

'HOPE FOR THE EARTH' IN THE EARLY JUDAIC ERA (JEWISH APOCALYPTICISM)?

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Abstract

It is argued that the early Judaic/inter-testamental period was a time of major changes in all walk of Jewish life in Palestine. This was directly or indirectly the result of Hellenism. Individuals and groups of people reacted in various ways to this phenomenon. Some were anti-Hellenistically inclined, others accommodated it totally, whereas still other groups adapted to some extent. Three prominent groups in Judaism (Sadducees, Pharisees and the Essenes) are analysed by means of a cultural anthropological method. The author comes to the conclusion that the Sadducees were primarily politically minded; the Pharisees adapted and survived the Jewish wars. The Essenes adopted an evasion 'theology' in which heaven and not earth was all-important.

Introduction

The so-called early Judaic/inter-testamental period is characterised by change. This is the result of various factors, of which a major contributing one was certainly the impact of Hellenism on the various societies in the ancient Near East. In Palestine and more specifically in Judah this all-encompassing system directly or indirectly¹ changed the face of Judaism dramatically. These changes in turn again led to divergent reactions in Jewish society seeking to cultivate some hope in a seemingly 'hopeless' political situation. Some groups were fiercely anti-Hellenistically inclined (Essenes?), whereas others actually embraced this novel system in the process losing their identity (Sadducees, Philo of Alexandria in Egypt). A third grouping followed a middle of the road approach by utilising Hellenistic ideas when they deemed it necessary (Pharisees).

One thing that can be stated for certain is that nothing remained unchanged under the pressures of political and other changes of that period. In the final analysis it led to people seeking novel ways of making sense of their lives. But before attending to the issue of 'hope for the earth', a cursory methodical orientation is imperative.

1. Theoretical orientation

The question mark in the title is an indication of a number of problems relating to this issue. For one, it is an indication of the uncertainty I feel of finding any indication of hope for the earth in the writings of especially the apocalypics of that period. Depending on one's definition, apocalypics after all tend to evade the earthly reality. I shall therefore spread my net a little wider, always remembering that the scope should not be too unrealistically broad. There is, nevertheless, continuity between the situation in Palestine before the Babylonian exile and that during the early Judaic era. Even though one finds

1 DJ Heyneman (*Godsdienstige versplintering in die vroeë Judaïsme* (200-63 v.C.): 'n Kultuur-antropologiese analise. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, 1998, University of Stellenbosch) has just argued that Hellenism indirectly led to a Jewish Renaissance.

clear signs of discontinuity between what is called by some (Otzen 1990:8) Classical Israel and Early Judaism², there are also definite correspondences (Blenkinsopp 1981 and Talmon 1986). Both are nationalistic in nature; the awareness of being a chosen people with a right to a land is characteristic of both systems. The determinative role which the law plays in both is an indication of continuity and, more specifically, the interrelatedness of politics and religion. The way in which the law functions in Early Judaism (Cook 1997), however, is a clear indication of how different these religious systems are.

There is also continuity in the way problems were solved. Trito-Isaiah and Zachariaiah are involved in attempts to make sense of hopeless political situations. The latter has to deal with the reality of the fact that the rebuilt temple is not even a shadow of the original temple of Solomon. As time goes by the prophetic voice is no longer heard and novel ways of making sense of life, of hearing the voice of God, are created. Consequently, during the post-exilic period, one finds the inauguration of the so-called *bat qol* (the voice of God), etc.

There are many more problems to be addressed before one can begin to look for 'hopeful' perspectives in the literature of early Judaism. For one, it is not immediately evident what should be understood under the rubric apocalypticism. I have decided to avoid spending too much time on issues of definition. Therefore I deliberately do not discuss existing definitions of the apocalyptic and apocalypticism. In this regard scholars distinguish between 'apocalypse' as a literary genre, 'apocalypticism' as a social ideology and 'apocalyptic eschatology' as a set of ideas and motifs that may also be found in other genres and social settings (Kraft & Nickelsburg 1986:345). What prompted my specific treatment of the subject is that there is an uncanny correspondence between Seleucid and Roman Palestine and South African politico-religious history. I am sure the reader will observe the parallels between the socio-religious groups I shall be discussing and certain groups especially in apartheid South Africa.

Secondly, the sources to be analysed are all characterised by intricate textual and hermeneutical problems. This should become abundantly clear from the cursory historical orientation I shall present below.

