

## CHAPTER 27

# The Future Perspective

“**T**HROUGHOUT the Old Testament there is a forward look”, wrote the late H. H. Rowley; “Israel believed that while there was a brief period of innocence and bliss at the opening of history, the real climax and crown of history lay in the future. She had a firm assurance that ‘the best is yet to be’, though that assurance, like every aspect of her faith, was rooted and grounded in God and not the mere expression of human optimism.”<sup>1</sup>

All human beings, even in the most primitive society, seek to look into the future; all have their hopes and fears and aspirations. For Israel, the future was the point at which the words of God and the works of God met; for “the God who speaks” spoke of the future, chiefly through the prophets, and “the God who acts” must inevitably, by his very nature as Lord of history, continue to act in history future. From the very earliest period, accordingly, Israel exercised a future hope. We may go back to Abraham, for instance, and observe that the patriarchs were given a firm promise of the land of Canaan, though they did not live to see its fulfilment.

Once again, however, we must endeavour to restrict our attention to the period of the monarchy, and to trace how the expectations of Israel developed against the background of that era. Her hopes did not rise in an historical vacuum. The prophets were men of their time, and we may well believe that God spoke to them in and through their environment and circumstances. It is to the prophets we must turn primarily, because they were by their very nature men who spoke of the future. (If in the past too much stress was laid upon the predictive elements in their message, we must nevertheless beware of going to an opposite extreme; to say that they were “forth-tellers” rather than “fore-tellers” is to pose a false dichotomy.) But

1. H. H. Rowley, *The Faith of Israel* (London, 1956), p. 177.

we should remember that the predictive element is not lacking in other parts of the Old Testament. On the walk to Emmaus, Luke tells us, Jesus discussed "Moses and all the prophets", and explained to the two puzzled disciples "the passages which referred to himself in every part of the scriptures" (Luke 24:27). The "messianic psalms", as they have often been called, may serve to illustrate the point.

We have had occasion to mention Psalm 2 a number of times already; in the first place, it was a *royal* psalm, used of and by the reigning king in Judah. First and foremost, it referred to him. But if its historical setting and function had exhausted the meaning, then such a psalm might well have been rejected from Israel's liturgy once the exile began, and once David's dynasty came to its sorry end. However, it was *not* rejected; it was rather embraced all the more firmly and gladly as time passed. "Such royal psalms", writes J. H. Eaton, "from the outset . . . had a prophetic character: they included vision and oracle, and the purpose of God which they revealed far transcended the experience of the time. The destiny which they promised to the house of David seemed all the more removed from experience as time went on; like the Kingdom of God itself, it was a matter of faith, defying appearances on the strength of the divine promise."<sup>2</sup> The term "messianic psalm", then, is no misnomer.

It is possible, too, that the familiar expression, "the Day of Yahweh" took its origin from the temple ritual; some scholars have argued, in any case, that one day in Israel's festal year was specifically God's Day, perhaps a day when he was ritually enthroned. Others, like the present writer, prefer to think of the Day in terms of outstanding battles in Israel's history.<sup>3</sup> In Israel, it was customary to refer to significant battles of past history as "the Day of . . ."; Isaiah, for instance, recalled Gideon's victory over the Midianites as "the Day of Midian" (Isaiah 9:4). Similarly, the victory in the second century B.C. by Judas Maccabaeus over the Syrian general Nicanor became celebrated annually as "Nicanor's Day" (cf. 2 Maccabees 15:35f.); and among the Arabs, pre-Islamic and early Muslim defeats and victories were described by the same formula.

