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THE INTERPRETATION OF PROPHECY AND THE ORIGIN OF APOCALYPTIC

The question of the origins of biblical apocalyptic has remained a controversial subject of study and, although many questions have been clarified, no fully satisfactory solution has yet appeared. In his very important study entitled *The Relevance of Apocalyptic* H.H. Rowley(1) argued strongly that it emerged on the basis of a post-exilic Jewish extension and reinterpretation of earlier prophecy. G. von Rad's rejection of such a position(2) has largely led, in further investigations, to a re-affirmation of the rightness of Rowley's position, but not without a number of modifications to it.(3) This is also the conclusion advocated by David Russell(4), and it may certainly be regarded as pointing in the right direction. At the same time, the import of von Rad's objections has been to draw fresh attention to the fact that there can have been no smooth transition from prophecy to apocalyptic and that the latter incorporates many features and assumptions originally alien to prophecy(5) especially that consciousness of a broad historical determinism which allowed that the final outcome of human history had been decreed in advance by divine ordinance.

Much of the difficulty pertaining to the attempts to trace the origins of Jewish apocalyptic lies in the impossibility of establishing a widely agreed definition concerning what constitutes such a movement of thought and literature. As it progressed apocalyptic came to take on a more clearly identifiable form, to promote the composition of separate and self-contained writings, and to make extensive use of certain easily recognised themes and techniques. Yet, in its early stages, it was certainly not essential that all of these features should be present for many of the central tendencies of apocalyptic to manifest themselves. Many scholars now recognise that a substantial layer of apocalyptic elaboration and reworking of earlier prophecy is to be found in the Book of Isaiah,(6) that similar trends appear in the Book of Ezekiel,(7) and that a substantial level of apocalyptic-type eschatology has been introduced into the Book of the Twelve Prophets.(8) Only the Book of Jeremiah, with its more uniform style of Deuteronomistic editing and composition, appears largely to have escaped this apocalyptic reworking. Consequently, although it represents only a rather minimal definition, Lars Hartmann's characterisation of apocalyptic as 'prophecy among the scribes' remains especially helpful.(9)

It emphasises the decisively literary character of apocalyptic, with its predilection for metaphors and unusual imagery, often applied in a coded fashion to situations far removed from those envisaged in its original context. The development of multiple meanings for specific words, images and themes, such as those of 'remnant' (cf. Isaiah 10.20-22), or the 'felling of a tree' (cf. Isaiah 10.17-19,33-34), becomes a frequently used technique. Such a literary device highlights the strange variety and open-endedness of much that is to be found in apocalyptic where the sense of a pre-determined end is often combined with an extraordinary sense of human choice and freedom as to the identity of victors and vanquished, faithful and rejected.

The present study is designed to draw attention to three short passages, all undoubtedly editorial comments, which are markedly apocalyptic in character and where a virtually identical phraseology appears. The passages concerned are Isaiah 10.23; 28.22 and Daniel 9.27. Students of the New Testament will readily recognise the prominent significance of the Daniel passage, which is alluded to in Mark 13.14 in the eschatological discourse of Jesus. The phrase that provides a clue for the understanding of all three texts is the reference to 'the full end that is decreed' (Heb. *kālah w'nehēraṣāh*), which is to be unleashed upon the whole earth. This is so striking that it must point to the recognition that all three passages are directly related to each other in some way. Precisely in what chronological sequence may be open to question, with the Danielic passage coming last, but with some uncertainty over the priority in regard to the two Isaianic instances. What is striking about all three references is that they employ an almost identical wording and presuppose as already well known a broad assertion about coming judgment upon the whole earth, regarded as already revealed and fixed, even though details and circumstances still remain open to different interpretations.

We consider all three passages in their biblical order. Isaiah 10.23: 'For the Lord Yahweh of Hosts is about to perform in the midst of all the earth the full end that is decreed'. This comes as an apocalyptic editorial comment upon the preceding three verses (Isaiah 10.20-22) where three separate and distinct interpretations are presented concerning the possibility and identity of a remnant of Israel, based on an interpretation of the meaning of the name Shear-jashub given to Isaiah's first child in Isaiah 7.3. A feature in all three interpretations of this name, which introduces the idea of a 'remnant', is they affirm that, in the time of salvation when the Assyrian oppressor is overthrown (Isaiah 10.5-15), not all of Israel will be saved - 'destruction has been decreed, overwhelming and righteous' (Isaiah 10.22). The assumption is very clearly that, although salvation has undoubtedly been promised to Israel through the prophetic word of God, this does not invalidate the parallel warning that judgment must befall the entire land.