On a methodological niveau I operate with the basic principle that the relationship between *text* and *context* is fundamental to our understanding of any literature. The research for this contribution was done by adopting a cultural-anthropological approach, based on the system-theoretical premise that culture embraces all aspects of human life, and that it is therefore impossible to study only one aspect, such as religion, in isolation. This also means that any change in one cultural domain will, of necessity, affect some or all of the other cultural domains of the particular group to a greater or lesser degree.

In this contribution I concentrate on specific religious groups of the early Judaic/intertestamental period, i.e. the 3rd century B.C.E. through to the 1st century CE. The changes in the political life of the Jews during this period, in the areas of the economy, social values, cosmology, etc. of course also have to be taken into account. It was particularly the major changes in the political life of the Jews that affected their religious life and this, in turn, had an important effect on influential groups within Judaism.

2 Cf. Kraft & Nickelsburg (1986:1ff.) for a discussion of the various definitions of the period under discussion. Scholars use terms such as 'Second Temple Judaism', 'post-biblical' and 'prerabbinic' Judaism, 'late' Judaism, 'period between the Bible and the Mishna'. I have opted for the definition 'Early Judaism'. This is the period from Alexander the Great to about the time of the Roman Emperor, Hadrian (333 B.C.E. - 135 A.D.).

2. Historical orientation

It is of the utmost importance to gain some insight into the political history of and especially religious developments during the inter-testamental period/early Judaism (during the reign of the Persian and the Hellenistic empires) in order to understand specific reactions to the repressive situation in which the Jews found themselves. Both the political and social factors that influenced the Judaism of the day are therefore discussed, albeit cursorily. The emphasis is on the religious groups that existed during this period in Palestine, especially in Judah (the Sadducees, Pharisees and the Essenes). It is thus my aim to help us to develop a historical consciousness of the inter-testamental/early Judaic period. This entails a critical approach towards the available sources in order to understand religious complexities of the day.

It is important to remember that the historical heavy-weights of this period were the Persians (750 B.C.E. - 651 A.D.), the Hellenists (Alexander the Great and the Diadochi) (the Seleucid empire [312-63 B.C.E.] as well as the Ptolemean empire [323 - 63 B.C.E.]) and the Romans (63 B.C.E. - 135 A.D.). During the Hellenistic era Palestine was under Ptolemaic (Egyptian) rule (301-200 B.C.E.) and under Seleucid (Syrian) dominion (200-63 B.C.E.). The Jewish population was fundamentally influenced by these major powers.

From this cursory orientation it should be clear that it was especially the impact of Alexander the Great and his followers that influenced Judaism fundamentally. Hellenism was the phenomenon that was characterised by the unification of Greek culture from the West with the culture of the East. It was a complicated yet utterly attractive phenomenon that influenced all facets of human life fundamentally. The East, including Judaism, reacted diversely to the aggressive expansion of Hellenism. As stated already some groups accepted it totally or partially, others rejected it to a greater or lesser extent. With the mentioned cultural-anthropological approach in mind I now discuss a number of socio-religious groups in the Jewish society of the day with the aim to shed light on the issue of 'hope for the earth'.

3. Socio-political and religious groups

One of the most difficult questions pertaining to the issues under discussion concerns the available sources. On the one hand, there is a notorious lack of primary sources for reconstruction. As far as the Pharisees and the Sadducees are concerned the same sources are available: Josephus, the NT and rabbinic writings. On the other hand, the extant sources are coloured by a certain amount of bias towards certain groupings. Christian sources are fiercely anti-Jewish, be it Pharisaic or Sadducean. Josephus himself is the end-product of a highly complicated childhood and later endeavours to come to terms with his nationality in a changing environment. His description of the Jewish wars (originally written in Aramaic and later translated into Greek) is directed by the question as to who in the final analysis is responsible for this devastation, the Romans, the revolutionaries or the Jews in general. He had an ambivalent attitude towards individual groups. He was a Pharisee by birth (*Vitae* 2#11) and became a 'believing' member of this group at the age of 19 (*Vitae* 2#12). He also states that he tried to become part of the Essenes without success. His *Antiquities* should also be seen as tendentious, if not propagandistic, as he deliberately endeavours to demonstrate the Israelite contribution to human history.

The critical study of rabbinical sources has undergone a dramatic change since the aggressive writings by Jacob Neusner. He was one of the first Jewish scholars to systematically query, on scientific grounds, the validity of rabbinical statements in the Mishna, Talmud, etc. He consistently applied a literary-critical analytical method in order to

evaluate rabbinical traditions and actually inaugurated a novel way of approaching these traditions. In the final analysis he warns against a dogmatic acceptance on face value of inter-textual combinations of these ancient traditions. Peter Schäfer also demonstrated a sound approach towards these sources.

