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THE FATE OF THE DEAD

STUDIES ON THE JEWISH AND CHRISTIAN APOCALYPSES

THE FATE OF THE DEAD

STUDIES ON THE JEWISH AND CHRISTIAN APOCALYPSES

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the Apocalypse of Peter, it must be used with great caution in studying the Apocalypse of Peter. Priority must be given to the Ethiopic version.

### 3 *Outline and Summary of the Apocalypse of Peter*

The Apocalypse of Peter can be divided into three main sections, whose contents can be briefly outlined as follows:

- i *Discourse on the Signs and the Time of the Parousia*
  - 1:1-3 The disciples' enquiry
  - 1:4-8 The parousia will be unmistakable
  - 2 The parable of the fig tree: the false Messiah and the martyrs of the last days
- ii *Vision of the Judgment and its Explanation*
  - 3 Picture of the judgment and Peter's distress
  - 4 The resurrection
  - 5 The cosmic conflagration
  - 6:1-6 The last judgment
  - 6:7-9 The judgment of the evil spirits
  - 7-12 The punishments in hell
  - 13 The punishments confirmed as just
  - 14:1 The prayers of the elect save some
  - 14:2-3 The elect inherit the promises
  - 14:4-6 Peter's earthly future
- iii *Visions of the Reward of the Righteous*
  - 15 Vision of Moses and Elijah
  - 16:1-6 Vision of Paradise
  - 16:7-17:1 Vision of the true Temple and Audition about the true Messiah
  - 17:2-7 The ascension

For readers coming fresh to the Apocalypse of Peter, a fuller summary of its contents may be helpful:

- i *Discourse on the Signs and the Time of the Parousia (chapters 1-2)*  
[Although it is not made clear by the opening of the work, the events take place after Jesus' resurrection.] Jesus and his disciples are on the Mount of Olives. They ask him about the signs and the time of his parousia and the end of the world. Jesus warns them not to believe

the false claimants to messiahship who will come. His own coming to judgment will be in unmistakable glory.

In order to indicate the time of the end, Jesus gives them the parable of the fig tree: when its shoots become tender, the end of the world will come. When Peter asks for explanation, Jesus tells another parable of a fig tree: the barren fig tree which will be uprooted unless it bears fruit. The fig tree in both parables is Israel. The sprouting of the fig tree will take place when a false messiah arises and Israel follows him. When they reject him, he will put many to death. They will be martyrs. Enoch and Elijah will show them that he is not the true messiah.

ii *Vision of the Judgment and its Explanation (chapters 3-14)*

Jesus shows Peter a vision of the judgment of all people at the last day. Peter is distressed at the fate of sinners, but his claim that it would have been better for them not to have been created is rejected by Jesus, who promises to show Peter the sinners' deeds (in order to enable him to appreciate the justice of their condemnation).

A long prophecy (by Jesus) of the judgment of sinners follows. It begins with an account of the resurrection, which must take place so that all humanity may appear before God on the day of judgment. God's word will reclaim all the dead, because for God nothing is impossible. Then will follow the cosmic conflagration, in which a flood of fire will consume the heavens and the sea and drive all people to judgment in the river of fire. Then Jesus Christ will come and be enthroned and crowned as judge. All will be judged according to their deeds, which will appear in order to accuse the wicked. The river of fire through which all must pass will prove their innocence or guilt. The angels will take the wicked to hell. The demons will also be brought to judgment and condemned to eternal punishment.

There follows a long description of the punishments in hell. A specific, different punishment is described for each of twenty-one types of sinner. The types of sinner and their punishments are:

- (1) those who blasphemed the way of righteousness—hung by tongues;
- (2) those who denied justice—pit of fire;
- (3) women who enticed men to adultery—hung by necks;
- (4) adulterers—hung by genitals;
- (5) murderers—poisonous animals and worms;
- (6) women who aborted their children—in a pit of excrement up to the throat;
- (7) infanticides—their milk produces flesh-eating animals;

- (8) persecutors and betrayers of Christ's righteous ones—scourged and eaten by unsleeping worm;
- (9) those who perverted and betrayed Christ's righteousness—bite tongues, hot irons in eyes;
- (10) those who put the martyrs to death with their lies—lips cut off, fire in mouth and entrails;
- (11) those who trusted in their riches and neglected the poor—fiery sharp column, clothed in rags;
- (12) usurers—in pit of excrement up to the knees;
- (13) male and female practising homosexuals—fall from precipice repeatedly;
- (14) makers of idols—scourged by chains of fire;
- (15) those who forsook God's commandments and obeyed demons—burning in flames;
- (16) those who did not honour their parents—roll down fiery precipice repeatedly;
- (17) those who disobeyed the teaching of their fathers and elders—hung and attacked by flesh-eating birds;
- (18) girls who had sex before marriage—dark clothes, flesh dissolved;
- (19) disobedient slaves—bite tongues continuously;
- (20) those who gave alms hypocritically—blind and deaf, coals of fire;
- (21) male and female sorcerers—on wheel of fire in the river of fire.

