

Visions & symbols

The world of Jewish apocalyptic writing

UNVEILING HISTORY

Changing scenes

As the events surrounding the Jewish exile to Babylon unfolded Hebrew prophecy faced new challenges. How were the prophets to enable the people of God to have faith and confidence in Yahweh's control of time and history, when they were being engulfed and their destinies seemed to be being decided by foreign nations with pagan rulers? Prophecy up to this point had of course been aware of other nations, and on occasions had addressed them. However, its central focus had always been Israel's covenant relationship with God that flowed from his choice, protection and sovereign rule over them as unique. Now the scene appeared to have changed. There would have been a strong temptation to believe that the heathen gods and their peoples had overwhelmed Yahweh's power. How were they to understand God's control of destiny when the scene had changed so dramatically on the stage of history?

Challenging perspectives

There were obviously pointers towards the answer as the prophets had faced the reality of the rise and fall of political super-powers. Habakkuk had rejoiced at the collapse of Assyria but struggled with the fact that the pagan ruler Nebuchadnezzar was being roused by none other than God himself (1:6). Habakkuk is shown that Yahweh was moving behind and amid all the events concerning the nations. Isaiah (40:15) had graphically prophesied that:

'Even the nations are like a drop from a bucket,
and are accounted as dust on the scales;
see he takes up the isles like fine dust.'

The events of the exile were of course nothing less than an act of God's judgment in the face of his people's rebellion against him. But the fact that he could call the nations as his servants to fulfil his will pointed to the certain fact that God was in absolute and overall control. Early in the exile Ezekiel is confronted with the awesome image of Yahweh's chariot-throne (1:4-28), which comes from the north, the perceived source of pagan military and political power. The whole encounter has a sense of presence that presents the God of Israel as the God of all peoples and nations.

But these were traumatic times. The truth about hope was being pressed to find sharper and clearer ways to express itself. The perspectives were changing and new means and media begin to be employed.

The crisis of exile

The exile prompted at least the following questions:

- What about God's promises concerning the land?
- Is Israel really God's chosen people?
- What about God's promises to David concerning the continuation of his line?
- Is Yahweh really sovereign over all the nations?
- Is Yahweh really the Creator in the light of the Babylonian creation myths?

One dramatic response to this development was the emergence of apocalyptic styles of writing and communication within Hebrew revelation.

Apocalyptic unveiled

When reading the Hebrew prophets we become aware that certain passages express a different style of writing. The shift is something subtle, but nonetheless clear. The medium is still poetry but the message is more vision than oracle. The ideas are expressed more in images than in mere words. Some obvious passages are:

- Isaiah 24-27
- Ezekiel 38-48
- Zechariah 1-8
- Joel

Some would argue for other passages to also be considered. Then of course there is the book of Daniel, which is unique within the Hebrew scriptures, and a fully developed example of this style of writing. It is called 'apocalyptic'; we must consider carefully its rise and vital influence on biblical hope.

The word 'apocalyptic' (from the Gk '*apokalypsis*') has the sense of 'to reveal', 'to uncover' or 'to unveil'; it is 'revelation' (cf Rev 1:1). It indicates the disclosing of spiritual secrets or persons, the unfolding of things previously hidden, drawing back the curtain on what has been concealed. Apocalyptic is a term that we now use to describe a whole body of particularly Jewish literature, with a distinctive style and characteristics, writings that particularly flourished from about 200 BCE to 150 CE. Books with titles like:

- 1 & 2 Enoch;
- 2 & 3 Baruch;
- 4 Ezra;
- Apocalypse of Abraham;
- Testament of Abraham;
- Testament of Levi;
- Shepherd of Hermas (Christian)



While little of the apocalyptic writing received canonical status (with the exception of Daniel and Revelation), the scattered and often beleaguered Jewish community, and later the early Christians, were strongly influenced by the movement.

The open heaven

Apocalyptic has been described as ‘the literature of crisis’, and it is no wonder that it flourished at a time of political and cultural pressure and religious persecution. We see in it one of the ways in which the human social psyche copes with the challenge of uncertain destiny. We do not know what external influences, mixing with a strong biblical tradition, may have helped to shape Jewish apocalyptic. They might have come from Persia, Egypt or Greece, or from various cosmological myths; we cannot be certain. What we do know is that we have subject matter that is essentially more concerned with:

- The future rather than the present;
- The spiritual rather than the material;
- The purposes of God rather than human actions.

