

Eschatology and the Church¹: Some New Testament Perspectives

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For many in the church today, eschatology seems to be one of the least relevant of the historic Christian doctrines. On the one hand, those who question the possibility of the supernatural in a scientific age find the cataclysmic irruption of God's power into human history at the end of the ages unpalatable. On the other hand, notable fundamentalists have repeatedly put forward clear-cut apocalyptic scenarios correlating current events with the signs of the end in ways which have been repeatedly disproved by subsequent history and which have tarnished all conservative Christian expectation in the process as misguided.² At the same time, a substantial amount of significant scholarship, particularly in evangelical circles, goes largely unnoticed by the church of Jesus Christ at large. This scholarship not only addresses key theological and exegetical cruxes but has direct relevance for Christian living on the threshold of the twenty-first century.

The topic is immense, so before I proceed I need to make several disclaimers and mark out the parameters of this brief study:

1. I am neither a systematic theologian nor an OT specialist, so, as my title indicates, my comments will be primarily limited to those who have grappled with key themes and texts in the NT. In this connection I have sometimes ventured an opinion on a range of questions which I know require more careful and sustained consideration.
2. Although there is a time and a place to use the term 'eschatology' broadly to refer to the goal and direction of human history under God's sovereignty at each stage of the biblical revelation.³ I will restrict my comments to issues dealing with the end of life or the end of human history as we know it.
3. My remarks are highly selective and do not reflect an exhaustive survey of the contemporary literature, although I have tried to read widely.
4. I will concentrate primarily on key trends in the last two decades of scholarly conversation and focus almost entirely on English-language material.

¹ An initial draft of this paper was delivered as the John Wenham Lecture to the Tyndale Associates as part of the July 1997 Tyndale Fellowship conference on 'Eschatology' in Swanwick.

² For a mainline Protestant survey of responses to several of these, see S.L. Cook, 'Reflections on Apocalypticism at the Approach of the Year 2000', *USQR* 49 (1995), pp. 3-16.

³ As, in the excellent study by W.J. Dumbrell, *The Search for Order: Biblical Eschatology in Focus* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994).

5. Despite my attempts to keep abreast with trends in the UK, my immediate context of teaching in a North American theological seminary will undoubtedly colour my perceptions and analyses of these trends. Hopefully this will

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not be entirely inappropriate. My own experience of living in several cultures has regularly reminded me of the value of seeing things from the 'outsider's' perspective. Indeed, there are some trends in North American evangelicalism that I believe merit wider exposure, even as I confess my indebtedness to British evangelicalism for many of the formative stimuli in my own theological pilgrimage.

Key Themes in Personal Eschatology

The Annihilationist Debate

A flurry of discussion continues in response to John Stott's famous admission of a decade ago that he wondered whether the data of the NT might direct one to the annihilationist perspective. This has normally implied that the unbeliever simply ceases all conscious existence upon death, although Stott seems to allow for people to suffer temporarily in a conscious state of 'hell.'⁴ Four arguments have proved influential among those who have defended this perspective:

1. the repeated Scriptural language about the 'destruction' of the impenitent;
2. the metaphor of fire as implying destruction;
3. the apparent injustice of infinite punishment for finite sin; and
4. the apparent irreconcilability of the promise of eternal bliss for God's people with their consciousness of others being eternally tormented.

Despite the inherent attractiveness of annihilationism to anyone with a heart of Christian compassion, this position must be finally judged as inadequate.⁵ The Greek words for punishment and destruction (*olethros*, *kolasis*, *apollumi* and its nominative forms) can refer to 'ruin', carrying the sense of the cessation of life as we know it in this world, with the possibility of influence by good, to be replaced by a state of eternal punishment. Several texts seem to demand a bodily resurrection of the unrighteous to a conscious existence of eternal separation from God, occurring in contexts in which they directly parallel descriptions of

⁴ D.L. Edwards with J. Stott, *Essentials: A Liberal-Evangelical Dialogue* (London: Hodder & Stoughton; Downers Grove: IVP, 1988), pp. 313-20. Cf. C.H. Pinnock, 'The Destruction of the Finally Impenitent', *Criswell Theological Review* 4 (1990), pp. 243-59. The debate, of course, has emerged in many periods of church history, and has had other modern defenders, but none has recently generated so much response as Stott (particularly in the UK) and Pinnock (particularly in the US). Stott has also stressed in response to his critics how tentatively he holds his view.

