

CHAPTER SIX

THE OLD TESTAMENT AS PROMISE

If we regard the way in which Christians have in the past found theological meaning and significance in the Old Testament, then one feature stands out above all others. This is the conviction that the Old Testament is a book of prophetic promise, which foretold an age of salvation that was to come.¹ For the early Christians this age had come with the events concerning Jesus of Nazareth, so that the age of the New Testament and the early Church could be regarded as one of fulfilment.

This simple scheme, that the Old Testament is a work of 'promise' and the New Testament one of 'fulfilment', provides a basic groundwork from which a wide range of interpretations have been developed. In Christian theology and liturgy no other way of approaching the Old Testament has attained anything like a comparable popularity or claim to authority. Nor is this simply a late development, since it pervades the New Testament in every one of its writings. Supremely this promise is regarded as having been spoken by the prophets:

And all the prophets who have spoken, from Samuel and those who came afterwards, also proclaimed these days (Acts 3.24).

The prophets who prophesied of the grace that was to be yours searched and inquired about this salvation; they inquired what person or time was indicated by the Spirit of Christ within them when predicting the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glory. It was revealed to them that they were serving not themselves but you, in the things which have now been announced to you by those who preached the good news to you through the Holy Spirit sent from heaven, things into which angels long to look (1 Pet. 1.10-12).

In spite of the strength and firmness with which this 'argument from prophecy' has appeared in the Christian tradition, we find, somewhat surprisingly, that the main lines of a more modern critical evaluation of Old Testament prophecy have proceeded rather differently. The great strength of the prophets has been seen in the clarity and forthrightness with which they denounced the social and religious wrongs of their society, so that it was by this means that they became the heralds of a truly moral understanding of the kingdom of God. Where they have been seen as the forerunners of Jesus, it has usually been as a consequence of their sense of righteousness and social justice as essential to any true service of God. Alongside this has gone a great emphasis upon their exposure and condemnation of the hollowness of all worship where it has not been allied to a concern for righteousness. Perhaps here, more than in most other respects, the historical-critical attempt to present a theological assessment of prophecy has departed from the major lines of interpretation which had previously prevailed almost totally in Christian thinking. Whereas the latter has seen the prophets as the foretellers of salvation, the more critical approach has highlighted their role as the heralds of doom and judgment. How has so marked a difference of viewpoint arisen?

A number of factors have played a part, but foremost among them is the concern which has prevailed in a modern critical approach to prophecy to get back to the authentic words of the original prophet. It is particularly when we examine the earlier prophets who flourished in the eighth century that we find that the main weight of their preaching was concerned with denouncing the sins of Judah and Israel. Although in all of the canonical prophets the present text includes sayings of a hopeful nature, in some instances, especially that of Amos, serious doubt has been thrown on their authenticity. Even in the case of a prophet like Isaiah, where a considerable number of very important prophecies of coming deliverance and salvation appear, it becomes evident that not all of them are certainly to be ascribed to the original eighth-century prophet. In any case a very forceful and strongly backed warning of coming doom also appears in Isaiah's preaching.

It is not until the latter half of the sixth century, with the prophecies of Isaiah 40-55, that a clear and unbroken announcement of Israel's impending deliverance and restoration is made. In other words, it was only when the exile was almost over and the judgment could be seen to have passed that the prophets began to sound forth the hope of restoration which tradition has most closely associated with them.

A not inconsiderable disparity is evident, therefore, between the traditional Christian and Jewish lines of prophetic interpretation, and the modern critical understanding of prophecy. On the surface it would seem that the aspect of prophecy which theological interpretation in the past has found to be most significant is one which critical scholarship has come to regard as more peripheral to the prophetic canon of the Old Testament.²

Yet another problem appears in regard to the biblical interpretation of prophecy. The quotations already cited from the New Testament, as well as a great number of supporting instances in which actual prophecies from the Old Testament are quoted, show that by the first century AD the view was fully accepted that the prophets had referred to events that were to take place centuries after they had spoken. Their foresight was believed to reach ahead to declare events that were far beyond the horizon of normal understanding and expectation. Yet this raises serious credibility problems in regard to the nature of God's providential control of history. Even more clearly it stands at variance with what we find in much of the prophetic literature of the canon, where we see that the prophets were addressing their contemporaries about the meaning and outcome of events which were taking place at that time, or which were shortly expected to take place. The time-span which prophecy was believed to cover has evidently been stretched to a quite remarkable degree. The general impression which the discerning reader obtains is that the New Testament writers have been carried away in their enthusiasm to interpret the events which stand at the centre of the Christian faith. They have done so to such an extent that they have quite freely and arbitrarily appealed to almost any Old Testament prophecy which could, in the light of what had taken place, be regarded as a foretelling of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. The

appearance is consequently one of a 'false' interpretation which has arisen after the events had transpired which are interpreted in this way.