The writing transports the reader out of their immediate existence and circumstance and allows them to stand under an open heaven and share in the mysteries of what God will finally do with the universe. The curtain between the temporal and the eternal is thrown back. The reader is offered a revelation direct from God, which is neither the result of mere human observation nor the typical exegesis of scripture. There is the clear belief that God has spoken directly to the seer.

We have to be very careful about making sweeping generalisations concerning the general characteristics of non-canonical apocalyptic writing. The documents appeared over a long period of time and therefore they often have different concerns. Most Jewish apocalypses, however, were usually one of two different types:

- **Other worldly journeys** (e.g. *1 Enoch* 1-82; *2 Enoch*; *Testament of Levi* 2-5; *Testament of Abraham* 10-15; *Apocalypse of Abraham*; *3 Baruch*) with a strong interest in cosmological speculation;
- **Historical reviews** (e.g. *1 Enoch* 83-90; 91:12-17; 93; *Jubilees* 23; *4 Ezra*; *2 Baruch*) with an interest in the development of history and characterised by visions.

Some of the most notable features of Jewish apocalyptic are:

- Long cycles of discourse;
- Forecasts of spiritual turmoil;
- Teaching to bring encouragement;
- Pseudonymity (author represented as a famous figure from the past);
- Symbolic/mythical images;
- Composite format (breaks, contradictions, developments).

This of course is no precise definition. One attempt to be more specific in giving clarification to Jewish apocalyptic has been the statement that it is:

[A] genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework in which a revelation is mediated by an other-worldly being to a human recipient, disclosing a transcendent reality which is both temporal, insofar as it envisages eschatological salvation, and spatial insofar as it involves another, supernatural world.¹

So it gives an assessment of the present, and it offers encouragement to the reader by focusing on a symbolic view of the universe, which has a better or transcendent future. Some other common features in Jewish apocalyptic (but these are not all found in each and every writing) are:

- Phrases, themes and motifs from the Hebrew scriptures;
 - Trance/dream/vision;
 - Heavenly ascent;
 - Vision of God's throne and glory
 - Mysterious revelations;
 - Heavenly secrets;
 - Descent to earth to communicate these mysteries:
 - Progress of history (particularly Israel's);
 - Ultimate fate of human beings;
 - Obscure symbolism;
 - Esoteric wisdom;
 - Alienation from the world as it is;
 - Anticipation of the eschatological undoing of evil.

Typically, the secrets revealed concerned:

- The mysteries of the heavenly world:
 - God's throne;
 - God's celestial palace;
 - Angels;
- Cosmology:
 - Mysteries of the cosmos are revealed during the heavenly ascent;
 - This can have the character of scientific enquiry (*1 Enoch*);
- Eschatology:
 - God's decisive intervention in human history and the establishment of the kingdom of God.

Its thinking was often dominated by a strong belief that God determines everything and by a clear eschatological dualism:

¹ John J. Collins, *Apocalypse: The Morphology of a Genre* (Semeia 14; Missoula: Society of Biblical Literature, 1979), 9.



- 'This age': under the power of evil until the Day of the Lord;
- 'Age to come': elect saved, wicked judged, age of righteousness.

We must remember, however, that while eschatology was a frequent apocalyptic theme, it was not however always a constant theme.

Child of prophecy

Jewish apocalyptic books need to be evaluated very carefully. The more they are studied the clearer it becomes that we cannot make simplistic generalisations about them. They are not just a collection of documents that use a particular literary technique or display a group of clearly identifiable characteristics. They reflect different emphases and approaches, and possibly reflect some profound personal experiences and deep individual reflection during times of severe crisis. Apart from all this there is the fascinating question of the relationship between the non-canonical documents and the presence of apocalyptic style writings in sections of the biblical text. What is the connection between them?

We do not know for certain what gave rise to the apocalyptic style of writing within scripture. It is unclear the extent to which there were external influences upon biblical developments. Neither do we know what influence creative scriptural styles had upon the main stream of apocalyptic. The fact that there is no absolute agreement among scholars as to exactly which passages within the Hebrew text are apocalyptic in style suggests that a gradual transition was taking place. In trying to illustrate the nature of the link between apocalyptic and prophecy, apocalyptic has been described as 'the child of prophecy'.