Isaiah 10.20-22 is a late editorial development added to the unit declaring Assyria's destruction, and based on a written collection of Isaiah's prophecies.⁽¹⁰⁾ This is shown by the reinterpretation of the name Shear-jashub in a very different way from that originally envisaged in 7.3, where it forms part of an intended message of assurance to Ahaz. Further indications of the scribal character of the unit are provided by the allusion to the promise to Israel's patriarchal ancestors that their descendants will become as numerous as the sand of the sea (Genesis 22.17, 32.13, 41.49; Joshua 11.4; Judges 7.12, 1 Samuel 13, 15; 2 Samuel 17.11, 1 Kings 4.20, 5.9). There can be no doubt that, even though the simile may have been a popular one, the writer had before him the Deuteronomistic history containing these promises of Israel's greatness, and was concerned to modify them in the light of his knowledge of the threat of judgment upon the whole land.

But whence then has he taken this message that a fearful and righteous destruction has been decreed upon the entire earth? Here we encounter a feature that has been of great significance to the apocalyptic development of earlier prophecy that the Hebrew word for

'earth, land' (Heb. 'eres) is ambiguous as to whether it indicates a national, or even more local, area of land, or whether it refers to the whole earth. This world-wide significance would appear to be intended here. In any case the belief that such a massive destruction had been 'decreed' by God can best be traced back to Isaiah 6.11. This was clearly a central text for the tradition of Isaiah's prophecies in general, since it summarises the central message given to the prophet at the time of his call. It affirms in the strongest possible terms the warning that judgment is coming upon 'the land'.

All of this indicates that Isaiah 10.20-22 is the work of an editorial scribe who has found himself wrestling with the seeming contradictions between the assurances of hope and greatness promised to Israel and warnings of judgment that must befall it (as Isaiah 6.11).(11) This promise of greatness has been linked with words affirming the destruction of all Israel's enemies (cf. Isaiah 14.26-27, which has been added to the more circumscribed promise of the defeat of Assyria in Isaiah 14.25).(12) O. Kaiser very convincingly suggests, therefore, that the parallel assurance concerning the coming defeat of Assyria expressed in Isaiah 10.24-25 had already been added to Isaiah 10.5-15 before the whole attempt to wrestle with the idea of a judgment upon Israel, now set down in verses 20-23, was made.(13) The solution to these seeming contradictions has been found in the idea of a 'remnant', an ever popular concept used by some Christians to reconcile a belief in divine election with awareness of their shortcomings and failings, which render them open to divine judgment.

Hartmann's contention that apocalyptic took its origins when prophecy was placed in the hands of scribes is supported by all this. It is a self-evidently literary development, since it depended for its techniques upon the ability to re-apply and re-use earlier words and images from prophecy.(14) Moreover, as is evident here, the scribes who were responsible for Isaiah 10.20-23 had access, not simply to a written collection of Isaiah's words but also to at least an edition of the Deuteronomistic History of Joshua - 2 Kings. What motivates the apocalyptic mentality which created Isaiah 10.23 is the conviction that the threat that a 'full end' has been 'decreed' (by God in the written word of prophecy) will be fulfilled in the end-time, a period which the scribe clearly believed to be imminent in his own day. The notion that the apparent contrasts and contradictions of prophecy can be reconciled by recognising that different prophecies applied to quite different situations and circumstances has been set aside in the attempt to work-out some knowledge of God's great 'Plan' for the end-time.

O. Kaiser suggests that the distinctive message and wording of Isaiah 10.23 has been taken from the first intimation in the book of Isaiah that 'a full end has been decreed upon the whole earth' in Isaiah 28.22.(15) This may well be so, but certainty on the point would appear to be unlikely, since it is most probable that v.22 has been added to the more original unit of Isaiah 28.14-21. This is a short piece of prophetic invective warning the leaders of Jerusalem that God is indeed capable of performing a work of judgment against his own people. Their political strategy and agreements, and their expectation of military support from Egypt, mockingly characterised as a treaty with death (v.15), are declared to be no true refuge. It may be, as Kaiser argues, that some expansions of the original prophecy have been made. Nevertheless in general it should be recognised that

the substance of v.14-21 is an authentic record of the tradition of Isaiah's preaching in the period 705-701 B.C., when the prophet made strong denunciations of Hezekiah's formulation of a mutual defence treaty with Egypt, prior to the withdrawal of allegiance to Sennacherib. Verse 22 then follows on from this and reads:

'Now therefore do not mock,
lest your bonds be made strong.

For destruction is decreed upon the whole earth.'

