

— END-TIMERS —

Three Thousand Years of
Waiting for Judgment Day

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Fighting the Dragon of Chaos: Beginnings

Although 4,000 years is no more than a fraction of the 70,000 that have passed since the first members of species *homo sapiens* followed a circuitous route into Asia from the African plain, virtually all recorded history is compressed within that period. By 2000 BCE, both settled agriculture and urban living were well established in Egypt, Mesopotamia, China, and the Indus Valley. Beyond these early centers of civilization, bronze-working skills had already been widely mastered, while pastoralists had tamed horses and knew how to support mobile communities on the products of living as well as dead animals. Freed at last from the daily struggle for survival, potters and scribes could focus on developing specialized skills that supplied a whole community's needs. Soon, the earliest trading contact for the exchange of products and natural resources had been opened between different centers of that elusive condition that would become known as civilization

Progress brought problems. The hunter-gatherer life style might have been a struggle, but it is thought that communities generally lived in some kind of peace¹ and a measure of social equality. With growing prosperity, urban dwellers now needed to protect their produce in granaries and their houses behind stone city walls, and even nomadic communities became exposed to attack by marauding bands of animal thieves. In this new world, communities needed to recruit powerful fighters who could be relied on to protect their hard-won property. Holding a near monopoly of advanced weapons, these warriors lost no time in establishing their position as a privileged and wealthy ruling class.

Still, human protection was not enough. Out of the multitude of available deities, city-states would select one as their own and lavish whatever wealth they could afford on temples, ceremonies, and sacrifices designed to ensure that this special guardian remained on their side. Since any failure in ritual could bring disaster on the whole community, these rites needed to be preformed by a specialist class of priests, who then allied themselves with the rulers and assumed

responsibility for upholding the unequal social order. Under their supervision, craft-workers, pastoralists and farm laborers, women and men, slave and free, were kept in their divinely ordered place within the hierarchal structure. By this time the ruler—be it king, queen, or pharaoh—had acquired responsibility for keeping chaos in its place and making the rain fall.

With food sources and boundaries secure, the more privileged members of society could now indulge in cosmic speculation. Whether arrived at independently or through interchange of ideas, proto-philosophers in the two ancient civilizations of Egypt and Sumer reached similar conclusions about the world in which they lived. Above their heads they saw the sky's great arch, from which stars—mainly static, but with a few wanderers—shone at night. Since these heavens gave much-needed rain, it followed that “upper waters” were held in place behind a solid firmament. The flat earth, in turn, sat above the “lower waters.” People could see how the great rivers, beside which they built their civilizations, were fed by fresh water from subterranean springs, but they lived in fear that this life-giving resource would be overwhelmed by the salty oceans, which represented the state of chaos out of which the ordered world had emerged.

Since fresh and salt waters needed to be kept apart, the underworld could only be seen as a place of endless conflict. Priests from both civilizations told how powerful gods struggled to keep chaos at bay. According to Babylonian legend, warrior deity Marduk (Ashur in Assyria) descended into the nether world to fight the dragon of chaos. For their part, Egyptians told how the sun god Ra drove his chariot across the heavens by day before plunging into the underworld to wage a nightly battle with an equally evil serpent. The chariot's re-emergence at dawn provided assurance that the forces of order had triumphed once again. Since sickness and death were also caused by demon possession, it was a matter of the greatest urgency for every individual that pharaoh and priests should perform their sacred duties with the greatest possible diligence.

Both Sumerians and Egyptians believed that the gods lived in the heavens, while evil spirits inhabited the lower world. After death, men and women could only look forward to a bleak existence in an underground “abode of the dead,” where they would live in darkness and eat dirt and dust. Israelites and Greeks would later share this vision of a land of sorrows, which they respectively called Sheol and Hades. Behind the Greek fable that told how Persephone descended into the underworld in autumn and reappeared in spring lies the Sumerian myth of how the goddess Inanna (Ishtar) visited her sister Ereshkegal, who was queen of the underworld. Both stories tell of death and rebirth—of winter, spring, and fertility. Inanna's lament describes the sense of loss and desolation that all humans would experience in that bleak underworld.

I eat clay for bread, I drink muddy water for beer
 I have to weep for young men forced to abandon their sweethearts
 I have to weep for girls wrenched from their lovers' laps
 For the infant I have to weep, expelled before its turn.²

A few fortunate Egyptians could anticipate a brighter fate. On his death, every pharaoh would take his place in Ra's boat, where he would continue his earthly task of keeping chaos at bay. A few favored nobles might also be received into a resting place with the gods. Their Sumerian counterparts found immortality more elusive. The Epic of Gilgamesh—the world's most ancient poem—tells how the King of Uruk took up a fruitless search for immortality. In the end, he could only accept the advice offered by Siduri, the woman wine-bearer.

You will never find the life for which you are looking,
 When the gods created man they allotted him death,
 but life they kept in their own keeping.
 As for you Gilgamesh, fill your body with good things,
 Day and night, night and day,
 Dance and be merry, feast and rejoice . . .
 Make your wife happy in your embrace;
 For this too is the lot of man.³

Even as a king, Gilgamesh could see no hope for the future. In order to get any glimpse of paradise, he needed to look backward to a mythical golden age when “there being no snakes, no scorpions, no hyenas, no lions, no dogs, no wolves, neither fear nor terror; humanity had no enemy.”⁴ In his epic, Gilgamesh told of a huge event, near the beginning of time, that had shaped the history of the world. After creation was complete, air god Enlil supervised the creation of human beings from the womb of the mother goddess. Although not immortal, those early humans could live to huge old age, as they assisted the gods by helping out with all the thankless tasks of daily life.

When gods began to complain that these humans were polluting the earth and breeding too fast, the issue was discussed in the divine council. “The noise of mankind has become too much,” complained Enlil. “I am losing sleep over the racket.”⁵ After these irritating humans had survived a series of divinely inflicted disasters, Enlil finally loosed the upper waters in a great flood, which arrived “like a wild ass screaming in the wind.” Seriously alarmed that there would henceforth be no human servants to do his dirty work, water god Ea secretly advised the virtuous Atra-Hasis to build a boat, which had to be large enough to accommodate samples of all animal species. When the waters subsided, Atra-Hasis' ark finally came to rest on a mountain summit, where he offered a sacrifice to the gods and—alone of all humankind—he received the gift of eternal life.

Storytellers and scribes were not concerned whether Gilgamesh was a historical figure any more than whether any particular pharaoh had fought the battles for which his tomb narrative gave him credit. The essence of ancient myth lay not in historical veracity but in the timeless message that lay behind the narrative. Flood myths would later spread across Middle Eastern cultures, of which one found a place in the Book of Genesis. In modern times, some scholars would ask whether

these tales might have arisen independently out of the folk memory of a real flood, which is thought to have happened when, at some time in the fifth millennium BCE, the Mediterranean broke through the Hellespont to inundate large areas of country around the Black Sea. Ancient Mesopotamian storytellers would surely have been amazed that their literal-minded descendants could so signally fail to grasp the narrative's hidden mythic meaning.

