THE HOLY ONES OF THE MOST HIGH IN DANIEL VII

by

V. S. POYTHRESS

Cambridge

Who are the ‘holy ones of the Most High’ in Daniel vii 18, 22, 25, 27 and who or what is the ‘one like a son of man’ in Dan. vii 13? These interrelated questions are the subject of continuing scholarly debate. I shall concentrate on the first of the two questions. ‘The holy ones of the Most High’ has been interpreted as designating either (a) angels or (b) the faithful people of Israel of the last days 1). Let us call these interpretations the angelic view and the Israelite view respectively.

For a precise discussion, the several layers of tradition need to be distinguished. We can inquire about the meaning of the expression (a) in the preliterary and nonliterary sources behind the Aramaic text of Daniel, (b) in the literary sources, if any, utilized by the final redactor or author, (c) in the mind of the final redactor/author, (d) in subsequent interpretation of Daniel vii (LXX, Theodotion, pseudepigrapha, NT). This article is concerned primarily with stage (c). For this stage, the Israelite view is favored by the following factors:


For bibliography, see especially Collins, ‘Son of Man’, and TDNT VIII 400-401.

Vetus Testamentum, Vol. XXVI, Fasc. 2
(1) Dan. vii 18. Israel is promised a great kingdom elsewhere in the OT (Num. xxiv 7, Isa. lx 12, Mic. iv 8). The coming kingdom is associated with the coming of a Messianic king to Israel. Hence this interpretation of Daniel is best confirmed if the ‘son of man’ figure originates in Israelite kingship, as Bentzen and Borsch argue. On the other hand, an eschatological angelic kingdom is unknown to the OT and intertestamental literature.

(2) Dan. vii 21, 25. The language about the oppression of the ‘holy ones’ is inconsistent with the angelic view.

(3) Dan. vii 27. Contextually, ‘people of the holy ones of the Most High’ of vii 27 appears to be an alternative expression for ‘holy ones of the Most High’ of vii 18. But ‘people’ (‘am) must refer to human beings, not angels (so uniformly in the OT; but see below).

(4) The mention of angels in other connections in Dan. vii 10, 16 makes it unlikely that the ‘holy ones of the Most High’ of vii 18 are to be identified with angels.

The angelic view is favored by the following:

1) Qedolim, when used as a noun in the Hebrew Bible, usually refers to angels, not men.

2) Dan. vii 13. The ‘son of man’ is a heavenly figure. If the ‘holy ones’ of vii 18 are to be identified with the ‘son of man’, they also are heavenly.


7) But cf. the caution of Noth, who points out that the picture of clouds of heaven may have other motivations (Laws, 222).