Intro (00:02):

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Intro (00:05):

Welcome to the podcast, a Yale Divinity School podcast series focusing on issues related to religion, culture, and politics. In this episode, YDS alum, Emily Judd, interviews Professor Emeritus John Collins on what the Bible says about end times, he argues against the idea that the modern state of Israel is necessary to usher in the end of days as asserted by a strand of evangelical Christianity.

Collins (00:29):

The idea in revelation is that you have a new creation and then God restores the new Jerusalem. You don't need Likud, you don't need Netanyahu.

Intro (00:39):

And Professor Collins contrasts apocalyptic beliefs in the Hebrew Bible with those in the New Testament,

Collins (00:46):

In most of those texts, they weren't expecting people to come back on Earth. By the time you get to the Book of Revelation, they are, they work that in

Judd (00:58):

Professor Collins. When we hear the word apocalypse in our modern times, we understand it to mean the destruction of the world as we know it. But I'm wondering if you can talk a bit about apocalypse as a literary genre. What makes a book apocalyptic? What types of contents are in a text that's considered to be apocalyptic?

Collins (01:19):

Well, the word apocalypse means revelation, so it's a revelation. So from a literary point of view, it ought to come in the form of revelation. We don't call every revelation an apocalypse. I would say the crucial thing is that there is always an angel or a heavenly being who interprets the apocalypse, who interprets the revelation. There is a typical kind of content, and actually there are two kinds, and some people would distinguish these as two different genres altogether, but I think they have enough in common to hold them together as sub-genres. One of them, I would say is historical. That is to say it gives you an overview of the course of history. And the main thing is that we're headed to a big crash. So there is an end coming, and with that end, there will be a resurrection and judgment of the dead.

(02:25):

Now, that's new in the Bible. You don't get that in the prophets. No, you get prophets talking about an end coming on by people Israel, but they mean a political end. Now it's not always literally the end of the world in an apocalypse, but it's the end of the world as we know it, and punctuated by judgment of the dead. That's the real novelty. The second kind of apocalypse is the heavenly ascent where somebody, Enoch, for example, goes up through the heavens, sees all sorts of things that no human being has ever seen, and usually thereto this, he will see where the dead are kept, where the good are rewarded and where the wicked are punished. And if he's lucky, he may even get a glimpses of the throne of God.

Judd (03:22):

I appreciate how you differentiate between prophecy and apocalypse. What do you think caused the rise of apocalyptic literature? How much influence do you think that crises, let's say persecution had on the authors who were writing these texts?

Collins (03:41):

Well, they had a lot of influence and more on some texts than on others. But what I've been coming round to thinking is that the first shift in this direction really comes, I think with the Hellenistic age, from the time of Alexander the Great on you have much more the sense of both space and time as being one continuum, not just little localized pockets. And I think that idea is not apocalyptic in itself, but it's the essential presupposition for anything apocalyptic. The visions of Daniel are written in a much more specific crisis that we can talk about with much more confidence because we have an account of it in the book of Maccabees. And that was an attempt by Ayn King anti his epiphanies to suppress the traditional Jewish cult in Jerusalem. And again, this was a utter shock. Nothing like that had actually ever happened before. And so that was the crisis. I think that sparked it in the case of Daniel. And then going forward from there, life has been crisis after another.

Judd (04:57):

Well, we certainly see some crises in our world today as well as apocalyptic mindsets. Do you think that this expectation of an imminent end of the world is more or less prevalent in today's world than it was in antiquity?

Collins (05:14):

It's very hard to quantify it either in antiquity or in the modern world. There was a craze of it back about 2000 for the year Y 2K. And I know people who follow this on the internet, and I guess if you really wanted to, you could, you'd see all the chatter that goes on about it. But a lot of society, of course, pay no attention to it whatsoever. And I suspect it was much the same way in antiquity that there were groups of people who got excited about this. And it comes in waves at the moment we've had, well, COVID-19, I think, inclined people that way. The climate crisis, I would say you shouldn't use the Bible as a guide looking for signs. There's a line of the gospels, the Son of Man is not coming with signs to be observed. And you know that the date of the hour, so the signs, this is a feature indeed of some apocalyptic texts, stars falling from heaven. When you see these things in a text or in a biblical text, say in Mark 13, it's a literary trope. It's not actually reliable information that there is something big coming. And the case of Mark 13, the big thing that was coming was the destruction of Jerusalem.

Judd (06:54):

But there is a part of the American population, specifically some evangelical Christians who believe that the establishment of the modern state of Israel is an apocalyptic sign. What does Revelation, which is the only apocalyptic book in the New Testament, what does Revelation actually say about this?

Collins (07:16):

Nothing. Nothing. Essentially, in the lot of the Jewish texts, you have the exiles coming back, the lost tribes of Israel, and that this is a natural enough thing in the Jewish tradition, you hope for restoration. But even in Revelation, it's not put quite that way that when the state is restored in Israel, nobody was thinking in those terms. The idea in Revelation is that you have a new creation and then God restores the new Jerusalem. You don't need Likud. You don't need Netanyahu.

Judd (08:02):

So then do you know the history of this apocalyptic belief that Jewish people have to be brought back to Israel for Jesus to return? Did that belief come after the establishment of modern Israel?

Collins (08:16):

I would think so. Are you familiar with the book we call Fourth Ezra or second Ezras

Judd (08:23):

Not much.