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It has long been recognized that similarities of vocabulary and grammatical structure in languages spoken across huge areas from Western Europe to the Indian subcontinent indicate that, at some time in the past, they had all branched off from a single parent stem. By linguistic analysis, scholars focused attention on a people, known from antiquity as Aryan, who lived on the steppes of southern Asia, somewhere near the Black and Caspian Seas, in the third millennium BCE. Archaeologists find them a deeply frustrating people. These illiterate nomads lived on the move, passing devotional hymns down the generations by word of mouth, leaving no temples or palaces, pottery, or carving. Modern genetic testing has, however, confirmed that the linguists' theories on a common Aryan origin are based on solid foundations. The Asian steppes will only support a sparse population and these Aryans were probably pushed from their homes—toward the west, east, and south—by overpopulation, hunger, and tribal warfare. Unlike the Moguls of later times, they left no apparent trails of devastation in their wake, but they did carry their language, social structure, gods, hymns, and fables into very distant lands.

Those Aryans who moved towards the west, into an area that would later be known as Europe, found no mountain barrier or advanced civilization that lay across their line of progress. Little is known of these migrations beyond the fact that they bequeathed versions of their speech that would divide into the Greco-Roman, Celtic, and Germanic language families that—barring small enclaves in Georgia and northern Spain—would dominate the continent. Myths and fables from areas as far apart as Scandinavia, Greece, and Russia show evidence of a common Aryan origin. In about 800 BCE, early Greek poet Hesiod wrote of the community of gods, chaos, and the creation of the world.

Now Iapetus took to wife the neat-ankled maid Clymene, daughter of Ocean, and went up with her into one bed. And she bare him a stout-hearted son, Atlas . . . And Atlas through hard constraint upholds the wide heaven with unwearying head and arms, standing at the borders of the earth before the clear-voiced Hesperides; for this lot wise Zeus assigned to him.⁶

It is believed that, in around 1800 BCE, bands of Aryans arrived in northwest India by way of Afghanistan and the mountains of the Hindu Kush at just the time when the early Indus valley civilization was sliding into in terminal decline. The invasion may or may not have been violent, but genetic research has

established that the newcomers managed to gain control of the upper castes of north Indian society, leaving the indigenous people to populate the lower castes.⁷ Aryan priests codified the ancient traditions into a collection of sacred hymns known as the *Rig Veda*, which would be passed down with astonishing accuracy by word of mouth, before being finally committed to writing many centuries later. These invocations and praises to the gods offer no treatise on morality and no divine revelation. They recount the old story of how the dragon of chaos was dismembered and primal darkness transformed “into a world with divisions, spheres, realms, numbers, a world of light, symbol of consciousness emerging from the unconscious.”⁸ From these chants, scholars have reconstructed the Aryan practices and beliefs as they had once been on the Asian steppes, the multitude of nature deities of earth, sun, water, fire, and wind, the water used in libations and holy fires that burned in every home. Although the early Vedas contain no insights into End-Time events, they did reach after more abstract concepts of eternity by linking the words *breath* and *wind* and imagining a universe that had been constructed out the body of primal man. Venerating ancestors as integral parts of their cosmos, they still looked forward to the time when their own bodies would blend with the waters to provide food for plants.⁹ But cultural influences moved in both directions. On the one side, Indo-European languages would ultimately be spoken across Pakistan and Bangladesh and by more than 70 percent of Indians. On the other side, it can already be detected in the *Vedas* that indigenous concepts of life and death and the nature of time would ultimately triumph over the thought patterns that the Aryans had brought with them. Western history has traditionally been perceived as a straight line, which progresses from a specific moment of creation, toward some kind of End-Time event. In the sub-continent, in contrast, the Indo-Aryans absorbed the Eastern vision of a universe that is in constant motion, in which time follows an immense circular process before starting again after the wheel has turned full circle. Although apocalyptic movements have emerged within Eastern faiths (as in cults connected with creator and destroyer god Siva and his blood-stained consort the goddess Kali), End-Time beliefs generally sit uneasily within the Eastern tradition.

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The Zoroastrian faith has been described as a “shadowy presence” spread across the ancient world. For many years, scholars argued over the date when the prophet Zarathustra (Zoroaster in the later Greek form) is supposed to have lived, with estimates widely separated over some 900 years, between 1500 and 600 BCE. It is now widely believed that he was a historical figure who may have taken part in the third Aryan migration into western Persia (Iran) in about 1200 to 1100 BCE. Probably born into the Aryan priesthood, he inherited his ancestors’ belief in a single supreme god, Ohrmazd, who was supported by a variety of lesser nature divinities. At the age of 30, Zarathustra found himself in the presence of a shining being, the one all-wise, wholly good, just, and uncreated god Ahura Mazda. Originally perhaps a younger god who supplanted his senior

Ohrmazd, in later Zoroastrian tradition, the two names would interchangeably represent the supreme Lord, who presided over Creation and would control the Last Things. Describing Ahura Mazda as the “one who set chaos in order,” Zarathustra described how he had created a regular world, which was as perfectly contained within the sky as an egg in its shell. Flat as the steppes from which his people had come, in this perfect world, the sun always stood at its zenith and there could be no winter, illness, or evil. Zarathustra then told how the wicked Angra Mainyu (*destructive mind*) approached Ahura Mazda with a demand for dominion over the whole world. When rejected, he launched an assault on this whole beautiful creation. In his destructive fury, he even broke the shell of heaven, causing the rancid upper waters to mix with the sweet lower waters, changing fertile land into desert and bringing drought and famine.

Legend does not record whether Zoroaster crossed mountain ranges while migrating from the steppe or whether he was born in east Persia and travelled westward over broken country. Either way, three millennia would pass before scientists discovered that the mountains between modern Afghanistan and Turkey sit on a confusion of fault lines, where five tectonic plates are in collision.¹⁰ Eruptions and earthquakes, thought to be caused by Ahura Mazda’s and Angra Mainyu’s subterranean battles, were bound to linger long in folk memory. Since Zarathustra’s Aryan (Iranian) people were not yet in contact with literate civilizations, his teachings were passed down verbally in the native Aryan language, which would become known as Avestan. In recent years, the world’s few Avestan scholars have managed to isolate the hymns and myths that provide insight into Zarathustra’s earliest vision of history. In the *Gathas*, the prophet looks both backward to “eternity past” and forward into “eternity to come.” Under his integrated scheme, the act of Creation mirrors a Last Judgment when rewards and punishments will be administered to all.¹¹ In the meantime, the cosmic battle between Ahura Mazda and Angra Mainyu would continue.

In the final days, when good has finally prevailed, the prophet expected to lead his followers across the Bridge of Separators into a world where the perfection of Creation has once again been restored. It appears, however, that Zarathustra finally came to realize that this great event would not happen in his own lifetime. Although he had three natural sons who would die in their turn, the myth told how the prophet deposited his semen at the bottom a lake, where it would keep on shining like a lamp. At some time in the future, a virgin would enter the lake and absorb this life-giving force into her body to bear the Messianic son, Saoshyant, who would save the world.