Much of the debate which gave rise to the modern critical understanding of prophecy took place at the beginning of the eighteenth century, leading on to a quite new approach at the end of that century under the stimulus of the German Romantic philosopher J. G. Herder and the pioneer of critical scholarship J. G. Eichhorn.³ It is neither necessary nor practicable to examine the course of the debate, nor the validity of the views which have prevailed. We may note, nevertheless, that to abandon the assumptions of the New Testament writers may be quite in order for an Old Testament scholar, but is scarcely very satisfactory for a student of the New. It results simply in a growing hiatus between the critical theological approach to the Old Testament and a critical approach to the Bible as a whole. We have already said earlier that this is undesirable, since it is the Bible as a whole that forms the Christian canon.

However, we may urge very strongly that the hiatus between the traditional theological and the critical approach to the study of the Old Testament prophets has been allowed to grow wider than it really need have done. The loss of interest from the Old Testament side in seeking to show how the kind of interpretation of prophecy that prevails in the New Testament has come about is not properly justified. We may appeal to three features which call for careful re-appraisal. In the first place, it is not simply New Testament authors who treat the prophetic corpus of the Old Testament in this way. In Ecclesiasticus 49.10 the Jewish attitude to the twelve 'minor' prophets is reflected:

May the bones of the twelve prophets also send forth new life from the ground where they lie! For they put new heart into Jacob, and rescued the people by their confident hope.

Here all twelve prophets, including Amos, are regarded as primarily concerned with having preached a message of hope and of coming salvation. Nor is this in any way an isolated example of Jewish understanding, since when we examine the interpretation of prophecy which prevailed in the Qumran

community, we find a similar assumption that the prophets foretold the coming of days of salvation in a distant future.⁴ The major difference between Christian and Jewish interpretation of prophecy does not lie in the kind of foretellings which are regarded as central, but rather in the fact that the early Christians regarded these prophecies as fulfilled. Jewish interpreters, however, still awaited their fulfilment even when, as at Qumran, they regarded this as imminent.

A second feature also enables us to gain a better grasp of the theological significance of prophecy by comparing the original texts with the ways in which the New Testament interprets them. The assumption that the original prophet knew how his prophecies would be fulfilled, and that this must be treated as the 'correct' interpretation of a prophecy is far too simple a view. The prophet himself recognised that a measure of 'openness' applied to his words, and that only God himself, expressing his will through events, would determine their ultimate meaning and 'truth'. It is in accordance with this that we find in the prophetic books of the Old Testament a very extensive range of interpretations and applications of prophecy, which critical scholarship has generally regarded as 'secondary'. A clear example is to be found in the way in which the prophecy attaching to the name Shear-jashub (= 'a remnant shall return') is developed in the book of Isaiah (Isa. 7.3; cf. Isa. 10.20-3; 11.11, 16).⁵ These interpretations are not from the original prophet, but they serve to show how later generations of scribes and interpreters applied the original name to new situations and circumstances out of the conviction that its fulfilment would be revealed by God in events. In other words, there was a genuine measure of 'openness' which allowed prophecies to be applied to more than one event, and these events would themselves serve to show how the prophecy was 'fulfilled'. What we see in the New Testament, and in a closely similar fashion in Qumran, is merely a further extension of this type of prophetic interpretation which already exists in the prophetic books. When we find therefore a distinctive interpretation of the idea of a 'remnant' in Romans 9.27 (cf. Rom. 11.5) it is simply a development of a pattern of interpretation which already exists in the Old Testament itself. It concerns

the interpreter of the Old Testament, therefore, as much as that of the New.

A third feature is also relevant in this regard, and arises out of the observations already made. It has belonged in great measure to the critical study of the Old Testament prophets that it should distinguish between the authentic and inauthentic sayings of each of them. Only so can the preaching of the prophet himself be recovered. Yet the books of the prophets have displayed very little concern to preserve the biography, or teaching, of an individual prophet. Rather the attention has been focused on the prophecies themselves as messages from God, so that no hesitation has been felt in relating various prophecies to each other. We see this very clearly in Ben Sira (Ecclesiasticus), and the way in which he could lump together the twelve prophets as having all proclaimed the same basic message. Evidently the literary form of the collection has itself contributed to the way in which prophecy has been understood.⁶

This raises certain fundamental questions about the actual course of development and whether it is the literary coming together which has occasioned the attempts at an overall pattern of interpretation. To some extent this is no doubt true, but it seems probable that an underlying conviction that the prophets did all proclaim a message which showed features of a common theme and expectation has helped to fashion the literary collection into its present form. At least there were current certain basic themes and conceptions relating to prophecy which enabled a connected corpus to emerge. Nor should we assume that the form of the prophetic literature has been largely dictated by liturgical and scribal necessity. A deeper level of theological connection can be seen to be present, as is shown by the marked repetition of a number of basic themes.

We may argue, therefore, that a theological study of the theme of 'promise' in the Old Testament must seek to elucidate the way in which this theme arose as the central one in the understanding of the preaching of the prophets. Before this can be achieved, however, it is necessary that we should obtain a clearer grasp of the earliest preaching of the canonical prophets of the Old Testament.

I. PROPHECY AND THE JUDGMENT OF ISRAEL

The earliest of the canonical prophets of the Old Testament is Amos (c. 760–750 BC), whose message can be conveniently summed up in his own words: 'The end has come upon my people Israel; I will never again pass by them' (Amos 8.2; cf. 5.2).

