

PREFACE

A comprehensive history of Christian Apocalyptic literature still remains to be written. The available studies on the subject hardly go beyond the stage of introductory surveys,¹ and a work like Bousset's Antichrist,² in spite of its value (being even now the most extensive study in the field), is both old and limited to the study of a single motif. There are several reasons for this state of affairs: a long tradition of contempt on the part of theologians for this obscure, unintellectual and somewhat peripheral genre; concentration on the period surrounding the New Testament and the search for a matrix of early Christian theology; and difficulties created by the transmission of a tradition that, as long as it was alive, was never guided or controlled by a responsible body of authorities as was, for instance, the rabbinical tradition in Judaism. Apocalyptic writing was always to a large extent "underground literature" which remained anonymous or disguised itself under famous names of the past. By its very nature, it remained exposed to continuous adaptation, reworking and expansion of earlier traditional material.

And yet, apocalyptic writing has been for centuries, for Jews, Christians and Muslims, a cherished way of affirming faith and hope in the face of temporal miseries. Moreover, not long ago, the late P.J. Alexander reminded

us of the interest that medieval apocalypses have for historians.³ In this respect the value of apocalyptic writing could be compared to that of Hagiography. Both belong to the realm of Volksliteratur, even if Apocalyptic literature often presents itself in a more "scholarly" or enlightened disguise. Like Hagiography, Apocalyptic writing can provide precious information about social conditions and values, political views, ethical concerns and, in general, the fears and the hopes of the people who wrote or transmitted it.

There has been in the past decades a revival of interest in Apocalyptic literature, which has produced many good editions and studies of individual works.⁴ Still, the uncultivated field is immense. A particular area which has been overlooked by scholars is the Christian Apocalyptic written in the Middle East after the Muslim conquest.⁵ Most of the available editions and studies come from the past century. What we know of it, however, represents only the tip of the iceberg. Many works lie unedited, unexamined, even in MSS available in the West. Many others, one has every reason to think, may be found in MSS preserved in Middle East libraries.

This situation makes it imperative to attempt to provide editions of as many as possible of the extant texts. Then, the assessment of the traditions, and the establishment of lines of interdependence and influence would be possible, as well as a comparison with the Jewish and

Muslim apocalyptic traditions of the medieval period (and, for the Syriac speaking area, with the Pahlavi apocalypses). There are enough indications in the available texts to allow one to conclude that those traditions interacted mutually.⁶ The confrontation between the main religions of the Middle East that took place at other levels of the intellectual endeavor was also carried on in the apocalyptic traditions, which from the beginning had been a preferred medium for defending and strengthening a tradition threatened from outside by religious propaganda and political pressure.

The present work is but a first step toward the stated goal. It includes the edition and the English version of two Christian apocalypses from the early Islamic period. The first text is the apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius (hereafter, PM), one of the most influential apocalypses ever written. Its influence in Byzantium and the Latin West has been known for a long time, but even the most preliminary research shows that it also set the pace for many of the later apocalypses produced in the Syriac speaking world, and to some extent, even in Egypt and Ethiopia. Together with PM, we will reedit the apocalyptic fragment published by F. Nau in 1917, which he considered to be the original text of PM.⁷ The edition of the Syriac text of PM as extant in MS Vat. Syr. 58 makes possible for the first time a minute comparison of these two Syriac texts.

The second text, the Sahidic apocalypse of Pseudo-Athanasius (hereafter, PA), is probably the earliest surviving apocalyptic text from Egypt which has to do with the Muslims. Its importance for the history of Coptic literature can hardly be exaggerated. As with PM, the edition of this text provides a sound starting point for the study of other apocalypses coming from the same region. It may even be a key text for the understanding of the development of Coptic literature after the Muslim conquest. It certainly throws light on the state of the Coptic Church a few generations after the arrival of the Muslims.

The edition of these texts is not only important for the student of Christian apocalypticism. Given their early date (PM comes from the second part of the seventh century and PA from the beginning of the eighth century), they are among the earliest witnesses to the Christian reaction in the East to the Islamic invasion. They prove, at the very least, that not all Christians in the East welcomed the Muslims as liberators from the Byzantine yoke, as one often finds it said in modern histories of the conquest.

