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Visions of the End: Prophetic Eschatology*

S. B. FROST

THE good old days" is a phrase which we do not hear very often now. Most people, looking back to the times before there were public hospitals and old age pensions, a dependable police force and impartial law courts, are not tempted to call them the "good old days." Yet we are perhaps only the second or third generation to think that the future is going to be better than the past—and even we have our doubts. Throughout its long history, the human race has tended to look back nostalgically rather than to look forward hopefully. "Times aren't what they used to be" has been the usual regretful comment. To teach mankind to look forward rather than backward has been one of the most important and difficult tasks of the Hebrew people and of the Bible they wrote.

If we examine the thought of ancient Egypt or Mesopotamia or even early Greece, we find no hopeful expectation of the future. Rather, life was conceived to be a great cycle in which one age follows another in rotation, just as the seasons follow one another through the circling year. Men thought of the *Annus Magnus* or Great Year, in which the Golden Age was succeeded by the Silver, Bronze and Iron Ages, so that in the full circle the Golden Age would return again. There is a sobering implication in the fact that men always reckoned themselves to be living in the Iron Age—and if I had said it was an "ironical" fact I would only have been using language which we have inherited from this kind of thinking.

Now where the Hebrews were distinctive in the Ancient World is that mentally they broke that circle and stretched it out into a straight line. The existence of this world, they said, began somewhere and is going somewhere. In time, we are not just going round and round in circles, but we are on the march. There was a beginning to the journey of mankind and one day there will be an end.

How the Hebrews—alone, as far as we can discover—came to make this tremendous change in mental outlook is a fascinating question, but what we must notice is that as a result of this thought-revolution, the Hebrews invented two things: History and Eschatology. The Hebrews were writing history (that is, the story of their past told in such a way as to bring out its significance for their own day and for the future) four hundred years before Herodotus the first Greek historian took up the task, and they were doing so because they believed that God was working out a plan or purpose,

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and that a review of their own past would reveal what that purpose was, and also how it would finally be fulfilled. So they did not invent history only, they also stumbled upon eschatology. Eschatology is a word which comes from the Greek *eschatos* meaning "last." Eschatology is the teaching about what is going to happen at the last day. For the very fact that they thought of history as the outworking of the purpose of God meant that, when that purpose was fulfilled, history would come to an end. "In the beginning, God" has as its inevitable corollary, "*in the end*, God." So now we have to ask what they conceived this purpose to be and how they thought it would be fulfilled.

The earliest Hebrew historian of whom we have any knowledge is the man responsible for the oldest source in the Pentateuch. He used ancient stories to depict man as created to live in close fellowship with God. By man's wilfulness and false independence he destroyed that relationship and has become alienated from God, so that life has gone very badly for him ever since. But God, this first historian taught, was not prepared to let it go at that. Rather, he was seeking some way of repairing the relationship. His method (and here our author leaves mythological parable and begins his history) was to choose a man, Abraham, and to bring into being through him a nation, Israel, which would be obedient and responsive to God, and which would indeed be in the close relationship with God that was originally intended. "I will be their God and they shall be my people"—that is the theme-song of the Old Testament.

This purpose of God in history is first expressed in the Old Testament in the form of a promise to Abraham that his descendants should become a nation and have a land of their own, but when with the settlement in Canaan and the setting up of the Davidic Kingdom the promise was in its literal sense fulfilled, the recognition that this was nevertheless not the full satisfaction of their hopes left the Hebrews free to recognize that the promise was capable of a further fulfillment in history. The culmination of God's purpose was not merely that they should be a nation living in a land of their own, but also that they should be a people, in a right, indeed perfect, relationship with their God. Only then could the old dream be said to be fully realized: "I will be their God, and they shall be my people."

The outstanding disability under which they lived was, of course, Gentile oppression. Not until that was dealt with could the purpose of God be accomplished. So they began to look forward to the "Day of the Lord." This was a day in the future when God would intervene directly in human affairs, and make His rule over all the nations fully effective. It would achieve the overthrow of all Israel's enemies, and would leave her in peace and prosperity to enjoy the providential and righteous rule of God as their Divine King. Thus we find three leading motifs beginning to emerge: first, the ending of the hostility of the Gentiles; secondly, the material prosperity and security of Israel; and thirdly, the justice and righteousness which would characterize the ideal existence of Israel in the New Age.