We might paraphrase Isaiah 9:4 with the words "the day of Midian's defeat", as does the New English Bible; by the same token, "the Day of the LORD" might well be rendered "the Day of Yahweh's victory". There is no wonder, then, that before ever a prophet discussed the Day of the Lord, a popular expectation had

2. J. H. Eaton, *Psalms: introduction and commentary* (TBC: London, 1967), p. 33.

3. For a brief discussion and useful bibliography on this much debated question, cf. H. H. Rowley, *op. cit.*, pp. 177ff.

arisen to the effect that another victory day was at hand, a day when Yahweh, the God of Israel, would again grant his people the miraculous sort of victories that they had experienced in the time of the Judges. When this popular expectation first grew we have no way of knowing, but we first meet it in Amos, in the first half of the eighth century. Probably it had gradually become prominent as the era of extreme Israelite weakness, at the end of the ninth century, had given way to the political recovery of Jeroboam II's reign; and the hope became a prop for Israel's faith when the Assyrians loomed on the horizon once again.

The interesting feature of Amos's discussion of the Day of Yahweh is that though he castigates the optimistic expectations of his contemporaries, he is far from denying that the Day of the Lord was certainly, unalterably, coming. "Fools who long for the day of the LORD", he proclaimed, "what will the day of the LORD mean to you? It will be darkness, not light. It will be as when a man runs from a lion, and a bear meets him, or turns into a house and leans his hand on the wall, and a snake bites him. The day of the LORD is indeed darkness, not light, a day of gloom with no dawn" (Amos 5:18ff.).

Amos, then, depicted the Day of Yahweh both as imminent and as a day of unrelieved gloom. But that is not the picture which meets us everywhere in the Old Testament, of course. We must bear in mind that days of battle were no rare event in Israel's history, and that "the Day of the LORD" had a variety of applications in the Old Testament writings. In Lamentations we read that the Day had already taken place;<sup>4</sup> but that was by no means the last word on the subject, in Old Testament or New.

A day of battle means victory for one party, defeat for the other, and as a rule escape or survival for a certain number of the vanquished army. These three motifs recur again and again in the prophetic writings, the commonest descriptive terms being "salvation", "judgement", and "remnant" respectively. The popular hope of Amos's day envisaged God as defeating Israel's foes and giving victory to his people; presumably the idea of a remnant played little or no part in their thinking. It was otherwise for Amos, who explicitly predicted not only defeat but "exile beyond Damascus" (5:27) for Israel, but at the same time offered limited hope to a remnant. "If you would live . . . if you would live, resort to the LORD", he counselled (5:4ff.). His remnant was in numerical terms startlingly small, however — "but ten men of Israel left", he declared (5:3). The number, though not the concept, contrasts with the promise given to Elijah nearly a century earlier, that the

4. Cf. Lamentations 1:12; 2:1; 2:21f. (The actual phrase used is "the day of Yahweh's anger".)

“Remnant” would be 7,000 strong (1 Kings 19:18). The phrase “the Day of Yahweh” does not occur in the latter passage, but the battle concept is implicit in the declaration that the “sword” of Hazael, Jehu and Elisha would kill very many people in Israel.

The predictions made to Elijah and by Amos alike came to their fulfilment, and proved in very truth to be days of darkness, bloodshed and calamity for the Northern Kingdom. Now the theme was taken up by the Judaeen prophet Isaiah, whose very name signifies “the salvation of Yahweh” and who named one of his sons “a remnant shall return” (Shear-jashub); his other son was called by a name which vividly signified the nature of judgement, “speed spoil, hasten plunder” (Maher-shalal-hash-baz). The remnant motif betokened at the same time warning and promise, for “a remnant shall return” signifies that *only* a remnant will do so. For the Northern Kingdom, the remnant would be minimal, as pitiful as Amos’s ten men — “two or three berries on the top of a branch, four or five on the boughs of the fruiting tree” (Isaiah 17:6). But Isaiah’s contemporary, Micah, was less concerned with numbers than potential, when he depicted the remnant of Jacob as dew, and as a lion (Micah 5:7f.).

Towards the end of Isaiah’s ministry, a day of Yahweh’s anger descended upon the prophet’s native Judah; and the prophet, looking back on the events of 701 B.C., could say, “If the LORD of Hosts had not left us a remnant, we should have been like Sodom” (Isaiah 1:9). History had fulfilled the word of God which had come to him at his call, that there would be a literal decimation, and then worse to follow, of his people’s population (cf. Isaiah 6:11ff.).