There appear to be several clear biblical influences on the development of apocalyptic:

- **Wisdom:** the Hebrew wisdom tradition² had a strong questioning spirit that desired both earthly and heavenly knowledge and sought to bring interpretation to life which would suggest an important source of influence upon apocalyptic.
- **Priesthood:** the Hebrew priestly tradition saw a great significance in image and symbolism; with the destruction and desecration of the Jerusalem temple there would have been real interest in, and speculation about, the heavenly temple.
- **Prophets:** the Hebrew prophetic tradition had a clear expectation of God revealing himself through his chosen agents; nor was it unusual for prophets to have visions or direct knowledge of the debates in heavenly courts or to be expected to interpret dreams and visions.

² See G. von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, Vol 2 (London: SCM, 1975), 301-308.



The prophetic influence would appear to be the primary one. The point at which 'seeing the vision' began to replace 'hearing the word' must have been an important factor. As P Hanson has said, 'apocalyptic eschatology is the mode assumed by the prophetic tradition in the post-exilic community'.³ There is a sense in which apocalyptic was an attempt amid adversity to answer the prophetic heart cry:

'O that you would rend the heavens and come down!
[Isa 64:1]

We shall make further comments about the relationship between prophecy and apocalyptic when we examine the book of Daniel below.

Image, impact and truth

One of the most striking features of much apocalyptic writing are its use of powerful images and graphic language. Added to this there is also the frequent reference to sound and colour. At one level it is as though you are looking through a child's picture book, but at another level it is as though you are walking through a gallery of surrealist paintings. Not all apocalyptic authors use imagery as much as others, but probably the writer to do so most dramatically is John in the book of Revelation.

Jewish apocalyptic imagery rests heavily upon its biblical roots. This is seen quite plainly in Revelation where quotations and themes from the Hebrew scriptures saturate every page. But added to that there is the vivid use of both colour and sound. White, red, gold and azure are mentioned time and again. Things are also often spoken of as dripping with blood. There are the sounds of thunder, hail, earthquake, trumpets, harps, voices like the sound of the sea, there is singing and lion's roaring. There are the cries of 'Allelulia', 'Woe' and 'Come'; and so very much more. All this creates a deep sense of awe and wonder.

The fundamental power of apocalyptic writing, as in Revelation and elsewhere, is probably found in its use of 'archetypal images'. These are deeply rooted emotional symbols that the human mind uses to interpret the world outside itself, and to make sense of its own experiences. These archetypal images are present in the mythology and folklore of peoples the world over. They are simply stated and not described; they are left to make their own deep impact. They paint their own picture and speak for themselves. They are powerful primeval imprints upon our psyche that can open a window beyond ourselves. They are profoundly personal and yet at the same time they seem part of a language of global human unconsciousness. They are vehicles for strong

³ P. Hanson, *The Dawn of Apocalyptic* (Rev ed.; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979) cited in D. C. Allison Jr., "Apocalyptic," in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (ed. Joel B. Green and Scot McKnight; Downers Grove/Leicester: IVP, 1992), 17-20 (18).



emotional and spiritual understanding; notice how they are present in dreams and can be stimulated by drug induced hallucinations. When we are confronted with these images they appear strangely familiar, we cannot say why because they are buried deeply in our unconscious mind. In Daniel, Revelation and elsewhere they can appear as:

- The Dragon
- The Abyss
- Sea giving up its dead
- Locusts
- The Beast
- City of precious stones
- Book of Life
- Morning Star
- The great banquet
- The Key
- White horse
- Great white throne
- Gog and Magog
- Armageddon
- War in heaven

There is a real challenge in the creative power of apocalyptic as to how we think about communicating truth by the use of symbol and image in a way that strikes an emotional chord. We live in a time when there is a cultural return to primal images for which apocalyptic has perfectly prepared us.

REVEALING DESTINY

Daniel and history

The book of Daniel stands at a critical point in the development of a biblical understanding of hope. It is clearly apocalyptic and yet it shows more restraint in its style than other literature of that type. It is obviously not traditional Hebrew prophecy; yet like the prophetic writings, but unlike other Jewish apocalyptic (with the exception of Revelation), it was accepted into the biblical canon.

Daniel stands in full continuity with the Law and the Prophets. Like them Yahweh is for him the God of covenant who is taking history to its appointed destiny. What makes this book distinctive is the way Daniel opens up the whole view of history to create a much wider horizon in a time span that is more extensive. He sees everything from the present right through to its conclusion, and in a way that includes all nations.