We can illustrate these things by referring to what is the finest of all the Golden Age prophecies:

It shall come to pass in the latter days
 that the mountain of the house of the LORD
 shall be established as the highest of the mountains,
 and shall be raised above the hills;
 and all the nations shall flow to it.
 Many peoples shall come, and say:
 "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD,
 to the house of the God of Jacob;
 that he may teach us his ways
 and that we may walk in his paths."
 For out of Zion shall go forth the law,
 and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.
 He shall judge between the nations,
 and shall decide for many peoples;
 and they shall beat their swords into plowshares,
 and their spears into pruning hooks;
 nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
 neither shall they learn war any more.

But while these three motifs intertwine in such passages to form the red cord of hope which runs through all the prophetic literature, there is a fourth strand which we need to observe carefully. It is, as it were, a contrasting thread of black, and therefore the most easily distinguished and on that account perhaps the most well-known. We meet it first in the book of Amos:

Woe to you who desire the day of the LORD!
 Why would you have the day of the LORD?
 It is darkness, and not light;
 as if a man fled from a lion,
 and a bear met him;
 or went into the house and leaned
 with his hand against the wall,
 and a serpent bit him.
 Is not the day of the LORD darkness, and not light,
 and gloom with no brightness in it?

Here Amos is obviously dissenting from the popular optimistic expectation. The Day of the Lord is not something to be light-heartedly hoped-for, but rather it is a day which Israel must await with fear and dread. If the wrath of the Lord is to be let loose on his Day, then clearly, says Amos, it will fall most heavily on guilty Israel, since she too, in spite of all her privileges, is alien in character and practice from God's own ideals:

You only have I known
 of all the families of the earth;
 therefore I will punish you
 for all your iniquities . . .

This idea was taken up and restated by Isaiah, and it becomes part of the prophetic tradition. It is the little-known prophet Zechariah who produced one of the most vivid descriptions of this aspect of the Day of the Lord:

The great day of the LORD is near,
 near and hastening fast;
 the sound of the day of the LORD is bitter,
 the mighty man cries aloud there.
 A day of wrath is that day,
 a day of distress and anguish,
 a day of ruin and devastation,
 a day of darkness and gloom,
 a day of clouds and thick darkness,
 a day of trumpet blast and battle cry
 against the fortified cities
 and against the lofty battlements.

As the destruction of the city of Jerusalem and the Judean state drew nearer and its inevitable character became more and more clear, the Day of the Lord and the impending fall of Jerusalem were naturally brought into closer relationship. They were, I think, never quite identified, but certainly the historical disaster was seen in the context and portrayed under the symbolism of the eschatological disaster. No one brought this out so vividly as Jeremiah, who in some moods saw the approaching disaster as nothing less than universal in its dimensions:

I looked on the earth, and lo, it was waste and void;
 and to the heavens, and they had no light.
 I looked on the mountains, and lo, they were quaking,
 and all the hills moved to and fro.
 I looked, and lo, there was no man,
 and all the birds of the air had fled.
 I looked, and lo, the fruitful land was a desert,
 and all its cities were laid in ruins
 before the LORD, before his fierce anger.

When the disaster actually took place, it seems to have expurgated for a while this sense of foreboding and judgment, but as the shock of the destruction of Jerusalem passed, so the note of judgment and doom crept back again into the eschatological expectation.