In what follows I shall endeavour to describe the groups mentioned, keeping in mind the lack of 'reliable' sources.

A. The sadducees = the higher classes (intellectuals), pro-establishment

It is extremely difficult to evaluate this grouping in Judaism as there are no writings available from the group itself. They are described by persons who were hostile towards them. The New Testament, for one, does not describe them positively (Acts 23). The rabbis, mostly Pharisees, were fiercely anti-Sadducean (Grabbe 1992:485). Josephus also held a rather negative view of them as can be gleaned from the following quotation: 'The Sadducees are even among themselves, rather boorish in their behaviour, and in their intercourse with their peers, are as rude as to aliens' (*Jewish Wars* 2.8.14 # 166). It must be remembered that Josephus, being a Pharisee himself, was biased against other groups in the Judaism of the day. What can be deduced from this statement is that they were considered to be part of the upper class. This is borne out by their political associations. They ruled the Sanhedrin until the Pharisees took over in the Hasmonean government and again later during the time of Roman government (Acts 23).

Origins

Because of the lack of primary sources it is practically impossible to determine their origins. Some believe that the Sadducees derived their name from a certain Zadok, who in the 2nd century B.C.E. decided to depart from the main stream of Judaism in order to found his own independent party (Otzen 1990:111). Others again trace them to the high priest during the reign of King David, who actually initiated the Zadokite priestly order. Even though there could certainly be an indirect link to this figure, it is much too early in the history of the Jewish people to be taken seriously as an option.

It is also uncertain when they began functioning as an independent political party. By 110 B.C.E., during the reign of John Hyrcanus, they seem to have become a force to be reckoned with. Hyrcanus (a Hasmonian) tried to be more accommodating towards Hellenism, in direct contrast to his predecessors, the Maccabees. A fact that must be kept in mind is that the higher classes also underwent tremendous changes during the inter-testamental period. The Sadducees were therefore not the same grouping by the time of the fall of Jerusalem (70 A.D.). As suggested, there is also a direct relationship between the Sadducees and the Hasmoneans. As time went by they became progressively more pro-Hellenistic and expanded economically. The Sadducees realised that it would no longer be possible for them to exist in total isolation. They therefore adapted for *nationalistic/chauvinistic* reasons. They became the establishment of the day.

What were their beliefs?

From the biased secondary writings on this group it would seem as if they were religiously conservative but politically liberal. This inevitably led to inconsistent reactions and pragmatism in the religious sphere.

Their religious views are also difficult to determine. The following characteristics of their religious views are usually referred to:

1. They believed only in the five books of Moses.
2. They were anti-apocalyptic, anti-revolutionary.
3. They did not believe in the resurrection.

They rejected the belief in angels as mere speculation.

Whereas the last 3 can be taken as relatively certain, there is no consensus as to the first one. The main problem is a canonical one. According to LeMoyné (1972:357) it is possible that the Sadducees actually used more than just the Pentateuch and that a book such as Daniel, with its references to angels, could have been rejected by them.

In the final analysis they were more politically than religiously orientated. They were quite content with their current situation, having political power. That is the primary reason why they did not survive the catastrophe of 70 A.D. They had adapted to the extent that they were no longer recognisable as a distinct group.

B. The Pharisees - the middle classes, moderates

Origins

The stormy years after 170 B.C.E. (Antiochus Epiphanes) were determinative in the formation of Pharisaism as an independent movement. It was the period of rebellion in Judah, resulting in the Maccabean wars. Pharisaism commenced as a national religious development among the middle classes and the priests (Otzen 1990:116). They are apparently related to the Hasidim, the so-called 'holy ones', who formed the popular background to the Maccabean wars. This connection, however, remains problematic as we have very little information about the Hasidim (Grabbe 1992:466). Be that as it may, by the time of the Maccabean revolts there existed various religio-political groups in Palestine. The expected conflict between the Hellenised Jews (the so-called Hellenisers) and the orthodox Jews (Hasidim?) led to this development (the origin of the Pharisees).