Daniel refocuses a biblical understanding of salvation history by viewing it in terms of world history. Daniel builds on the Hebrew covenant confidence that God's purpose cannot be thwarted, and by pulling back the curtain reveals the spiritual dimension of history where God pulls down the mighty and overthrows

injustice. This is of course a central key to hope, which dramatically challenges all other theories of history. So the book of Daniel stands:

- at the intersection between the testaments;
- at the cross roads of history;
- at the divide between scripture and extra-biblical literature;
- at the preparation stage for the new covenant.

A book of variety

- Two languages (Hebrew and Aramaic);
- Two kinds of material (narrative and visions);
- Two different times and places (Babylon under Nebuchadnezzar; Palestine under Antiochus IV);

Structure

- Series of short stories 1-6;
 - Tales of court contest: Daniel v Babylonian wise men;
 - Tales of court conflict: Daniel or his friends delivered from death;
- Apocalyptic visions 7-12.
- 2:4b - 7 in Aramaic - this cuts across the story/vision divide!

Aramaic section

This has the following chiastic structure:

2 a vision of four empires

3 a trial of faithfulness and a marvellous deliverance

4 an omen interpreted and a king challenged and chastised

5 an omen interpreted and a king challenged and deposed

6 a trial of faithfulness and a marvellous deliverance

7 a vision of four empires

Prophecy in new idiom

Daniel is a very exciting but difficult book. It presents us with enormous historical, textual and interpretation problems. The purpose of this session is not to get involved in these important issues, but rather to explore its message in terms of the whole drama of biblical hope.

The text gives the impression that Daniel was an historical figure in the sixth century BCE during the years of Babylonian and Persian power. However, most biblical scholars believe that the stories and visions in the book were written in the second century BCE when the Jews struggled for survival under the Greeks at the time of Antiochus IV (Epiphanes).

In this particular period the Jews truly were 'in crisis':

- Culture clash
- Internal conflict
- Political oppression



- Foreign imperialism
- Economic crisis
- Psychological stress
- Religious change
- Identity threat
- Future unknown

The traditional prophetic styles alone, even the 'prophetic-apocalyptic' sections of prophets like Isaiah, Ezekiel and Zechariah, were not fully appropriate for this new radically changed and critical situation. An interpretation of history based essentially upon national faithfulness to the covenant was no longer adequate amid the rise and fall of world empires. Jews were either in a foreign land or living in Israel under an occupying power. The stage was now too big and Judaism too fragmented. There was a missionary situation interfacing quite different cultures. New and appropriate forms of communication had to be found.

In Daniel, the poetry of the prophet, which of course had proclaimed Yahweh's victory over the nations, gave way to the visions and the dreams of the seer. Daniel presents a genuinely expanded world view with a more comprehensive understanding of world history, which not only includes other nations but in which they play a key role.

In this pagan world the 'God of gods' communicates through his servant who is one of the 'wise' by means of visions and dream. Daniel was trained among the wise in Babylon, and like Joseph before Pharaoh centuries earlier, vision and dream become vehicles of revelation. Like the wise in Hebrew culture there is enquiry after the laws of the universe and an attempt to systematise them. The fact that it is 'the wise' who are raised to life by God and 'will shine like the brightness of the sky' (12:2-3) brings in a universal hope; for the 'wise' would certainly also be found among those outside of the people of Israel.

Daniel speaks about time in a highly abstract way. First, there is his idiomatic use of both the concept and the word for 'time' itself, with memorable phrases like:

- '... for a season and a time' (7:12);
- '... time, two times and half a time [7:25]

Second, there is his symbolic use of numbers, which appear to give a precise answer to the classic prophetic question, 'How long O Lord?'. But as we shall see they do not have that purpose. For example in 9:24-27 the 69 1/2 weeks just falls short of the full 70 weeks of completeness; it is saying that 'the end is not yet'. The text of Daniel is not something with which you can calculate 'the end'. It uses different language but speaks with the same voice as the rest of scripture, 'the end is coming, it is near, but it is not yet'.

The book of Daniel is a highly complex document which requires careful study, and over which controversy will inevitably continue. Mindful of this we want

simply to comment on the five primary visions in the book with the aim of understanding their contribution to biblical hope.

Statue and stone

Nebuchadnezzar dreams a troubling dream (2:1) to which Daniel brings both the detail and the interpretation (2:31-45). A huge statue with a golden head, silver torso, bronze thighs and feet of glazed china mixed with iron. Suddenly a stone, uncut by human hands, smashed the feet of the sculpture so that it crumbled to chaff and blew away. The stone replaced it by becoming a huge mountain that filled the whole earth.