As the prophet’s followers moved into western Persia, they are thought to have converted the Magi priests and passed on the Avestan language as a living medium of communication, and these Magi then imported new elements into the faith that they had received.¹² Then, in around the late fifth century BCE, Zoroastrianism developed a 12,000-year millenarian structure, by which all history was divided into four periods of 3,000 years.¹³ Instead of taking just six days, the Zoroastrian process of Creation consumed the whole of the initial

3,000 years, after which there followed two intermediate periods, each of which was subdivided into three separate millennia. Since each era would have its own savior, Zarathustra needed to deposit three packages of semen in lakes, where each would await the start of his assigned 3000 years. The first two Messiahs would battle inconclusively with the forces of Angra Mainyu for the first 6000 years; then, at the beginning of the fourth and final era, Saoshyant would rise from the lake to engage in the confrontation that would shape the destiny of all souls. Every human—without regard for wealth, rank, or sex—needed to be clear on which side they stood, for, at physical death, all would be judged according to their thoughts and deeds.

Still, the battle is not finished. All normal values become perverted as Angra Mainyu and his demons gain control of the earth.

Families will split in hatred. The son will strike the father and brother will fight against brother. . . . Men from the lower orders will marry the daughters of the nobles and the priests. Slaves will walk in the paths of nobles. . . . Religious duties will be neglected; apostasy will abound; the rituals will hardly be performed; and the sacred fires will no longer be upheld.¹⁴

When this reign of evil finally draws to its end, a great year marks the start of Ahura Mazda's eternal time. Then the sun will stand still in the heavens for 30 days and nights, while all plants become green and illness and death disappear from the land. As the earth gives up its dead, all humans pass through hot metal that pours out of the hills. "For him who is righteous it will seem like warm milk and for him who is wicked it will seem as if he is walking in the flesh through molten metal."¹⁵ According to Persian mythology, the three-headed dragon of chaos would then be chained within Mount Damavand until the world finally reaches its end. At the universal resurrection, when humans are reunited with their earthly bodies, all mountains and hills are leveled to restore the primal simplicity of the Aryan steppes. The final separation would then be made between humans who were destined for the place of bliss and those less fortunate who would plunge into the depths of hell. As they cross the Bridge of Separators, they see before them the ancient yet ever-youthful figure of Mithra, who had been present at Creation and is now the most senior of all created beings. On his left is shining savior Saoshyant, while Rashu holds the scales of justice on his right. "In the weighing Rashu the just, who holds the balance of souls, neither makes it dip, neither for the just nor for the wicked, neither for the lord man nor for the ruler of the land."¹⁶ A beautiful maiden then escorts the just into the bliss of paradise, while a horrid hag throws the lost into a pit of misery and darkness.

The demon Visarsh will seize the wicked person's soul and will beat it and torment it scornfully and wrathfully and the wicked person's soul will cry out in loud lamentation and will weep and utter many pleas, entreatingly and make many struggles in vain.¹⁷

Still Ahura Mazda is merciful, and some may spend only a short period in torment before being admitted to paradise.

In the sixth century BCE, devout Zoroastrian Cyrus the Great set about governing his vast empire according to the prophet's teaching. Instead of persecuting those of other faiths, he tried to show justice and tolerance to all who lived within his huge empire. Being a mobile and nonliterate people, early Zoroastrians might have left little for archaeologists to dig up, and (astonishingly) the bulk of their oral tradition was not committed to paper the ninth and tenth centuries CE. Still, their apocalyptic faith remained influential across wide areas of the Middle East long into the Christian era.

Some would argue that Zoroastrianism was the world's first monotheistic religion, others that that it brought dualism to both Judaism and Christianity. For theological purists, the issue lies in whether he presents Ahura Mazda and Angra Mainyu as co-existent and equal divinities or whether the destructive spirit stands alongside Mithra, one level down. But Zarathustra and his priests did not think like twenty-first century scholars and that issue must remain unclarified. Whatever the theoretical position, religious believers who came under Zoroastrian influence in later centuries increasingly portrayed evil as an independent force in a cosmos of polar opposites—children of light against agents of darkness, angels of good in conflict with demons of evil, the fallen temporal world set against otherworldly divine spheres. Within Christian popular culture, in particular, God and Satan—like Ahura Mazda and Angra Mainyu—would remain locked in the battle until the end of time.

David's Righteous Branch: The Jewish End-Time

Somewhere around 1200 BCE—near the time Zoroaster was preaching on the Persian plain and Mycenaean cities were at war with Troy—a people who were already known as Israelites were building their first settlements in the land of Canaan. Although archaeologists have found no evidence that any had spent time in Egypt, the Bible presents them as newcomers who were very separate from other Canaanite people. In reality, they not only all spoke versions of the same Semitic family of languages but also shared many of the same regional myths and legends.

“Most high” god El (Elohim) stood alone as head of the Canaanite pantheon. This white-haired and elderly gentleman, who lived in the heavens, embodied every known virtue. But venerable features belied sexual vigor, for, with consort Asherah, El had fathered a whole council of “sons of god,” who, at the most expansive, could be likened to the stars in the sky. Translators and commentators have long resisted evidence of some biblical passages that place the roots of Jewish religion not with Abraham or Moses but squarely within the context of Middle Eastern myth. This is most clearly illustrated in a passage that tells how Yahweh became Israel’s special god. “When the Most High gave to the nations their inheritance, when he separated humankind, he fixed the bounds of the people according to the number of the gods. The Lord’s portion is his people, Jacob his allotted share.”¹ The passage distinguishes two gods: El is translated as “the Most High” and Yahweh as “the Lord” and, in common with El’s other sons, he is given responsibility for just this one people. Following Canaanite tradition the Israelites would then transfer El’s honors, titles, and even physical description onto their own Yahweh, until he became the supreme—and later indeed the only—God.

Still, for many centuries, relationships between El's offspring could be turbulent. Fertility god Ba'al and his sister/lover Anat fought endless battles with Yamm, god of the chaos and the ocean, and his ally Mot, lord of death and the underworld. This Canaanite re-enactment of the primal struggle was fought out with no quarter expected or given on either side. With his pointed beard and horned helmet, Ba'al could command respect as a warrior, but his consort Anat was the more fearsome opponent—only happy when wading across the battlefield, satiated on human flesh and knee deep in blood, with the heads of fallen enemies slung round her waist and their hands tied in her sash. In his role as fertility god, Ba'al rode the storms, commanding the thunder and lightning to bring the rain that kept livestock in good health and delivered prosperous harvests. With so much at stake, it is no surprise that many Israelites chose the precautionary route of worshipping both Yahweh and Ba'al. Even at this early stage, it is thought that Jews were divided between an urban elite, which was inclined toward the Canaanite model, and Yahwistic tribal society. Biblical writers looked back to a short-lived golden age in around 1000 BCE, when King David was reported to have drawn the Jews together into a single kingdom with a united devotion to Yahweh. Then his son Solomon took a cosmopolitan collection of wives and concubines and set about introducing the whole panoply of Canaanite worship and kingship. This "disobedience" brought civil war and a division of the kingdom into the larger Israel, based on Samaria in the north and Judah in the south, which had its capital in Jerusalem. From this time, prophets—"men with garments of hair"—took it on themselves to remind fellow Jews that any compromise with Canaanite religion would bring disaster on the whole people. Ninth-century preacher Elijah recorded that, by his time, just 7,000 Israelites remained true to the pure worship of Yahweh. Famously, he set about demonstrating his god's power by bringing fire onto Ba'al's altar and slaughtering 450 of his prophets.

