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THEODICY: HOW GOD IS VINDICATED

Aloma Jonker

This article explores the place of resurrection as vindication in second temple apocalyptic texts and how the events of Jesus' life, death, resurrection and exaltation fulfil these eschatological expectations.

Theodicy is defined as 'vindication of divine providence in view of the existence of evil.'¹ Encyclopedia Britannica describes theodicy as: 'the explanation of why a perfectly good, almighty, and all-knowing God permits evil.'²

Background

During the second temple period Jewish peasantry were heavily oppressed by the economic, political, and corrupt religious institutions of the time. They bore the brunt of extortionist taxes levied by foreign conquerors. The ruling priestly class, anxious to maintain their wealth and position in society, collaborated with the foreign pagan empires and collected taxes from the Jewish populace. Yet the people remembered a time characterised by a different social and economic order when God was King of Israel. Hellenising reforms, reaching a climax with Antiochus Epiphanes, however, provoked a crisis of faith for Jews as those who wanted to remain faithful to Yahweh, and were committed to keeping Torah, faced death. In response to this situation there was an upsurge of apocalyptic literature.³

Apocalypse

Hebrew apocalyptic literature held on to God at a time when evil appeared to have the upper hand and God's promises of a peaceful existence in the promised land seemed to be in jeopardy. These works sought revelation as to why history was turning out this way. Revelation often took the form of visions or dreams that painted dramatic pictures of cosmic events. The

¹ H.W. Fowler and F.G. Fowler, eds., *The Concise Oxford Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964), p. 1344.

² <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/590596/theodicy> Accessed: 16/12/2009

³ R.A. Horsley and John S. Hanson, *Bandits, Prophets, and Messiahs: Popular Movements at the Time of Jesus* (Minneapolis: Winston, 1985), pp. 2–17.

visions pointed to the eschatological fulfilment of history and enabled the people to contextualise their own circumstances.⁴

Second temple apocalyptic literature focused on what is going on in the heavenly realm and sought to explain the state of affairs on earth in terms of a conflict between two sets of angels in heaven. This presupposed spiritual power behind events on earth and identified fallen angels as the sponsors of the evil and violence perpetrated by different nations, rulers and people. The resolution of this conflict was found in judgment and restoration. In this manner God's sovereignty was maintained and fulfilment of his promises was assured despite persistent evil.⁵

Resurrection and Vindication

Since second temple apocalyptic literature arose under conditions in which persecution for adherence to Torah frequently resulted in death, belief in resurrection was the only way to overcome the theological problem created by the demise of the faithful. In this context resurrection to eternal life constituted confirmation of righteousness despite the fact that untimely death on earth would have seemed to indicate God's disfavour. The concept of resurrection comes from Isaiah 26:19 'But your dead will live Lord; their bodies will rise...' In this context resurrection is associated with the redemption and restoration of Israel. The resurrection of God's people is contrasted with the fact that those who have ruled over them '... are now dead, they live no more, their spirits do not rise...' (Isa 26:14). In this passage the death of the overlords is seen as God's punishment, whereas resurrection is a sign of exoneration.⁶ The book of Daniel, however, represents a development of this passage and resurrection itself is no longer viewed as justification. In Daniel 12:2 the focus does not appear to be the restoration of Israel but the resurrection of individuals 'some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt' (TNIV). In this text resurrection itself does not have the connotation of vindication, but stands in the service of judgment.⁷ The intent of the resurrection in Daniel 12:2 is restoration of righteous sufferers to communion with God's

⁴ Horsley and Hanson, *Bandits, Prophets, and Messiahs*, pp. 17, 18.

⁵ George W.E. Nickelsburg, *Resurrection, Immortality and Eternal Life in Intertestamental Judaism and Early Christianity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), p. 25.

⁶ Nickelsburg, *Resurrection*, p. 31.

⁷ Nickelsburg, *Resurrection*, p. 37.

people whose fellowship they have been deprived of as result of suffering. Judgment also leads to the exposure and condemnation of the wicked.⁸

Judgment

Eschatological judgment, as encountered in apocalyptic literature, constitutes God's way of putting right the wrongs resulting from persecution.⁹ This judgment involves the demise of evil angels as well as human persecutors. The judgment generally concerned a twofold movement in which the righteous were resurrected to eternal life while the wicked were condemned to Sheol. In the *Similitudes of Enoch* judgment takes the form of rejection of those who failed to acknowledge God and his Messiah. Those who put their hope in God will live eternally in his presence while those who failed to acknowledge him as king will be cast into outer darkness devoid of God's presence (1 *En.* 63:7, 9).

