

Old Testament Apocalyptic

CHRISTOPHER R. SEITZ

Keywords: Apocalypse, prophecy, wisdom, revelation, inspiration, eschatology

Just What Exactly is Old Testament Apocalyptic?

'Apocalypse' and 'apocalyptic' are obviously terms derived from Greek language and literary form(s). Should one expect to see a similar genre of literature in the scriptures of Israel, designated now, in the light of a twofold Christian canon, the 'Old Testament'?

Generally the answer 'yes' has been given. Less clear are (1) the precise delimiting of portions of the Old Testament which might be called 'apocalyptic', (2) the social origins of such literature and its connection with prophecy and wisdom and torah, and other better-known genres in the Old Testament canon, and (3) whether apocalyptic forms of discourse are related to or distinctive from prophetic eschatological proclamation. If there is something called 'apocalyptic eschatology', do we know what it is? Is it covered by the phrase 'prophetic eschatology' or is that something different?

Gerhard von Rad and Paul Hanson are representative of opposing positions on these three matters. The former sees apocalyptic as unrelated to prophecy, and as an elaboration of Israel's wisdom tradition; the latter argues that apocalyptic emerges when the mundane (this-world) concerns of prophecy no longer find plausibility, and mythic patterns reassert themselves to cover this lost ground. The 'dawn of apocalyptic' casts its shadow after the dusk of prophecy has fallen.

The position adopted here is that apocalyptic discourse is rooted in certain instincts known to be cultivated among Israel's sages. An 'apocalypse', in Hebrew and Old Testament terms, is a disclosure, given to those for whom it has been prepared. It differs from prophecy in that it is not spontaneous, inspired address, concerned with the righteousness of God in the events of Israel's history, delivered (with all the consequences) to the broadest possible constituency, in the full light of day. Rather, inspiration is understood as the capacity to interpret either texts or revelations vouchsafed in private, so as to disclose eternal realities. These realities have been fixed from eternity, and are manifested through a revelation (apocalypse) for all who have the capacity to comprehend what has been shown forth, and acknowledge what they receive as true. This requires wisdom and a commonly held body of sacred texts, which generally constitute the raw material

combusting in the disclosure. It also requires an agent of disclosure, accepted as truly sent by God.

As such, one can speak of apocalyptic in connection with prophecy as that which is *interpreted truly*, usually through the lens of sacred texts, rather than the *inspired delivering of God's fresh word*. Obviously there is a fine line here. When oral prophecy in Israel begins to disappear, this is in direct proportion to the emergence of the written legacy of prophecy, which calls for ongoing interpretation. So, for example, in the Book of Isaiah, the great prophet lives on in the words vouchsafed to him, which serve to illumine a new generation. Those who interpret and elaborate this word 'that returns not empty but accomplishes' (55:11) are the servant and his followers. To the degree that Isaiah's word is seen as now being fulfilled, it has been disclosed as being that which God intended from the start. Here we touch upon a key feature of the apocalyptic instinct in the Old Testament. It is rooted in the Isaianic 'have you not known, have you not seen, has it not been told you from the beginning?' — that is, a sense that a deep truth, revealed long ago, is at last finding its proper fulfilment.

Prophetic Eschatology

If Old Testament eschatological speech involves general descriptions of the end time, or latter time, what is the relationship of such address to apocalyptic? We are familiar with eschatological speech as central to Israel's conception of prophecy. The Mosaic prophets speak words which must come to pass, or else they (or their prophecies) are not to be feared; they have spoken presumptuously (Deut. 18:22). While a major corrective was introduced in the nineteenth-century, which held that prophets were 'forth-tellers not fore-tellers', it remains the case nonetheless that forthtelling entailed speech about the future. The prophets speak of 'the latter days' and of what God will do 'in that day'. Such speech can be grounded in the present ('because you have done X, Y will follow'), but it need not be, strictly speaking. Prophecy may contain speech which opens onto vistas of sheer discontinuity, as God shows forth his intentions for the future. All of the prophetic books contain such speech, Isaiah being the most representative.

Nascent Apocalyptic? The Book of Isaiah

In the Book of Isaiah, we see also another type of inspired appeal. In chapters 40–48, particularly, the truth of something uttered long ago is said to be finding its proper fulfilment. This creates a high degree of rhetorical urgency — ‘have you not known, have you not seen, has it not been told you?’ the hidden speaker cries out, transparent to the Holy One of Israel. The argument developed so intensely in these chapters turns on grasping the link between former and latter things. Former things are testimony given to past generations, the very existence of which as ‘privileged information’ for the present generation serves to defeat the claims of the nations, and ground Israel’s election in the past and its hope for its future. Within the larger book of Isaiah, then, we are given to understand that words spoken in Isaiah’s day, which hardened hearts and closed ears (6:10), were no less divinely inspired for doing such. Rather, this testimony was bound up and sealed among disciples (8:16), and finds at last its intended audience in the latter days. Though deaf and blind, God’s servant Israel has ears and can see (43:8). The older prophetic word (‘former thing’) is now being heard in all its fresh truthfulness.

