

The Hope

Assumptions, opinions and expectations

HOPE SPRINGS ETERNAL

What is hope?

'Hope springs eternal'¹ we are told, but what actually is hope? Some accepted definitions are:

Hope is the 'expectation and desire combined, a feeling of trust.'² 'To cherish a desire of good with some expectation of fulfillment, to have confidence.'³ 'A belief in a positive outcome related to events and circumstances, implies a certain amount of perseverance.'⁴

Hope is at the very centre of the human experience of being. Hope, by its very nature has a constant forward look, reaching into the future towards an end or goal.

Hope is an essential function of the mind and its ability to imagine something 'other' than what is and what is possible. At its core it is about our quest for meaning and possibilities. Hope is shot through with a creativity that transcends limits; it also has a deep emotional dimension. To extinguish all hope would bring a person to the brink of something close to a living death.

As we shall see, a biblical understanding sees at times an almost interchangeable connection between hope and faith. Both have an unshakable tenacity; both make a connection between the visible and the invisible. Faith, at its core, is activity that makes happen what God wants to happen, while hope brings imagination and passion to the values of faith.

In western culture we live in a time when most of the convictions and certainties, that shaped people's hopes in the past, have been shaken or fallen away. Some feel themselves 'without hope', others 'hopeless', with fewer and fewer people believing that any substantial vision of hope (often referred to in contemporary terms as an 'over-arching paradigm' or 'meta-narrative') can be meaningful.⁵

¹ Quoted by Alexander Pope, 'Hope springs eternal in the human breast' in *'An Essay on Man'* in Epistle 1 in 1733 but he is believed to be quoting a much older and well established English proverb

² JB Sykes (Ed) *'The Concise Oxford Dictionary'* Oxford University Press 1982

³ C Schwarz *et al* (Eds) *'Chambers English Dictionary'* Cambridge University press 1988

⁴ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hope>

⁵ For a useful summary of the western secular decline of hope see 'The Decline of Secular Hope' in R Bauckham & T Hart *'Hope Against Hope'* Darton, Longman & Todd 1999 p 1-25



Varieties of hope

People across the wider cultures and faiths of the world have had, and continue to have, different ways of expressing and understanding hope; but these are nevertheless an important part of our exploration of hope. While many people seem to have a persistent capacity for hope in the sense of a desire for a better world, there are others who understand hope from a much darker and disturbing perspective:

□ Cyclical hope

Based on the seasons and the rhythms of nature. Things are born, grow, die and the process starts all over again. Hope expresses different shades and textures as it moves through each stage of a cycle. Hope promised change, cycle upon cycle, in some cases with the possibility of an occasionally re-occurring 'golden age' after vast intervals in-between. This understanding of reality may lie at the roots of the hope and anxiety found in reincarnation.

□ Static hope

The Mediaeval church saw hope as essentially static, rather than dynamic and progressive. Events like the 'second coming' and the 'last judgment' would take place in the future, but in this world of time and space there were temporal and spiritual hierarchies holding everything in place, culminating in the role of the Emperor and the Pope. Hope lay in the perceived security this was seen to bring.

□ Utopian hope

Karl Marx taught that history was brought into being through human struggle with the physical world and overthrowing oppressive power structures. Hope existed in the possibility of discovering principles, which through revolution could establish a just and classless society - 'Utopia' - upon the earth. Hope was to be found in the human ability to bring about revolutionary change.

□ Galactic hope

Physical cosmology has no certain view about the ultimate fate of the universe. For some the universe is 'closed' and they speculate that the 'Big Bang' will reverse into the 'Big Crunch' and return to a dimensionless singularity. For others the universe is 'open' (or perhaps 'flat') ever expanding, probably resulting in either a 'Big Freeze' or 'Heat Death'. Few cosmologists imagine some final 'steady state' of bliss! Will 'entropy' finally win or might there be whole new dimensions of reality? ⁶

□ Illusory hope

In Greek Platonic philosophy the world of the senses is deceptive, only in the eternal realm of ideas is reality actually found. Things in this world are no more than flickering shadows of the real world.