⁵ R.A. Peterson, 'A Traditionalist Response to John Stott's Arguments for Annihilationism' *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 37 (1994), pp. 553-68; R.L. Reymond, 'Dr John Stott on Hell,' *Presbyterion* 16 (1990), pp. 41-59; J.I. Packer, 'The Problem of Eternal Punishment', *Crux* 26.3 (1990) pp. 18-25; H.O.J. Brown, 'Will the Lost Suffer Forever?' *Criswell Theological Review* 4 (1990), pp. 261-78.

eternal life (*cf. esp.* Dn. 12:2; Mt. 25:41, 46; and Jn 5:24-30).⁶ Several texts warn against hell by declaring that it would be better for those in danger of going there never to have been born, a statement that makes little sense if the wicked at some point merely cease to exist (*cf. esp.* Mt. 18:8-9; 26:24; and note a similar comparative logic dealing with degrees of eternal punishment in Mt. 10:15).⁷ Second, the fires of hell are said to be unquenchable (Mt. 3:12; Mk 9:43), suggesting that whatever fuels them remains for eternity. Third, the problem of infinite punishment for finite sin is not resolved by annihilationism; those who would cease to exist would still do so for an infinite period of time. Indeed, this

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disparity is a problem for all perspectives on the fate of the impenitent short of full-fledged universalism, and its solution probably requires something along the lines of C.S. Lewis's famous descriptions of those who are unsaved eternally resisting any desire for salvation⁸ (*cf.* Rev. 9:20-21; 16:9-10). Fourth, the existence of any finally impenitent, whether conscious or destroyed, remains a datum of Scripture which apparently clashes with God's perfect happiness and victory. So, again, it is not clear that anything short of complete universalism solves this problem. And if we had a greater appreciation of divine holiness, one of the communicable attributes which we can look forward to sharing in some measure in the life to come, we probably would not sense this same tension over the destruction of the wicked that we do now.⁹

The implications for the church are potentially enormous, particularly with respect to its outreach. Wildly different definitions of evangelism in fact compete with one another for acceptance.¹⁰ There is little doubt that a proper, biblical, evangelistic zeal for reconciling men and women to God is easily quenched if one seriously believes that the worst that can happen to the non-Christian is that he or she simply ceases to exist.¹¹ I would love to find out in the next life that I am wrong and that proponents of annihilationism are right on this issue, but I wonder if the risk is worth taking, if indeed it turns out that this view is wrong and the more traditional Christian view is right, and if in the process my enthusiasm for sharing Christ with the lost has so waned that sinners are consigned to an endless agony that might otherwise not have been their plight.

⁶ E.E. Ellis, 'Forum on Conditional Immortality' (Swanwick: Tyndale Conference, 1997), argues that the parallelism consists of a one-time event with eternal consequences. But the fate of the unbeliever is to depart 'into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels' (Mt. 25:41), a fire that is said to torment 'day and night forever and ever' (Rev. 20:10). *Cf.* also Rev. 14:10-11.

⁷ This would seem to be true even if hell were conceived as potentially temporal, as in D. Cheetham, 'Hell as Potentially Temporal,' *Expository Times* 108 (1997), pp. 260-63.

⁸ C.S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1946).

⁹ For a more detailed, recent presentation and analysis of the issues at stake in this debate, see T. Gray, 'Destroyed Forever: An Examination of the Debates Concerning Annihilation and Conditional Immortality,' *Themelios* 21.2 (1996), pp. 14-18

[http://www.theologicalstudies.org.uk/article_destroyed_gray.html].

¹⁰ Most notably, with respect to the question of to what extent spiritual salvation to prepare one for a life beyond this world should even still be included in the concept. Particularly significant for theological students' reflection are the diverse contributions to R. Evans et al., eds., *The Globalization of Theological Education* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1993).

¹¹ This is not to say it will inevitably be quashed; happily some act inconsistently with their premises and continue in faithful obedience in this arena.

The Nature of Hell

None of the above remarks, however, necessarily commits one to a particular position on a second recently much-debated issue. A discussion of four Christian views on hell itemizes the literal, the metaphorical, the purgatorial, and the conditional views.¹² The last of these, conditional immortality, is only slightly different from the annihilationist view already discussed.¹³ The third, or purgatorial view, is largely limited to Roman Catholic circles and, by the admission of its own supporters, not clearly defensible from the Protestant canon. But increasingly, interpreters are recognizing that the language of eternal destruction in the NT consistently employs a variety of metaphors, most notably fire and outer darkness which, if absolutized, contradict one another.¹⁴ 2 Thessalonians 1:9 may be one of the most literal descriptions of the fate of the wicked, as it explains, 'They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power.'¹⁵ Much of the offense in the concept of conscious eternal punishment may be mitigated if one refuses to include literal bodily torments in one's description, seeing rather a state of profound agony and

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awareness of being separated from God and all things good.¹⁶ Yet this metaphorical view does not so remove the sting of death as to quash evangelistic zeal.

