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The Day of the Lord: The Apocalyptic Dimension of the Old Testament Prophets'

Warnings

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Dies irae, dies illa

solvet saeculum in favilla

teste David cum Sybilla

Tuba mirum spargens sonum

et sepulchra regionum

coget omnes ante thronum.¹

(attributed to Tomaso de Celano, cca. 1250)

Introduction

In his celebrated work, *The Theology of Hope*, Juergen Moltmann defines eschatology as “something in which we migrate and which is in migration with us”.

One major component of this definition is movement, dynamism; another one is the unknown. Eschatology is “something”, we don’t know what, but it is. The unknown deserves attention as well, in particular for the impact it has on man’s daily life and on his or her destiny.

As paradoxical as this task may be, philosophers and theologians alike are seriously engaged in approaching the issue, interpreting it and trying to make sense of it, just as when they approach ontologically another paradox, death, a phenomenon also unknown in its essence.

There was one category of theologians in the Old Testament times who approached the field of eschatology with great emphasis and intensity: the prophets.

They were God’s messengers, chosen by God, sent to the people of Israel to constantly remind it of its obligations towards the One who gave to this people a special status in the midst of other peoples.

When other tools used to bring the people of Israel to obedience were exhausted, God used eschatology, and in particular its apocalyptic dimension.²

Eschatology generally refers to the last things, to the last judgment, to the end of the world and time and the effective beginning of God’s kingdom. It thus brings bad news and good news.

Because eschatology also relates to the eternal life, to the first new realities, to the new type of existence offered by God, which is why it is also called the eighth day of the world's creation, it does not generate pessimism and despair.

Aspects of Eschatology

The study of the Old Testament prophetic books' eschatology reveals that it has two dimensions: a temporal one, concerning this life on this earth, and an atemporal one, concerning the life to come and the kingdom of God.

Besides God, there are three categories of players in the eschatological drama: the people of Israel, all the nations, and the entire cosmos. All these participants are connected to the eschatological realities in both their temporal and atemporal dimensions.

For each participant in this drama, according to the prophetic writings, there is a period of waiting. The most talked about waiting is experienced by Israel, who is expecting a savior within the limits of the temporal, who is supposed to bring, through revolution, freedom and prosperity to its people.

But the other nations are waiting as well. In the first dimension of the eschatological realities the nations will come to know the Messiah as the Son of God; in the second dimension the nations will also be judged. As J. Blauw writes, they cannot be excluded from the Kingdom, because just as God created them and is their king, in the future, the prophets reveal, the God of Israel will be the God of all nations as well.³

The universe will also be part of the eschatological events. In regard to the temporal dimension, the prophets speak of nature's reaction to the divine and human interventions, of partial cataclysms. As for the atemporal dimension, they speak of a total renewal of God's created order.

The Reason for the Threats

The apocalyptic prophecies in the Old Testament are basically threats that God is using in order to bring His people to total faithfulness.

The fact of being chosen gave the people of Israel advantages and status, and it was supposed to guard this quality carefully, while being fully aware of its position *coram Deo* (before God) and *coram mundo* (in the world).

As chosen people, Israel was in a certain type of dependence upon God, which implied obligations toward God as well. As long as these obligations were fulfilled, God appeared as a loving Father to them, and whenever they were disregarded He appeared as an aloof king who inspired fear.

Very often the situation existed where God's love, providence, and His interventions in the life of Israel were not given due attention because people were too busy with its own needs, oppressions, injustices, and other crises. That is why Israel did not even realize that the primary reason of its problems was people's turning away from God's will. It was the job of the prophets

to make the connection between cause and effect, to make the people conscious of where it was and where it needed to be.

The stronger the sin, the stronger the threats. One of the things the prophets did was to emphasize the moral character of the Law, of God's commandments. Submission to the law would give people's actions and life moral value and would bring them into God's communion.

Disobedience to the law, immorality, sin would have consequences on both dimensions of human life: horizontal, concerning human relationships, and vertical, concerning man's relation with God. Sin deforms the image of God, the image that man essentially is. To persevere in immorality means losing the true knowledge of God and misusing the gifts generously offered to man, through which he or she does the necessary good works for salvation.

Indeed, the criteria for salvation in the prophetic books, according to Rudolf Schnackenburg,⁴ are always the good works that form the moral constitution of each person. Often even spiritual qualities such as faith and hope, because of their concrete implications for the daily life, are considered good works. Obedience to the Decalogue, which contains commandments of both spiritual and also of immediate practical, concrete character, is considered a good work.

It is the prophets' constant insistence on this issue that indicates how important good deeds were in God's eyes, and that explains God's anger with Israel and His recourse to the apocalyptic threats often delivered through the prophets.