⁶ J Gardner *'The Intelligent Universe: AI, ET, and the Emerging Mind of the Cosmos'* New Page Books 2007 is an example of someone grappling with these questions from a 'new science' perspective



In Indian thought, this world of the senses and sensation (*samsara*) is an illusion (*maya*); hope is in the possibility of enlightenment (*samadhi*) and eventual release (*moksha*) from the cycle of reincarnation and absorption into the world soul (*brahman*).⁷

□ Tormenting hope

The myth of Pandora (the first woman) is said, by Hesiod the Greek poet, to have been given a gift by the god Zeus of a grain jar filled with evils,⁸ which she allows to escape into the world, with the exception of 'hope' that remains secure in the container. Of this Friedrich Nietzsche says:

'Zeus did not want man to throw his life away, no matter how much the other evils might torment him, but rather to go on letting himself be tormented anew. To that end, he gives man hope. In truth, it is the most evil of evils because it prolongs man's torment'⁹

□ Meaningless hope

Sophocles the author of Greek tragedies said, "Not to be born at all – that is by far the best prizing; the second best is as soon as one is born with all speed to return thither whence one has come."¹⁰ There is also the epitaph on many a Mediterranean gravestone, 'I was not, I was, I am not, I do not care'. Job says:

'A person, born of woman, is few of days and full of trouble,
they come up like a flower and wither they flee like a shadow and do not last'
(14:1-2)

Qoheleth says:

'The living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing;
they have no more reward, and even the memory of them is lost'
(Ecc 9:5)

This world's hope

Human hope generally displays the confidence and foresight to work with factors in the present, which they believe they can control, or they believe will persist and are unlikely to change.

⁷ *Brahman* is the concept of the supreme spirit found in Hinduism; unchanging, infinite, immanent, transcendent reality which is the Divine Ground of all matter, energy, time, space and being and everything beyond in this universe

⁸ Another Greek poet Theognis gives an alternative version of the story in which the contents of the jar are blessings (probably based on an earlier version than Hesiod) and therefore 'hope' is a good and this has become the most popular understanding

⁹ F Nietzsche '*Human, All Too Human*' Penguin Classics 1994

¹⁰ Sophocles in *Oedipus Colonus* l. 1225

Biblical writers make it clear that outside of God everything is actually uncertain and incalculable and that hope based upon anything but God is irresponsible and will be overthrown, by fear and anxiety (Isa 32:9-11). For them there is no hope in:

- Riches (Ps 52:7);
- Personal righteousness (Ezk 33:13);
- Human strength (Jer 17:5);
- The Temple (Jer 7:4);
- Idols (Hab 2:18);
- International peace treaties (Isa 31:1).

People can place their hope wherever they wish but it is God alone who decides what happens (Prov 16:9). Worldly hopes take their confidence from what individuals falsely believe are controllable factors. New Testament writers are quite clear as to how they understand the situation:

‘Remember that you were at that time separated from Christ,
alienated from the commonwealth of Israel,
and strangers to the covenants of promise,
having no hope and without God in the world’
(Eph 2:12)

‘But we would not have you ignorant, brethren,
concerning those who are asleep,
that you may not grieve, as others do who have no hope’
(1Th 4:13)

LIVING HOPE

Best yet to come

Foundational to the Christian faith is its dynamic forward look. It sees God working in the present, and having worked in the past, yet it proclaims that the real climax of history lies ahead - in the future, ‘the best is yet to come’.

The hope of the people of God is central to the biblical text. Among other faiths and beliefs there are powerful expressions of hope, that is why they inspire their following. However, properly understood the biblical concept of hope is unique, it is awesome - at times almost defying imagination. Biblical Christian hope is without parallel because it is understood to be much more than simply the product of human imagination or optimism. It is a gift from God and has no existence at all apart from being rooted in the divine.

Biblical hope

This world’s hope may be seen as finding its strength in being in control, but the only true hope is the living hope of the people of God, because it is rooted in the one who cannot be controlled.