The metals each represent empires; the identification of which has been a matter of great debate in biblical studies, but the following reconstruction would seem to make most sense:

- **The first empire is Babylonia:** Nebuchadnezzar's and Belshazzar's (2:37-38; 5:2);
- **The second empire is Media:** 'Darius the Mede' representing its power (5:31);
- **The third empire is Persia:** Cyrus ruled Media and Persia jointly from 550 BCE (6:28);
- **The fourth empire is Greece:** Alexander established it and it divided at his death.

Some argue that the fourth empire was Rome because the Medo-Persian empire was never separate. The argument against this is that the concept of 'four kingdoms' was a well established ancient literary device and so Daniel divided the Medes from the Persians, not entirely artificially, to fit his scheme. Reinforcing this idea is the way in which the fourth empire fits the period of the Greeks so well.

The image represents particular empires, and yet all empires. Human rulers always shape their kingdoms in their own image and by their very nature must therefore ultimately be reduced to chaff. The fact that every human structure will eventually be replaced by God's kingdom is at the heart of biblical hope. This vision, like the others that follow it, speaks to a particular time but also to all times. This is a summary of human history from God's point of view.

Beasts and the son of man

This time it is Daniel who has a dream (7:1-27). There is a great sea whipped into a tempest by the four winds of heaven. Out of the storm appear four great beasts. Then there is a judgment scene with God, 'the ancient of days', seated on his throne; and a mysterious figure 'like a son of man' to whom is given victory and rule for ever, with a community of the 'holy ones'.

The sea is the cosmic ocean of chaos which threatens to engulf the world, from which the incarnation of godless anarchy emerges in the form of hideous



creatures. Many believe they represent the same four empires we encountered in Nebuchadnezzar's dream:

- **Babylon:** 'like a lion' (v 4);
- **Media:** 'like a bear' (v 5);
- **Persia:** 'like a leopard' (v 6) ;
- **Greece:** 'different from all the beasts' (v 7).

Attention focuses upon the indescribable fourth beast, and on a 'little horn' that emerges from it. The horn has 'human eyes and a mouth which speaks great things' (v 8); it is usually identified as Antiochus IV. It is slain and destroyed. Whatever the identity of the beasts may be, and whether they die then or later ('a season and a time' v 12), their ultimate defeat is assured at God's hands. They may seem to have the freedom to 'wear out the saints of the Most High ... for a time, two times and half a time'⁴ (v 25), but God with his saints will be victorious.

In contrast to the beasts we see the mysterious appearance of 'one like a son of man' who is invested with rule by God himself (vv13-14). There is a clear contrast between the bestiality of empire and the humanity of this figure. This heavenly human-like being is invested with what the beasts claimed. This mysterious figure; who cannot here be linked to the Messiah but later will be, is an individual who both represents the suffering saints in their struggle and yet is one in whom the saints ultimately appear to find corporate identity:

'The kingship and dominion and the greatness of the kingdoms under the whole heaven shall be given to the peoples of the holy ones of the Most High; and their kingdom shall be an everlasting kingdom, and all dominions shall serve and obey them.' (v 27).

Ram and he-goat

Daniel has a vision (8:1-14), following this he is also given the interpretation by the heavenly messenger Gabriel (8:19-25). Daniel sees a ram with two horns, which represents the Medes and the Persians, it moved irresistibly west, north and south. Then there appeared a male goat with a single horn from the west, which represents the Greek empire under Alexander the Great; it moved at phenomenal speed and overthrew the ram. At the height of its power the he-goat's horn broke to be replaced by four smaller ones; illustrating the division of the empire among Alexander's generals at his death. Finally, a 'little horn' grows to usurp all the others and even challenges God himself, clearly Antiochus IV. However, his ultimate fate is clear, 'he shall be broken, and not by human hands' 8:25).

⁴ Historically this would appear to refer to the three and a half years the Judean Jews suffered under Antiochus IV, but symbolically it is true of all times of suffering and persecution.



Horns in this context represent bestial power and so make a direct connection with the previous vision. The ram and the he-goat also represent their respective signs of the zodiac and illustrate the pagan world's reliance upon astrological powers and the belief in their control of human destiny. Aries was guardian of Medo-Persia and Capricorn was custodian of Greece. The climax of the vision is the abominable arrogance of the 'little horn' (Antiochus) and his antichrist behaviour in destroying 'the people of the holy ones' (8:24).

