

Old Testament Apocalyptic Literature

TIME AND APOCALYPSE: FOURTH ISAIAH, JOEL, SECOND ZECHARIAH¹

On that day. . . Yahweh will become King over all the earth. Zech. 14:8 f.

"Fourth" Isaiah

These four chapters, Isaiah 24-27, cannot be the creation of one of the earlier Isaiahs (First or Second or "Third"), although marked affinities exist. What we loosely call "Fourth" Isaiah is certainly in the broad sense Isaianic: it comes, we suspect, out of the still continuing Isaianic circles. But the last critical Old Testament scholar of any great stature to defend the eighth-century Isaiah's authorship of 24-27 was the remarkable Franz Delitzsch (1813-1890); and almost reluctantly, he himself came finally to abandon the identification.

Three sections in Isaiah 24-27 are more strongly apocalyptic than anything else we have yet read in the Old Testament (24: 18c-23; 25:6-9; 26:20-27:1). A now classical definition of this term *apocalyptic* (literally, "uncovered") properly sees the transition from prophetic to apocalyptic literature as really scarcely traceable. But it may be asserted in general terms that whereas prophecy foretells a definite future which has its foundation in the present, apocalyptic directs its anticipation solely and simply to the future — to a new world-period which stands sharply contrasted with the present. The classical model of all apocalyptic may be found in Daniel 7 [see below]. . . it is only after a great war of destruction, a "Day of Yahweh" or day of the Great Judgment, that the² dominion of God will begin.

Isaiah 24-27 is not entirely apocalyptic: now and again the reader comes to feel that he has his eye on history. But as the sensitive Delitzsch expressed it long ago, "if we try to

follow out and grasp these [historical] relations, they escape us like will o' the wisps; because . . . they are . . . made emblems of the last things in the distant future."³ Delitzsch is arguing with discernment that where we think we have hold of a projection of history — that is, where we think we have moved in unbroken continuity from history past and present to distant history — we discover that it is in fact no projection at all, that while the passage started us off in history,⁴ it leaves us at the end in seeming discontinuity with history and the historical process.

The dating of the section with any measure of certainty is impossible. Seeming historical allusions have been variously identified with events in the history of the Middle East from the beginning of the Persian period down through the Maccabean Wars of the second century B.C. Happily, since the major thrust of Isaiah 24-27 is apocalyptic, the matter of date is not crucial. By universal consent it is postexilic; and we should guess that it is best assigned to the fourth century. Arguments for and against the unity of the four chapters are equally inconclusive but again not of great importance. Most frequently suspect as breaking the unity are the three songs (25:1-5,9-12; 26:1-19; and 27:2-6). If

these are not of a piece with the rest, but are themselves a unity, they should probably be dated later than the long apocalyptic poem into which, in that case, they have been inserted.

In chapter 24 the reader will not fail to note a point of emphasis strongly reminiscent of the first Isaiah — the subjugation and humiliation of the proud (see especially vv. 4b and 21). Apocalyptic's characteristic discontinuity with history is expressed in verses 19, 20, and 23:

The earth is utterly broken, the earth is rent asunder, the earth is violently shaken. The earth staggers like a drunken man, it sways like a hut; Then the moon will be confounded, and the sun ashamed; Sun and moon will have no function any longer: Yahweh is the Light. The voice of classical prophetism with its theological ethic is revived in the first of the songs: For thou [Yahweh] hast been a stronghold to the poor a stronghold to the needy in his distress, a shelter from the storm and a shade from the heat. (25:4)

The universalism of Second Isaiah is reflected in the prose lines of 25:6:

On this mountain [Jerusalem's Mount Zion; see 24:23] Yahweh of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of fat things, a feast of wines on the lees, of fat things full of marrow, of wine on the lees well refined.

This universalism is not as consistently maintained as it is in Second Isaiah, as witness the bitter words against Moab in the same passage, 25:10-12.

Discontinuity in history is again voiced in 25:8:

He will swallow up death forever, and the Lord Yahweh will wipe away tears from all faces, and the reproach of his people he will take away from all the earth; for Yahweh has spoken.

This is not a reference to life after death, but to a radically transformed age in which, simply, there will be no death.

In several ways 26:3-5 is suggestive of First Isaiah:

Thou dost keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on thee, because he trusts in thee.