The reasons why this end must come upon Israel are spelt out in terms of the oppression of the poor, the corruption of justice, and the disregard of fundamental human rights (cf. Amos 2.6–8; 5.10–12; 6.4). In spite of attempts to show that the prophet was displaying a new depth of insight into the heinousness of these crimes, and thereby injecting a new moral emphasis into Israel's religion, there is little clear evidence that this aspect of his preaching was in any way all that novel. Rather, it was the serious consequences which he foretold as a punishment for these sins that gave to them a new priority. It is when we come to ask how these threats were fulfilled that we begin to encounter the measure of 'openness' in a prophet's preaching.

The fact that Amos, and his contemporary Hosea, both preached in the northern kingdom of Israel, shows that it is the 'end' of this kingdom which was most of all in the prophet's mind. The coupling of this judgment with the fall of the house of Jeroboam II (786–746 BC) would corroborate this (Amos 7.9; cf. Hos. 1.4–5). The central part of Amos's preaching, therefore, was a warning of the coming political downfall of the northern kingdom of Israel, which was realised through the severe onslaught upon that kingdom by the Assyrians, culminating in the fall of Samaria in 722. The presence in Amos of related warnings to Judah (Amos 2.4–5; 3.1; cf. 1.2) indicates that a comparable threat was applied to the southern kingdom. Whether this was actually spoken by Amos himself, or whether it represents a secondary application at the hands of editors, has been a matter of considerable debate. Most probably the latter is the case, but in any event it does not affect the question of the meaning of the sayings.

We find similar instances in Hosea, where threats uttered against Israel are applied to Judah in a way that appears to be secondary (cf. Hos. 1.7; 4.15; 6.11; 11.12). The primary

message of both prophets, therefore, can be seen to have been a warning of military and political disaster facing the northern kingdom of Israel in the eighth century B.C. The fact that in the third quarter of that century this kingdom was virtually wiped out as an identifiable political entity would appear to mark the main basis of fulfilment associated with such sayings.

The major difference between the two prophets is to be found in the reasons which each adduces to justify the coming disaster. Against the social nature of the sins which are uppermost in Amos, Hosea rebukes the people more directly for their religious abuses, including idolatry, false ritual, and the resort to abhorrent sexual practices (Hos. 4.11-14, 17-19; 6.8-10). Brief as this summary must be, it is sufficient to show the appropriateness of interpreting these prophets as preachers of doom and judgment. That there are also present in the respective books of their sayings a number of prophecies giving assurance and hope must be understood in relation to this primary basis. Whether these hopeful prophecies are to be ascribed to the same prophets, or to later editors, is really of less importance than the recognition that these words of hope do not in any case stand at the centre of their message. We can therefore deal with them separately.

We may note briefly some characteristics of a third prophet of the eighth century, Isaiah of Jerusalem, who was active rather later, in the period 740-700 B.C. Two features may be singled out in respect of the book which bears his name. The first is that the original eighth-century prophet's preaching is preserved in chapters 1-39, but that here we can discern a very extensive amount of editorial development and elaboration. The second is that chapters 40 ff. stem from the sixth century and later, and are clearly to be detached from the earlier chapters.

We may sum up the outstanding features of Isaiah's prophetic message very briefly. First, we note that we find a message announcing doom and judgment from God, both on Israel and Judah, comparable to that of Amos, only this time it is the southern kingdom which stands at the centre of the threat (Isa. 3.1-5; 5.5-6; 28.14-18; 29.1-4). Furthermore, Isaiah was undoubtedly preaching in, and against, Judah, after the remnants of the northern kingdom collapsed in 722 B.C. In

the case of Isaiah, as compared with Amos and Hosea, we find that there is a rather fuller body of prophetic material promising future salvation and deliverance (esp. Isa. 2.2-4; 11.1-9; 14.1-2; 32.1-8). Overall, therefore, the main features of the preaching of the great prophets of the eighth century are to be found in their preaching of doom and judgment. Such threats provide a basis for an interpretation of history in which the righteous will of God is seen to be at work.

If we add the name of the fourth major prophetic figure of the eighth century, Micah, then the overall picture remains the same. In the case of this prophet the complex development of the text of the book has aroused considerable scholarly debate over the question of how much can be ascribed to Micah himself. Yet the problems here are basically the same as in the other instances, so that the main thrust of Micah's preaching must be seen in his threats of coming judgment upon Judah. It is doubtful whether any of the sayings of hope in the book are from the original prophet, although the reason for this conclusion is largely the broad one that such prophecies would be out of place alongside the threats.

There is a broad consistency, therefore, in the preaching of the eighth-century prophets, which must be matched with the calamitous political events of the last half of that century. During this period both Israel and Judah suffered severely at the hands of the Assyrians, and by the close of the century only a tiny remnant of the kingdom of Judah remained as a surviving part of what had once been a significant near eastern power.