Once again the same motifs were taken up, this time by a prophet of Josiah’s reign, Zephaniah, whose short book is devoted to the major theme of the Day of Yahweh, “The great day of the LORD is near,” he warned, “it comes with speed” (Zephaniah 1:14); and he describes it in the by-now familiar terms of darkness and battle. With this prophet, however, we find a more universal dimension than with his predecessors. The very opening words of his prophecy announce God’s purpose to “sweep the earth clean of all that is on it” — even to “wipe out mankind from the earth”. The broad sweep of his canvas may be seen again in the oracle of Yahweh in chapter 3, verse 8: “Mine it is to gather nations and assemble kingdoms, to pour out on them my indignation, all the heat of my anger; the whole earth shall be consumed by the fire of my jealousy.” In Zephaniah’s prophecy, then, we are confronted with the final Day of Yahweh; it is not the downfall of Jerusalem predicted by his contemporary Jeremiah that fills his vision, but the day when Yahweh will exercise judgement upon all the nations. Not that Judah will escape the holocaust; Yahweh’s judgement will fall there too, and only a remnant will survive.

The themes connected with the Day of Yahweh were thus used and re-used by the prophets, first to describe imminent political events, and then to depict something of God's final purposes (though without losing any of the conviction of imminence). The gradual transition to an eschatological frame of reference was natural and logical; it stemmed from the prophets' insight that if Yahweh was indeed the Lord of history and the God of his elect nation, then he could not forever leave Israel on the treadmill of history; he must ultimately rescue his people from wrong within and foes without. The monarchic period, as it had turned out to be, could not possibly be God's last word for Israel. All the prophets, therefore, however much some of them muted the note of hope, looked forward to a day when their God would bring Israel through to its final, its ultimate salvation. In the meantime, as successive Days of Yahweh passed, he always took care to preserve a remnant of his people.

The prophets saw, moreover, that this remnant consisted not of those who just chanced to escape the disasters of the day, but of those whom Yahweh specially selected to escape them. Isaiah described Yahweh's purpose thus: "Once again I will act against you (Jerusalem) to refine away your base metal as with potash and purge all your impurities" (1:25). It was the dross that was to be consumed. Zephaniah put Yahweh's purpose for Jerusalem into more specific terms: "Then I will rid you of your proud and arrogant citizens . . . But I will leave in you a people afflicted and poor" (Zephaniah 3:11f.). In similar vein Habakkuk prophesied: "as for the traitor in his over-confidence, still less will he ride out the storm, for all his bragging"; but by contrast "the righteous man will live by being faithful" (2:4f.).

In the remnant, then, lay the hope for the future; it would be the true Israel, fulfilling all God's hopes and intentions for his people. Several prophets emphasized that righteousness and holiness would be the keynote of the future people of God. Hosea, schooled by his own unhappy marital experiences, represented God as taking his people to himself in a second betrothal ceremony. "I will betroth you to myself for ever, betroth you in lawful wedlock with unfailing devotion and love: I will betroth you to myself to have and to hold, and you shall know the LORD" (Hosea 2:19f.). Jeremiah's teaching was very similar, but he preferred to use the imagery of the covenant, very probably because he had seen the failure of the covenant renewal sponsored by King Josiah:

The time is coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with Israel and Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand and led them out of Egypt. Although they broke my covenant, I was patient with them, says the

LORD. But this is the covenant which I will make with Israel after those days, says the LORD; I will set my law within them and write it on their hearts; I will become their God and they shall become my people. No longer need they teach one another to know the LORD; all of them, high and low alike, shall know me, says the LORD, for I will forgive their wrongdoing and remember their sin no more.

