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# Divine Disclosure: An Introduction to Jewish Apocalyptic

David J. Reimer

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## Divine Disclosure: An introduction to Jewish Apocalyptic

D.S. Russell

Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992

xxi + 164 pp.

For many, apocalyptic literature is not the most inviting legacy from ancient religious writers. Its bizarre symbolism and obscure references render it difficult to understand even at a superficial level. The corpus of apocalyptic literature is vast—far larger than many non-specialists might suppose. In such circumstances, anyone encountering this literature for the first time is in need of some guidance with which to make that initial approach. David Russell, erstwhile General Secretary of the Baptist Union of Great Britain, has been one of the more active scholars in recent decades who has attempted to open out this difficult body of literature. His first major book on the topic appeared in 1964; this latest work, then, is a product of long gestation.

*Divine Disclosure* began life as a lecture series, given at McMaster Divinity College, which was rewritten with a wider readership in mind. Russell aims to give a brief and uncomplicated introduction to Jewish apocalyptic literature, leaving Christian instances aside. The result is a sober, thorough, and responsible account of many aspects of this literature. Russell struggles with the definition of “apocalyptic” before going on to describe briefly the historical and literary roots of apocalypses. Thumbnail sketches of several of the better known apocalypses follow. Since Christian apocalypses are beyond the pale, Revelation—the book that gave the name to the genre—is not mentioned here (Russell does have some comments on it later). Specific issues common to the interpretation of many of these works are then discussed: revelation, divine secrets, eschatology, dualism, and messianism. Russell concludes with some reflections on the Christian interpretation of these books and the main theological themes they address.

Russell delivers the goods as promised. This work will help to draw the reader into the world of these apocalypses. Both in its descriptions of individual books, as well as in its discussion of larger issues, Russell’s work makes this seemingly bizarre literature somewhat less strange and, therefore, more approachable. At the same time, this work seems to suffer from being a *synthetic* survey, an orientation to content often abstracted from context. The strategy adopted, that of a parade of introductions, keeps the literature at arm’s length so that one never feels quite comfortable with it. This is the problem that plagues many introductions, however, and at least Russell’s work establishes a framework in which a closer encounter may be made.

It is heartening to read the words of one who has spent many years studying this literature. At several places, Russell registers points on which his mind has changed (e.g., pp. 121, 146, n. 7), and this openness to new

ideas is exemplary. The study of apocalypses is something of a growth industry in biblical studies at the moment, and perhaps Russell's view of things will change even more. His approach exemplifies that which takes the book of Daniel as setting the standard for the genre, and which links this literature to certain social groups. Both of these notions have come under extreme criticism: Daniel is no longer the earliest apocalyptic work we know, and it is increasingly seen as one among many examples of the genre; links between given works with certain social groups have not been found convincing, so that this equation must be set aside. There is the further problem of the origins of apocalypses. Russell's discussion is duly cautious, but, in my opinion, takes too little account of other, non-Jewish apocalypses. Rather than asking if prophecy or wisdom is the natural parent of apocalypse, one needs to struggle with why it is that apocalypses sprang up spontaneously in several neighbouring cultures in the Hellenistic period (including Egyptian and Greek). One begins to suspect that the origins of apocalypses must be sought outside the Jewish tradition alone.

As a final caveat, one might note that the Select Bibliography is, perhaps, too select. Three works that would be of great interest to readers of this book ought to be included: John Barton's *Oracles of God*, J.J. Collins' *The Apocalyptic Imagination*, and Martha Himmelfarb's *Tours of Hell*.

The most successful chapters are those which address issues common to apocalypses. I, for one, would be eager to see Russell at work in a more directly interpretative mode, perhaps commenting on selected passages or works, and thus providing closer encounters with apocalypses than an introduction affords. *Divine Disclosure* successfully lays the foundation for taking those next, even more exciting, steps.

David J. Reimer  
Regent's Park College, Oxford