When we look further ahead to the two great prophetic figures of the last years of Judah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel, we find many points which remind us of the preaching of their earlier compatriots. There are strong indications that these men were already familiar with traditions of the sayings of their prophetic predecessors, especially Hosea. Very plainly the same sins which had called forth the threats and denunciations of prophets in the eighth century were still present in Judah in the sixth, and could be adduced as the cause of God's wrath. The view that the basic foundations of Old Testament prophecy are to be seen in these threats of doom is clearly correct. In Jeremiah and Ezekiel, however, we have a surer anchorage for words of

hope, which are largely to be dated after the disaster of 587 BC had taken place. Yet even so, in the case of Jeremiah, it is usually accepted that many of the hopeful sayings in the book do not derive from the original prophet, but from later editors. In any case it is certain that the 'Deuteronomistic' editors of the book have greatly expanded and developed the original message of hope.

Even here, therefore, we cannot escape the deep-seated problem which we first encounter with Amos. How can we find room in the preaching of prophets of doom for words of hope? The answer has generally been found in positing a very substantial work by editors and later scribes to whom so much of the hopeful material which is now in the books is ascribed. Not until the great prophecies of Isaiah 40-55 did the prophetic message become one in which hope took the central place. The message of hope would thereby appear to be a relatively late grafting in to the general pattern of prophetic preaching. How are we to reach a satisfactory conclusion on a question of this complexity, in which literary, theological and historical issues are all closely interrelated?

2. PROPHECY AND HOPE

The problem of the origin and meaning of the prophecies of hope and restoration for Israel must find answers to two main questions. The first concerns the circumstances in which it is possible for us to see that such a message would have been entirely appropriate. The second question concerns the reason why this message of hope has been added to each of the prophets, and why it takes very much the same form in each of them.

The first question has generally been answered by noting the real birth of the message of hope during the years of Babylonian exile, and regarding this as the first truly appropriate moment for it to have arisen. However, not all scholars have been convinced that no place for a message of hope existed in the eighth century BC. We may consider the problem in relation to one particular text, that of Amos 9.11-12:

'In that day I will raise up the booth of David that is fallen,
and repair its breaches and raise up its ruins,

and rebuild it as in the days of old;
that they may possess the remnant of Edom
and all the nations who are called by my name,
says the LORD who does this.

The use of the metaphor of the 'booth', or 'shelter', of David to signify his kingdom raises a number of questions. The reference could be to the collapse of the united kingdom of David, which took place with the division into two kingdoms after Solomon's death. Or it could be to the downfall of the northern kingdom in 722, which had once been an important part of the territory ruled by David. It could, however, also refer to the fall of the Davidic dynasty from the throne of Judah, which did not take place until Zedekiah's deposition in 587 BC. A large number of scholars have taken the reference in the latter sense, so that the promise in these two verses, as well as that which follows in Amos 9.13-15, have been ascribed to the post-exilic age. On the other hand, G. von Rad, in arguing that the reference is back to the disruption in the tenth century BC, has defended the authenticity of the saying from Amos.⁷

In itself the saying scarcely allows a very clear-cut decision to be made. However, when we compare it with comparable sayings in Hosea (e.g. Hos. 2.5), and Isaiah (e.g. Isa. 9.2-7; 11.1-9; 32.1-8) regarding the restoration of the united Davidic kingdom, the picture gains a clearer perspective. The recent recognition that a very significant and substantial editing of a collection of Isaiah's prophecies occurred during the reign of Josiah (640-609 BC),⁸ enables us to see that a very attractive case can be made out for recognising that the age of Josiah witnessed a very marked resurgence of hope for the restoration of Israel. The clearest indication of this is to be found in the Deuteronomic movement and its ambition of re-establishing a united Israel modelled after the old kingdom of David. Certainly by this time in the seventh century BC, there were indications of the weakening of the Assyrian grip on Judah, and substantial signs of new hope and expectation abroad in the land. There is no reason, therefore, why all the hopeful prophecies to be found in Amos, Hosea and Isaiah should be later than this time. The assumption that all of them must be post-exilic is

unnecessarily rigid. In fact several scholars have concluded that, even if serious doubt remains about the presence of a clear word of hope in Amos, at least with Hosea and Isaiah these prophets looked for a restoration of Israel beyond the judgments which they foresaw.⁹ There are strong reasons, therefore, why it should be fully recognised that a message of hope entered into the mainstream of Israelite-Judean prophecy no later than the seventh century BC, and probably before this time.

It remains doubtful, however, whether this message of hope can be properly called eschatological, for the simple reason that Judah had survived to become a remnant of the old kingdom of Israel. Very possibly the beginning of the 'remnant'-theology in Isaiah is to be traced back to this time, although the original prophecy had looked in a very different direction. What was anticipated was a resurgence of Israelite power and independence after the disastrous years of Assyrian oppression and suzerainty. Such a hope could take up the themes and images which belonged to a far older stage of Israel's worship and religious life. Especially here we can see an influence from the older Jerusalem traditions associated with the Davidic monarchy and the great festivals celebrated in the temple there. All of these belong to the general theme of hope, rather than with an eschatology in the full sense.