Dies illa

The prophets, as chosen among the chosen people, with an enlightened conscience, were aware of the frightening hostility Israel showed toward God. Sin is hostility toward God, and time spent in sin is considered human time, which comes to an end when divine justice appears.

Then, at the end of the time of men, Yahwe's day will start, the day of the Lord. Then, in that day, the real face of sin will be uncovered and the gravity of disobedience to the divine commandments will be made known to all.

The day of the Lord is at the same time a treat and a promise concerning the eschatological fulfillment of God's kingdom. But first of all it is a day of reprimand and punishment rather than promise. The perseverance of a life lived in sin will make the threats and the divine anger so vast and dreadful that even the universe in its entirety will be affected.

These threats make reference to the future of the chosen people, as well as to the whole of humankind. That is why, according to the prophets, man's life is always framed in the atemporal, the eschatological perspective of the day of the Lord.

In order to persuade Israel to return to God and follow the law, the prophets turn that day into the culminant point of their preaching. They give that day a very somber perspective by using a variety of images, comparisons, figures of speech. That day, the day of the Lord is harsh, merciless, furious and full of revenge, great and dreadful as no other until then, a day of darkness and thick fog, of desolation and destruction, which will devastate the earth and kill the sinners.

That day will be a day of fear and trouble, veiled and somber, of constraint and humiliation, a day of cries and screaming, of chaos, great lamentation, a day of shame, of cold and freezing.

It is the day of the judgment, and only God knows when it will occur. It is portrayed, however, in very dynamic terminology as if it is imminent, at the door, and threatening. It is spoken of in the present tense:

“That day is terrible, behold, it is coming, the fury is coming, the time of trouble and torture. The day of the Lord is coming, it is approaching, ever faster, one can hear it coming, alas, what a day!” The anger of God will manifest with evidence; this is how it looks in Ezekiel’s vision:

“An end! The end is coming on the four corners of the land. Now the end is upon you and I shall send My anger against you; I shall judge you according to your ways and I shall bring all your abominations upon you. [...] An end is coming; the end has come! It has awakened against you; behold, it has come! Your doom has come to you, o inhabitants of the land. The time has come, the day is near [...] I will repay you according to your ways, while your abominations are in your midst [...] Behold the day! Behold, it is coming! Your doom has gone forth” (7: 2-10).

This is the day of the Lord, because here His almightiness will be manifest, there will be no confusion as to who is the judge. Lordship implies power and His power will be uncontested, but it also implies justice and dignity, which is why He will keep and fulfill His promises: the sinners will be destroyed and the righteous will be saved. Consequently, everybody will see and participate in the day of the Lord, no one will be exempt from knowing Him even through the many troubles.

In order to show the power of God's lordship in a stronger and more convincing way, the prophet describes with vivid details how nature will also be affected in that day:

“On that day there will surely be a great earthquake in the land of Israel; and the fish of the sea, the birds of the heavens, the beasts of the field, all the creeping things that creep on the earth, and all the men who are on the face of the earth will shake at My presence; the mountains also will be thrown down, the steep pathways will collapse, and every wall will fall to the ground” (Ezekiel 38: 18-20).

Laments and tears will be useless on that day, as they will not save the sinners from God's anger. All of them will be brought before God and punished, as the prophet Zephaniah warns: “In that day [...] I will search Jerusalem with lamps and will punish the men who are stagnant in spirit, who say in their hearts: The Lord will not do good or evil” (1: 10-12).

It is interesting to notice that in one of his Messianic prophecies, Isaiah speaks of one year of God's mercy, a long period of time therefore, which will extend between the first and the second coming of the Lord; but the vengeance, the judgment is only for one day, and that will be only at the end of human time, which means that, as terrible as that day will be, the mercy of God reigns until then in order for everyone to have a chance to repent and turn back to God: “The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring the good news to the afflicted; He has sent me to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and freedom to prisoners, to proclaim *the favorable year of the Lord, and the day of vengeance of God*” (61: 1-2) (emphasis added).

As mentioned earlier, the prophets speak of God's justice in relation to men's morality, to their bad or good works: "For the day of the Lord draws near on all the nations; as you have done it will be done to you. Your dealings will return on your own head" (Obadiah 1:15) (See also Zephaniah 1:7; 1: 14-15; 1: 18; 2: 2-3; Zehariah 14).

Man's acts will be considered at the judgment of God not only for what they represent in themselves, but also for their implications. That is why, in some interpretations, after the personal judgment after one's death, there is going to be a last judgment at the end of the world. Sometimes consequences can be even worse than what produced them. Jeremiah talks about the fruit of one's deeds: "I, the Lord, search the heart, I test the mind, to give to each man according to his ways, according to the result of his deeds" (17: 10).