Sexuality is the most powerful symbol of fecundity known to humans, and Ba'al's followers believed that sacred prostitution could encourage fertility across the whole environment. In response, Hebrew prophets used sexual images to highlight continued breaches of the covenant between Yahweh and his people. Whether speaking literally or figuratively, Hosea told how God instructed him to marry a prostitute. Her later unfaithfulness provided a metaphor for Israel's adulterous relationship with local gods. Jeremiah then told how Yahweh forbade him to marry so that—like his God,—he would never know the security of a faithful and loving relationship. To the distress of feminist believers, Ezekiel used a long, even pornographic, story of two whores to illustrate Judah's continuing fall from grace.²

Besides being a jealous and warlike God Yahweh was also defender of the poor and weak. This message, first passionately argued by the prophet Amos, would become a running theme through the centuries. "Ah, you who make iniquitous decrees," announced Isaiah, "who write oppressive statutes, to turn aside the needy from justice and to rob the poor of my people of their right, that widows

may be your spoil, and that you may make the orphans your prey!"³ Failure to deliver social justice was seen as yet another damning proof that the Israelites had deserted their own god.

Ba'al worship still flourished in the eighth century BCE at a time when the Assyrians started to threaten both Jewish kingdoms. Powerless against this most brutal enemy, by all precedents, the Jews should have deserted their inadequate war god Yahweh and delivered allegiance to the manifestly more powerful Ashur. Assyrian king Sennacherib delivered his advice to the people of Jerusalem with the warning:

Do not let Hezekiah mislead you by saying, The Lord (Yahweh) will surely deliver us. Has any of the gods of the nations saved their land out of the hand of the king of Assyria? Where are the gods of Hamath and Arpad? Where are the gods of Sepharvaim? Have they delivered Samaria out of my hand? Who among all the gods of these countries have saved their countries out of my hand, that the Lord should save Jerusalem out of my hand?⁴

Prophets Hosea, Amos, and Isaiah responded by preaching that Yahweh was, in reality, so powerful that even Assyrian monarchs followed his command by bringing vengeance on his faithless people. While Mithra Saoshyant and Rashu distribute bliss or damnation according to each individual's deserts, the Hebrew prophets could only anticipate that communal punishment would be imposed on the whole community.

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Some scholars identify the reign of Josiah in the late seventh century BCE as a time when editors (or one editor) set about strengthening the prophetic message. Within the documents that were then being gathered into the collection that would later become the Hebrew Bible, there seemed to be some lack of clarity on the nature of the covenant between Yahweh and his people. It needed to be made clear that their God had only agreed to deliver the promised land in return for a commitment that his people would worship him alone.⁵ In order to provide Israel with a compelling ancient history that would predate any contact with Canaan, scribes added miraculous elements to tales of the captivity in and exodus from Egypt as well as later wandering in the desert. In the *Book of Joshua*, they recount how Yahweh then kept his side of the bargain by delivering the promised land of Canaan to his own people. According to this narrative, Yahweh personally orchestrated the brutal process of ethnic cleansing. First, he hardened the inhabitants' hearts "so that they would come against Israel in battle, in order that they might be utterly destroyed, and might receive no mercy, but be exterminated." Then he applied sanctions on any Israelite leader who failed to pursue the slaughter down to the last living creature.⁶ In the most dramatic—and indeed inconceivable—of all nature miracles, Yahweh even halted the sun in its tracks so that Joshua would have enough time to complete the task of wiping out the Amorites.

“Sun, stand still at Gibeon,
and Moon, in the valley of Aijalon.”
And the sun stood still, and the moon stopped,
until the nation took vengeance on their enemies . . .⁷

If this interpretation of the biblical narrative is correct—as many scholars believe—then it follows that that these later editors were more concerned with threatening their idolatrous contemporaries than with constructing an accurate historical record. Later scribes place the key message for their own times in the dying Joshua’s mouth:

And now I am about to go the way of all the earth, and you know in your hearts and souls, all of you, that not one thing has failed of all the good things that the Lord your God promised concerning you. . . . But just as all the good things . . . have been fulfilled for you, so the Lord will bring upon you all the bad things, until he has destroyed you from this good land that the Lord your God has given you. If you transgress the covenant of the Lord your God, which he enjoined on you, and go and serve other gods and bow down to them, then the anger of the Lord will be kindled against you, and you shall perish quickly from the good land that he has given to you.⁸

Those concerned with the Canaanites’ fate can take comfort from the fact that many of those same enemy people, who had supposedly been exterminated, would reappear later in the bible narrative. Like storytellers of old, these editors told of mythic past and future battles that demonstrably never happened in real history.

Therefore, as I live, says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, Moab shall become like Sodom and the Ammonites like Gomorrah, a land possessed by nettles and salt-pits, and a waste for ever. The remnant of my people shall plunder them, and the survivors of my nation shall possess them.⁹

Read together, tales of past and future conflict between Israel and its neighbors provide a fitting prelude to generations of blood-curdling apocalyptic literature.

After eighth-century prophets Hosea and Amos forecast that the northern kingdom of Israel would fall to the king of Assyria, the younger “First” Isaiah lived to see the disaster, which obliterated the 10 northern tribes. Late-seventh-century prophet Jeremiah then predicted that Yahweh would punish the smaller southern state of Judah and in 596 BCE his successor Ezekiel may well have watched as Jerusalem fell and Solomon’s Temple was destroyed by the armies of Babylonian ruler Nebuchadnezzar.

Israel’s earlier prophets are today mined for visions of the Apocalypse. Biblical literalists argue that, if Isaiah can know the name of Persian Emperor Cyrus II, who was born some hundred years after his own death, and sixth-century Daniel can foretell events in the third-century Hellenistic empire, then

their writings must also carry messages for the contemporary world. Scholars, in contrast, find it impossible to accept that biblical prophets (alone of all the world's population) could have access to detailed information about the distant future. When these early prophets did look forward, scholars argue, their forecasts were earthly, immediate, and readily enough foreseen by any close observer of contemporary events. Apparent pre-knowledge of rulers and empires therefore provides liberal scholars with unambiguous evidence that the passage in question is a later addition.

The Babylonian exile would prove to be a watershed in Jewish belief. After living with no concept of personal judgment, the afterlife, and the end of time, exiled Jews now found themselves exposed to Zoroastrian speculation on just these issues.

