

The Origin of Apocalyptic in Biblical Religion

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*This paper forms the sequel to "The Place of Apocalyptic in Biblical Religion", which appeared under Professor Ladd's name in our last number.**

If the apocalyptic structure, including the necessity for a catastrophic inbreaking of God to destroy the evil of this age and to inaugurate the glorious kingdom of God, is an essential element in Paul's thought, it remains to ask whether this apocalyptic structure is derived from the Old Testament prophets and belongs to biblical religion as a whole, or whether it is a late development which was due to foreign influences which transformed prophetic religion into a dualism quite alien to its true character. We would not be so rash as to deny that later Jewish apocalyptic represents a considerable development over prophetic religion. Furthermore, the question of Persian influence is an involved problem which we cannot here discuss. We would, however, attempt to demonstrate that resort to Persian influence is not *necessary* to account for the main development in Jewish apocalyptic, for its basic elements belong to Old Testament prophetic religion.

An interpretation of prophetic eschatology¹ requires an appreciation of the Old Testament view of God and the world. The natural world is not thought of as a realm of existence apart from God but is the result of the divine creative activity and participates in the divine moral purpose. "Thus saith the Lord who created the heavens (He is God), who formed the earth and made it (he established it; he did not create it a chaos, he formed it to be inhabited!)" (Isa. 45: 18). God is continually active, manifesting

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His power in nature. He brings out the stars each night (Isa. 40: 26); winds are His messengers, and fire and flame His ministers (Ps. 104: 4). The Hebrew mind did not think of "laws of nature" in describing natural phenomena. It recognized the sustained activity of God in and through His world.

Yet Hebrew religion never conceived of God in exclusively immanent terms as a deity who is identified with his creation. The strong resistance to any form of idolatry reflects the consciousness that God is not a part of His creation and therefore may not be worshipped through the medium of created things. God is a personal being who is exalted in glory, majesty and power; and the world is His creation. Therefore while not identified with the world, God is continually active in the world, manifesting His divine power and purposes in and through the created order, yet always remaining transcendent over creation.

* [Now on-line at http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/eq/place_ladd.pdf]

¹ The meaning of the word "eschatology" is subject to vigorous debate. See in al. J. Lindblom, *The Servant Songs in Deutero-Isaiah* (Lund, 1951); "Gibt es eine Eschatologie bet den alttestamentlichen Propheten?" *Studia Theologica* VI (1953), pp. 79 ff.; Th. C. Vrieven, "Prophecy and Eschatology", *Supplements to Vetus Testamentum* I (1951), pp. 199 ff. We use the word to designate the consummation of God's redemptive purpose whether or not an "end of history" or of the world is anticipated.

The transcendence of God is illustrated in the descriptions of the divine visitations. When God came down to Mount Sinai, the mountain was enveloped in lightnings, thunders, and smoke; and the earth quaked greatly. In the Psalms, descriptions of these theophanic visitations are couched in what may be called semi-apocalyptic language. "God, when thou didst go forth before thy people, when thou didst march through the wilderness, the earth quaked, the heavens poured down rain, at the presence of God" (Ps. 68: 8). When God sends help to his servant who finds himself in trouble, the deliverance is again described poetically. "Then the earth reeled and rocked; the foundations also of the mountains trembled and quaked, because he was angry.... He bowed the heavens, and came down; thick darkness was under his feet.... Out of the brightness before him there broke through his clouds hailstones and coals of fire. The LORD also thundered in the heavens, and the Most High uttered his voice, hailstones and coals of fire. And he sent out his arrows, and scattered them; he flashed forth lightnings, and routed them. Then the channels of the sea were seen, and the foundations of the world were laid bare, at thy rebuke, O LORD, at the blast of the breath of thy nostrils" (Ps. 18: 7, 9, 12-15). When the mighty God visits the earth, the very structure of the world is shaken.

The world sustains not only a relationship to God but to man as well, in that it was made for man and participates in his destiny. Since the world is God's world, it is a good work (Gen. 1: 10, 12, 18, etc.). The Old Testament reflects no pessimism as to the character of the world per se. Evil is never thought to inhere in

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creation because of its material or physical character. Any trace of a gnostic view of matter is foreign to Old Testament thought.² While God is transcendent over His world, the earth is the divinely ordained scene of man's existence and, as God's creation, is a proper setting for the "good" life.³ God has crowned man with glory and honour, giving him dominion over creation, placing all things under his feet. Man is to enjoy God's blessings and in turn glorify God for His goodness.