The elect will be shown the punishments of the damned. The latter cry for mercy, but the angel in charge of hell, Tartarouchos, tells them it is now too late for repentance. The damned acknowledge the justice of their punishment. But when the righteous intercede for the damned, Jesus Christ the judge will grant their prayers. Those for whom they pray will be baptised in the Acherusian lake and will share the destiny of the elect. The elect will enter Jesus Christ's eternal kingdom, with the patriarchs, and his promises to them will be fulfilled.

Concluding the prophecy of judgment, Jesus now addresses Peter personally about his future. He is to spread the Gospel through the whole world. He is to go to Rome, where he will die a martyr 'at the hands of the son of the one who is in Hades.'<sup>9</sup>

iii *Visions of the Reward of the Righteous (chapters 15-17)*

Jesus and the disciples go to 'the holy mountain,' where the disciples are granted five revelations. The first is of Moses and Elijah, appearing in resplendent beauty as heavenly beings. When Peter asks where

<sup>9</sup> Rainer fragment.

the other patriarchs are, they are shown the heavenly paradise. Jesus says that this destiny of the patriarchs is also to be that of those who are persecuted for his righteousness.

When Peter offers to construct three tents for Jesus, Moses and Elijah, he is severely rebuked by Jesus, but promised a vision and an audition (the third and fourth of the five revelations) to enlighten him. The vision is of the tent which the Father has made for Jesus and the elect. The audition is of a voice from heaven declaring Jesus to be God's beloved Son who should be obeyed. Finally, the disciples witness the ascension of Jesus, with Moses and Elijah, through the heavens. Jesus takes with him 'people in the flesh.' The disciples descend the mountain, glorifying God, who has written the names of the righteous in the book of life in heaven.

## II THE LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEXTS

### 1 *Literary Context*

We cannot be sure whether the title *Apocalypse of Peter* is original. It does not occur in the Ethiopic version, which has a lengthy title or prologue which certainly does not belong to the original text. But the title *Apocalypse of Peter* is already used by the Muratorian Canon and by Clement of Alexandria, and so it may well be original. It is true that many of the works which now bear the title *Apocalypse* came to be so called only at a later date (quite apart from those which have been so called only by modern scholars), but the period in which the *Apocalypse of Peter* must have been written—the early second century C.E.—is one in which it is plausible to hold that the term ἀποκάλυψις could be being used as the description of a literary work containing the account of a revelation given by a supernatural being to a prophet or visionary.

But whether or not its title is original, the *Apocalypse of Peter* certainly belongs to that rather broad genre of ancient literature which we call apocalypses. Indeed, its date—in the early second century C.E.—places it in a golden age, perhaps the golden age of Jewish and Christian apocalyptic literature. The period between the two great Jewish revolts (between 70 and 132 C.E.) produced the greatest of all the Jewish and Christian apocalypses: the *Book of Revelation*, 4 *Ezra* and 2 *Baruch*—works in which the genre of apocalyptic became the vehicle for truly great literature and truly profound theology. A considerable number of other extant Jewish and Christian apocalypses also date from the late first and early second centuries: the *Apocalypse of Abraham*, the *Ladder of Jacob*, the *Ascension of*

Isaiah, the Greek *Apocalypse of Baruch* (3 *Baruch*), the *Shepherd of Hermas*, and quite probably also the *Parables of Enoch*, the Slavonic *Apocalypse of Enoch* (2 *Enoch*), and so-called 5 *Ezra*. It is hard to be sure whether this period really was exceptionally productive of apocalypses, or whether that impression is due to the accidents of survival. There certainly were more Jewish apocalypses in earlier periods, such as the early first century C.E., than have survived, and it is always very important to remember that all extant ancient Jewish apocalypses, with the exception of Daniel and the apocalyptic works found at Qumran, have been preserved by Christians. Many which were not congenial to Christian use may not have survived. With due allowance for these factors, however, it does seem probable that the writing of apocalypses especially flourished in the period from 70 C.E. to about the middle of the second century. The reasons will be partly that the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in 70 C.E. posed for Judaism issues of theodicy and eschatology which were most suitably wrestled with or answered in the literary genre of apocalypse, and partly that much of early Christianity remained during this period a strongly eschatological religious movement which therefore found one of its most natural forms of expression in the apocalypse. I do not make the mistake of considering eschatology the sole content of apocalypses,<sup>10</sup> but most of the apocalypses I have mentioned do in fact focus especially on matters of eschatology, as the *Apocalypse of Peter* also does. Of course, during the same period—the second century—the genre apocalypse was also adopted and adapted by Christian Gnostics as a vehicle for the kind of revelations they wished to present.

The *Apocalypse of Peter* has some close links, by way of themes and traditions, with some of the Jewish apocalypses of its period: 4 *Ezra*, 2 *Baruch*, the *Parables of Enoch*. If, as I shall argue, the *Apocalypse of Peter* is a Palestinian Jewish Christian work, these links with contemporary Palestinian Jewish apocalypses are especially interesting. They help to explain the preservation of these Jewish works by Christians, by showing us the context of Palestinian Jewish Christian apocalyptic in which these Jewish apocalypses would have been of interest. It was doubtless in such Christian circles as those from which the *Apocalypse of Peter* comes that Jewish apocalypses such as 4 *Ezra* were read and then passed on to the wider church which later preserved them.

<sup>10</sup> This mistake has been corrected especially by C. Rowland, *The Open Heaven* (London: SPCK, 1982).