

The Riddle of Psalm 49 – is rapture a Jewish prophecy?

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During a trip to Israel I asked a good friend of mine whether he knew of a Jewish notion of rapture as described in the case of Enoch who was thus saved from the Flood:

Gen 5,24 *And Enoch walked with God: and he [was] not; for God took him.*

My friend remembered his father (who was a leading member of a Sephardic congregation in Morocco) referring to such a belief.

As a Christian Bible student I greatly enjoy the dialogue and exchange with Jewish scholars, as many of the early Christian teachings are based on Jewish traditions and scriptures: Recognizing the Jewish background and symbolism enhances the understanding of Christian theology. On the other hand, Christian scriptures frequently not only reference Jewish concepts but continue to develop them. Over the years some of these concepts have become disconnected from the Jewish roots – to an extent where they are categorized as Christian ideas, while neglected in current Jewish teachings. I believe the notion of rapture is an example of an originally Jewish tradition.

This article aims to rediscover the Jewish roots of the hopeful concept of rapture. I will also reference some of the Christian prophetic scripture, as it not only reflects but highlights the original Jewish thoughts.

During my search of Jewish literature I came across the Art Scroll Tanach series on the Psalms, quoting Ibn Esra's commentary on Psalm 49. This Psalm opens as follows (Authorised Version):

Ps 49,1-5 *To the chief Musician, A Psalm for the sons of Korah.
Hear this, all [ye] people; give ear, all [ye] inhabitants of the world:
Both low and high, rich and poor, together.
My mouth shall speak of wisdom; and the meditation of my heart
[shall be] of understanding.
I will incline mine ear to a parable: I will open my dark saying upon
the harp.*

The expression "dark saying" is rendered "riddle" in the Art Scroll translation. It has also the meaning of mystery.

In the Art Scroll translation verse 16 of Psalm 49 reads:

*But God will redeem my soul from the grip of the Lower World
(Sheol), for He shall take me.*

The Hebrew word for "take" is identical to the word in Gen.5,24. In the following I quote from the Art Scroll commentary:

„I have been alert to incline my ear to the instructive parable; therefore I have solved the riddle (v 5). Thus I am certain that God will bring me close to Him, far from the grip of the Sheol" (Rashi).

„When my love for God is so all-consuming that the very letters of His name become indelibly etched in my heart... I shall never die; rather, my soul will be drawn upwards, until it disappears in the heavenly abode, as we read of the ancient tzaddik (Genesis 5:24) And Chanoch walked with God, then he was no more, for God had taken him" (Ibn Esra).

Finally, this is a reference of a Jewish anticipation very much resembling the Christian hope of rapture. This forgotten concept is referred to in psalm 49 as a riddle or mystery.

This image also emerges in Christian prophecy, in particular in the book of Revelation, the last book of the Christian Bible.

In the days of the voice of the seventh angel, when he is about to sound the trumpet, the mystery of God also shall be completed, as he has made known the glad tidings to his own bondmen the prophets (Rev.10,7 - J.N. Darby translation).

For years I have looked for an explanation of “glad tidings” the mysterious promise of God that will be fulfilled in those grueling times at the sounding of the “Seventh trumpet”.

There are seven trumpet judgements described in Revelation, the seventh of which is divided into seven bowls of God’s wrath:

Rev 15,1 *And I saw another sign in heaven, great and marvelous, seven angels having the seven last plagues; for in them is filled up the wrath of God.*

However, before the command is given to pour out the seven bowls of God’s wrath on earth, John, the writer of the “Revelation”, is presented with a most comforting glimpse of Heaven:

Rev 15,2-4 *And I saw as it were a sea of glass mingled with fire: and them that had gotten the victory over the beast, and over his image, and over his mark, [and] over the number of his name, stand on the sea of glass, having the harps of God.
And they sing the song of Moses the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb, saying, Great and marvelous [are] thy works, Lord God Almighty; just and true [are] thy ways, thou King of saints. Who shall not fear thee, O Lord, and glorify thy name? for [thou] only [art] holy: for all nations shall come and worship before thee; for thy judgements are made manifest.*

Who are these victors over the “beast” and who is this “beast”?