Biblical words most usually translated hope are, *betach* (Heb) and *elpis* (Gk). This hope is 'confidence in God whose goodness and mercy are to be relied on and whose promises cannot fail'¹¹ It is seen as the only 'expectation that can be counted on', because it is fixed upon God alone. Only God gives any reason for confidence in hope (Jer 17:7-8). Hope is a gift from God; our response in embracing it is an affirmation of divine character and sovereign power whether or not we know the details of what will actually happen. This hope is to be constant whether we are in crisis or in blessing. It is to be a sign to the world that we are in relationship with the one who controls the world's destiny.

Biblical hope is made up of three essential elements; any one aspect of which may be emphasized at any time:

- Expectation, yearning and longing for the future (Prov 23:18; Rom 8:23)
- Trust, confidence and faith (Isa 12:2; Heb 11:1)
- Steadfast patience (Ps 130:5,7; Rom 8:25)¹²

In contrast to worldly hopes, biblical hope is not some consoling dream, nor the mere optimism of human imagination, which somehow helps us forget our present troubles - the real 'opium of the people'. Nor does it contain the uncertainty that perpetually haunts the most optimistic of human hopes. Only the people of God can be like Abraham and 'hope against hope' – 'hoping when there is nothing left to hope for' – hoping when all the controllable factors and flights of optimism have been crushed and turned into dust (Rom 4:18).

The words of Romans 8:19-25 give us an important microcosm of a biblical Christian understanding of hope:

'For the anxious longing of creation waits eagerly
for the revealing of the children of God;
for the creation was subjected to futility,
not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it,
in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay
and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.
We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now;
and not only the creation, but we ourselves,
who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption,
the redemption of our bodies.
For in hope we were saved.
Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen?
But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience'

- We see that hope is *not* something that just touches individual people and human society, but in fact it embraces the whole of creation; the complete cosmos will experience redemption and salvation.

¹¹ A Barr '*Hope in the New Testament*' Scottish Journal of Theology 3 Edinburgh 1950 p72

¹² But this is a dynamic patience, often used in ancient Greek writings to describe the attitude of the inhabitants of a city under siege not leaving any stone unturned in order to thwart and frustrate the intentions of their oppressors – this is passionate resistant resilient hope!



- We see the tremendous energy that hope generates, for example just in verse 19:
 - **‘anxious longing’** or ‘eager expectation’, to crane your neck to observe what is coming’, even ‘stalking’ (Gk: *apokaradokia*);
 - **‘waits eagerly’** or ‘anxious watching’, ‘a violent waiting’, or ‘to spy out attentively’ (Gk: *apekdechomai*).

Biblical hope is filled with very powerful emotional response.¹³

- We see that biblical hope is to do with ‘eschatology’, that is ‘the study of the last or ultimate things’. Eschatology has been described as referring ‘to a time in the future when the course of history will be changed to such an extent that one can speak of an entirely new state of reality’¹⁴. Eschatology comes from the Greek word *eschatos*, which in popular use could refer to:
 - ‘the very furthest limits of space’
 - ‘the very final element in time’
 - ‘the very last piece of money’

The New Testament use is essentially both communal and cosmic in its reference. It is clear that no other ancient culture appears to have had an eschatological hope with the scope and dynamism of the biblical one.

- We see that biblical hope is to do with a ‘tensile dynamic’ between what is called ‘the already but the not yet’. As John says, ‘The hour is coming and now is’ (4:23). Eschatology is ‘realized’ in the presence of the kingdom of God in the person of Jesus, yet it is still to be fully ‘consummated’ in the final cosmic establishing of God’s reign. We are caught between the magnetic pull of these two poles.