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As a priest (who, in the view of some commentators, showed symptoms of schizophrenia), Ezekiel was a member of the more privileged class that was taken into exile. These unwilling visitors to Babylon were encouraged to settle in national groups and follow their distinctive ways of life and worship, but still they found separation from Jerusalem and temple worship intolerable. "By the rivers waters of Babylon," wrote the psalmist, "there we sat down and there we wept, when we remembered Zion . . . How could we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?"¹⁰

Ezekiel described how the heavens opened as he stood beside the river Chebar, and he received a vision of strange beasts—part human, part animal, part bird—of living coals, "wheels within wheels," and a firmament that shone like crystal.

And there came a voice from above the dome over their heads . . . And above the dome over their heads there was something like a throne, in appearance like sapphire; and seated above the likeness of a throne was something that seemed like a human form.¹¹

The prophet may even have seen the dead bodies of Judah's soldiers as they lay on the plains of Jericho after King Zedekiah's final defeat in 587 BCE. He now told how he heard a sound of rattling as dry bones came together "bone to its bone." Drawing from this image, he delivers what can be interpreted as the Bible's first promise of personal resurrection.¹² Judah, he declared, will know that Yahweh is lord "when I open your graves and bring you up from your graves, O my people, and I will put my spirit within you and you shall live."¹³ He looked forward to a time when widely scattered Jews would return Jerusalem. With the temple rebuilt, a new Davidic monarchy in place, and covenant restored, then at last Yahweh could say "I will be their God and they shall be my people."

Gazing even deeper into a mythical future, Ezekiel foretold how Gog, king of a northern land of Magog, would invade Judah with a huge army. Returning to his role as warrior god, Yahweh would then intervene to defeat the invading hordes. The people of Judah would take no part until the slaughter was over, when they would be given the task of burying the mass of bodies and ritually cleansing the

land. Yahweh then commands his people to gather all the birds and wild beasts to join in a banquet, at which—in language reminiscent of the gruesome Anat myth—humans and animals join together to “eat the flesh of the mighty, and drink the blood of the princes of the earth . . . You shall eat fat until you are filled, and drink blood until you are drunk, at the sacrificial feast that I am preparing for you.”¹⁴

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The gap in time that passes between the end of Chapter 39 and the beginning of Chapter 40 in the *Book of Isaiah* has been the subject of much controversy. Set around 690 BCE, Chapter 39 deals with King Hezekiah of Judah’s reception of Babylonian ambassadors and the prophet’s warning against showing them too much of his wealth. Then, by the next verse, some 150 years have passed, Babylon has fallen to the Persians, and the writer knows Emperor Cyrus II by name. Literalist believers may assert as a matter of faith that both passages were written by the same hand; for the historian, it is beyond dispute that they were not.

In words of the King James Version that would be memorably set to music by George Frederick Handel, a new anonymous prophet announces that the conflict between Yahweh and his people is finally over.

Comfort ye, comfort ye, my people saith your God.
 Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem,
 and cry unto her that her warfare is accomplished, that her iniquity is pardoned.
 For she has received from the Lord’s hand double for all her sins.
 The voice of one that crieth in the wilderness, “prepare ye the way of the Lord.
 Make straight in the desert a highway for our God.”

This “Second Isaiah” is well familiar with Zoroastrian teaching and imagery. Like the Aryan prophet before him, he proclaims that “every valley shall be exalted and every mountain and hill made low” when the earth will regain the evenness of creation to greet the arrival of the true God. The new triumphal route across the Syrian Desert (which on the ground is already remarkably flat) is to be prepared for Yahweh’s triumphant return to the holy city and even the ocean is subdued to provide “a path in the mighty waters.”¹⁵ In those first triumphant chapters, there is no bridge of separators, no angel holding scales, and no fiery pit for the wicked. As communal punishment had been imposed for idolatry, so communal salvation is now bestowed on Judah. For this prophet, the whole Jewish nation has become transformed into Yahweh’s faithful servant, destined to bring unity to all creation. His universal monotheistic message more closely follows Zoroastrian than Jewish precedent.

I will say to the North, Give up, and to the South, do not withhold; bring my sons from afar and my daughters from the end of the earth, Every one who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made. Bring forth the people who are blind, yet

have eyes, who are deaf, yet have ears! Let all the nations gather together, and let the people assemble.¹⁶

Past alien rulers may have served Yahweh's purpose by punishing his unfaithful people; now this unnamed prophet presents Cyrus as his shepherd and Messiah.¹⁷ This is altogether too much for one commentator, who concludes that such verses must be a later addition to the original text. "Who," he asks, "can take seriously a prophet who in God's name proclaims the impending *salvation* of humanity through the agency of a pagan conqueror?"¹⁸ In this prophet's eyes, however, the pious Zoroastrian emperor was no pagan, but a fellow searcher after truth. Babylonian exile might have been less painful than the Assyrian version, but both aimed to extinguish a conquered people's national identity by removing the leaders and crafts-folk and impoverishing those who remained. To the prophet's delight, Cyrus was now drawing up plans to send the exiles home, where they would work on the task of restoring local prosperity and pride in partnership with Persian officials.

Commentators have debated whether the latter part of Isaiah, from Chapter 40 to the end, is the work of just one or perhaps two or even more unnamed writers. Some argue that the language and key message remain consistent, while others point out that much of the old optimism is lost. That is, perhaps, no surprise. The exiles finally returned under the leadership of traditionalist priests, who cared only about rebuilding the temple and restoring the old order of society. On arrival, they were taken aback to discover that many of those left behind had abandoned the ritual laws and even "married out" of Judaism. On the other side, followers of "the second Isaiah" were equally shocked that these same people were barely surviving in the deepest poverty. Postexile society was now deeply split between those who remained determined to concentrate all resources on the immediate task of rebuilding the temple and their opponents, who argued that any available funds should be directed to the relief of poverty. As temple work was brought to a halt, even prophecy became divided. "Minor prophets" Zechariah and Haggai aligned themselves with the priestly cause. Taking Ezekiel as their model, they argued that no salvation could be achieved until the building work was complete. Haggai announced that the people themselves had to take the blame for economic disaster—"because my house lies in ruins while all of you hurry off to your own houses. Therefore the heavens above you have withheld the dew and the earth has withheld its produce."¹⁹

Either the second Isaiah himself or one of his followers argued the opposing case. "Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds on injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house: when you see the naked, to cover them and not to hide yourself from your own kin?"²⁰ Evidence of this division between governing and radical factions resurfaces through the succeeding centuries and, in varying contexts, it will remain a running theme through the whole narrative of End-Time belief.

The returning exiles may have believed that Jerusalem stood at the center of the cosmos. In the worldly perspective, however, they had returned to a depopulated and impoverished satrapy, barely 25 miles long, that stood on the fringe of the huge Persian Empire. Unable to defend their land by military force, the returned Jews no longer had any significant voice in regional politics. Yet, for all its worldly misfortunes, Jerusalem remained the focus of expectation.