The concluding phrase which may be translated either as 'a full end is decreed', or 'a full end and a decision' is identical to that found in Isaiah 10.23. It would seem to be highly unlikely that this formed any part of the original content of the prophecy of v.14-21. It has been added to it subsequently when a scribe found in the prophet's message warning against making 'a covenant with death' precisely the kind of repudiation of self-assured hope and optimism which he felt to be most appropriate to bolster his own message of judgment concerning the time of the end. It therefore fits quite smoothly into the overall theological framework of the apocalyptic elaborations which have added a distinctive layer to the book. Any assumption on the part of the Jewish community that, when the judgment came upon all the nations that threatened Israel (Isaiah 14.25, 29.5-9), there would be no comparable punishment of sinners in Israel is sharply rejected. Clearly the scribal author of Isaiah 28.22 felt very strongly on this point: 'Now therefore do not mock (as the leaders of Jerusalem mocked Isaiah in 28.9-10)'. There must be a remembrance that God has decreed judgment upon the whole earth - so the sinners of Judah will not escape unscathed! It is precisely the same message that has occasioned the introduction of the theme in Isaiah 10.20-22 that only a remnant will ultimately be able to enjoy God's exaltation of Israel.

Thus it is very difficult to determine where the priority lies between Isaiah 10.23 and 18.22 since both should be reckoned as glosses added to the short units preceding them. It could indeed be the case that the same scribe has been responsible for both, since the message that is expressed is virtually the same - when the time of judgment comes, as has assuredly been decreed for the whole earth, then this will overtake sinners and the lawless in Judah as well as the nations that threaten it.

We recognise two important features here which are very significant for the pressures and tendencies which encouraged the rise of the apocalyptic movement. The first is the distinctly sectarian spirit which motivated such additions to the written text of prophecy.(16) Whilst it appears to be regarded as an accepted truth that God had fore-ordained Israel to a position of ultimate greatness among the nations, all too readily this had led to a false complacency and to a cynical indifference to attempts to uphold a strict religious loyalty on the part of many Jews. They got on with their daily lives and left the larger questions of Israel's destiny to an unknown and uncertain future. In doing so they posed a challenge to the more zealously law-abiding and tora-conscious men and women of Judah. By affirming that only some in Judah would be saved at the end-time, a determined effort was made to encourage a sincere, and self-denying, loyalty on the part of all members of the community. Such loyalty would really matter at the time of the end! The second feature is that, although the broad framework of God's plan for Israel and the nations is assumed to have been revealed through prophecy, an element

of openness in such a message remains. Judgment had indeed been decreed, but when, for whom, and with what severity and purpose, had all to be worked out from a careful study of scripture. So the parameters of eschatology and of judgment had yet to be more fully unravelled by a careful searching of the scriptures.

The third of the passages where the mysterious message of 'the full end that has been decreed' is given is Daniel 9.27, a very important verse for the interpretation of the Book of Daniel as a whole, and many difficulties of translation and meaning have been recognised.⁽¹⁷⁾ In what is presented as the revelation given to Daniel by the angel Gabriel (Daniel 9.24-27), the significance of Jeremiah's prophecy of a duration for the exile of seventy years is disclosed (Daniel 7.24; cf. Jeremiah 25.11ff., 29.10). This message is then interpreted in terms of an historical event which can only be a reference to the desecration of the sanctuary of Jerusalem by Antiochus Epiphanes: 'And he shall make a firm covenant with many for one week; and for half of the week he shall cause sacrifice and offering to cease; and upon the wing of abominations shall come one who makes desolate, until the decreed end is poured out on the desolator'. Whilst the passage has been extensively discussed by commentators and some details of the translation remain obscure.⁽¹⁸⁾ What cannot be in doubt, however, is the fact that the historical event that is alluded to is the suspension of the daily offering in the Jerusalem temple in the three year period Chislew 15 or 25, 167 B.C. until Chislew 25, 164 B.C. Our immediate concern, however, is not with the historical reference as such but rather with the occurrence yet again of the phrase 'the end that is decreed' (J.A. Montgomery would translate it 'an end and determination'), the precise phrase found earlier in Isaiah 10.23 and 28.22.

What is more significant in this case is that the phrase, now found to be so distinctive of the development of apocalyptic out of written prophecy, is a structural part of the whole Gabrielic revelation in Daniel 9.24-27. It is taken for granted that 'a full end' has indeed been decreed by God at the end time. This is assumed to be well-known to those who had explored the message of prophecy. What has been left unclear and indeterminate is precisely when, and upon whom, such a judgment must fall. Here in this vision given to Daniel by the angel Gabriel, the time and circumstance of this long fore-ordained judgment is declared. When we look further ahead to the New Testament we find that the Markan allusion back to this verse (Mark 13.14) is intended to convey exactly the same sense of a long awaited fulfilment of a visionary warning given beforehand through prophecy.

The purpose of the present study of these three passages, all of which are linked together by this highly meaningful and distinctive phrase, is to demonstrate how apocalyptic has indeed arisen on the basis of prophecy. We can re-assert the contention that all three passages are inter-related in that they share a literary dependence. Whether, as Kaiser thinks, Isaiah 28.22 was the first to formulate the phrase 'a full end that is decreed', cannot be affirmed with any certainty. What is certain, however, is that both Isaianic passages reflect a broadly similar intention of affirming that only some within Judah will be among those who escape judgment at the time of the end.