Similarly, Daniel the prophet had a vision of four beasts and also enquired about their identity. The divine answer was:

Dan 7,17-23 *These great beasts, which are four, [are] four kings, [which] shall arise out of the earth. But the saints of the most High shall take the kingdom, and possess the kingdom for ever, even for ever and ever. Then I would know the truth of the fourth beast, which was diverse from all the others, exceeding dreadful, whose teeth [were of] iron, and his nails [of] brass; [which] devoured, brake in pieces, and stamped the residue with his feet; And of the ten horns that [were] in his head, and [of] the other which came up, and before whom three fell; even [of] that horn that had eyes, and a mouth that spake very great things, whose look [was] more stout than his fellows. I beheld, and the same horn made war with the saints, and prevailed against them; Until the Ancient of days came, and judgement was given to the saints of the most High; and the time came that the saints possessed the kingdom. Thus he said, The fourth beast shall be the fourth kingdom upon earth, which shall be*

diverse from all kingdoms, and shall devour the whole earth, and shall tread it down, and break it in pieces.

Back to chapters 13 and 17 of Revelation where this prophecy is further explained: Rev 13,1-2 & 5 *And I stood upon the sand of the sea, and saw a beast rise up out of the sea, having seven heads and ten horns, and upon his horns ten crowns, and upon his heads the name of blasphemy. And the beast which I saw was like unto a leopard, and his feet were as [the feet] of a bear, and his mouth as the mouth of a lion: and the dragon gave him his power, and his seat, and great authority. v.5 And there was given unto him a mouth speaking great things and blasphemies; and power was given unto him to continue forty [and] two months.*

Both Daniel the prophet and John, the writer of the “Revelation“ define the beast as a political power, a coming kingdom (empire) and a coming king (prince, ruler, dictator) with satanic power (see also Dan.9,26-27 and Rev. 17,3-13).

In Rev.13 a second beast, a religious authority with satanic power is described, which causes the world wide worship of the first beast:

Rev 13,11-17 *And I beheld another beast coming up out of the earth; and he had two horns like a lamb, and he spake as a dragon. And he exerciseth all the power of the first beast before him, and causeth the earth and them, which dwell therein to worship the first beast... And deceiveth them that dwell on the earth by [the means of] those miracles which he had power to do in the sight of the beast; saying to them that dwell on the earth, that they should make an image to the beast, which had the wound by a sword, and did live. And he had power to give life unto the image of the beast, that the image of the beast should both speak, and cause that as many as would not worship the image of the beast should be killed. And he causeth all, both small and great, rich and poor, free and bond, to receive a mark in their right hand, or in their foreheads: And that no man might buy or sell, save he that had the mark, or the name of the beast, or the number of his name.*

In this passage the meaning of the beast’s image and his mark and the number of his name are explained.

According to Daniel 12, the 3½ years of the Beast’s supremacy, will bring the worst persecution of all faithful believers, who worship God.

Dan 12,1 & 11 *And at that time shall Michael stand up, the great prince which standeth for the children of thy people: and there shall be a time of trouble, such as never was since there was a nation [even] to that same time: and at that time thy people shall be delivered, every one that shall be found written in the book. And from the time [that] the daily [sacrifice] shall be taken away, and the abomination that maketh desolate set up, [there shall be] a thousand two hundred and ninety days.*

However, Daniel’s people, the faithful of Israel, will be delivered – either by rapture, just before this most terrible time, or by God’s special protection during this time.

After looking at the identity of the Beast, and the suffering it will cause, we see the victors and how this group of believers is rescued from worst persecution to “sing the Song of Moses and the Lamb”. But how exactly are they saved?

According to my understanding we find this same group referenced in Rev.7 and 14. In chapter 7 of Revelation 144 000 servants of God from the 12 tribes of Israel are being sealed:

Rev 7,2-4 *And I saw another angel ascending from the east, having the seal of the living God: and he cried with a loud voice to the four angels, to whom it was given to hurt the earth and the sea, Saying, Hurt not the earth, neither the sea, nor the trees, till we have sealed the servants of our God in their foreheads. And I heard the number of them which were sealed: [and there were] sealed an hundred [and] forty [and] four thousand of all the tribes of the children of Israel.*

The execution of God’s judgements on earth is delayed until these servants of God are sealed and thus kept safe during the trumpet judgements (Rev.9,4).