Rejoice with Jerusalem and exult in her, all you who love her; share her joy with all your heart, all you who mourn over her. Then may you suck and be fed from the breasts that give comfort, delighting in the plentiful milk. For thus says the Lord: I will send peace flowing over her like a river, and the wealth of nations like a stream in flood; it shall suckle you and you shall be carried in their arms and dandled on their knees. As a mother comforts her son, so will I myself comfort you, and you shall find comfort in Jerusalem.²¹

As earthly hope faded, so compensatory visions of the future became detached from the real world and lodged in a miraculous parallel universe. Ezekiel had presented the destruction of Gog as Yahweh's single-handed triumph; now Zechariah reassured his country people that "many peoples and strong nations shall come to seek the Lord of hosts in Jerusalem." With mounting expectation, he graphically described Yahweh's future triumph over Hadrach, Tyre, Sidon, Damascus, Aram, Ashkelon, Gaza, Ekron, Ashtod, and Philistia. "Tyre has built itself a rampart," he declared, "and heaped up silver like dust, and gold like the dirt of the streets and it shall be devoured by fire. But now, the Lord will strip it of its possessions and hurl its wealth into the sea." With these improbable victories accomplished, the daughters of Jerusalem would rejoice and greet the arrival of their king with a great shout.²²

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Zoroastrians look back on Alexander of Macedon's victory at the 333 BCE battle of Issus as the darkest day in history. As the Persian Empire collapsed after what, at least by the standards of the day, had been two centuries of enlightened rule, it seemed as though the evil Angra Mainyu had at last been let loose. Every worst fear seemed justified when, at the fall of Tyre, the young Greek king crucified every male of military age and sold other survivors into slavery. When Alexander died in 323 at the age of 32, his great empire was divided between three of his generals. As communities from different nationalities lived cheek by jowl during this period of Hellenistic domination, the eastern Mediterranean lands seethed with interacting ideas that were drawn from across the range of cultures.

Although ancient Mesopotamian and Canaanite tablets were now long buried, the image of an ocean that represented chaos and an underworld where ancient gods and monsters fought endless battles still survived within popular culture. During the coming centuries, tales of cosmic conflict would reappear in both the canon of both the Hebrew Bible and Christian New Testament.

After breaking the Persian Empire, Alexander of Macedon gathered 10,000 of his soldiers and, in a famous ceremony, joined them with Persian wives. By this dramatic gesture, he delivered the message that, from his time, east and west would be one.

While the Greeks are most readily associated with the classical tradition of philosophy associated with Socrates, they also brought a more magical and mystical tradition, centered around the sayings of oracles and sibyls. As the classical era passed, mysterious beliefs, which can be traced back to sixth-century mathematician and mystic Pythagoras, rapidly gained popularity. Although little is known of his life, this sage left a "Pythagorean" community, which only admitted enquirers after complex initiation procedures. Members were divided between an inner circle of "learners," who were privileged to explore an intuitive knowledge of spiritual truths, and an outer circle of "listeners." Within this tradition, the concept of "wisdom" is divorced from logical thought processes to become a transcendental insight, not far distant from the Eastern concept of "enlightenment." Even Socrates' pupil Plato taught that the world had become divided between the ideal and the material—"form" and "substance." Followers concluded from this that every eternal human soul is imprisoned within a mortal body. While these ideas would take many forms as they spread into different cultures and across huge areas, this core belief that knowledge exists on two levels continued to provide a binding thread of a way of thought that would become known as *Gnosticism*. On the surface of any text was an open meaning that was accessible to all; beneath lay a deeper message that would remain hidden until it could be mystically revealed by some woman or man who was worthy to penetrate the depths of knowledge (*gnosis*).

Syncretism is defined as the attempt to reconcile diverse and even opposite religious views within a single belief system. While all religious faith is, at root, syncretistic, this fusion of religious rose to an extraordinary level in the Hellenistic world. In one scholar's words:

The Gnostic systems compounded everything—oriental mythologies, astrological doctrines, Iranian theology, elements of Jewish tradition, whether Biblical rabbinical or occult, Christian salvation-eschatology, Platonic terms and concepts. Syncretism . . . pervaded the whole thought of the age and showed itself in all provinces of literary expression.²³

The word Gnostic also describes specific sects—many of which originated in the southern part of modern Iraq—that flourished in the centuries before and after the birth of Jesus of Nazareth. These groups developed a common esoteric theology in which God is perceived as a transcendent being, hidden from his creatures by layers of "realms," which are each ruled by a hostile archon. In time, Gnosticism penetrated other faiths—first Judaism and then Christianity and Islam. Throughout, it will hold an ambiguous position in the End-Time narrative. While, on one level, concentration on inner wisdom and unity with the divine

can be appear to contradict outward visions of heaven and the Apocalypse, on another level, such speculation can also provide fruitful stimulus for messianic speculation.

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During this Hellenistic age, Judaism was an actively proselytizing faith. The New Testament *Book of Acts* gives a vivid description of the crowd that gathered in the streets of Jerusalem in the early first century CE. Here were both natural-born Jews and converts, who all spoke the languages native to areas where they had settled.

Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power.²⁴

Scattered Jewish communities, which had not yet been consigned to impermeable ghettos, found themselves in the front line of syncretistic pressure. Still, while the many Jewish apocalyptic writings of the following centuries did betray influences from both East and West, they never lost contact with their own distinctive Hebrew inheritance.

The five sections that make up a compilation known as 1 Enoch are thought to have been produced over a period of some 50 years, from about 200 BCE. In order to lend weight to any narrative, it was then both a widespread and respectable practice to write under the pen name of some past worthy. According to Genesis, Enoch lived near the beginning of time, grandfather to Noah and just seven (admittedly very long) generations from Adam. Notably wise and virtuous, he was spared death and taken bodily up to heaven. His recorded accomplishments were indeed formidable. “He was the first among men who learned writing and wisdom and wrote down the signs of heaven according to the order of their months in a book, that men might know the seasons of the years to the order of their separate months.”²⁵ Enoch had also been identified with two characters in Sumerian legend, who were reputed to have close contact with heavenly powers and a unique knowledge of the cosmos and insight into the future.²⁶ As the only characters in the Hebrew Bible to be taken up into heaven without experiencing death, Enoch and the prophet Elijah would later be identified as the two witnesses of the Apocalypse.²⁷ The patriarch now tells how an angel takes him into the presence of that white-haired old man, who is readily identified as high god El of Canaanite myth. Zoroastrian portents of the Apocalypse are again evident. “And the high mountains shall be shaken, and the high hills shall be made low, and shall melt like wax before the flame.”²⁸ The oldest section, named the *Book of Watchers*, takes its theme from an unsettlingly polytheistic verse in Genesis.