The expression "that day" as the day of the Lord indicates a significant point, which requires heightened awareness on the part of man. The expression is used about 90 times in the prophetic books just in order to strengthen and make clear this message: there is a time of men where they can do whatever they want, and if they do wrong they have a chance to repent and fix their wrongdoings, and thus be reintegrated in God's love,⁵ and there is a time of God when only God will be at work and men will not be able to do anything. And since nobody knows when the day of the Lord will be, the message is that *hic et nunc* is where and when man can work for his or her salvation and win the kingdom of God.

In that day, even God's majesty will have a terrifying effect on people. Nobody will be able to stand His unapproachable glory; Isaiah uses a very plastic language to describe the moment: "And men will go into the caves of the rocks and into the holes of the ground before the terror of

the Lord and before the splendor of His majesty when He will arise and make the earth tremble” (2:19).

God’s resentment will manifest toward the sinners in multiple forms, and that appears as a normal and expected reaction vis-a-vis man’s iniquities: “So, also I will make you sick, striking you down, desolating you because of your sins” (Michah, 6:13). The sinner will be, in Amos’s vision “As when a man flees from a lion and a bear meets him, or goes home, leans his hand against the wall and a snake bites him” (5:19).

The gravity of man’s sin in God’s eyes is indicated by the sharpness of the language the prophet uses to describe the punishment: “And I shall appoint over them four kinds of doom, declares the Lord: the sword to slay, the dogs to drag off, the birds of the sky and the beasts of the earth to devour and destroy” (Jeremiah 15: 3).

After the judgment there will, evidently, be much less people on earth because the unjust will no longer be around. As Isaiah puts it: “I will make mortal man scarcer than pure gold and mankind than the gold of Ophir” (13:12). And the remaining ones will live as a new people of God in a renewed universe equivalent to a new creation, “For behold, I create new heavens and a new earth and the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind” (Isaiah 65: 17).

One of the images frequently used by the prophets to illustrate the intensity of God’s anger, but also the intensity of the suffering of sinners in their punishment, is that of fire: “And the strong man will become tinder, his work also a spark; thus they shall both burn together, and there will be none to quench them” (Isaiah 1: 31). Or in Ezekiel’s vision: “I shall blow on you with the fire of My wrath, [...] You will be fuel for the fire” (21: 31-32).

As dreadful as it will be, the Judgment in the day of the Lord will be inevitable; it will be like an existential necessity because of the logic behind it: everything has consequences; evil brings about evil, good brings about good: *abyssus abyssum invocat*. For all injustice there must be a day of justice; that is only natural: “Let justice run down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream” (Amos 5: 24).⁶

Conclusion

This short overview is indicative of the fact that one of the main aspects of the Old Testament prophetic books is eschatology in both its dimensions, temporal and atemporal, that is, with its practical implications for people’s daily lives, and with its future perspective.

The prophets were sent to Israel in order to reprimand, conscientize, show, advise, convert. This type of activity had in view Israel’s submission to the divine law and will, and was done in light of the prophets’ eschatological visions.

Eschatology is the “place” where God and man are supposed to meet; it impacts on this life because God acts to help man realize the right way of living, man acts toward God, in particular when he or she gets the message. Out of his love for people God reveals Himself in many ways so that everybody can come to the knowledge of His will. But it seems that regular types of revelation do not help to fulfill God’s goal. Then, out of the same love, God recurses to an unusual, strange, extraordinary way to reveal His divine will: the apocalyptic, where the good is rewarded and evil is punished.

The close connection between eschatology and the kingdom of God is evident. Eschatology is

anchored in the kingdom and is fulfilled in it. It starts on earth and gives to the earthly life the perspective of the kingdom. Eschatology, with its apocalypse, is meant to prepare God's people for His kingdom.

The role of the Old Testaments' prophets can be seen from several points of view. But essentially, they are moralists, in the positive sense of the term. They intend to conscientize people of the moral value of the faith in, and faithfulness to the supreme God in which each one is called to participate, that is, to live in God.

¹The day of wrath, that day/ which will reduce the world to ashes/ as foretold by David and the Sybil// The trumpet scattering a wondrous sound/ among the graves of all the lands/ will assemble all before the Throne.

²In this paper I am using the term "apocalypse", not in the neutral sense of revelation in general, but in its negative connotation, as revelation of the final destruction of the world according to the biblical prophecies.

³J. Blauw, *L'apostolat de l'Eglise* (Paris: Foi Vivante, 1968), 60.

⁴Rudolf Schnackenburg, *Règne et Royaume de Dieu* (Paris: L'Orante, 1965), p. 57.

⁵ Dumitru Bondalici, *Enciclopedia Marilor Personalități din Vechiul și Noul Testament*, Editura Andreiana, Sibiu, 2010, p. 196.

⁶For all biblical citations I have used the New American Standard version published by the American Bible Society, New York, 1991.