Furthermore, we must recognize that Old Testament religion senses a sympathy, even a sort of unity existing between man and nature. The earth is not merely the indifferent stage on which man carries out his task but is in fact itself, like man, intended to contribute to the divine glory.⁴ The ultimate destiny of man in the Old Testament remains earth-centred and is never conceived of as a bodiless, non-material, purely "spiritual" supra-mundane existence as in Greek thought.⁵

Because of the sympathy existing between man and the world, a moral element is intruded into the character of the world by virtue of which the earth as well as man stands in need of redemption. The story of the cursing of the earth is a basic presupposition of all Old Testament theology. Sin has not only affected the conduct of men and their relationship toward God; it has also brought about a condition in the natural world so that it does not function as God originally intended. Man no longer can enjoy the full measure of the divine

² W. Robinson, *Inspiration and Revelation in the Old Testament* (1946), p. 31.

³ G. Ernest Wright, *Interpreter's Bible* (New York, 1952), I, p. 365.

⁴ Cf. A. C. Welch, *Kings and Prophets of Israel* (London, 1952), pp. 234 f.

⁵ Cf. Job. Pedersen, *Israel, Its Life and Culture* (London, 1926), I, p. 334.

blessings. Life becomes a cycle of toil and struggle and the earth produces not only fruit but also thorns and thistles.

The baleful influence of man's sin is seen not only in the abnormal character of the world; when sin increases, the very order of the world is affected. Because of the swearing, lying, killing, stealing, and immorality which transcends all bounds, "the land mourns and all who dwell in it languish, and also the beasts of the field, and the birds of the air; and even the fish of the sea are taken away" (Hos. 4: 3).⁶ Because of sin, the land mourns.

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and the grass of every field withers; for the wickedness of those who dwell in the earth, the beasts and the birds are swept away (Jer. 12: 4).⁷

The evil effect of sin upon nature is implicit throughout the prophetic literature; and it becomes most explicit in the twofold prophetic expectations of divine judgment upon the world and the final eschatological redemption of nature. "In prophetic theology the original creation was conceived to have been so marred by human sin that God's judgment would take the form of a destruction of the world order."⁸ Amos speaks of a divine judgment by fire which first consumes the great deep and then eats up the lard (Amos 7: 4). This can hardly be a natural catastrophe such as drought or forest fire, for in such calamities, the earth would be destroyed before the deep. In the day of judgment, the "host of heaven shall rot away, and the skies roll up like a scroll. All their host shall fall, as leaves fall from the vine, like leaves falling from the fig tree" (Isa. 34: 4). Jeremiah also anticipates a day when the earth becomes waste and void and the heavens fail to give their light, when the mountains quake and the hills are shaken, when both man and fowl are destroyed, the fruitful land turned into a desert and its cities made ruins before the fierce anger of the Lord (Jer. 4: 23-26). Zephaniah sees in the day of the Lord a judgment that will engulf both man and beasts as well as the birds of the air and the fish of the sea (1: 3); the whole earth will in fact be consumed in the fire of God's wrath and the heat of his anger (1: 18 ; 3: 8).

The divine judgment upon the world does not mean the final destruction of the physical world. Beyond judgment is redemption. While the note of catastrophic judgment illustrated above is not to be found everywhere in the prophetic literature, it is, as Professor Wright has intimated, a theme essential to prophetic theology; and the expectation of a redeemed world is even more prominent. While Amos is primarily a prophet of doom, there are intimations of an ultimate salvation in his prophecy (5: 14-15); and in the concluding chapter, Amos anticipates a restoration of the house of David and a day when the earth will be so fruitful that the labour of planting and harvesting will be unnecessary and

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the mountains and hills will flow with wine (9: 13).⁹

⁶ A. C. Knudson thinks this describes the universal eschatological world-catastrophe (*Religious Teaching of the Old Testament* [Nashville, 1918], p., 361). While the language of the prophet provides a background for such a concept, Knudson carries his interpretation a bit too far.

⁷ Cf. also Joel 1: 10, 18; Isa. 16: 8

⁸ G. Ernest Wright, *op. cit.*, p. 365.

⁹ Much critical scholarship rejects the authenticity of the last chapter of Amos because the promise of salvation is held to be contradictory to the book as a whole. It is, however, more difficult to conceive of the prophet

The world of nature as well as man thus stands in need of redemption; and the prophetic vision of the kingdom of God includes such redemption. The prophets again and again look forward to the deliverance of creation "from the bondage of corruption", and the description is usually couched in terms of material prosperity and physical well-being. God will make a covenant with the animal kingdom that there may be peace between the wild beasts and men (Hos. 2: 18) and all violence and destruction will be done away (Isa. 11: 6-9). The wilderness will become fruitful (Isa. 32: 15), the desert will bloom (Isa. 35: 1), the burning sands will be cooled and the dry places spring forth with water (Isa. 35: 7). This redemptive expectation is far more than the satisfaction of an idyllic dream of physical well-being; it is morally and religiously grounded, for the redemption of nature will be effected only when the earth is filled with the knowledge of God (Isa. 11: 9).