(Jeremiah 31:31-34)

This famous passage offers the divine promise of the new covenant to both Israel and Judah, despite the fact that as a political entity Israel had long since ceased to exist. In the same way Jeremiah predicted not only the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple but also the rebuilding of the city, to serve the community of the future:

These are the words of the LORD who made the earth, who formed it and established it; the LORD is his name: If you call to me I will answer you, and tell you great and mysterious things which you do not understand. These are the words of the LORD the God of Israel concerning the houses in this city and the royal palace, which are to be razed to the ground, concerning siege-ramp and sword, and attackers who fill the houses with the corpses of those whom he struck down in his furious rage: I hid my face from this city because of their wicked ways, but now I will bring her healing; I will heal and cure Judah and Israel, and will let my people see an age of peace and security. I will restore their fortunes and build them again as once they were. I will cleanse them of all the wickedness and sin that they have committed; I will forgive all the evil deeds they have done in rebellion against me.

(Jeremiah 33:2-8)

The Jerusalem which fell in 587 B.C. had been characterized by idolatry and immorality; but the prophet, as this passage shows, envisaged a new Jerusalem, not merely rebuilt, but of a totally new character and quality. From now on the very name Zion came to signify the faithful people of the Lord, wherever they find themselves geographically located. In such a renewed condition, the future Jerusalem would be far more than just a minor capital city; it would have a universal role to fulfil. In their conviction that Yahweh was the Lord of history and of the whole earth, the prophets saw that the nations round about, so often hitherto the foes of Israel and so often fighting with each other too, could not forever continue thus in the purposes of God. In the future universal peace must descend; and that peace would be but one element in the universal scene of God's will done on earth:

In days to come  
the mountain of the LORD's house  
shall be set over all other mountains,  
lifted high above the hills.

All the nations shall come streaming to it,  
 and many people shall come and say,  
 'Come, let us climb up on to the mountain of the LORD,  
 to the house of the God of Jacob,  
 that he may teach us his ways  
 and we may walk in his paths.'  
 For instruction issues from Zion,  
 and out of Jerusalem comes the word of the LORD;  
 he will be judge between nations,  
 arbiter among many peoples.  
 They shall beat their swords into mattocks  
 and their spears into pruning-knives;  
 nation shall not lift sword against nation  
 nor ever again be trained for war.

(Isaiah 2:2ff.; cf. Micah 4:1ff.)

In the prophets' view of future history, then, Jerusalem had a new and immensely significant role to fulfil. It would be appropriately named "The-LORD-is-there", to use a memorable phrase from the last verse of the Book of Ezekiel. But not only so; it would also be the home of the Lord's anointed, the future Davidic King. Had human monarchy proved a failure? So it might often have seemed, but the prophets and many others besides could always cast their minds back to the era of David himself. His reign had been no utopia, but it proved for all time something of the concrete possibilities of royal achievement in Israel. What Israel needed, then, was not the abrogation of the monarchy but another and even greater David, whose realm would be of universal dimensions. Besides, had not Yahweh promised that David's throne should be established for ever (2 Samuel 7:16)?

We come finally, then, to the messianic hope of the prophets. It was a hope that had its antecedents, as in the rather cryptic oracle of Balaam (Numbers 24:17) and in the ambiguously worded blessing of Jacob (Genesis 49:10);<sup>5</sup> but it is in the books of the eighth century prophets that we first meet messianic predictions in plain language. In Hosea 3:4f. we meet a very brief statement to the effect that after many days without a king, the Israelites "will again seek the LORD their God and David their king". But what sort of king? In Hosea the theme is not elaborated upon. In Amos 9:11f., another short passage predicts the restoration of "David's fallen booth"; the word "booth" seems to betoken shelter and protection, so that it is implied that the second David would be a military protector to his people. Verse 12 goes on to predict the restoration of the Davidic empire; the reuniting of Israel and Judah is implicit in this

5. See the variety of possible translations offered by recent English Versions.

prophecy. Thus here we learn a little more about the role of the messianic King.

Micah 5:2-4 is the Messianic passage to which Herod the Great was introduced sadly late in life, it is recorded in Matthew 2:3ff. That king's interest centred on the one detail "Bethlehem"; but more significant in the passage as a whole is the prediction that the scion of Bethlehem would be both "a man of peace" and also one whose greatness should "reach to the ends of the earth".