Christ our hope

It has been significantly observed about a biblical understanding of hope, ‘The full use of this word in its full biblical sense is hardly found before we reach the Epistles, and this is not surprising, since Christian hope is grounded on the resurrection of Christ ...’¹⁵

‘Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ!
By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope
through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead’
(1Pt 1:3)

¹³ DN Freedman (Ed) *‘Anchor Bible Dictionary’ Vol:3* Doubleday 1992 see article T Prendergast ‘Hope’ p 284

¹⁴ DN Freedman (Ed) *‘Anchor Bible Dictionary’ Vol:5* Doubleday 1992 see article DL Petersen “Eschatology” p 575

¹⁵ A Richardson (Ed) *‘A Theological Word Book of the Bible’* see article ‘Hope’ London SCM Press 1965 p 108-109



Across the Hebrew scriptures, through the inter-testamental period and on into the Gospels, there are an astonishing array of insights and ideas, associated with biblical hope. They flow like streams and tributaries, ever gathering depth and force, only to burst like a thundering waterfall into a cosmic ocean at the resurrection of Jesus.

It is in Jesus that the hopes of the people of God are brought into focus (Mat 12:21). Christ is our hope (1 Tim 1:1). Hope is no longer simply a beacon that lights our path and draws us forward into our destiny in God, but because of the resurrection of Jesus we have been born into a life that has hope pulsing through it (1 Pet 1:3,21). As we embrace 'the hope', we embrace 'salvation', and in return we begin to find salvation embracing us. Our hope becomes a means of grace (Rom 8:24). Christ in us is our hope (Col 1:27).

It is Jesus' resurrection that gives substance and access to the hope (Rom 5:1-2). Hope, having its source in the resurrection life of the Spirit, brings the fruit of joy and peace (Rom 15:13), courage and sure confidence in all things (1Cor 15:19; 2Cor 1:10; 3:12; Phil 1:20; 1 Pet 1:21) and a godly pride (Heb 3:6).

□ Hope and anchor

'We have this hope,
a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul,
a hope that enters the inner shrine behind the curtain'
(Heb 6:19)

Here the author of Hebrews works with a powerful image of hope; it is like an 'anchor' embedded in the depths of our living physical being ('soul') with a direct and living connection into the 'Most Holy Place' of God's eternal habitation ('the inner shrine behind the curtain'). Using ancient Jewish tabernacle / temple imagery in both cosmic and personal terms, we see hope as this living connection between the very centre of our inner being as an individual disciple of Jesus and the 'Holy of Holies' – symbol of the most intense expression of the presence and dwelling-place of God – in the innermost sanctuary of the heavenly temple. It conveys an intensity in a Christian understanding of hope both in terms of relationship and huge strength.

□ Hope and character

'... we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God.
And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings,
knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character,
and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us,
because God's love has been poured into our hearts
through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us'
(Rom 5.2-4)

'And all who have this hope in them purify themselves, just as he is pure'
(1 John 3.3)

As we have seen, hope does not only give us a direction forward, but it also changes the people who hope within themselves; it changes and matures their character. To the

outside world our hope may seem like just another dream, but the quality of character it produces is something they cannot ignore. Hope produces a character, which is holy; this is provocative. It will cause people to ask about the nature of the hope that makes this person who they are (cf 1Pet 3:15). People with this 'living hope' are saints (cf Heb 3:1) and a saint has been described as 'someone whose life makes it easier to believe in God'.¹⁶ This is the true impact of authentic hope.

□ Hope, faith and love

'And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three;
and the greatest of these is love'
(1Cor 13:13)

' ... remembering before our God and Father your work of faith
and labour of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ '
(1Th 1:3)

'But since we belong to the day, let us be sober,
and put on the breastplate of faith and love,
and for a helmet the hope of salvation'
(1Th 5:8)

Notice the way that hope is frequently intertwined with faith and love (see the above and also Gal 5:5-6; Heb 6:10-12; 1Pt 1:21-22). They are in reality inseparable. Faith, in its call to 'trust', and its confidence in the reality of what is unseen and its commitment 'to make happen what God wants to happen' is often used almost interchangeably with hope on occasions.¹⁷ The close connection between a Christian understanding of hope and love shows it to be free from selfish motive; it longs that others will share in the blessings that it is certain this 'living hope' will bring.