A second point, less widely noted, addresses further objections. Is it not unjust that the generally kind, decent, non-Christian neighbour in our pluralist world should suffer the same fate as the Idi Amins or Pol Pots of our day? I think the answer is 'yes', but then one must immediately add that nothing in Scripture consigns us to believing that the fate of all of Hell's inhabitants should be the same. Particularly significant in this light is Luke 12:47-48, verses unique to Luke's version of the parable of the faithful and unfaithful servants: 'The servant who knows the master's will and does not get ready or does not do what the master wants will be beaten with many blows. But the one who does not know and does things deserving punishment will be beaten with few blows'. Given that damnation in Scripture is consistently linked with judgment according to one's works, it makes eminent sense to speak of a widespread gradation of degrees of punishment in hell.¹⁷

¹² *Four Views on Hell*, ed. W. Crockett (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992).

¹³ Technically, 'conditional immortality' deals only with the issue of whether humans have an innately immortal soul. Even if they do not, God might choose to raise both believers and unbelievers to an everlasting conscious existence. But usually proponents of conditional immortality go on to affirm the annihilation of the unbeliever.

¹⁴ See, e.g., G.E. Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, rev. D.A. Hagner (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993; Cambridge: Lutterworth, 1994), p. 196.

¹⁵ All quotations in this paper follow the New International Version, Inclusive Language Edition (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1996).

¹⁶ Cf. especially I.H. Marshall, *1 and 2 Thessalonians* (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 17 pp. 178-80.

¹⁷ N. Geldenhuys, *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1951), p. 365; cf. D. Gooding, *According to Luke* (Leicester: InterVarsity, 1987), pp. 246; J.A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke*, vol. 2 (Garden City: Doubleday, 1985), p. 992, - at the level of the historical Jesus but not of Lukan redaction. Curiously, most commentators assume that Jesus is still speaking of his disciples in vv. 47-48. But vv. 45-46 depict a faithless servant who contrasts with the faithful steward of vv. 42-44 and who is assigned 'a place with the unbelievers' (v. 46). 'The servant' of v. 47, then, is taken

The Fate of the Unevangelized

Speaking of those who do not know their master's will leads us directly into a third much-debated area of personal eschatology. What about those who have never had a clear presentation of the Christian gospel? Numerous recent anthologies of essays addressing this question from a variety of perspectives have appeared in evangelical literature.¹⁸ Indeed, two triennial conferences ago, the Tyndale Fellowship addressed this question as part of its major theme of responding to the pluralism of our modern world.¹⁹ John Sanders has provided the most extensive taxonomy of historic Christian options, complete with the biblical data to which each appeals, the strengths and weaknesses of each case, and the list of key Christian writers over the centuries who have advocated each view. Sanders' categories include: (1) restrictivism (all those who have not heard are damned); (2) universal evangelization before death (subdivided into the options that (a) God will send the message to those who are genuinely seeking Him; (b) there will be a universal opportunity for salvation just before death; and (c) God's middle knowledge - His pre-understanding of what all possible beings would do in all possibly created worlds - leaves no one without excuse); (3) eschatological evangelization (*i.e.*, the possibility of repentance in a post-mortem state); and (4) universally accessible salvation apart from evangelization (God through His prevenient grace or general revelation, making it possible for all those who truly seek Him to be saved).²⁰ Perhaps the most important lesson to be derived from Sanders' study is that there is not one and only one traditional, historic Christian position on this question, despite the claims of some to the contrary. And while, on the one hand, in an age of rampant pluralism it

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is clearly crucial to reassert the distinctive claims of the gospel, it is not as clear that we are required to adopt the restrictivist position. Sir Norman Anderson, arguably evangelicalism's leading spokesman of the past generation in the area of comparative religions, spoke cogently when he wrote just over two decades ago,

May this not provide us with a guideline to the solution of the burning problem of those in other religions who have never heard - or never heard with understanding - of the Saviour? It is not, of course, that they can earn salvation through their religious devotion or moral achievements, great though these sometimes are - for the NT is emphatic that no man can ever earn salvation. But what if the Spirit of God convicts them, as he alone can, of something of their sin and need; and what if he enables them, in the darkness or twilight, somehow to cast themselves on the mercy of God and cry out, as it were, for his

most naturally as elaborating on the faithless servant of the immediately preceding verses. Verses 47-48 thus consider two kinds of faithless servants who take their place among unbelievers.