The most thorough-going picture of the redemption of the world is found in Isaiah where God creates new heavens and a new earth (Isa. 65: 17; 66: 22). It is important to note that the new order which rises out of the catastrophic judgment destined to fall upon the world will include a new earth. Earthly existence is not displaced by a gnostic sort of immaterial life. The portrait of the redeemed life in the kingdom of God on the new earth of Isaiah 65: 18-25 is painted in the same colours as that of Isaiah 11: 1-9; some of the language is almost identical.

We have deliberately limited most of our discussion to the earlier prophetic writings which are generally not regarded as being particularly "apocalyptic" in character:¹⁰ and from this survey several conclusions may now be drawn.

1. God is the creator and sustainer of the world; and yet He is transcendent over the world. "The glory and majesty of God as well as His "otherness" are set forth in "semi-apocalyptic" language in descriptions of the shaking and quaking of the earth before the divine theophanies.

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2. While the world as God's creation is good, man's sin has so affected the earth that it cannot be conceived in its present condition to be the scene of the perfected kingdom of God. The earth as well as man must be redeemed.

3. This redemption will ensue after judgment has fallen upon the old order. The Day of the Lord will witness not only the judgment of men but also the judgment of the world of nature by a catastrophic divine visitation.

4. Out of the ruins of judgment will arise a new order, the kingdom of God, in which nature will attain a perfect harmony with the will of God and thereby provide a perfect environment and dwelling place for the Lord's redeemed.

5. The kingdom of God will therefore be finally attained only in a new order which is achieved by a direct intervention of God. While the new order is continuous with the old

expecting that God's purposes would end in defeat and frustration. Even the sinfulness of Israel cannot ultimately bring the divine purpose to naught; and though the immediate future appears to be one of unrelieved gloom, eventually God will accomplish His redemptive purpose.

¹⁰ Such as Isaiah 24-27, Ezekiel, Zechariah, Joel and Daniel.

order, the new is not produced by the old; it is accomplished only by the direct activity of a sovereign God. In the words of Professor Rowley: "There was always a hiatus in prophecy between the future that should arise from the present and 'the latter end of the days'." This is not only a temporal but also "a causal hiatus. It was to come down from God on to the plane of history and to be established by His activity. Only the hand of God could break the causal nexus between sin and its fruit, which is more sin".¹¹

This twofold work of catastrophic judgment and of recreation by the direct activity of God, which is in turn based upon the influence of sin in the world, is the essence of apocalyptic religion, and it is found at the heart of prophetic eschatology. We are unable to find adequate grounds for the distinction referred to earlier, that prophetic eschatology expects God to accomplish His kingdom within the present order through the agency of historical media while apocalyptic eschatology despaired of the present order and looked for the kingdom only in a different order by a miraculous intervention of God. There is, to be sure, an element of truth in this position; but prophetic eschatology was also *tinged with pessimism for the present order. It did not expect history to produce the kingdom, nor did it think alone of God's activity through ordinary historical events. God must act directly to create a new order before the Golden Age would come.*

This is the fundamental philosophy of the apocalyptic interpretation of eschatology. No sharp distinction can be made between

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the prophetic and the apocalyptic outlooks at this point. The prophetic eschatology is fundamentally apocalyptic in character. Late Judaism developed these tendencies which were implicit in prophetic eschatology into the explicit structure of the two ages. However, at one important point, Jewish apocalyptic surrendered one of the most essential elements of prophetic eschatology: the conviction that God was Lord of the present as well as of the future. The prophets saw God's hand in present events; and they also looked forward to a day of apocalyptic consummation. The Jewish apocalyptists lost the consciousness of God's judging and redeeming hand in present historical events. This age was abandoned to evil; the redemptive act of God awaited the end of the age when evil would be destroyed.

The New Testament builds on the antithetical structure of Jewish apocalyptic, but it reverts to the Old Testament prophetic consciousness that the redemptive activity of God belongs both to the future and to the present. While Satan is the god of this age, God is still sovereign and has manifested His redemptive power in the present evil age in the person and work of His Son. The kingdom of God, which will yet come with apocalyptic power and glory, has already invaded the realm of Satan. The Messiah who is yet to appear in kingly power has come among men in humility to redeem them from the power of sin. In the language of 2 Corinthians, while unbelievers remain blinded in darkness, for the man who is in Christ the old has passed away, behold, the new has come. The blessings of the new age may be enjoyed by the man of faith because God has done something in history. Bethlehem, Golgotha, the garden tomb: these are all geographical places which witnessed redemptive events in time and space. Thus we must conclude that while both Jewish apocalyptic and New Testament apocalyptic developed principles fundamental in the Old Testament prophetic eschatology, Jewish apocalyptic developed in certain non-prophetic directions which sets it apart from its

¹¹ *The Re-discovery of the Old Testament* (London, 1945), p. 198.

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biblical counterpart, which we may describe by the term prophetic-apocalyptic to distinguish it from the non-prophetic apocalyptic of late Judaism.

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