Unending hope

It is a popular notion that 'hope' is simply a quality that will be necessary until the establishing of the new heaven and earth and then it will no longer be necessary because all hope will then be fulfilled. This is not the case, as the words of Paul, already reflected on above in a different context, make clear:

"So faith, hope, love abide, these three ..."
(1Cor 13:13)

The key word in this phrase is 'abide'. Its use here takes the experience of hope (along with love and faith) deep into the infinite future.

¹⁶ Quoted by W Barclay in *'The Letters of James and Peter: The Daily Study Bible'* The Saint Andrews Press 1960

¹⁷ This is particularly the case in the writings attributed to the apostle Paul. The subtle distinction between 'faith' and 'hope' is that 'faith' sees (and often experiences) what most people cannot see (See Heb 11:1), while 'hope' does not yet experience (but constantly anticipates) what it longs for (See Rom 8:25)



The western church has tended to see the 'life of the world to come' as something static and unchanging ('you can't improve on perfection'), in contrast the eastern church has seen life in the future kingdom as dynamic.

Gregory of Nyssa said that the essence of perfection consists precisely in never becoming perfect, but in always reaching forward to some higher perfection that lies beyond. This expression of hope as 'reaching forward' is called *epektasis*. This word comes from Philippians 3:13-14:

'... but one thing I do, forgetting those things that are behind,
and reaching forward¹⁸ to those things which are before,
I press on towards the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus'

'Reaching forward' is a wonderful expression of hope, the word *epektasis* is related to *teinein* [(to stretch) and *tasis* (a stretching-tension)

Kallistos Ware says: "Because God is infinite, this constant reaching forward, or *epektasis*, proves limitless. The soul possesses God, and yet still seeks him; her joy is full, and yet grows always more intense. God grows ever nearer to us, yet he still remains the Other; we behold him face to face, yet we still continue to advance further and further into the divine mystery. Although strangers no longer, we do not cease to be pilgrims. We go forward from glory to glory, and then to a glory that is greater still. Never, in all eternity, shall we reach a point where we have accomplished all that there is to do, or discovered all that there is to know. 'Not only in this present age but also in the age to come,' says St Irenaeus, 'God will always have something more to teach us, and we will always have something more to learn from God.'¹⁹

This idea of *epektasis* has had a profound influence on the Eastern Orthodox teaching regarding *theosis* or 'divinization'.

Gregory of Nyssa also taught that while it cannot be known whether or not all humans will be saved, as Origen speculated, faithful Christians may hope and pray for the salvation of all, even after death. He thus presents an important and hope-filled alternative to those theologies, such as that of Augustine, which state that at least some, of necessity, will be eternally condemned to hell.²⁰

Reason for hope

'Always be ready to make your defense to anyone
who demands from you an account of the hope that is in you
yet do it with gentleness and reverence'
(1Pet 3:15)

Hope is provocative. People will want to know the reason why we have this living dynamic hope and when they do we must be ready to 'present the case for it'; whether this is a

¹⁸ The word is *epekteinomenon*, - from the word *epektasis*

¹⁹ *Source still to be verified*

²⁰ For much more on *epektasis* see: http://orthodoxwiki.org/Gregory_of_Nyssa



formal presentation, as if on trial before a court, or simply speaking from the passion of the heart.²¹ The ability to do both is important. What the case for the 'living hope' that is found at the very centre of the Christian faith is, is what takes up the rest of these sessions.

SETTING THE SCENE

Last Things First

As we have already seen 'eschatology' is the study of 'the last things'. Traditionally it confined itself to the '*parousia*', 'resurrection', 'judgment', 'heaven' and 'hell'. More recently it has come to be understood as speaking of God's final and ultimate purposes in the broadest possible sense; the consummation of world history.

- No subject has fallen into greater disrepute as a result of its exploitation by cranks and fanatics;
- No subject is in greater need of re-imagining and re-focusing in the minds and priorities of Christians if their actions are to have the direction and dynamic God requires.