In chapter 14 these 144 000 people from Israel are seen on the heavenly mount Zion together with the Lamb:

Rev 14,1-5 *And I looked, and, lo, a Lamb stood on the mount Sion, and with him an hundred forty [and] four thousand, having his Father's name written in their foreheads. And I heard a voice from heaven, as the voice of many waters, and as the voice of a great thunder: and I heard the voice of harpers harping with their harps: And they sung as it were a new song before the throne, and before the four beasts, and the elders: and no man could learn that song but the hundred [and] forty [and] four thousand, which were redeemed from the earth. These are they, which were not defiled with women; for they are virgins. These are they which follow the Lamb whithersoever he goeth. These were redeemed from among men, [being] the firstfruits unto God and to the Lamb. And in their mouth was found no guile: for they are without fault before the throne of God.*

Between Rev.7 and 14 we expect to find the rapture of this group of 144 000 from the 12 tribes of Israel. And indeed, we find a very interesting description of a marvelous woman giving birth to a “man-child” and his rescue in form of rapture.

Rev 12,1-5 *And there appeared a great wonder in heaven; a woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and upon her head a crown of twelve stars: And she being with child cried, travailing in birth, and pained to be delivered. And there appeared another wonder in heaven; and behold a great red dragon, having seven heads and ten horns, and seven crowns upon his heads. And his tail drew the third part of the stars of heaven, and did cast them to the earth: and the dragon stood before the woman which was ready to be delivered, for to devour her child as soon as it was born. And she brought forth a man-child, who was to rule all nations with a rod of iron: and her child was caught up unto God, and [to] his throne.*

Many Christian scholars agree that this woman symbolizes the people of Israel; however, most of them teach, that her man-child is Jesus Christ, based on Psalm 2:

Ps 2,7-9 *I will declare the decree: the LORD hath said unto me, Thou [art] my Son; this day have I begotten thee. Ask of me, and I shall give [thee] the heathen [for] thine inheritance, and the uttermost parts of the earth [for] thy possession. Thou shalt break them with a rod of iron; thou shalt dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel.*

To my understanding this Christian teaching is deficient, lacking the vision of the King Messiah together with his people, as described by Daniel:

Dan 7,13-14 *I saw in the night visions, and, behold, [one] like the Son of man came with the clouds of heaven, and came to the Ancient of days, and they brought him near before him. And there was given him dominion, and glory, and a kingdom, that all people, nations, and languages, should serve him: his dominion [is] an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom [that] which shall not be destroyed.*

This „Son of man“ is identified by RASHI as the King Messiah. It is significant that the same promise, which is given to him is also given to the Faithful of Israel, and thus identifying him with the people of the saints of the most High:

Dan 7,27 *And the kingdom and dominion, and the greatness of the kingdom under the whole heaven, shall be given to the people of the saints of the most High, whose kingdom [is] an everlasting kingdom, and all dominions shall serve and obey him.*

Conclusion

The concept of a divine rescue in form of rapture originates in Jewish scripture: it is mentioned in the book of psalms in form of a riddle and exemplified in the story of Enoch. The Christian scripture offers additional details in the book of Revelation.

Based on both the Christian and the Jewish scriptural evidence, I conclude that the man-child symbolizes the Messiah saving 144 000 of Israel's faithful, who are redeemed as first fruits from the earth.

The rapture of this group from Israel at the midpoint of Israel's last seven years before the return of Messiah is announced in Rev.10,7. With it *the mystery of God also shall be completed, as he has made known the glad tidings to his own bondmen the prophets.*

The prophetic announcement of this glad tidings is found in Psalm 49:

Ps 49,16 *But God will redeem my soul from the grip of the Lower World (Sheol), for He shall take me.*

This verse is interpreted by Ibn Ezra with the following words:

„I shall never die; rather, my soul will be drawn upwards, until it disappears in the heavenly abode, as we read of the ancient tzaddik (Genesis 5:24) And Chanoch walked with God, then he was no more, for God had taken him“.

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