What was lacking for an eschatology was a sense that a full and complete end had overtaken the survivors of Israel, so that an entirely new beginning needed to be made. This is the new element that came with the disaster which overtook Judah in 587, with the destruction of the temple and the removal of the Davidic king. The two institutions which seemed to have achieved most in providing a sense of continuity with the greatness of Israel's past were swept away. From this time onwards the whole direction of the prophetic faith turned to look for the return of that part of the community of Judah which had been carried into Babylonian exile in 598 and 587. We find this very fully demonstrated in the way in which the book of Jeremiah has been expanded and developed. The prophet's words of hope for a renewal of normal life in Judah (cf. esp. Jer. 32.15) have been very fully and extensively elaborated by Deuteronomistic editors to show that this fulfilment could only come when the

return from exile took place (Jer. 24.1-10; 29.10-14; 32.36-44). We find a similar hope of a return from the Babylonian exile at the centre of the message of Ezekiel (cf. Ezek. 36.8-15; 37.15-23; 40-8), and then coming into full flower in the preaching of the prophet of Isaiah 40-55 (Isa. 40.1-5; 43.1-7, 14-21; 45.20-3).

The prophets who followed after the time of Babylon's downfall, when the first company of returning Jews made their way back to their homeland, elaborate still further on this hope of a return. They do so, however, in language which becomes increasingly extravagant, and which displays a growing frustration with the political and social possibilities of the times. The prophetic hope of a return to the land and a restoration of Israel acquires a marked supernatural and apocalyptic character (cf. Isa. 60.1-22; 61.1-7; 66.12-16). In this way the prophetic eschatology appears to have slipped further and further away from the realities of history, and to have moved into a strange world of apocalyptic images and themes. Yet these themes and images themselves derive from the older cult and prophecy of Israel.

When we look at the canonical collection of the Latter Prophets we find that there is a certain connectedness between the different prophets, and signs that their preaching has been treated as a part of a larger whole. It is the conviction that all the prophets were speaking about the death and rebirth of Israel that has brought together prophecies which stretch across more than two centuries. Beginning with Amos and the onset of the threat from Assyria in the middle of the eighth century, and continuing until the early returns of the fifth century, Israel and Judah had suffered traumatic disasters. The specific and individual circumstances of threat and danger have been swallowed up in a wider portrayal of doom and judgment which applies to all Israel. History has become subsumed in eschatology. Yet in a comparable fashion, the message of hope that began no later than the middle of the seventh century has become an all-embracing message of Israel's restoration and future greatness. No hesitation and compunction has been felt, therefore, by the editors of the separate prophetic books in applying this message of hope to each of the books. Such a hope belonged to the prophetic 'message', even though, from a

strictly literary viewpoint, it did not derive from each individual prophet. Individual prophetic hopes and promises have become part of a much greater theme of 'promise' which came to be seen as characteristic of prophecy as a whole.

3. THE FORMS OF PROPHETIC HOPE

The particular way in which the prophetic books have been put together, supplemented and expanded to form a large canonical collection, has clearly been the result of a very extended process. Nevertheless, within this process a number of basic concepts and themes have played a dominant role. Where the modern critical scholar is rightly desirous of listening to the differing sound of each of the prophetic voices, the editors of the collection have worked with a different aim, and have tended to obscure these different tones by the way in which they have edited the collection into a whole. The result now is that we frequently find difficulty in determining the authenticity or otherwise of particular sayings, as we have already noted especially in the case of the hope expressed by Amos and Hosea. Certainly it has not been the needs of liturgical use alone that has determined this, but rather the conviction that the prophetic message is a unity, the ultimate author of which is God himself. The theological student of the meaning of prophecy must consequently be content at times to accept some degree of uncertainty as to when a particular saying was added to a book, since to note this has not been in any way a concern of the original editors.

However, this way of treating the prophetic books, in which some consistency of pattern and ideas is evident, does enable us to see the importance of a number of recurrent themes which form the centre of their message of hope. We may now note briefly what these are. At the head of them we can undoubtedly place of the expectation of a return from exile (cf. esp. Jer. 24: 1-10; 29.10-14; Ezek. 36.8-15; Isa. 40.1ff.). The plight of those deported to Babylon has become a kind of model or symbol of the plight of all the scattered and dispossessed Jews who formed the Diaspora. The very word 'exile' comes to take on a larger significance as a description of the scattered Jews of every land.

Behind this we can also detect the importance of the consequences that arose from the Assyrian deportations from the northern kingdom in the late eighth and seventh centuries BC (cf. Jer. 31.7-9; Ezek. 36.8-15; Isa. 49.6). The return of these people too, however completely they appeared to have become lost among the nations, became a part of this hope of a return. So the return to Jerusalem and to Mount Zion became the classic image of how Israel's restoration would take place (cf. Isa. 60.1-22; Joel 3.9-17). With this is coupled a related theme that members of Gentile nations will join with them, to pay homage to them and to act as their servants (cf. Isa. 33.1-24; 35.1-10). This theme of 'return' also implies the great importance that was attached to the promise of the land. Never is there the slightest suggestion that Israel's misfortune of being scattered among the nations should be a permanent condition, or that it might re-establish its national existence in some other territory than that promised to the patriarch Abraham. This land itself becomes central to the theme of promise.