They were extremely active on the religious level. They warned the Jewish nation against the inherent dangers of Hellenism. Therefore the law played such a prominent part in their religious activities. It became the norm for each aspect of daily life. They also stressed holiness and laws of purity that had to be obeyed by each Jew, not just the priests. This led to the development of independent groups (fraternities) that functioned as exclusive 'clubs' (Otzen 1990:119). In course of time these developed into independent 'schools' with esteemed 'teachers' (rabbis) in control. One example is Rabbi Hillel, who was less legalistic than, for instance Rabbi Shammai. They both lived in the time of King Herod the Great and were regarded as prominent rabbinic scholars during the early Christian era. Johanan ben Zakai is another example. He survived the fall of Jerusalem (68-70 A.D.) and founded a new 'academic' centre at Jamnia (Javneh) (Deist 1988:19). This is where Judaism was restructured after the devastation of Jerusalem. During this period various brilliant Jewish scholars helped to rebuild Judaism. The Hebrew Bible was probably finally compiled and various Jewish documents like the Mishna and the Talmud originated during this time, the final forms are naturally to be dated later. These are documents based upon specific Jewish exegetical practices, which were in the final instance aimed at the fulfilment of 'the whole law'.

One famous Jewish rabbi, Akiba, actually supported the rebellion under the messianic leadership of Bar Kochba in 135 A.D. that was brutally suppressed by Hadrian, the Roman emperor. A prominent difference between the Pharisees and the Sadducees is thus that the former were not typical establishment people, as the Sadducees were. They rebelled when they deemed it necessary. However, they also adapted to a large extent in order to survive.

As a matter of fact, if they had not intelligently adjusted their views, *inter alia*, by Johanan ben Zakkai hailing emperor Vespasian as the Messiah, Judaism would have had a totally different face after the fall of Jerusalem. The Hebrew Bible would not have been available in the format it has today. This would certainly have had a devastating effect on the three existing monotheistic religions (Judaism, Christianity and Islam).

What were their beliefs?

1. They were religiously and politically conservative. This led to legalism; they applied purity laws to all aspects of all Jew's life.
2. The oral Torah played a determinative role in addition to the written Torah. In this way man's life could be regulated in detail.
3. They departed from the perspective that holy scripture (Torah=law) provided answers to all of life's problems. They therefore developed rules according to which people had to live (halakah = from *HLK* 'to walk'). The Mishna and Talmud contain thousands of such rules.

C. The nationalistic-religious revolutionaries, lower classes

This grouping consisted of two diametrically opposed movements:

1. The *radicals*, who physically opposed the Roman oppressors. Examples are the zealots (Massada), the Herodians, the Sicarii, the Idumeans, etc. Josephus writes about this history in his Jewish wars. They were eliminated by the Romans.
2. The *Essenes* form a separate group. They were in a certain sense pacifists, although they expected a radical intervention by God against the Romans.

Who were they?

Surprisingly enough, on the face of it they seem to be non-Jewish.

1. They departed from mainstream Judaism of the day and went to live to the north-west of the Dead Sea, adjacent to wadi (creek) Qumran.
2. They had a rigid hierarchical structure with difficult prescriptions.
3. All possessions were communal property.
4. They were ascetically orientated. Therefore scholars (De Vaux) initially thought they were Christian monks!
5. They departed from the temple service, which was the central institution in Israel! However, they followed the law literally.
6. Even though they lived like the lower classes their leaders initially came from the upper or middle classes.

What were their beliefs?

1. They stressed cultic purity. At the settlement at Qumran (Khirbet Qumran) various baths and pools were discovered. There are striking correspondences with the beliefs of the Pharisees.
2. They exhibit certain syncretistic religious characteristics. Josephus stated that they had the same belief in the existence of the soul as the 'sons of the Greeks' (pre-existent and immortal).
3. They exhibit *dualistic* characteristics in their religion: the war of the sons of the light against the sons of the darkness. This could be the result of the Persian dualism which the Jews encountered in Babylon (cf. EM Louw 1998).

4. They follow a unique *exegetical model*; the so-called Peshet method of interpretation is encountered in the Habakkuk commentary (Lohse 1971). The so-called Teacher of Righteousness quotes a phrase from Habakkuk and interprets it in a contemporary way. He, *inter alia*, takes the Kittim as the Romans.
5. They expected two Messiahs, one like Aaron, the priestly and one like Moses, the political Messiah (1QS 9:10-11).

The fact that they actually fled to the Dead Sea is an indication that they were politically indifferent. They tried to evade all political issues by separating themselves from the rest of Judaism. Ironically they met with the same fate as all other parties in Palestine in the early Christian era, excepting the Pharisees; they all disappeared after the fall of Jerusalem, having no say whatsoever in the future development of Judaism.