I am deeply indebted to the staff of the Institute for Christian Oriental Research, of the Catholic University of America, for having introduced me to the world of Eastern Christianity, for their constant support throughout this project, and for their generosity in granting me scholar-

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NOTES

¹Cf., for instance, H. Weinel, "Die spätere christliche Apokalyptik," in Eucharisterion. Festschrift H. Gunkel, ed. by H. Schmidt, FRLANT 19 (Göttingen, 1923), vol. II, pp. 141-73; H. Gross, "Apokalypsen, apokryphe. I. des AT," LTK 1 (2nd ed., 1957), 696-98; J. Michl, "Apokalypsen, apokryphe. II. A. des NT," ibid., pp. 698-704; R. Schütz, "Apokalyptik III. Altchristliche Apokalyptik," RGK 1 (3rd ed., 1957) 467-69; H. Kraft, "Apokalyptik. IV. Kirchengeschichte," ibid., pp. 469-70; Ph. Vielhauer, "Apokalypsen und Verwandtes," in Neutestamentliche Apokryphen, ed. by W. Schneemelcher, vol. II (3rd ed.; Tübingen, 1964), pp. 407-54; K.H. Schwartz, "Apokalyptic/Apokalypsen. IV. Alte Kirche," TRE 3 (1978), 257-75; R. Konrad, "Apokalyptik/Apokalypsen. V. Mittelalter," ibid., pp. 275-80.

²W. Bousset, Der Antichrist in der Überlieferung des Judentums, des Neuen Testaments und der alten Kirche. Ein Beitrag zur Auslegung der Apokalypse (Göttingen, 1895).

³P.J. Alexander, "Medieval Apocalypses as Historical Sources," AHR 73 (1968), 997-1018.

⁴Cf., e.g., P.J. Alexander, ed., The Oracle of Baalbek, Dumbarton Oaks Studies X (Washington, D.C. 1967); the Syriac and Byzantine Apocalypses published by H. Schmoldt, Die Schrift "vom jungen Daniel" und "Daniels

letzte Vision" (Diss. Hamburg, 1972); the new edition of Adso's letter on the Antichrist by D. Verhelst, Adso Dervensis. De ortu et tempore Antichristi, necnon et tractatus qui ab eo dependunt, CC, Continuatio Mediaevalis 45 (Turnhout, 1976); and the new critical editions of the Greek Pseudo-Methodius by A. Lolos, Die Apokalypse des Ps.-Methodius, Beiträge zur klassischen Philologie 83 (Meisenheim am Glan, 1976); Die dritte und vierte Redaktion des Ps.-Methodios, Beiträge zur klassischen Philologie 94 (Meisenheim am Glan, 1978). A useful bibliography, at least for works from 400-1500 A.D., can be found in the survey of B. McGinn, Visions of the End (New York, 1979). One has to add in this connection the new English version of a collection of Pseudepigrapha edited by J.H. Charlesworth, whose first volume is devoted to Apocalyptic Literature and Testaments (New York, 1983). Cf. the excellent review by S. Brock in JJS 35 (1984), 200-09. The achievements of the study of Apocalypticism and apocalyptic literature in recent years are best seen in the contributions of the Apocalypse Group in the SBL Genres Project, cf. Apocalypse: The Morphology of a Genre, in Semeia 14 (1979), and in the Proceedings of the International Colloquium on Apocalypticism held in Uppsala in 1979, Apocalypticism in the Mediterranean World and the Near East, ed. by D. Hellholm (Tübingen, 1983).

⁵The latest comprehensive study of this particular chapter in the history of Christian apocalypticism is M.

Steinschneider, "Apokalypsen mit polemischer Tendenz," ZDMG
28 (1874), 627-57.

⁶One needs only to refer to the Armilos saga in late
Jewish apocalyptic or to the traditions concerning
al-dajjāl in Islam. Cf., especially, A. Abel,
"al-Dadjdjāl," in EI II (2nd ed., 1965), 76-77.

⁷F. Nau, "Méthodius-Clément-Andronicus," JA, XI Series
9 (1917), 415-71.