In this understanding, present inspired truth is the disclosure of something from of old. In turn this gives rise to speech about the future ‘created now, not long ago’ (48:7). Such speech deserves the label ‘eschatological’ for it concerns the latter days, stretching out into a future lying before the speaker and the generations who are being addressed. It is not based on anything specifically attested in former times. Rather, it is grounded in the general reliability of God’s former word, and it then goes its own way. ‘From this time forward I make you hear new things’ (48:6). Many of the ‘new things’ involve matters of immediate concern, to be sure (e.g., the work of the persecuted servant). The general point to be made is that a particular appeal to past testimony, now disclosing its truthfulness, has given way in the Book of Isaiah to a subsequent burst of fresh inspiration, constituting the final chapters (49–66). Occasionally, one will encounter the earlier appeal to former things in these chapters, but this occurs far more subtly and without drawing attention to itself. Two good examples are the appeal to the creation account in 65:20–23 (no labour pains; long life; new heavens and earth) and the citation of Isaiah 11:6 in 65:25, in combination with allusions to the serpent and the holy mountain (Isa. 2:1–4). This combining of texts to produce new inspired address is typical of that aspect of apocalyptic we might term ‘exegetical’. Truth is disclosed by reference to past revelation, now publicly revealed and asserted in the name of a fresh divine purpose.

One can talk, therefore, about the difference between appeal to the past for the purpose of disclosing

revelatory truth in the present, on the one hand, and inspired address to the present concerning the latter things, on the other. One could say the first is apocalyptic, involving the disclosure of truth with reference to prior testimony in texts or tradition or teaching (‘seal the teaching’ or torah). The second is more commonly classified as ‘eschatological’ proclamation. Yet in Isaiah we see also how they depend upon one another. The authority of eschatology relies in no small part on the reliability of apocalypse, and especially the capacity of inspiration to show the truth of the word spoken in the past for a present, intended hearing. All this is established from eternity by the counsel of the Holy One. The servant interpreter has access to that divine counsel and his inspiration consists of the revelation of truth already held together in time by God himself, confirmed, ratified and dispatched through his Holy Entourage (40:1–11).

*Old Testament Apocalyptic:
Daniel The Sage*

If apocalyptic instincts seek to set forth past revelation unveiled for present truthful hearing, the Book of Daniel is probably the closest thing to apocalyptic in the Old Testament. Like Isaiah, the book contains two main parts. The first part tells of Daniel and his wise colleagues. Wisdom is both knowledge, especially of sacred traditions, and also the discipline of obedience such knowledge commends (which could involve martyrdom). This section of Daniel (chapters 1–6) is frequently called the Folk Tales of Daniel, emphasizing Daniel’s obedience and the victory of Israel’s God. Daniel and his friends remain loyal, and their faith is rewarded in this world.

As such, these chapters relate events contemporaneous with Daniel. These chapters do not appeal either to former things or to a future tableau relevant to Daniel’s present situation. Apocalypse (disclosure) does raise its head in these chapters, in the form of dreams and visions which guide Daniel and show him how to act. Unlike the Book of Isaiah, however, the disclosure is private, based upon special revelation to Daniel alone. The visions he receives in these chapters are for his immediate circumstances.

The apocalyptic genre of the book is not revealed until one reads these chapters in conjunction with the second part of the book, the visions of Daniel (chapters 7–12). There the reader learns that events in the days of the Maccabean kings (that is, many centuries later) were seen by Daniel in Babylonian exile. Because they were not for his own day, he could not understand them, and indeed they made him anxious and confused (7:15).

The book is apocalyptic if this Maccabean perspective is taken to be intended, as reflecting the time of the final composition of the book. That is, for readers in the

Maccabean period, events unfolding before their eyes, of great urgency, had been seen long ago by the wise and legendary visionary, Daniel. The truth of their day, and the commendation of loyalty to God and obedience to his torah, are to be found in Daniel himself and in his visions, relevant not to him alone, but also to later generations.

Pusey and others in the mid-nineteenth century saw Daniel's prophetic capacity impugned by the rise of critical method; he demanded that 'prophetic Daniel' be retained as the miraculous predictor of future events, or else he was an impostor and his work a fraud.

Appreciation of apocalyptic theology in the Old Testament has given modern students of sacred scripture another choice. Daniel is at once a model of faith and obedience for a generation under persecution centuries later, and indeed generations up to and including our own; and his interpretational wisdom and visionary inspiration provide the concrete means by which later generations could consult him and find abiding patterns and shadows casting even into their own days. Nebuchadnezzar and later tyrants are coordinated according to God's eternal word of judgement and mercy.

Old Testament Apocalyptic and Present Exposition

At the heart of Old Testament canon consciousness is the conviction that God's word is dynamic and accomplishing, long beyond its moment of delivery. This is because it is not the property of the speaker, but of God himself. It goes forth in accordance with his purpose.

The revealing of present divine purposes through the

study of scripture's word has its precedent within scripture itself, in apocalyptic. Wisdom is patience and care in the study of this word, so that its 'fit' in the present is guided not by human whim, or need, or ideal, but by his own eternal purpose for his own word of truth.

Isaiah gives testimony of how generations were bolstered in hope and in the assurance of their election by virtue of having a concrete record of judgement and mercy, and being able to interpret his will for them. Possession of this testimony was itself a measure of God's election and his persistent care for them, and at the same time established that 'The LORD alone is God'. Others without such testimony worship wood and stone. God was the judge of his people, not a Babylonian king. So says the testimony of the 'former things'.

Apocalyptic reminds the church that scripture is a precious, privileged and privileging gift, the possession of which brings truth, life, hope in darkness, and testimony to the One God with whom we have to do. When Paul speaks of gifts of the Spirit (1 Cor. 12), alongside prophecy we find knowledge, wisdom, and interpretation. These three lie at the heart of Old Testament apocalyptic, when, guided by God's Holy Spirit, they are put to use for the revealing of God's eternal truth. The danger of false prophecy is clear; so too, the threat from false wisdom in the handling of God's word. Wisdom requires patient listening and obedience. Such is the abiding testimony of the Books of Daniel and Isaiah, and of Old Testament apocalyptic.

Christopher R Seitz is Professor of Old Testament and Theological Studies at the University of St Andrews.