There is, however, a very deep concern in the prophetic message of hope that Israel should recover its status as a nation. In particular, the division into two separate kingdoms of Israel and Judah is viewed as an act of sin, which must not be repeated. The Israel of the future is consequently foreseen as a single united Israel under a single ruler (cf. Ezek. 37.15-23).

This brings us to the third of these basic prophetic themes of hope, which is that the new Israel is to come under a restored king of the Davidic line (Amos 9.11-12; Hos. 2.5; Isa. 9.2-7; 11.1-9; 32.1; 33.17; Jer. 33.19-26; Ezek. 37.24-8). This hope, which found a basic point of reference in the older Davidic promise tradition delivered by the prophet Nathan in 2 Samuel 7.13, became the foundation of the later 'messianic' hope. Since the restored king was to be an 'anointed' ruler (Hebrew *māšāḥ*) of the Davidic family, there is some basis for speaking of a 'messianic' hope. Yet this was certainly not the full expectation of a remarkable superhuman figure such as developed in later Judaism. Rather, it was a hope of the restoration of a Davidic ruler, based on the belief that this dynasty alone had been entrusted with this privilege by God.

Two factors in particular belonged to this hope. In the first

place it was important, since the renewal of the monarchy would signify for Israel the return to full political independence. In this particular form the hope was destined never to be realised, even though the possibility that it would be at one time seemed real and even imminent (Hag. 2.23). In the second place the expectation of a return of the kingship, restricted to the Davidic line, was important for the concept of the unity of Israel. It is no surprise, therefore, to discover that eager eyes must have surveyed the fortunes of the Davidic family for a long time after Zerubbabel's death (cf. 1 Chr. 3.16-24). Throughout the period when this hope was at its greatest, it is evident that the main weight of interest lay with the belief in the divine destiny of the descendants of David, rather than with any deep commitment to the monarchy as an institution on the part of Israel. In this form the hope appears gradually to have waned, only to re-appear later in a more radical form with the expectation of a messiah of more transcendent proportions, but once again descended, as prophecy foretold, from the house of David.

In relation to the messianic hope we find how the written form of prophecy lent new possibilities to the interpretations which could be placed upon it. The hope of a restoration of a Davidic kingship became transformed into a wider portrayal of the coming of a heavenly saviour figure. The prophecies on which the later hope was built, as in the Messianic Testimonia from Qumran,¹⁰ were the earlier prophecies seen in a new context of expectation. It is in no way the special divine status of the king in ancient Israel which has aroused this pattern of interpretation, but rather the unique importance of the Davidic family in Israel's history.

A further basic theme, or model, of the prophetic hope is the belief in an ultimate glorification of Mount Zion as the centre of a great kingdom of peace. Jerusalem itself becomes a place of the greatest importance, with its rebuilt temple looked to as the place where God's 'glory' or 'presence' would appear (cf. Ezek. 48.35; Mal. 3.1). To this the nations would come as an act of pilgrimage and homage, rather in the way that their representatives had done long before in the short-lived kingdom of David (Isa. 2.2-4 = Mic. 4.1-5; cf. Isa. 60.14; 61.5).

It becomes evident on examination that all of these images of what the restoration of Israel would bring have been drawn in one way or another from the tradition of Israel's past history as a nation. The central role of Israel as the people of God is everywhere assumed and used as a basis for depicting the future. Yet this is not in any way out of a conviction that history is cyclic in its nature, and that an inevitable 'return to the past' would take place as future years unrolled. In general such a deterministic view of history appears to have been almost completely alien to the Israelite tradition of thought. It is instead the belief that Israel's election must mean something, both for Israel itself and for the nations which would be blessed through it, that lies at the heart of these convictions. In calling Abraham, God had begun a task which he had not completed. Indeed the intransigence of the old Israel and its resort to idolatry were regarded as having frustrated this purpose. Yet the purpose itself had not, and could not, be abandoned. God would bring to fruition that which he had begun. By an understandable human reaction, the very frustrations and disappointments of the post-exilic age appear to have intensified the strength and firmness of the conviction that the final goal of God's purpose – the eschatological age of salvation – would certainly come.

It is difficult, to the point of impossibility, to speak of this element of 'promise' and eschatological hope in the Old Testament in terms of a 'doctrine', or of a rounded theology. Its literary form is primarily that of prophecy, and its ideas are expressed through images and thematic models, and not through firm doctrines or fixed schemes in which the sequence of events could be determined. The very flexibility of the literary and verbal expression of such hopes and images meant that there could be no single form of interpretation which could be heralded as self-evidently correct.

It is against this background that we must understand the rise of certain key-words and sometimes bizarre images in Jewish hope. In some circles this gradually developed into a new literary form, which we can call apocalyptic, of which the book of Daniel is the only full example in the Old Testament.¹¹ This new type of literature, however, which for a period flourished extravagantly in Judaism, arose out of earlier

prophecy, and carried its images and themes to strange extremes. For this to have happened one essential prerequisite was necessary, and this was that prophecy should already have become an accepted part of a canonical literature. The new 'prophecy' was essentially the ability to discover the further messages that were believed to lie hidden in the old (cf. Dan. 9.2).