Compare, for example, Isaiah 7:9 and 28:16. One could almost say that the apocalyptic hope is the inevitable and ultimate extension of Isaiah's so-called quietism, his insistence that the fulfillment of existence is only in faith. And now Isaiah's eloquent castigation of pride (see especially Isa. 2:12-17) is resounded:

For he [Yahweh] has brought low the inhabitants of the height, the lofty city. He lays it low, lays it low to the ground, casts it to the dust. (25:5)

There are probably only two passages in the Old Testament which state explicitly — beyond possibility of doubt — the belief in full life after death. One is Daniel 2:12; and the other is before us now in Isaiah 26:19:

Thy dead shall live, their bodies shall rise. O dwellers in the dust, awake and sing for joy!

One nevertheless recalls other lines which push hard in the direction of resurrection — Ezekiel's vision in the valley of death (Ezek. 37); some of Job's penetrating questions (Job 14:14 f.; 16:18 f.; 19:23; 27); Psalms 16, 73, and 139; and at least for this reader, the ⁵ Servant in the fourth of Second Isaiah's Servant Songs, Isaiah 52:13-53:12.

Finally, we cite the appropriateness of "Fourth" Isaiah's place among the Isaiahs as that place is supported by the affinity between the earliest and latest Isaianic Songs of the Vineyard in Isaiah 5 and 27. For the first Isaiah, Yahweh's vineyard (Israel) was the object of Yahweh's offended concern, his indignation, his wrath and judgment (5:1-7).

Now, after the long passage of time and in the perspective of apocalyptic, the same vineyard is

A pleasant vineyard, sing of it! I, Yahweh, am its keeper. (27:2)

It is the same Song of the Vineyard, but a song transformed. It sings now of a vineyard brought out of judgment, through judgment, into fulfillment and redemption.

Joel

The three chapters of Joel (four in Hebrew) fall into two major divisions. The first is 1:1-2:27. Two overwhelming natural disasters (accompanied by lesser calamities) are described — a plague of locusts and a severe famine. These appear to have no direct connection with one another (although 2:3a may reflect an effort to relate them), since the famine is caused not by locusts but by drought (see 1:18-20). This first division of Joel closes with the community's confession and petition to Yahweh with the consequent deliverance from the disasters.

The second division is 2:28-3:21. This is an apocalypse in which Yahweh himself visits in exterminating wrath all of Judah's enemies, and himself establishes the utopian age in Jerusalem, to be enjoyed forever by his chosen people.

Specifically, all we know of the author is his name and the name of his father. Beyond this, it is a good guess that he was a priest, and if so, a priest possessed of the articulate gift of the classical prophet — almost. Joel speaks with a style and power which come very near meeting that very high standard. And in part for this reason a pre-exilic date for Joel was long maintained (one of the last scholars to abandon it was, again, Franz Delitzsch). In recent decades Joel has commonly been assigned to the fourth century, or even the early third century.

A recent survey of all evidence for the date of Joel sets the time between 323 and 285 (that is, between the death of Alexander the Great and of Ptolemy I): "when the northern tribes had disappeared, the Jews were scattered . . . the temple was functioning, Mt. Zion was the only Holy Mountain, the wall was standing, the priests ruled Jerusalem, the Jews had no armies, Egypt oppressed Judea, and the Greeks bought Jewish slaves."⁶

The locust plague is one of a series of natural disasters which, for Joel, are sure signs of the Day of Yahweh. The plague is so graphically described after the analogy of an invading army that interpreters have occasionally (but probably wrongly) supposed that Joel envisages in fact the catastrophe of military invasion (2:25 seems clearly to refute this possibility).

Mark now the tender lines of 2:12—13: Yet even now, says Yahweh, return to me with all your heart,

..... And rend your hearts and not your garments. Return to Yahweh your God, for he is gracious and merciful, Slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

If something of prophetism's verbal gift and theological insight still live in Joel, the universalism of prophetism at its highest is missing — according to the usual interpretation of Joel. "All flesh" of 2:28 is commonly taken in context as a reference only to all Judah. But is it clearly so limited? This is the beginning of the apocalypse of Joel:

And it shall come to pass afterward [i.e., after the calamitous Day of Yahweh] that I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophecy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions. (2:28) And what shall we say of the breadth of faith and expectation in 2:32: And it shall come to pass that all (?) who call upon the name of Yahweh shall be delivered [from Yahweh's wrath in the Day of Yahweh]

But in what follows, Joel sees the survival and restoration of Judah and Jerusalem and Zion, and Yahweh's devastating judgment upon the nations that have participated in the abuse of Yahweh's people. This is not necessarily a denial of Yahweh's ultimate purposive concern for "all flesh." The old covenant faith, with possible universalistic overtones, is still brilliantly sounded:

Multitudes, multitudes, in the valley of decision! For the day of Yahweh is near in the valley of decision. The sun and the moon are darkened, and the stars withdraw their shining. And Yahweh roars from Zion, and utters his voice from Jerusalem, and the heavens and the earth shake. But Yahweh is a refuge to his people, a stronghold to the people of Israel. (3:14-16)

It was in any case this faith, accommodating itself in one form or another to almost every conceivable circumstance of existence, which was responsible for the survival of Judaism's essential integrity, her unique entity — and, historically assessed, for the subsequent creation of the Christian faith.

