

Revelation 6: Introduction to the “Messianic Woes”

I. Jewish Apocalyptic Context

A. Summary

A tumultuous period of eschatological distress and tribulation that, according to early Judaism, was to precede the coming of the Messiah. Characteristic features include apostasy, war, earthquakes, drought, famine, pestilence, familial strife and betrayal, cosmic signs, increasing wickedness, and the scarcity of truth and wisdom. Otherwise known in the rabbinic literature as the “birth pangs of the Messiah,” these woes lead inexorably to the birth of the final state of blessedness.

The concept of messianic woes has OT roots (Isa. 13:6–8; 26:16–19; Jer. 13:21; Mic. 5:2–4 [MT 1–3]; 7:1–6), more generally in OT depictions of the trauma associated with the day of the Lord (e.g., Joel 1:15–2:11; 2:30–31 [3:3–4]; Zeph. 1:14–18; esp. Dan. 12:1–3). The messianic woes pattern finds fuller development in the OT Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha (4 Ezra 5:1–13; 2 Apoc. Bar. 25–32; Jub. 23:13–25; Apoc. Abr. 30:4–8; T. Mos. 8–9), the Dead Sea Scrolls (1QH 3:3–18), the NT, and in patristic (Did. 16:3–6; Herm. Vis. 4.1–2; Barn. 4:3–5) and rabbinic (m. Soṭa 9:15; *b. Sanh.* 97a–98b; *Šabb.* 118a; *Pesah.* 118a; *Ketub.* 111a) literature.

The Synoptic eschatological discourse (Matt. 24; Mark 13; Luke 21) offers a striking NT parallel to the Jewish notion of messianic woes (cf. the “beginning of birth pangs,” Matt. 24:8; Mark 13:8), as do the visions of the seven seals, trumpets, and bowls (Rev. 6–16). Numerous other NT texts may also share this same background (e.g., Matt. 10:17–23, 34–36; Rom. 8:17–18; 2 Cor. 4:16–17; 1 Thess. 3:3–5). -- Mark Dubis, “Messianic Woes,” *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible* (Eerdmans, 2000), 890

B. Old Testament

While I was thinking about the horns, there before me was another horn, a little one, which came up among them; and three of the first horns were uprooted before it. This horn had eyes like the eyes of a man and a mouth that spoke boastfully.

⁹ As I looked, thrones were set in place, and the Ancient of Days took his seat. His clothing was as white as snow; the hair of his head was white like wool. His throne was flaming with fire, and its wheels were all ablaze. ¹⁰ A river of fire was flowing, coming out from before him. Thousands upon thousands attended him; ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him. The court was seated, and the books [Gk. *biblos*, LXX; cf. Rev. 5:1] were opened.

¹¹ Then I continued to watch because of the boastful words the horn was speaking. I kept looking until the beast was slain and its body destroyed and thrown into the blazing fire. ¹² (The other beasts had been stripped of their authority, but were allowed to live for a period of time.)

¹³ In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. ¹⁴ He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and men of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed. (^{NIV} Dan 7:8–14)

C. Intertestamental

Now concerning the signs: lo, the days are coming when those who inhabit the earth shall be seized with great terror, and the way of truth shall be hidden, and the land shall be barren of faith. ² Unrighteousness shall be increased beyond what you yourself see, and beyond what you heard of formerly. ³ And the land that you now see ruling shall be a trackless waste, and people shall see it desolate... ⁴ and the sun shall suddenly begin to shine at night, and the moon during

the day. ⁵ Blood shall drip from wood, and the stone shall utter its voice; the peoples shall be troubled, and the stars shall fall... ¹⁰ and [wisdom] shall be sought by many but shall not be found, and unrighteousness and unrestraint shall increase on earth. ¹¹ One country shall ask its neighbor, 'Has righteousness, or anyone who does right, passed through you?' And it will answer, 'No.' (^{NRSV} 2 Esdras 5:1–11)

D. New Testament

Now concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered together to him, we ask you, brothers, ² not to be quickly shaken in mind or alarmed, either by a spirit or a spoken word, or a letter seeming to be from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come. ³ Let no one deceive you in any way. For that day will not come, unless the rebellion comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction, ⁴ who opposes and exalts himself against every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, proclaiming himself to be God. ⁵ Do you not remember that when I was still with you I told you these things? (^{ESV} 2 Thess 2:1–5)

E. The Didache

16. "Watch" over your life: do not let your lamps go out, and do not be unprepared, but be ready, for you do not know the hour when our Lord is coming. Gather together frequently, seeking the things that benefit your souls, for all the time you have believed will be of no use to you if you are not found perfect in the last time. For in the last days the false prophets and corrupters will abound, and the sheep will be turned into wolves, and love will be turned into hate. For as lawlessness increases, they will hate and persecute and betray one another. And then the deceiver of the world will appear as a son of God and "will perform signs and wonders," and the earth will be delivered into his hands, and he will commit abominations the likes of which have never happened before. Then all humankind will come to the fiery test, and "many will fall away" and perish; but "those who endure" in their faith "will be saved" by the accursed one himself. And "then there will appear the signs" of the truth: first the sign of an opening in heaven, then the sign of the sound of a trumpet, and third, the resurrection of the dead—but not of all; rather, as it has been said, "The Lord will come, and all his saints with him." Then the world "will see the Lord coming upon the clouds of heaven." -- M. W. Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers* (Baker, 1999), 267–69

II. Applying the Messianic Woes

A. The Messianic Woes and Missiology

- God extending mercy before the Day of Judgment (2 Pet. 3:9; 1 Tim. 1:15) > Rev. 9:20; 16:9
- God seeking the fullness of the Gentiles before the Day of the Lord (Rom. 11:25; Matt. 28:19) > Rev. 5:9; 7:9; 14:6; 15:4

B. The Messianic Woes and Discipleship

- The necessity of embracing martyrdom (cf. Matt. 24:13; Lk. 14:26–33) > Rev. 13:10; 14:12
- Tribulations and the eternal weight of glory (cf. Rom. 8:18; 2 Cor. 4:17) > Rev. 12:11; 15:2

C. The Messianic Woes and Martyrdom

- Martyrdom as ultimate witness of the cross and divine mercy (cf. Col. 1:24; Rev. 6:9) > Rev. 2:9; 6:9; 7:14; 11:7, 18; 12:11, 17; 13:7; 14:13; 15:2; 16:6; 17:6; 18:20; 19:2; 20:4
- Martyrdom as catalyst of eschatological judgments (cf. Rev. 16:6; 18:20; 19:2) > as the saints persecuted (cf. Rev. 7:14; 13:7; 16:6; 17:6), judgments escalate (cf. Rev. 8:5; 14:7; 16:7; 18:2)