It has been well said, 'If you don't know where you are going you will end up somewhere else!' It is for this reason that we must give a central place to eschatology, putting 'last things first'. Only as we develop an understanding of God's plan for 'all things' will our lives and hopes be shaped aright. Eschatology is the cutting edge of our walk in the Spirit; it is here we learn what it really means to be living at the edge of time. Without eschatology we can make no real sense of the world in which we live.

Moving with caution

For all that eschatology is an important area of study, it is also one of the most difficult. Not only is the subject matter complex, but also the problems are increased by the false expectations people place upon the text, in what they demand it should be able to tell them:

- **Terminology:** Biblical passages about the 'end-times', and the theology developed from them are filled with specialist phrases: the 'Day of the Lord'; the 'Kingdom of God'; the 'Messiah'; the 'Son of Man'; the 'Millennium'; the 'Tribulation'; the 'Beast'; etc. Each must be clearly understood and carefully used;
- **Language style:** The full truth of God's ultimate purposes is beyond human imagination (1Cor 2:9). Each particular biblical writer has to wrestle with both the limitations of their own perspective and human language. Different authors use a variety of language styles in their effort to communicate; while some write literally, others use poetic, mythical or symbolic media. Any interpretation must take account of this;

²¹ See JND Kelly *'The Epistles of Peter and Jude: Black's New Testament Commentaries'* A&C Black 1969 p 142-143



- **Expectation:** Despite clear statements to the effect that it is not for us ‘to know the times or the seasons which the Father has fixed by his own authority’ (Acts 1:7), many people have felt at liberty to use the biblical text to reconstruct an exact programme of events, sometimes with a strong suggestion as to their timing. The deep human passion to divine the future, along with the tantalizing nature of scripture, which many believe has quasi-magical properties to reveal hidden codes and encryptions about ultimate destiny, has proved too much for the imagination of generations of sincere but quixotic readers of the Bible. Others have given the ideas a political and revolutionary twist that has led to the tragic death of thousands down through the centuries.²² The fact that there are as many timetables as there are presenters should warn us against this error. Much as we would like to know all the details, God has chosen to outline only the broad themes and patterns within the biblical text. To press particular passages for more detail not only distorts them but also blinds us to what they are actually saying. We must never forget the many Jews who would not recognize Jesus, as the Messiah because he did not appear to fit their predetermined ideas as to what ‘the anointed one’ would actually be like.

When studying biblical hope we must always remember that it is working with themes and not with chronology, with images and not timetables, and that ethics and how we live our everyday lives now are as of much eschatological importance as what we believe will happen then. In fact, the ‘now’ and the ‘then’, the ‘ethics’ and the ‘eschatology’ must be lived out in constant creative tension.

Taking in the view

As we embark on this subject we are humbly seeking to find the biblical vantage point from which to gain a panorama of God’s ‘end time’ purposes within the horizon line of eternity. While recognising that our perspective will often be limited, and that at times much of the terrain will be shrouded in mist, nevertheless the biblical writers have given us enough information to enable us to identify essential principles and spiritual landmarks, like beacons shining brightly along our path, by which we can fix our position and plot the direction ahead.

As we shall see, a biblical understanding of hope is expressed in many different ways, but two of the most influential are prophetic and apocalyptic writings, about which it is important to have at least some understanding:

□ Prophecy proclaimed

Biblical prophecy is about proclaiming and *forth-telling* the character and will of God, it is *not* about *foretelling* the future. The central focus of Hebrew prophecy had always been Israel’s covenant relationship with God that flowed from his choice, protection and sovereign rule over them as unique. Prophets continually called the people back to the ethical, moral and spiritual demands of the Sinai covenant. Obedience to which promised

²² The list of books around this subject would fill a huge library, but three titles that would begin to give you an initial feel of the subject are: N Cohn ‘*The Pursuit of the Millennium*’ pub Temple Smith 1970; F Carey (Ed) ‘*The Apocalypse and the Shape of Things to Come*’ pub British Museum Press 1999; D Thompson ‘*The End of Time*’ pub Minerva 1997



blessing but disobedience would bring catastrophe – this understanding was an important element in Israel's hope.