When people began to multiply on the face of the ground, and daughters were born to them, the sons of God saw that they were fair; and they took wives for themselves of all that they chose.²⁹

According to the better-known creation narrative, evil was brought into the world through the disobedience of Adam and Eve. In 1 Enoch, humans become the victims of a cosmic fall of divine beings (later identified as angels) who existed in heaven before humans were ever created. Both—theoretically irreconcilable—myths would develop parallel lives through later apocalyptic writing and the poems of John Milton. This angelic fall brought a disastrous loss of human innocence.³⁰

And Azâzêl taught men to make swords, and knives, and shields, and breastplates, and made known to them the metals of the earth and the art of working them, and bracelets, and ornaments, and the use of antimony, and the beautifying of the eyelids, and all kinds of costly stones, and all coloring tinctures. And there arose much godlessness, and they committed fornication, and they were led astray, and became corrupt in all their ways. Semjâzâ taught enchantments, and root-cuttings, 'Armârôs the resolving of enchantments, Barâqîjâl (taught) astrology, Kôkabêl the constellations, Êzêqêêl the knowledge of the clouds, Araqiêl the signs of the earth, Shamsiêl the signs of the sun, and Sariêl the course of the moon. And as men perished, they cried, and their cry went up to heaven.³¹

In earlier writings—notably in the *Book of Job*—Satan (or Belial) appears not as a wicked force but as God's prosecuting counsel; here in Enoch, rebellious angels take their place as cosmic agents of evil. Although Semjâzâ is named as leader of the fallen angels, it is Azâzêl's image that would become imprinted on posterity. Traditionally associated with the animal sin-offering, driven into the wilderness at Yom Kippur, it is he who carries the goat's horns which will identify the devil in Christian art. The fate that Zoroaster predicted for Angra Mainyu is now pronounced on Azâzêl.

The Lord said to Raphael: "Bind Azâzêl hand and foot, and cast him into the darkness: and make an opening in the desert . . . and cast him therein. And place upon him rough and jagged rocks, and cover him with darkness, and let him abide there for ever, and cover his face that he may not see light. And on the day of the great judgment he shall be cast into the fire."³²

In later chapters, 1 Enoch describes how nature itself will become out of joint to herald the end of time. As the fruits of the earth fail and the stars transgress their order and rivers run with blood, all the nations will become stirred up, Then parents will cast away their own babes and "a man shall not withhold his hand from slaying his sons and his sons." In that Day of Judgment, sinners will perish with their possessions and splendor in shame, slaughter, and destitution.³³

The *Book of Jubilees* continued themes developed in the earlier *Book of Watchers*. Here the devil Mastema (hostility) lets pass no opportunity to bring evil to the whole of creation. Having charge of vast legions of demons, he sends out spirits “to do all manner of wrong and sin, and all manner of transgression, to corrupt and destroy, and to shed blood upon the earth.”³⁴

Still, if there is evil, so there must be good, and angels, who had previously been anonymous messengers of God, are now named as warriors for virtue. The archangel Michael (he who is like God) appears in 1 Enoch as leader of the heavenly host and (like Mithra) the celestial being who is closest to his god. In attendance are archangels such as Gabriel (God is my strength), Raphael (God heals), and Uriel (fire of God), alongside a growing array of heavenly beings. From now on, the battle between good and evil will be fought out in celestial time and space between massed ranks of opposing armies.

After being rejected for inclusion in the Hebrew Bible, Enoch school writings still had wide influence in Jewish communities until leading rabbis determined to suppress all apocalyptic speculation after the second temple was destroyed in 70 CE. They were only rediscovered when early nineteenth-century European explorers found that 1 the work remained an integral part of the Ethiopian Bible. The visions of one other pseudonymous author, in contrast, have always been readily accessible to both Jews and Christians.

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The *Book of Daniel* remains a puzzling work; written half in Aramaic and half in Hebrew, it starts by telling such stories from the Babylonian exile as how Daniel successfully interpreted Nebuchadnezzar’s dream and Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego survived the burning fiery furnace. Then in Chapter 7—still in Aramaic—it plunges four centuries forward to deliver a coded account of the varying fortunes of Babylonian, Medean, Persian, and Greek empires. From Chapter 8 to the end, it then moves into Hebrew to describe a visit to heaven, comment on the contemporary political narrative, and conclude with a glimpse of the End-Time. While debate continues on whether this later section was the work of one or more hands, no serious Jewish or Christian scholar can entertain the literalist position that it was all written by a man called Daniel in Babylon at the time of the exile.

Throughout the early chapters, the narrative is told in the third person, with characters observed from the outside. In its linguistic origin, the word *apocalypse* means unveiling or revealing, and here the writer tells of a dream. “I, Daniel, saw in my vision by night the four winds of heaven stirring up the great sea. And four great beasts came up out of the sea, different from one another.”³⁵ With inspiration still grounded in the ancient Babylonian combat myth, the first three beasts are identified as the eastern empires that have lost their power—Babylonian by a lion with wings of an eagle, Medean by a bear, and Persian by a leopard with four wings of a bird. Then, out of the ocean of chaos, there emerges Alexander’s more threatening Hellenistic empire.

After this I saw in the visions by night a fourth beast, terrifying and dreadful and exceedingly strong. It had great iron teeth and was devouring, breaking in pieces, and stamping what was left with its feet. It was different from all the beasts that preceded it, and it had ten horns. I was considering the horns, when another horn appeared, a little one coming up among them . . . There were eyes like human eyes in this horn, and a mouth speaking arrogantly.³⁶

Within any herd, power was thought to lie with the animal that has the largest horn, and each horn represented one in a series of Hellenistic rulers, the first and largest representing Alexander himself and the little one, which grew as “Daniel” watched, the current ruler Antiochus IV, officially known as Epiphanes “manifest god” (corrupted by opponents to Epimanes “the mad”). In order to decipher these apocalyptic chapters, the reader does need some background knowledge of Antiochus’ reign. Judea was then torn by a conflict, verging on civil war, between traditionalist Jews and Hellenizers, who had embraced the Greek culture. Antiochus reacted violently when the traditionalists staged an abortive rebellion against his rule

When news of what had happened reached the king, he took it to mean that Judea was in revolt. So, raging inwardly, he left Egypt and took the city by storm. He commanded his soldiers to cut down relentlessly everyone they met and to kill those who went into their houses. Then there was massacre of young and old, destruction of boys, women, and children, and slaughter of young girls and infants. Within the total of three days eighty thousand were destroyed, forty thousand in hand-to-hand fighting, and as many were sold into slavery as were killed.³⁷

The king then forced his way into the temple precinct, outlawed key Jewish practices such as circumcision, and replaced temple worship with his own ritual. After priests and scribes who resisted were brutally killed, the Maccabee family led a popular revolt.

