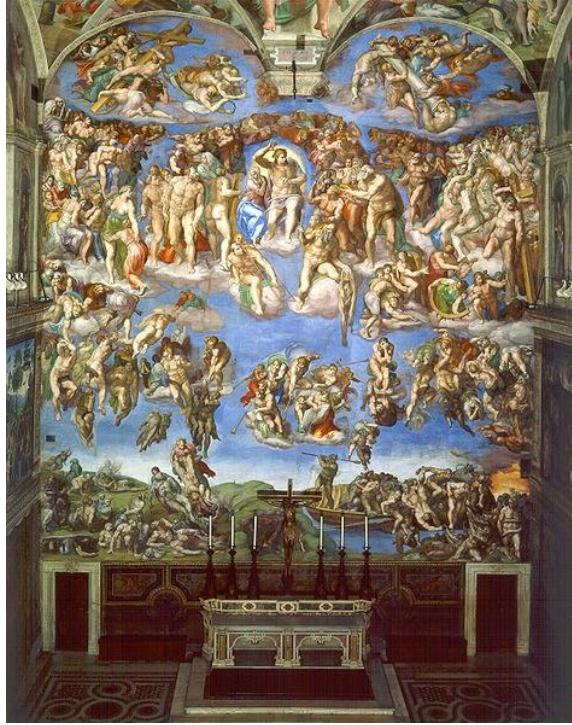


The Book of Enoch



Luke 21:25 "Jesus said, 'There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then (then) they will see *'the Son of Man coming in a cloud'* with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.'"

When I was in seminary, my New Testament professor described *The Book of Enoch* as the most important book not to make it into our Bible. *The Book of Enoch* is an ancient Jewish apocalyptic text, ascribed by tradition (1 Enoch 60:8) to the

patriarch Enoch, who in the Old Testament was the father of Methuselah and the great-grandfather of Noah. Genesis 5:25 oddly reads: "Enoch walked with God; then he was no more, because God took him." Enoch appears in this verse not to have died, where everybody else in this long list of Adam's descendants were specifically said to have died and their days numbered, but Enoch seems to have been uniquely just assumed up to heaven.

Thus, it is interesting that it is in *The Book of Enoch* that the phrase "one like the Son of Man coming in the clouds" first appears, words which Jesus quoted in today's Gospel. *The Book of Enoch* used the expression "the Son of Man" extensively as an eschatological protagonist, who is also called by the author the "Righteous One", the "Chosen One", even the "Messiah", and who is depicted as seating upon the throne of glory at the final judgment to come.

The Prophet Daniel repeated the phrase (7.14) in a similar apocalyptic description to that of Jesus in today's reading, with Daniel writing, "I saw in my vision by night, and behold, the four winds of heaven were stirring up the great sea. . . and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him. . . and his kingdom will have no end."

Jesus uses that same phrase "the Son of Man" elsewhere in the Gospels besides today's reading, and indeed everywhere that the phrase "the Son of Man" is found in the Gospels, it is found upon Jesus' lips! Sometimes he seems to be talking about someone else, and sometimes it seems that he is talking about himself as the prophesied eschatological Son of man. In the passage from the Revelation of St. John, the Divine, which we heard last Sunday, the author writes (1.17): "Look! He is coming with the clouds; every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all the tribes of the earth will wail on account of him. . . . Then I looked, and there was a white cloud, and seated on the cloud was one like the Son of Man, with a golden crown on his head and a sharp sickle in his hand!" St. John the Divine confirms that Jesus was seen by the early Church as fulfilling this ancient prophecy about the coming Kingdom of God and the one like a Son of Man.

This so-called Book of Enoch, probably written about 300 B.C.E. (and thus definitely not then by the Biblical Patriarch himself who would have lived 6,000 years ago), is simply an early part of a great trove of apocalyptic writings in the 200 years or so before the birth of Jesus, and about 100 years thereafter. One will find similar apocalyptic themes and images in the Book of Daniel, the prophet Ezekiel, the books of the Maccabees, the second and third books of Baruch, the fourth book

of Ezra, and in a number of Christian apocalypses as well written after the death of Jesus, most notably the Revelation to St. John, the Divine, but also the Apocalypse of Peter, the Ascension of Isaiah, the Testament of Abraham, the Apocalypse of Paul, and the Shepherd of Hermas.

There was simply an apocalyptic culture alive and well in the days before and after Jesus. Not surprisingly, many fragments of *The Book of Enoch* were found among the Dead Sea Scrolls in 1968, along with other apocalyptic literature. There was already an established connection between these kinds of apocalyptic claims and the Jewish sect of the Essenes, who were living out there in the wilderness of the Jordan River preparing for the End of the World, by keeping themselves pure and undefiled and ready for the Judgment which was to come. Thus, it is not remarkable that the patriarch Enoch is mentioned in both the book of Ecclesiasticus and the Epistle to the Hebrews. Ecclesiasticus reads that "Enoch pleased the Lord and was taken up, (as) an example of repentance to all generations" (44.16). The Epistle to the Hebrews (11:15) reads: "'By faith Enoch was taken so that he did not experience death' and 'he was not found, because God had taken him.' For it was attested before he was taken away that 'he had pleased God.'" The New Testament Epistle of St. Jude mentions "*The Book of Enoch*" by name, and then quotes from it directly (1.14-15). Thus in the early

church, *The Book of Enoch* was often considered as Holy Scripture, as it was in the Epistle of Barnabas (4:3) and by some of the early Church Fathers, such as Athenagoras, Clement of Alexandria, or Tertullian, (Tertullian) who wrote about 200 C.E. that the book had been rejected by the Jews as scripture specifically because it purportedly contained prophecies pertaining to Jesus, but soon after that time, *The Book of Enoch* became lost to us.

For outside of Ethiopia, *The Book of Enoch* was considered lost until the beginning of the seventeenth century, when the book was found there in the Ethiopian (Ge'ez) dialect. *The Book of Enoch* only survives in its entirety in this Ethiopic translation and interestingly *The Book of Enoch* is part of the Old Testament Scriptures used there by the Christian Ethiopian Tewahedo Orthodox Church, the largest Oriental Orthodox Church, as well as by the Ethiopian Jewish community of Beta Israel. Thus, there is little doubt that *The Book of Enoch* was influential in molding New Testament ideas and expectations about the Messiah, the Son of Man, the Kingdom of God, and the Resurrection of the dead. They may have got the timing of the End of the World wrong, but some scholars have argued that all of the writers of the New Testament were familiar with it and were more or less influenced by it.

Now while these various apocalyptic writings do not all agree with each other exactly in terms of their details, they reflect a general belief and expectation at that time that the world of this age was soon coming to an end, and that a great Judgment of all the people on earth, and not just the Jewish people but all the people, was coming, and after that judgment, those deemed righteous would live in peace forever in the Kingdom of God, either here on earth or perhaps later in heaven. We hear echoes of this kind of thinking in John, the Baptist, with St. Paul, and especially with Jesus in the Gospels, all warning us to stay awake, to repent, to watch and keep vigilant, because no one knows at what hour 'one like the Son of Man' will come down from the clouds for the Great Judgment, which will mark the end of this age and the arrival of the Kingdom of God. So, keep awake, we are told! This reverent vigilance for the Coming of the Son of Man is the traditional theme of the Season of Advent, which starts for us today. AMEN.