Second Zechariah

It may be that three prophetic supplements have been appended to Zechariah 1-8: (1) Zechariah 9-11 (13:7-9 is clearly out of place, and no doubt originally concluded Zech. 9-11); (2) Zechariah 12-14; and (3) Malachi.

Second Zechariah (9-14) is in general character apocalyptic. As such, it is distinguished for the variety in which it presents the apocalyptic form. Five distinct apocalypses are recorded which have no relationship to each other except the typical apocalyptic style, and, probably, a chronological arrangement and reference.

In the first of the apocalypses, 9:1-10, Yahweh's wrath is visited on Judah's immediate neighbors, Syria, Phoenicia, and Philistia. The instrument of divine wrath envisaged by the writer is probably the brilliant son and successor of Philip II of Macedon, Alexander

the Great (336-323), who brought the Persian empire to its end and who in the name of Greece conquered the world. The apocalypse closes with the advent of the Messiah and the establishment of universal and everlasting peace, verses 9-10.⁷

In the second apocalypse, 9:11-17, Greece is destroyed. All Israel, in the land of Judah and everywhere in dispersion, knows peace and security.

Upon the death of Alexander, the Greek empire was divided and the fortunes of Palestine were for a time determined by the Ptolemies of Egypt and the Seleucids of Syria (Ptolemy I and Seleucus I were both generals under Alexander). For more than a century after Alexander's death Egypt maintained dominant political control of Palestine although until the turn of the century (301 B.C. at the battle of Ipsus in Phrygia) that control was sharply contested by the Seleucid rule. This third apocalypse, 10:3-11:3, describes ostensibly the overthrow of Assyria and Egypt; but there can be no doubt that these two divisions of Alexander's empire are meant to be designated. It is the overthrow of the Ptolemies and the Seleucids, the empires of Egypt and Syria, that is envisaged, with particular emphasis on Syria (11:1-3).

In 12: 1-13:6 Judah and Jerusalem are vindicated against the nations and made victorious by Yahweh's intervention; the city repents and mourns for someone martyred in a just cause (the historical allusion is unknown); and Yahweh now removes all idolatry and prophecy (degenerate prophecy, prophecy of a mercenary and corrupt form), and effects Jerusalem's spiritual cleansing in a divine fountain. If the order of the apocalypses continues chronological, we can only assume that this is a little later in the Greek period (which is the general designation of the epoch from Alexander's conquest to the time of Rome's annexation of Palestine in 67 B.C.).

Like the fourth, the fifth apocalypse, chapter 14, is also obscure; but its stress upon Egypt suggests a time still a little later in the Greek period. If one may so speak, it is the most apocalyptic of all, that is, it is on a vaster scale and presents by far the most radical break with history. The catastrophe is again (as in the fourth apocalypse) an attack upon Jerusalem by all nations — but this time the city falls and half the city is taken captive. Now Yahweh intervenes. The topography of Palestine is transformed. The living waters (cf. Ezek. 47; and Joel 3:18) flow again. All the mountains are leveled except the

Jerusalem hill which is raised to a still higher elevation. The nations fighting against Judah are punished; but the survivors go up to Jerusalem to worship Yahweh. Our tastes would call for the close of the apocalypse at the end of verse 16, perhaps, but the following verses do not annul its universalism; and the concluding note of priestly piety (14:20-21) intends to say simply and essentially that the community is completely devoted to Yahweh.

This brief survey of five apocalypses covers all of Zechariah 9-14 except 11:4-17 and 13:7-9. Like Jeremiah 23:1-4 and Ezekiel 34 and 37:16-28, these two passages are in the form of an allegory of the shepherd; but unlike the shepherd allegories of Jeremiah and Ezekiel, the apparent detailed historical reference here remains utterly enigmatic, totally mystifying.

Time and apocalypse. When faith was able to see no possibility of the fulfillment of Yahweh's historical purposes in the historical process, it was history, not faith, that was broken. Apocalyptic preserved the faith and made it still articulate in the vision of time and history interrupted and transformed by the decisive invasion of Yahweh himself.

Yahweh will become king over all the earth. On that day Yahweh will be one and his name one! (Zech. 14:9)