Both instances in the Book of Isaiah must be credited to late post-exilic scribes who were re-interpreting the prophecies of the

book in an apocalyptic pattern of thought. Ancient prophecy was believed to contain knowledge concerning the mysteries of future judgment and salvation. The use of the same distinctive phrase in Daniel 9.27 must certainly be later still, but can be regarded as intrinsic to the structure and composition of the vision set out in Daniel 9.20-27. M.Fishbane comments 'The compiler of Daniel 9 thus produced a skilful exegetical ensemble'.(19) The fact that all three passages are held together by their use of such a highly distinctive phrase is itself not without significance. It reflects the desire to piece together a comprehensive and final interpretation of the time of the end on the basis of biblical prophecy.

The ultimate point of reference of the phrase, however, must be traced back to the call of Isaiah and to the summary of his message given in Isaiah 6.11., which was seen to provide a revelation of the purpose of God central to the message of prophecy as a whole. What we are faced with then is an example of what M. Fishbane has called 'mantological exegesis' in which one passage has provided a kernel upon which a series of further prophetic revelations has been built up. Further to these points we can also draw attention to the way in which the terse formulation 'a full end that is decreed', or 'a full end and a determination (decreed destiny)', which has proved awkward for translators, sums up remarkably concisely a central tenet of apocalyptic. It points to the belief that a fearful and climactic judgment awaits all the inhabitants of the earth. When, and upon whom, remained a repeated challenge and incentive for those who observed 'the signs of the times' to discover.

FOOTNOTES

1 H.H. Rowley, *The Relevance of Apocalyptic. A Study of Jewish Apocalypses from Daniel to the Revelation*, 3rd ed. 2 G. von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel*, 1972, pp263-283. 3 'Apocalyptic', *Tradition and Interpretation. Essays by members of the Society for Old Testament Study*, ed. G.W. Anderson, 1979, pp189ff. 4 D.S. Russell, *The Method and Message of Jewish Apocalyptic, 200 B.C. - A.D. 100*, 1964, pp73ff.,178ff. 5 cf. M.A. Knibb 'Prophecy and the Emergence of the Jewish Apocalypses', *Israel's Prophetic Tradition. Essays in Honour of Peter R. Ackroyd*, ed. R.J. Coggins, A. Phillips and M.A. Knibb, 1982, pp155-180. 6 O. Kaiser, *Isaiah 1-12*, Old Testament Library, Eng. Tr. J. Bowden, 2nd ed., 1983, especially pp240-242; P.D. Hanson, *The Dawn of Apocalyptic*, Philadelphia, 1975, pp32ff. 7 This especially applies to Ezekiel 38-39, Cf. W. Zimmerlie, *Ezekiel 2*, Hermeneia, Philadelphia, 1983, Eng. Tr. J.D. Martin, pp281ff. 8 Cf. P.D. Hanson, *Op.Cit.* pp280ff. 9 L. Hartmann, *Prophecy Interpreted. The Formation of Some Jewish Apocalyptic Texts and of the Eschatological Discourse, Mark 13 par*, Coniectanea Biblica, N.T. Series 1, Lund. 10 Cf. my study 'A Remnant Chosen by Grace (Romans 11.5)', *Pauline Studies. Essays in Honour of F.F. Bruce on his 70th Birthday*, eds. D.A. Hagner and M.J. Harris, Exeter, 1980, pp106-121. 11 O. Kaiser, *Op.Cit.* p242. 12 This pattern of enlarging the scope of an assurance concerning the defeat of Assyria into one concerning all the nations that threaten Zion is repeated in Isaiah 29.5-9. I have dealt with such a feature in my (forthcoming) study entitled 'Isaiah 14.22-27: A Central Passage Reconsidered' to be published in the series *Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium, Leuven*.

13 O. Kaiser, *Op.Cit.*, p242. 14 Cf. my essay 'Prophecy as Literature. A Re-appraisal', *The Hermeneutical Quest. Essays in Honour of J.L. Mays for his 65th Birthday*, Princeton Theological Monographs 4, ed. D.G. Miller, 1986, pp59-76. 15 O. Kaiser, *Op.Cit.* p242. 16 Cf. P.D. Hanson 'Old Testament Apocalyptic Reexamined', *Visionaries and Their Apocalypses*, Issues in Religion and Theology 2, ed. P.D. Hanson, 1983, p54. 17 Cf. J.A. Montgomery, *The Book of Daniel*, I.C.C. Edinburgh, 1927, pp385f. N.W. Porteous, *Daniel. A Commentary*, Old Testament Library, 1965, p143. 18 Cf. Montgomery, *Op.Cit.* pp386f., also M. Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel*, 1985, pp485ff. 19 M. Fishbane, *Op.Cit.* p489.

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