This is markedly so in the literature of the intertestamental period. Many of these writings are apocalypses, that is, they purport to reveal what the end of the world will be like. Most of them use involved symbolisms and strange imagery to convey their message, but this is merely the language which their age and situation forced upon them. Behind the use of what has been aptly described as the "apocalyptic menageries" stands a very sober purpose: to reiterate and carry further the eschatological expectation of the Old Testament. The main motifs are still the same: on the one hand, the overthrow of the Gentiles, the security and prosperity of Israel,

and the spiritual blessedness of the redeemed community; and on the other, the doom and judgment of God's wrath on all wickedness. But the significant thing about this literature is that in it the Golden Age which is to follow upon the end of history comes to be conceived as not taking place in this world, but in a new, transcendental existence or heaven. Probably this is due to Persian and Greek influences, but when we come to the New Testament, we find that this is also the assumption of Jesus and his followers. Indeed, we may say that the only major difference between Christian and Jewish teaching on this theme is the same difference as distinguishes all Christian thought from Jewish: Christian thought is centred in, and revolves around, the person of Jesus. Thus the Day of the Lord still has the same double character of bliss and doom, of vindication and judgment, but it has now become the Day of the Son of Man. Further, the nationalistic emphasis on the overthrow of the Gentiles and on the material prosperity of redeemed Israel, recedes into the background, and the main emphasis is on the spiritual happiness of the redeemed community reunited with Jesus. St. Mark quotes Jesus as making use of the apocalyptic imagery, but in a restrained and therefore all the more impressive manner:

But in those days, after that tribulation, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. And then they will see the Son of man coming in clouds with great power and glory. And then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.

In St. Luke we find that the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans was foreseen by Jesus, and that, like the prophets of old, he sees the impending historical disaster in terms of the eschatological disaster:

But when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation has come near.

And there will be signs in sun and moon and stars, and upon the earth distress of nations in perplexity at the roaring of the sea and the waves, men fainting with fear and with foreboding of what is coming on the world; for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. And then they will see the Son of man coming in a cloud with power and great glory.

Once again the two are never quite identified, but the kinship between the two events is clearly recognized.

The most famous account of Christian eschatology is given us in the *Revelation of John*. Here the emphasis falls very heavily on the aspects of doom and judgment, expressed in lurid symbolism and strange imagery. It is, moreover, extremely interesting to see how the same themes, which expressed teaching about the beginning of the world, are now thrown into the future and are employed to describe the end of the world. The World-Judgment of the Flood takes a new form in the World-Judgment of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse. The primeval Conflict which preceded Creation returns as Armageddon, the last conflict which precedes the Golden

Age, and the Tree of Life which was in the Garden of Eden reappears as the Tree of Life in the City of God. These age-old tales of the world's beginnings are now employed as what we might call eschatological sign-language for the indescribable realities of the World's End. The book closes, however, on a joyous note. It ends with the description, not of the coming doom, but of the ineffable joy of the Kingdom of God, the culmination of God's purpose in history and therefore the end of history:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride, adorned for her husband; and I heard a great voice from the throne saying, "Behold the dwelling of God is with men. He will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away."

To sum up, we may say that the Christian teaching as derived from the Bible, maintains that as human history had a beginning, so it will have an end. As that beginning was God's act, so that end shall be also. "In the beginning, God . . . in the end, God." But as that end will come in judgment and destruction on all that is mean and ugly, sordid and cruel and alien to God's mind, so it will come in vindication and renewal for all that is good and true and beautiful. For those brought up in the Christian tradition, and who have learned to interpret the great disasters of history as the fearful judgment of God's moral law, the possibility of an atomic holocaust in our age is very real. It may or may not be the end of history, but it will certainly have to be viewed in that context. That is, we must say that if it comes, it will not be by blind chance, nor by man's accidental blunder, but as part of the terrible outworking of God's moral judgment. And also, we must say that if it comes, it will not be ultimate disaster. For beyond it lies the imperishable glory of the Kingdom of God. For, as St. Paul said,

Eye hath not seen,
Nor ear heard,
Nor hath it entered into the heart of man—
The things that God hath prepared for them that love Him.

That is why we Christians sing in this as in every age the great words of the *Te Deum*:

We believe that Thou shalt come to be our Judge.
We therefore pray Thee, help Thy servants,
Whom Thou hast redeemed with Thy precious blood.
Make them to be numbered with Thy Saints
In glory everlasting.