4. Hope for the earth in early Judaic writings

With this historical orientation as background, it now remains for me to try and find 'hopeful' perspectives in the writings mentioned. It should be immediately evident that the Sadducees will have no contribution to make regarding this issue. They endeavoured to solve all problems in a political way. They represented the establishment and largely co-operated with the political leaders of the day, whether the Ptolemeans or the Seleucids. We also do not have much literature available on this Jewish grouping. Pharisaic Judaic writings are different. The rabbis certainly approached problems from a religious perspective, as can be seen in their legalistic writings. However, rabbinic Judaism is a complicated research field and, for the sake of this symposium, I have decided to take a closer look at one of the writings of the Essenes, namely the so-called 'War Scroll'.

The main reason why I have chosen this writing is that it is one of the Essene documents that shows traits of end-time expectations. It is the best-known eschatological composition and is known as the War of the Sons of Light against the Sons of Darkness, a description of the final eschatological war between the armies of the light and those of darkness. It exhibits a strange combination of the heavenly and the earthly. A real war is apparently described, and consequently heathen nations such as Edom, Moab, the Ammonites and the Philistines are mentioned, as well as the Kittim of Assyria and Egypt! However, they are called the army of Belial, which could indeed be assisted by Belial and his angelic warriors (Chapter 16:11). As a counterpart, there is Israel and the holy beings (angels) (18:1) of the light. After an intense series of battles the sons of darkness will ultimately be defeated when God finally intervenes (Chapter 18). The success of the war is guaranteed because it is preordained.

Let me quote a passage from this scroll (columns VIII and IX):

'The whole army, seven formations, twenty-eight thousand warriors, and the horsemen, six thousand in number, all these shall take up the pursuit so as to destroy the enemy in the battle of God for an eternal annihilation. The priests shall blow for them the trumpets of pursuit, and the warriors shall spread out against the whole enemy force for a pursuit of annihilation, while the cavalry roll back the enemy at the sides of the field of battle until their extermination. During the assault the priests shall sound a fanfare from afar, and shall not come into the midst of the slain so as to be defiled by their impure blood, for they are holy; they shall not desecrate the oil of their priestly anointment with the blood of the nations of vanity'. (Yadin 1962:298 & 300)

The symbolic presentation of the war in the war scroll may have had many applications which are not mutually exclusive. It could have been created for actual or future use in war.

It could therefore have been used to provide the religious motivation for Jewish troops facing a well-trained and forceful Roman army. It is also possible that it was used for propagandistic purposes (Charlesworth 1994). Finally, it could have been written for liturgical purposes or for personal meditation, to bolster the hopes of a suppressed community that had no real power.

Be that as it may, the OT influence can clearly be perceived in this central Essene writing. The armies are organised, as the Israelites were when wandering in the wilderness, into tribes, camps, families and numbers (Exod 18:21-25). The priests have an all-important function in the war itself. The special position Israel receives in the divine plan of God is important. Israel is, of course, understood in a chauvinistic sense, for they, the Qumran community, are the real Israel who are living in the end times. Their strict way of life, with an emphasis on purification and an adherence to the law of Moses, represents an endeavour to return to an ideal past. This has led some to describe the eschatology of Qumran as 'restorative' as against 'utopian' eschatology (Schiffman 1989:1) that reaches out to an ideal future. To me it seems as if there are elements of both at Qumran. The restoration that will, however, take place is also of an idealistic nature. Schiffman is of the opinion that the combination of the two trends, restorative and utopian, appeared for the first time at Qumran.

These eschatological expectations have a bearing on the concept of Messianism found at Qumran. It is exactly this final war, the ensuing recapture of Jerusalem and the rebuilding of the temple that will pave the way for the Anointed, inaugurating the eschaton (Dimant 1984:540). This readily leads to a state of eternal bliss for the sons of the light, whereas their adversaries are relegated to eternal fire (1QS 2:4; 4:7 and 1QM 1:13).

The catastrophic historical situation of Seleucid Palestine lies at the root of these 'idealistic' views at Qumran. This crisis-filled period craved novel solutions and salvation. Solutions were primarily based upon OT concepts. The Essenes expected imminently the eschatological war that would usher in a totally new order, devoid of oppression and suffering. The long-awaited coming of the Messiahs would simply be the realization of God's divine, preordained plan for the sons of light at the end of the days (Cook 1997:1120).

5. Conclusion

I am sure the reader will have observed the uncanny correspondence between Seleucid Palestine and the South African politico-religious history I mentioned earlier. It is certainly also evident that similar marginalised approaches to socio-religious problems should be avoided. In terms of the theme of this symposium it should now be clear that the evasion theology which is characteristic of the Essene movement is a form of escapism from the earth. The hope that suffuses the War Scroll is a craving for an ideal future, where the oppressing Romans will no longer be around and where, not the earth, but heaven is all-important!

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