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 their destinies seemed to be being decided by foreign nations with pagan rulers? Prophecy up to this point had been aware of other nations, and on occasions had addressed them, but 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? There are pointers towards the answer as the prophets faced the reality of the rise and fall of political super-powers, for example:

- Habakkuk rejoiced at the collapse of Assyria but struggled with the fact that the pagan ruler Nebuchadnezzar was being called Yahweh's 'servant' (1:6). God is revealed as moving behind and within all the turbulent events of history.
- Isaiah graphically prophesied that 'even the nations are like a water-drop from a bucket, and are accounted as dust on the scales' (40:15). The exile was an act of God's judgment on the people's rebellion; but the fact that Yahweh could speak of the nations as divine 'servants' accomplishing God's will, all points to the certain fact that it is God who is in absolute and overall control.
- 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 spiritual, 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 all nations.

So biblical prophecy is a major medium in communicating authentic hope, both on its emphasis on godly living now in the present, together with a confidence in the character of God that it will triumph universally and cosmically.

□ **Apocalyptic unveiled**

However, in traumatic times hope was forced to find sharper and clearer ways to express itself. New media began to be employed and apocalyptic styles of writing began to appear.

The word 'apocalyptic' (from the Gk: *apocalypsis*) has the sense of 'to reveal', 'to uncover' or 'to unveil'; it is 'revelation'. It indicates the disclosing of spiritual secrets or persons, the unfolding of things previously hidden, drawing back the curtain on what has been concealed up until now.

Even while reading the Hebrew prophets we become aware that certain passages express a different style of writing than the rest.²³ Then of course there is the book of Daniel, which is unique within the Hebrew scriptures, and a fully developed example of the apocalyptic

²³ Some obvious passages are Isa 24-27; Ezk 38-48; Zec 1-8 and Joel



style of writing.²⁴ In trying to illustrate the nature of the link between apocalyptic and prophecy, apocalyptic has been described as ‘the child of prophecy’.²⁵

The shift in approach 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. We must consider carefully the rise and vital influence of apocalyptic on the biblical understanding of hope.

Apocalyptic has been described as ‘the literature of crisis’, flourishing at a time of political and cultural pressure and religious persecution.²⁶ It is one of the ways in which the human social psyche copes with the challenge of uncertain destiny.²⁷ We know that the subject matter is essentially 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.

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. It is concerned with those themes and expectations, of the post-exilic period, which were shaped by a belief that the end of the world was approaching:

²⁴ ‘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 BC to 150 CE. Books with titles like - 1&2 Enoch; Book of Jubilees; Assumption of Moses; Apocalypse of Baruch; 4 Ezra; Testament of Levi; Apocalypse of Abraham; Testament of Abraham.... and many more. 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.

²⁵ A phrase coined by HH Rowley in *‘The Relevance of the Apocalyptic’* 1944. 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’ (Quoted by DC Allison see reference below). 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)

²⁶ This of course is no precise definition of apocalyptic literature, but one attempt to be more specific in giving clarification to Jewish apocalyptic has been that it is, *‘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.’* (Formulated by the Society of Biblical Literature genre project and quoted by DC Allison in his article ‘Apocalyptic’ in the *‘Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels’* Ed JB Green [et al] Inter-Varsity Press 1992 p17)

²⁷ We do not know what external influences may have helped to shape Jewish apocalyptic; mixing with a strong biblical tradition. They might have come from Persia, Egypt or Greece, or from various cosmological myths; we cannot be certain.

- Eschatological signs;
- Expectation of cosmic cataclysm;
- Belief in an imminent other worldly kingdom;
- Concern for universal human history;
- Interest in heavenly redeemer figures.

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

One of the most striking features of much apocalyptic writing (like Daniel and Revelation) are their 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.²⁸

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.