With the arrival of apocalyptic the concept of God's promise to Israel acquired a new medium of expression. Yet already we find an abundance of indications that it was a medium with genuine antecedents in the way in which earlier prophecy had been studied, interpreted and re-applied by the editors of the prophetic books themselves. There is no clear and broadly acceptable definition by which the passage from prophecy to apocalyptic can be readily traced. The strange images and symbols of the latter have their antecedents in the poetry and conventional descriptions of divine activity which we find in the former. With this new literary form there went a clear pattern of interpretation which could treat all prophecy as a kind of apocalyptic, with hidden meanings contained in every word, and names and numbers used as ciphers. Hence it is no surprise to discover from the way in which the prophetic books of Nahum and Habbakuk were interpreted at Qumran that they could be regarded as though they were a form of apocalyptic.¹² All prophecy had come to be seen as a veiled form of revelation, the fundamental message of which was the judgment that still awaited the sinners of the earth and the salvation that was to come for Israel.

Already, therefore, we discover that the particular assumptions about Old Testament prophecy that we find in the New Testament are firmly anticipated in the Old. If we are to seek some defence of the early Christian claim that the prophetic message of the Old Testament had been fulfilled in the events concerning Jesus of Nazareth, then we must begin to trace critically and historically the way in which prophecy itself developed from the preached utterances of inspired individuals to become a written series of texts, collected together and edited to form great books. These were then subsequently interpreted as a vast repository of hidden truths and revelations which the

skilful interpreter and the discerning student of events could use to discover the will of God.

4. THE PROMISE IN THE LAW AND THE WRITINGS

So far we have looked at the theme of promise in the Old Testament in relation to the books of the prophets. Attempts that have been made from time to time to trace the ultimate origin of this concept of promise further back than the prophets, to discover its roots either in an ancient mythology or a particular tradition of the cult, must be rejected. It is the way in which the prophets gave new hope to Israel and Judah, after the ruination of the old kingdoms had occurred in the eighth to the sixth centuries B.C., that has given rise to this fundamental theme of promise.

Yet when we turn to the New Testament for some guidance upon the way in which the promise was being interpreted in the first century A.D. we find that passages from the Pentateuch and the Writings could be interpreted as though they were prophecy. This is most notable in the way in which royal psalms are interpreted as foretellings of the coming of the messiah in early Christian preaching, so that the text of the psalm, which was certainly originally composed and intended for liturgical use, is treated exactly as though it were prophecy. The divine declaration of Psalm 2.1-2 is interpreted in Acts 4.25-6, as a prophetic foretelling of the sufferings of Jesus, in precisely the same way as though it had been preserved in a book of prophecy:

Why did the Gentiles rage,
and the peoples imagine vain things?
The kings of the earth set themselves in array,
and the rulers were gathered together,
against the Lord and against his Anointed.

Even in the case of a psalm which carries in itself no special indication that it was a royal psalm (Ps. 118), we find that it could be treated as containing a prophecy of the rejection of the messiah by God's people in Acts 4.11. Evidently what has taken place is that the category of prophecy, and the assumptions and

methods of interpretation that were believed to belong to it, have been carried over to other parts of the Old Testament. This recognition is of great importance in the modern critical attempt to uncover the origins of the messianic hope in ancient Israel. It also matters greatly in connection with attempts to claim a far greater number of the psalms as being concerned with the kingship of Israel than any explicit statement in the text warrants. So attempts have been carried through in which the institution of kingship itself, and the distinctive high ideology associated with this, have been regarded as the real basis of Israel's 'messianic' hope.¹³ Yet this can be true only by reaching a very extended understanding of what such a hope truly entails.

We have already seen that, so far as the main essential of the 'messianic' hope was concerned, this derived from the expectation of the restoration of the Davidic family to the kingship of a renewed Israel after the Babylonian exile. The distinctive elements of the old royal ideology as such, difficult as this is to define on account of its highly symbolic language, came to be caught up in this, but was not its main stimulus. The prophetic interpretation of specific psalms has not arisen because these psalms were originally thought to be prophetic in their nature, but rather as a consequence of the trends and developments which were taking place in the formation of a collection of canonical texts.

This raises a very deeply rooted issue in relation to the hope of a messiah as it is expressed in the Old Testament. We find that not one of the texts which the New Testament appeals to in support of such a hope can, from a strictly historical-critical point of view, be held originally to have been intended in the way in which it was later taken. Nor is this an exclusively Christian phenomenon, since we find a comparable situation with regard to the collection of Messianic Testimonia at Qumran.¹⁴ Yet, in spite of this certainty about their original meaning, it is precisely these texts which have formed the seed-bed of the messianic hope. We are faced here with the phenomenon that old texts were being read with new eyes, and in the context of a broader hope which prophecy as a whole was felt to have warranted. When this began to happen is almost

impossible to determine, though the evidence from Qumran indicates that it was towards the very end of the Old Testament period. The existence of a sacred canon of prophetic writings provided a platform on which a number of very powerful and influential images of the meaning of 'promise' could be built.