There would appear to be a significant link between these first three visions; each seeming to have an historical focus and climax in the events under Antiochus 'Epiphanes', but also very much more than this. All this is but part of, and illustrative of, the bigger drama leading to God's final overthrow of evil at 'the time of the end' (v 17), which will see God's kingdom fully established. The visions have an historical sharpness; '2300 evenings and mornings' (v 14), the three and a half years (1150 days) of temple desecration under Antiochus. But at the same time an open-endedness of waiting: 'many days from now' (v 26). What is certain is that hope will triumph but 'not by human hands' (v 25).

Seventy weeks

The next brief but highly complex vision (9:24-27) comes as the result of Daniel meditating on the prophecy of Jeremiah (25:11-14; 29:10-14) in which God promises to restore Israel to her own land after 70 years of exile and captivity have taken place. The simple fact is that Babylon has been destroyed but when will the restoration take place? Contemplation on the prophetic promise drives Daniel to a moving prayer in which he pours out his heart to God in anguish and supplication for his people and their plight. God replies with this cryptic vision:

Seventy weeks are decreed for your people and your holy city ... Know therefore and understand: from the time that the word went out to restore and rebuild Jerusalem until the time of an appointed prince, there shall be seven weeks; and for sixty two weeks it shall be built again with streets and moat, but in a troubled time. After the sixty-two weeks an anointed one shall be cut off and shall have nothing, and the troops of the prince who is to come shall destroy the city and the sanctuary. Its end shall come with a flood, and to the end there shall be war. Desolations are decreed, he shall make a strong covenant with many for one week, and for half a week he shall make sacrifice and offering cease; and in their place shall be an abomination that desolates, until the decreed end is poured out upon the desolator (9:24-27)

In these four verses we seem to have a clear predictive prophecy with which it would appear we should be able to calculate with some ease when the foretold events would take place. But in reality the issues are unbelievably complex.

The literal fulfilment of Jeremiah's prophecy would appear to be found in a period from 587 (the destruction of Jerusalem) to 516 (the restoration of the temple in Jerusalem), a period of 71 years.



Here in Daniel the original 70 years, prophesied by Jeremiah, is given an apocalyptic meaning of '70 weeks of years'; that is 490 years. The most popular way of interpreting this is to relate it again to the time of Antiochus IV:

605 Jeremiah's prophecy	556 Cyrus' accession	49 years (7 weeks v 25)
605 Jeremiah's prophecy	171 murder of Onias	434 years (62 weeks v 25)
170 murder of Onias	164 rededication of temple	7 years (1 week v 27)
		490 years (70 weeks v 24)
167 desecration of temple	164 rededication of temple	3 1/2 years (1/2 week v 27)

The 'anointed one cut off' in v 26 is thus Onias and the 'abomination that desolates' of v 27 is the desecration of the temple.

However, there are those who believe that by using another completely different set of calculations the information in the vision refers to the coming of Jesus the Messiah:

- The fact that Jesus applies ideas in chapters 7 and 12 to himself, and appears to reinterpret Daniel's visions in Matthew 24 and 25 suggests he understood the visions to be pointing towards himself and to the end of time;
- However, neither Jesus nor the early church appear to refer to this particular vision.

It is much better to view this passage as chronography rather than chronology. The use of symbolic language points to significant historical events but should not be taken as literal time spans:

- 7 weeks ends with an 'anointed leader'. This is probably Zerubbabel or Joshua who are described as 'anointed ones' in Zech 4:14;
- 62 weeks ends with another 'anointed one' cut off. This probably does refer to the murder of Onias the High Priest;
- The final week is the period of the crisis under Antiochus IV. Half way through, in 167 BCE, the temple is desecrated (a pagan altar is erected in the temple and pigs are sacrificed on it).

However, whether this vision has one particular meaning, or dimensions of meaning, it is *not* a basis for calculations or chronological proofs; it leaves us humbled. What is certain is that it points our attention towards 'the end' and the fulfilment of God's ultimate goal which he clearly states he will accomplish (v 24); this he certainly does in the eschatological coming of Jesus:

- To finish transgression;
- To put an end to sin;
- To atone for iniquity;
- To bring in everlasting righteousness;
- To seal both vision and prophet;
- To anoint a most holy place.