But it is to Isaiah that we must turn for the fullest description of the messianic King. The famous Immanuel prophecy (Isaiah 7:14) does not in fact tell us very much; we are obliged to turn to the New Testament for the clear and unambiguous statement of a virgin birth, since so far as the limited evidence goes, the Hebrew noun used in Isaiah 7:14 (*'almah*), was not a term restricted to virgins (though it certainly included them): hence the rendering "young woman" in modern English Versions, including Roman Catholic ones. This fact need neither surprise nor distress us, for a careful reading of the context suggests that the primary fulfilment of Isaiah's prophecy was a contemporary one as a sign to King Ahaz — and nobody would wish to suggest that any birth in Isaiah's time was a virgin birth. It is just possible that the original reference was to Hezekiah; but even if so, the promise that "the LORD will bring on you, your people, and your house, a time the like of which has not been seen since Ephraim broke away from Judah" (7:17) seems, like the royal psalms, to be more appropriate for the ideal future king than for any historical king of Judah, even Hezekiah. The symbolic title "Immanuel", "God-with-us", is again more fittingly used of Christ than of Hezekiah.<sup>6</sup>

No such problems surround other passages in Isaiah, however. Isaiah 11:1-10 describes the essential ruling qualities of the Messiah, who is here called a shoot from the stock of Jesse — that is to say, a scion of David's house who would arise after the fall of the dynasty. This king, unlike so many of David's heirs, is described as equipped with "the spirit of the LORD", with its concomitant wisdom, righteousness and power. His reign will accordingly be reminiscent of Eden:

Then the wolf shall live with the sheep,  
and the leopard lie down with the kid;  
the calf and the young lion shall grow up together,  
and a little child shall lead them;

6. The literature discussing the Immanuel prophecy is enormous. Very helpful despite its brevity is C. R. North in *IDB*, s.v. "Immanuel". A recent scholarly defence of a Messianic interpretation is that of J. Coppens, *Le Messianisme royal (Lectio divina 54: Paris, 1968)*, pp. 69-76.

the cow and the bear shall be friends,  
 and their young shall lie down together.  
 The lion shall eat straw like cattle;  
 the infant shall play over the hole of the cobra,  
 and the young child dance over the viper's nest.  
 They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain;  
 for as the waters fill the sea,  
 so shall the land be filled with the knowledge of the LORD.

(verses 6-9)

Finally there is the well-known passage in Isaiah 9:6f.:

For a boy has been born for us, a son given to us  
 to bear the symbol of dominion on his shoulder;  
 and he shall be called  
 in purpose wonderful, in battle God-like,  
 Father for all time, Prince of peace.  
 Great shall the dominion be,  
 and boundless the peace  
 bestowed on David's throne and on his kingdom,  
 to establish it and sustain it  
 with justice and righteousness  
 from now and for evermore.

The style of these verses is that of an annunciation, and it has often been thought that the words of the oracle have been adapted from another ceremony in the life of the kings of Judah. In other words, was it expected of each king of Judah in turn that he should come somewhere near the ideal posed in these verses? It may be so, but the suggestion can only remain a hypothesis. Be that as it may, the blueprint for the ideal Davidic King is here presented to us. His people's political needs would be met by one who was both God-like in battle and the very Prince of peace; the victory won, his people would find the inestimable solace of the one who was their Father for all time. And as the years stretched out it would be increasingly clear that here was a King who could be misled by no ill-advised counsel, for he himself was "in purpose wonderful".

Here we must leave our study of the prophetic hope — already so rich and full of promise, but not yet complete. The fulfilment could not come yet, for Hebrew history had not yet run its course. The dark days of exile and the difficult period of restoration which followed would have their own formative effects on Israel's faith and hope. The pre-exilic prophets had not said the final word of divine revelation; but they had laid a firm foundation on which the people of God would be able to build in the centuries that lay ahead.