Questions & Reflections

1. What reason would you give for the hope that is within you (1 Pet 3:15)?
2. What strikes you as the most significant factors in a biblical understanding of hope?
3. Why do you think a sense of hope is so important to a person's wellbeing? What are the types of circumstances that lead people into an experience of hopelessness? In the light of your thoughts on these *two* questions, what do you think makes a Christian understanding of hope distinctive and how ought it to be expressed in both words and actions?

Reading and Resources

Key books:

R Bauckham & T Hart '**Hope Against Hope**' Darton, Longman & Todd 1999

JB Green (Ed *et al*) '**Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels**' IVP 1992: article: 'Kingdom of God' / Heaven by CC Caragounis p 417-430

G MacDonald '**The Evangelical Universalist**' SPCK 2008

NT Wright '**New Heavens, New Earth: The Biblical Picture of the Christian Hope**' Grove Books 1999

NT Wright '**The Resurrection of the Son of God**' SPCK 2003

P Yoder '**Shalom: The Bible's Word for Salvation, Justice & Peace**' Life & Faith Press 1987

²⁸ For more discussion on the use of images see RA Preston & AT Hanson '**Revelation**': *Torch Commentary* SCM 1949 p42-46, and C Rowland 'The Open Heaven'



Other useful book resources:

- J Alison '**Living in the End Times**' SPCK 1997
CE Armerding & WW Gasque (Ed) '**Handbook of Biblical Prophecy**' Baker 1977
W Barclay '**A Spiritual Autobiography**' Eerdmans Publishing Company 1977
R Bauckham '**Jude & 2 Peter**' Word 1983
R Bauckham '**The Theology of the Book of Revelation**' Cambridge 1993
GR Beasley-Murray '**The Book of Revelation**' Eerdmans 1981
J Bonda '**The One Purpose of God**' Eerdmans 1993
W Brueggemann '**Peace: Understanding Biblical Themes**' Chalice Press 2001
F Carey (Ed) '**The Apocalypse and the Shape of Things to Come**' British Museum Press 1999
RG Close '**The Meaning of the Millennium: Four Views**' IVP 1977
N Cohn '**The Pursuit of the Millennium**' Temple Smith 1970
DN Freedman (Ed) '**Anchor Bible Dictionary**' Vol:3 Doubleday 1992 see article T Prendergast 'Hope' p 284
DN Freedman (Ed) '**Anchor Bible Dictionary**' Vol:5 Doubleday 1992 see articles:
 - Eschatology by DL Petersen p 575
 - *Parousia* by Christopher Rowland p xxx
- JB Green [Ed et al] '**Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels**' IVP 1992: articles:
 - Apocalyptic by DC Allison
 - Eschatology by DC Allison Jr p 206-209
 - Son of Man by IH Marshall p 775-781
- G Kittel (Ed) '**Theological Dictionary of the New Testament**' Eerdmans 1964: article *basileus* by KL Schmidt [et al] Vol 1: p 564-593
AT Lincoln '**Paradise Now and Not Yet**' Cambridge 1981
D Linn 'Good Goats – Healing our Image of God' Paultist Press
BD McLaren '**The Secret Message of Jesus**' Thomas Nelson 2006
RH Mounce '**The Book of Revelation**' Eerdmans 1977
R Parry & C Partridge (Eds) '**Universal Salvation?**' Paternoster 2003
A Richardson (Ed) '**A Theological Word Book of the Bible**' see article 'Hope' London SCM Press 1965 p 108-109
The Doctrine Commission of the Church of England, '**The Mystery of Salvation**' London, Church House Publishing, 1995
D Thompson '**The End of Time**' Minerva 1997
Walter Wink '**Engaging the Powers**' Fortress Press 1992
NT Wright '**The New Testament and the People of God**' SPCK 1992
NT Wright '**Jesus and the Victory of God**' SPCK 1996
NT Wright '**Surprised by Hope**' SPCK 2007
PB Yoder & WM Swartley (Ed) '**The Meaning of Peace**' (2nd Ed) IMS Elkhart 2001