The latter part of Daniel should therefore be read as an allegory on history and current affairs, written in a secret code that is comprehensible only to the initiate. This contemporary political narrative is both introduced and concluded by visions of the Apocalypse. The writer tells how he was brought into the presence of the familiar El figure—named here the Ancient One—“His clothing was white as snow, and the hair of his head like pure wool . . . A thousand thousand served him, and ten thousand times ten thousand stood attending him. The court sat in judgment, and the books were opened.”³⁸ Then, out of the clouds of heaven, appears “one like the Son of Man.”³⁹ Perhaps no phrase in literature has been subjected to more scholarly analysis. Literally meaning no more than “someone like a human being,” and used earlier as the form of address used by God when addressing the prophet Ezekiel, it now develops messianic overtones. In a later section of 1 Enoch, a divine being in human form, who had been present at creation, appears alongside God.

From the beginning the Son of Man was hidden, and the Most High preserved him in the presence of His might, and revealed him to the elect and the congregation of the elect and holy shall be sown, and all the elect shall stand before him on that day. And all the kings and the mighty and the exalted and those who rule the earth shall fall down before him on their faces and worship and set their hope upon that Son of Man, and petition him and supplicate for mercy at his hands.⁴⁰

This figure stands in judgment, hurling kings into realms of darkness from which they can never hope to be raised.

Although Son of Man imagery would later become central to Christianity, it was first used when addressing Jewish readers. In order to erase later overtones, some Jewish scholars have interpreted it as a collective term to represent the Jewish people. While this can be made to fit into the Daniel narrative, it takes no account of its wider use in Enoch. An alternative explanation, that the character is an angel, must therefore be preferred. Here, then, is the Mithra-like figure of the archangel Michael, whose name means “the one who is like God.”

In the heat of Antiochus’ persecution, the prophet still needed to know the date when the temple sanctuary would be cleansed of Antiochus’ profanity so that the End-Time could finally arrive. After first setting dates that were not realized, Daniel asked the question that would be repeated so often in later years; “my lord, what shall be the outcome of these things?” “Go your way, Daniel,” replied the angel, “for the words are to remain secret and sealed until the time of the end.” After being accepted into both the Hebrew and the Christian canons, Daniel’s symbolism would acquire great significance for all later apocalyptic speculation. In intervening centuries, End-Time believers have made huge investments of time and energy, trying to unravel what was then “secret and sealed” and to fix on a date for the “outcome of these things.” “Happy are those” concluded the angel, “who persevere and attain the thousand three hundred and thirty-five days. But you, go your way, and rest; you shall rise for your reward at the end of the days.”⁴¹

The beast with iron teeth that had now arrived from the west was “different from all the beasts that preceded it” because Hellenistic rulers—in common with the Romans who followed—imposed a cultural imperialism on conquered people that was alien to earlier conquerors from the East. Some Jews did compromise with their new masters, but, for those who stood firm, the language of apocalypse was a convenient vehicle for coded communication between like-minded people. The message of heavenly intervention and future reward for the martyred dead could also, once again, provide consolation to those who found themselves deprived of meaningful earthly power.

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The mid-twentieth-century discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls aroused high excitement in scholarly circles, and these ancient documents have been combed for evidence of apocalyptic belief. It was long accepted that the scrolls were the

work of a devout inward-looking community—forerunner of many later millennial sects—that were based at Qumran, beside the Dead Sea. In recent years, though, archaeologists have reported that the this site more closely resembles a trading post than a religious community, and it has even been suggested that the documents could be the contents of the temple library that was hidden away when Roman soldiers started to overrun the country.⁴² Whichever hypothesis turns out to be correct, it is clear that Jewish people around the time of Jesus of Nazareth were much taken up with apocalyptic speculation. Most of the scrolls are copies of both biblical and noncanonical books. Alongside Daniel, Psalms, Deuteronomy, Genesis, and Isaiah, both 1 Enoch and Jubilees feature high amongst those most frequently copied.

Images of the battle between good and evil reappear in the writings that were generated within the Qumran community. God “created man to govern the world,” declares the *Instruction of the Two Spirits*, “and has appointed for him two spirits in which to walk until the time of his visitation: the spirits of truth and wickedness.”⁴³ The *Rule of the War of the Sons of Light and the Sons of Darkness* describes the preparation for conflict, when the forces of Michael and Belial meet on equal terms in a last great battle. As pagan rulers exercised power in the real world, so Belial would enjoy his time of victory before the divine Michael finally triumphs at the end of time. Those who had been martyred for their faith would then be resurrected into their heavenly reward.

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It is not easy to unravel the ways in which ancient Jews came to anticipate the arrival of a final deliverer.⁴⁴ The word Messiah (or Christ from the Greek) literally means “the anointed one,” and the idea of a future savior has its roots in the real or mythical anointing of King David in about 1000 BCE. “I will establish your posterity for ever,” declared the psalmist. “I will make your throne endure for all generations.” The hope for a royal Messiah of David’s line persisted even after many of David’s real descendants had perished in the civil war that followed Solomon’s death. Centuries later Jeremiah could summon a royal Messiah to save Judah from Babylonian armies:

The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety.⁴⁵

Since the high priest was also anointed with oil, it was even suggested that the Jews could expect the arrival of two Messiahs: one, descended from David, would operate in the political arena, while the other, descended from Aaron, would realize religious aspirations. A Dead Sea scroll writer charged the faithful to abide by established precepts “until there shall come the prophet and the Messiahs of Aaron and Israel.”⁴⁶ After Antiochus’ death, hopes focused on the Maccabee family, and for a period of some 20 years, John Hyrcanus held both

anointed roles of king and high priest, as well as that of prophet. But the coming of a Messiah could signal a time of terror as well as hope. "Let him come," said the Jewish teacher, "but let me not see him."⁴⁷

Anticipation for the End-Time ran particularly high some 60 years later, when the prophet John started to baptize for the forgiveness of sins in the river Jordan. Clad in a camel-hair coat and living on locusts and wild honey, he warned that the one who came after him would carry his winnowing-fork in his hand, "and he will clear his threshing-floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."⁴⁸

Though names and imagery would change, the key ingredients for later apocalyptic speculation were now in place. From ancient Middle Eastern civilizations came the conflict myth, the oceans of chaos, beasts of destruction, heroic gods of salvation, and individual demon possession. Zoroastrianism then added the three core End-Time concepts of divine visions (apocalypticism), the coming of one or more saviors (messianism), and the division of time into eras (millenarianism). From this source came also the concept of an eternal struggle between good and evil, which heralds a specific time of tribulation, as well as a Last Judgment, with all due punishment and reward. In the earlier Jewish tradition, we encounter the concept of sin through human choice, Yahweh's implacable vengeance against apostasy, and the expectation of a Messiah from the line of David. During the exile, Ezekiel explored the hope of human resurrection and described God's gory struggle with the evil empire of Magog in a final climactic battle (*Armageddon*). Later prophets and noncanonical writers would introduce demonic fall as an alternative cause of sin and clarify the role of a personalized devil. Most tellingly, they elevated the Apocalypse from the temporal world to a magical universe where human beings were helpless to influence events. Jewish and Christian visionaries then became skilled in wrapping the real events of history and current affairs within allegory and apocalyptic language. When brought together in Jewish, Christian, and Muslim writings, these elements would combine to form an explosive cocktail that still threatens to detonate many centuries later.