Persecution and Exaltation

In the *Wisdom of Solomon* the theme of persecution and exaltation of the righteous person is explored. The righteous person is insulted, tortured and condemned to a 'shameful death' on account of his (or her) loyalty to Torah (Wis 2:19–20) by the arrogant rich (Wis 5:8), who disregard wisdom and rebel against God (Wis 3:10–11) The death of the righteous person seems to confirm the oppressors' opinion that he (or she) was a fraud. 'The righteous who have died will, [however], condemn the ungodly who are living,' according to Wis 4:16. At the final judgment 'the righteous will stand with great confidence in the presence of those who have oppressed them...' but 'when the unrighteous see them they will be shaken with a dreadful fear...' (Wis 5:1–2). The unrighteous will be 'amazed at the unexpected salvation of the righteous' (Wis 5:2) who will 'be numbered among the children of God' (Wis 5:5) and will live forever in God's care receiving a 'glorious crown' from him (Wis 5:15–16). While not an apocalypse this document delineates the anticipated reversal of fortune that entails the exaltation of the righteous person while the rich persecutors realise their folly, acclaim the true standing of the righteous and face disaster themselves. The exaltation of the righteous includes judging the unrighteous (Wis 4:16).¹⁰ The judgment that is anticipated

⁸ Goldingay, *Daniel* (Dallas: Word, 1998), p. 307.

⁹ Nickelsburg, *Resurrection*, p. 41.

¹⁰ Nickelsburg, *Resurrection*, pp. 81–82.

in *Wisdom of Solomon* is made explicit in the *Similitudes of Enoch* as described below.

The judgment scene in *1 Enoch* 62 and 63 opens with a picture of exaltation in which the Elect One sits enthroned as judge. The kings, officials and governors who have oppressed the righteous on earth are commanded to see if they recognise the Elect One (*1 En.* 62:1–2) at which they start writhing in pain (*1 En.* 62:4–5), an image that recalls Isaiah 13:8. With the Son of Man (Elect One) seated on ‘the throne of his glory,’ ‘the holy ones will stand before him’ (*1 En.* 62:6–9) while their persecutors will fall down and worship him but to no avail (*1 En.* 62:9–11). The oppressors will be delivered ‘to the angels for punishment in order that vengeance (shall) be executed on them’ (*1 En.* 62:11–12). In this manner the righteous and elect ones will be saved and they will not face their oppressors again (*1 En.* 62:13–14). Instead the righteous will be clothed in everlasting garments of glory and they will feast and rest and live with the Son of Man in the presence of God forever (*1 En.* 62: 14–16). *The Similitudes* therefore envisages the vindication of the righteous who will be resurrected to glorified life in the presence of God while their persecutors, the rich and powerful, are resurrected to punishment, banished from before God and face utter darkness (*1 En.* 63:6,9).

The Similitudes echoes the book of Daniel’s understanding that resurrection is the occasion for judgment. The apocalypse thus anticipates that God will be faithful to his promises and that the righteous will live under his rule in the Promised Land.

The Passion and Resurrection of Christ

When the Son of Man, concealed with God from before creation (*1 En.* 48:2, 6; 62:7), took on human flesh and dwelt among us and was arraigned, suffered and died, what was foreseen in the apocalypses came to life. The sinless, righteous one was convicted and crucified by corrupt religious officials and gentile civilian rulers on account of his obedience to God. In Jesus’ passion and resurrection, apocalypse became history as the one who was judged is raised from the dead and ascends to God. Jesus’ resurrection is proof of his righteousness and affirms that which the apocalypses foresaw, namely: those who remain faithful to God despite persecution and hardship will be vindicated.

But Jesus is also God. Therefore his trial, death and resurrection stands as proof of God’s faithfulness, not only in terms of raising to life those who are righteous, but also in terms of sharing in our suffering

while simultaneously revealing humankind's treachery even as he took our judgement upon himself. The historical passion, death and resurrection of the Son of Man, Jesus Christ, the Messiah and Son of God thus represents the assize foreseen in *1 Enoch* with a surprising twist that calls into question the righteousness of God's own people, while magnifying his righteousness and mercy, now extended to all in the name of and through his Son Jesus Christ.

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