From the point of view of the messianic interpretation of certain psalms, it appears most probable that the same stimulus towards a new dimension of interpretation had been felt. It is in fact possible that those editors who incorporated into the Psalter the texts of royal psalms, which must have appeared obsolete at a time when Judah had no king, did so out of a genuine hope that Israel would again need them. In this case a dimension of hope was present in the act of retaining compositions which the contemporary political scene made inapplicable in their original sense. The formation of the canon, therefore, must have had its own part to play in projecting the ideas and images associated with the kingship into the future. If this is so, then the more specifically 'messianic' interpretation of these and other psalms which we find in the New Testament marks a further step along a path that had already been begun in the Old Testament period itself.

To the general reader of the Bible it is no doubt more than a little bewildering to find that the assumption that each passage or text can have only one original and 'correct' meaning is not adhered to in the Bible itself. With prophecy in particular certain sayings and phrases came to be the subject of a very extended process of 'exegesis' in which a whole series of meanings could be uncovered.¹⁵ Difficult as it is for historical criticism to trace these developments, we must recognise the importance of such a process to the Bible as a whole. Two factors must be borne in mind. It was in significant measure the belief that prophetic texts had a further meaning which was yet to be disclosed in the future which contributed to their being retained in a sacred canon. At the same time this very process of fashioning a permanent written collection, which could be read and pondered on in ages long after their original deliverance, encouraged the further search for such new and hidden meanings. Important key names and themes, such as those of 'the remnant' (Shear-jashub) and of 'God with us' (Immanuel),

had already acquired a substantial history of interpretation within the Old Testament itself. It belongs to the understanding of the theme of promise in this literature that this remarkable dimension of historical depth in its patterns of interpretation should be followed through and understood. Perhaps most of all it is regrettable that even where there has been a desire to note the unity of the Bible as a whole, this major feature of the Bible's own expression of unity should be neglected.

This same type of 'prophetic' interpretation of the Old Testament can also be seen to have affected the Pentateuch. When Paul interprets the promise to Abraham (Gen. 12.1-3), it is noteworthy that it is taken in such a way as to show that it was still believed to refer to the future: 'The promise to Abraham and his descendants, that they should inherit the world . . .' (Rom. 4.13).

This particular interpretation is striking since it reflects directly on the entire understanding of 'the land' and of its relationship to Judaism. Accepting the ambiguity in the Hebrew word 'land/earth' (Hebrew *'eres*), the narrower reference has been discarded. The original text of the promise almost certainly belongs to one of the oldest written strata of the Pentateuch (J), which must surely have proceeded originally to narrate how this promise was fulfilled in the conquest by Abraham's descendants of the land of Canaan. This 'fulfilment' is now replaced by that given in the book of Joshua, which, however, falls in the Former Prophets and not in the Pentateuch itself. Something of a break has been made between the affirmation of the promise and the account of its fulfilment, suggesting, as Paul takes it up, that the promise exceeded the fulfilment that had been given.¹⁶ In this way the editorial formation and shaping of the Pentateuch has contributed its own measure of interpretative context, so that the old text could take on a new level of meaning. To contrast the 'original' meaning of the text with the revised and extended meaning which we find in Paul's epistle would be to ignore the considerable history of reflection and re-application which had taken place between them. In this process the canonical form of the Old Testament has evidently had a part to play.

To some extent it must be argued that the formation of a

canon of sacred writings is not only a function of religious life, but itself constitutes a measure of interpretation. By placing scripture alongside scripture a whole new range of interpretations became possible. Through comparison, association, and sequential ordering, a basis for exegesis could be established which far exceeded that which existed for the original independent document, in so far as critical scholarship has been capable of defining and outlining this. Hence, the association of certain psalms with prophecy has allowed these psalms to be treated as prophecy. Similarly, the importance of eschatological promise in prophecy has allowed the ideas and themes proper to this expectation to be read across into the assertions and promises of the Pentateuch. While it is attractive and convenient from a hypothetical standpoint to treat 'text' and 'interpretation' as two separately identifiable stages of investigation, we quickly find from a practical position that the two merge into one another. The canon itself establishes a context of its own which must be considered in understanding each of its parts.

From this perspective we can see that the early Christian claim that the whole Old Testament is a book of prophetic promise cannot be regarded as something imposed on the literature from outside. Rather it reflects an understanding which exists within the Old Testament canon itself. We find, therefore, that the Old Testament is presented to us with two major themes governing its form and establishing a basis of understanding from which all its writings are to be interpreted. It is a book of *tôrâh* – of the 'law' of the covenant between God and Israel. Yet it is also a book of promise, for it recognises the tensions that have arisen within this covenant relationship and the fact that Israel stands poised between the election of God, with all the promises that this entails of land, national life, and the task of bringing blessing to the nations, and its fulfilment. The law itself is both a gift and a goal. While we can see that historically the theme of 'law' belongs primarily to the Pentateuch and that of 'promise' to the Prophets, in practice all parts of the literature could be interpreted from the perspective of both themes. However, their mutual interrelationships, and the questions of priority between them, do not appear with any

rigid fixity. In their own ways, both Judaism and Christianity saw the relationships differently as they built upon the Old Testament and established their own priorities in interpreting its demands upon the continuing 'Israel of God'.