Collins (08:25):

Now if you have, this is not even in the Catholic Bible, but it is in the Vulgate, and you'll find it if you have an Oxford annotated Bible with apocrypha, you will find second Ezra in the apocrypha. And that has visions of restoration in which the last tribes come back and reassembled. So that motif goes right back to the time of Christ. Pretty much that's the natural living aspiration for the Jewish people, the hope for restoration to go back where they came from. But to think that there is actually a divine plan for this that gets a little bit dodgy. That if you try to say that there is a divine plan for history and you've all got to conform to it, that serves somebody's interests and it hurts the interests of some other people.

Judd (09:35):

Now, speaking of Jewish books, the Dead Sea Scrolls, which were written by a Jewish sect called the ASEANs who are living out in the desert and Qumran, one of their scrolls is called the War scroll. It's this description of an eschatological war between the sons of light that is the SCNs themselves and the whole rest of mankind. How does this apocalyptic text compare with the two apocalyptic books in the Bible that is Daniel and Revelation?

Collins (10:08):

Well, it is a different myth, if I may put it this way. But now you see nearly every apocalypse has some myth. Now, by a myth, I mean an ancient story, an ancient paradigm for how the world works. In Daniel, it says, if you took Old Testament interpretation, or at least if you took it from me, you would've heard at the beginning of the course about the myths of from ancient Babylon and from you Garrett, which dealt with a monster, often a sea monster who is threatening the order of the world and then create a good God for the Babylonians Bal, for the Canaanites defeats the sea monster. And that's the climactic battle. Now, in the book of Daniel, what does Daniel see? He sees four great bees coming up out of the sea and then a figure riding on the clouds, which is the way Baal came in the old Eucharistic myths.

(11:19):

So it's taking that story and projecting it into the future. And I think in the Book of Daniel, originally, the figure writing and the clouds is the Archangel Michael who was the patron angel of Israel. In the Book of Revelation, you go basically with that myth. You have beast coming up out of the sea and a beast on the land, and you have a dragon, but it's the battle with a monster. Now, what's different in the Dead Sea Scrolls and the war scroll is that there you have two forces of light and darkness. And in another text from Koran, the community rule, the one that I've just written the commentary on, it says that when God created humanity, God created two spirits for humanity to walk in one of light and one of darkness. In other words, this was part of the divine plan with the sea monster. This is a rebellion, it's an upheaval, but with the light and darkness, this is part of the plan. Now, most like both Daniel and Revelation go on

than to talk about the resurrection of the dead at the end. And the war squirrel doesn't actually do that. It may well be implied.

Judd (12:39):

So when it comes to the resurrection of the dead in the end days, how do the apocalyptic text in the Hebrew Bible compare with the one in the New Testament? That is revelation.

Collins (12:50):

In most of those texts, they weren't expecting people to come back on Earth. By the time you get to the Book of Revelation, they are, they work that in because there were two ways of thinking about the future. One of them is the older one that you get already in the Hebrew Bible, and that is the restoration of Israel led by a messiah, a king who will restore the kingdom of Israel on earth and life will go on earth. And then what comes in with the apocalyptic literature is a judgment from outside, an intervention by a heavenly force, and the whole thing is decided on a heavenly level, and there's a new creation and so much less continuity. If you like

Judd (13:39):

Professor Collins, you have used a train analogy to describe the theology of end times. You've said that God has set the train schedule, the train is going to come, but you have to decide whether you get on it or not, and you cannot hold up the train or cause it to come early. But there are some people today who do think that their actions can speed up the end of the world. There are some American evangelical Christians who donate money to Israel with the idea that this is somehow going to hasten the return of Jesus. In the Jewish context, there is a concept called Tikkun Olam where some people believe that human action to repair our broken world can bring about the kingdom of God. Is there any equivalent to these ideas in antiquity? Is there anything, any belief that humans could influence the timing of the apocalypse?

Collins (14:38):

Very little. I can think of one apocalyptic text, the fourth Sibylline oracle, where if people repent, the judgment will not happen. But that's very unusual. The typical thing, the trade analogy generally holds that it's going to happen. And what you are not determined, you still have a free choice as to which side you're going to be on, but the course of events is going to happen on schedule. The idea of that say, Tikkun Olam can bring the kingdom of God. I would almost call that de mythologizing because what it's saying is we ought to work for a better world. And that's good. That's good advice, but it's not going to bring the millennium. Why

Judd (15:35):

Should people study or read apocalyptic literature today? What's the benefit to studying Daniel or Revelation or other similar books?

Collins (15:44):

The most urgent reason to read today is because there are all sorts of idiots out there who take it literally, and you need to read it and understand it to debunk that. That's the most urgent reason. But it's also great literature. It's very imaginative. It's almost like a comic book with bright colors, dragons. This would be the medium, I think, if people were doing this nowadays. And if you take it for what it is, which is a fantasy, then it's wonderful literature and it gives you some wonderful language and

wonderful images. One of which I think is it gives you language for naming evil. And that's useful. I mean, so long as you don't take it too literally.

Judd (16:43):

Can you give an example of this naming of evil?

Collins (16:47):

Well, the beast, the fourth beast in Daniel and Stomping with His Feet. I can think of very pertinent analogies in the news at the moment, in at least two places in the world where this is happening, where you have a beast trampling on people.

Judd (17:10):

Humankind hasn't changed.

Collins (17:12):

Humankind hasn't changed at all. Yes.

Judd (17:15):

Well, thank you so much Professor Collins for taking time to discuss apocalyptic literature. We really look forward to your supplemental book to the Apocalyptic Imagination, which should be coming out soon.

Collins (17:28):

Pleasure to talk to you, Emily.