Cosmic drama

The final vision (Chapters 10-12) has as its concern, 'what is to happen to your people at the end of days' (10:14). A 'great conflict' (10:1) from which God's people will arise triumphant. The scene is set for Daniel with an encounter with a majestic heavenly figure (10:5-6) whose glory and presence leave him completely and repeatedly overwhelmed.

The vision itself (11:2-45) is a great drama made up of a series of cameo sketches that portray the history of Gentile rulers from Persian times down to the reign of Antiochus IV Epiphanes, and their relationship to the Jews. It becomes more detailed as the story unfolds. The names of the main actors are not given, but they are not hard to guess because the narrative fits the detail of the time with such astonishing accuracy. What is given is a long story of war, violence, suffering, conquest, hope, despair, treachery and persecution.

The chief villain is once again Antiochus, 'a contemptible person' (v 21). His actions involve:

- Flattery and force (vv 21-22);
- Deceit and violence (vv 23-24);
- Favour and falsehood (vv 26-27);
- Seduction and self-gratification (vv 32, 36);
- Desecrating the holy sanctuary (v 31);
- Persecuting the people of God (v 33);
- Exalting himself greater than any god (v 36);
- Speaking horrendous things against the God of gods (v 36).

'Yet he shall come to his end with no one to help him'
(v 45)

The heroes of the epic are the 'wise ones' who 'give understanding to many' (v 33). Even their terrible suffering is an act of refining, purifying and cleansing (v 35). In reality they are caught up in a great cosmic drama played out since the dawn of time, under the hand of God who is the Lord of history. Staged upon the earth against the back cloth of eternity. Everything is now moving towards the great finale where all wrongs will be put right. The end is the key to the plot; only in the conclusion do you understand the whole. 'What is determined shall be done' (v 36).

The last act begins with the archangel Michael, champion and advocate of the people, standing centre stage (12:1). He says nothing for his presence is enough. There is to be a time of trouble beyond what humans have ever previously experienced, but there will be deliverance. This liberation from the tyrant will be so dramatic it can only be described in resurrection language:

'Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake,
some to everlasting life and some to everlasting contempt.
Those who are wise shall shine as the brightness of the sky,



and those who lead many to righteousness,
like the stars for ever and ever'.
(12:2-3)

This final vision reveals the following details:

- There is a cosmic drama involving the angels of the nations:
 - Gabriel?
 - Michael (prince of Israel)
 - Prince of Persia
 - Prince of Greece
- Events in heaven are mirrored on earth; there is great attention to historical detail in chapter 11 on the Persian and Greek periods down to the reigns of Antiochus III and IV
- 11:40ff changes to 'the time of the end'; we are now in the period of Antiochus IV. The destruction of Antiochus (which is still future at the time of writing so the book can be dated quite precisely) will be like a resurrection for the faithful
- The book is to be sealed until 'the time of the end' = period of Antiochus IV
- The wise (*maskilim*) are the heroes (and the probable authors/editors of the book)
- Resurrection language is used to describe God's intervention in Israel's history to overthrow Antiochus IV; the language does not refer to the end of the world

APOCALYPTIC LANGUAGE

This final point leads us to the power of apocalyptic language, so often taken to refer to the end of the world. It is the only appropriate language that can invest historical events with their full significance. For example, take the following descriptions of the same event viewed from different perspectives:

- I was aware of a blur of colour and a sudden loud noise;
- I saw and heard a vehicle driving noisily down the road;
- I saw an ambulance on its way to hospital;
- I have just witnessed a tragedy;
- This is the end of the world for me.⁵

Apocalyptic, 'end of the world' language is appropriate to describe graphically the powerful effects of a particular event, or series of events, on an individual or a group.

⁵ This example is taken from N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (London: SPCK, 1992), 282-3.



QUESTIONS

1. Why do you think it is important for Christians to understand the significance of apocalyptic writing? What practical benefits would there be?
2. How would you use the book of Daniel to encourage Christians in their faith today, taking special account of its message and style of writing?
3. What can we learn, both about truth and its communication, from the way writers used apocalyptic imagery?
4. Biblical apocalyptic writers use many powerful primal images like: a dragon, an abyss, a great white throne, a book of life, a plague of locusts, the morning star – and so many more. These would be instinctively understood in most cultures of the world. Why do you think they used this language? How does it connect with the truth? How might contemporary cinema and theatre be a medium to use similar ideas to explore meaning and truth today?

READING AND RESOURCES

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