¹⁸ See *esp.* *What About Those Who Have Never Heard? Three Views on the Destiny of the Unevangelized*, ed. J. Sanders (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1995); *Through No Fault of Their Own? The Fate of Those Who Have Never Heard*, eds. W.V. Crockett and J.G. Sigountos (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991).

¹⁹ Many of these papers were published in *One God, One Lord in a World of Religious Pluralism*, eds. A.D. Clarke and B.W. Winter (Cambridge: Tyndale House, 1991).

²⁰ J. Sanders, *No Other Name: An Investigation Into the Destiny of the Unevangelized* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992; London: SPCK, 1994).

forgiveness and salvation? Will they not then be accepted and forgiven in the one and only Saviour?²¹

Our understanding of how deeply embedded the concept of 'works-righteousness' is in the vast majority of human religions does not generate great optimism that large numbers of people would come into the kingdom by this method. But the wisdom of Anderson's position at the same time allows us to carry on with our evangelism more intelligently and perhaps more effectively. For indeed one of the biggest stumbling blocks to coming to faith in Christ for many today is the apparently unsatisfactory nature of the arguments of the restrictivist position basing universal accountability on general revelation. Anderson's cautious 'wider hope' does not require one to imagine the grotesque scenario of somebody having been saved apart from the knowledge of Christ and then refusing the gospel upon hearing it, only to find him, or herself lost. Presumably anyone already seeking a knowledge of the one, true, living God would be empowered by Him to respond positively to the Christian message. Nor is this version of the position Sanders calls 'universally accessible salvation apart from evangelization' without Scriptural support. Several recent writers have insisted that this is precisely what Romans 2:12-16 implies, even if it is never explicitly stated.²² The alternative options all fail at key points: Those who 'show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts now accusing, now even defending them' (Rm. 2:15) could be a merely hypothetical category, but this explanation does not work nearly as well with the parallel statements in 7-11 and 25-29 (about those who do good, are circumcised by the Spirit and receive eternal life). As J.D.G. Dunn has stressed, the culmination of this section of Romans in 3:20 does not state that no one is justified apart from having heard of Christ, but rather that no one is justified by the works of the Law.²³ But the view of C.E.B. Cranfield, that in all three of these

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excerpts in Romans 2 only Christians are in view,²⁴ runs afoul of the larger narrative flow of the epistle, in which the role of the Christian gospel does not seem to be unpacked until 3:21. So, at the very least, we have precedent in Romans 2 for the faithful *Jew* under the old covenant responding by grace with faith in God's promises. But the reference to the *Gentiles* in verse 14 then most naturally raises the question if all those who have not heard might not be theologically 'B.C.', even if they are chronologically living in the Christian dispensation.

Eternal Life for Christians

²¹ N. Anderson, *The World's Religions* (London: InterVarsity, 1975; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), p. 234.

²² See esp. G.N. Davies, *Faith and Obedience in Romans* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1990), pp. 53-71; K. Snodgrass, 'Justification By Grace - To the Doers: An Analysis of the Place of Romans 2 in the Theology of Paul,' *New Testament Studies* 32 (1986), pp. 72-93; J.D.G. Dunn, *Romans 1 - 8* (Dallas: Word, 1988), p. 107.

²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 158-60.

²⁴ C.E.B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, vol. 1 (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1975), pp. 151-53, pp. 155-63.

It is a little ironic that so much study has concentrated on the fate of unbelievers without a corresponding focus on the glory to which Christians can look forward.²⁵ Two areas of study to which only slight attention has been devoted deserve further exploration. First is the issue of rewards for believers. I have argued elsewhere that, contrary to one popular strand of thought, believers should not expect eternal degrees of reward in heaven. The imagery of the parable of the vineyard laborers (Mt. 20:1-16) points us away from such an expectation, as does the logic of heaven itself (how can there be degrees of perfection?). The so-called 'crown' passages (1 Cor. 9:25; 1 Thes. 2:19; 2 Tim. 4:8; Jas. 1:12; 1 Pet. 5:4), as well as numerous other NT texts, speak merely of eternal life in general as the reward for Christian commitment. I do not dispute for one minute that the NT teaches that each believer will have an entirely unique experience before God on Judgment Day (*esp.* Matt. 25:14-30; 1 Cor. 3:11-15; 2 Cor. 5:1-10). I merely dispute whether any passages commit us to seeing such unique experiences as perpetuated throughout all eternity.²⁶

The issue is a significant one, for a fair amount of motivation for living the Christian life is often based on these alleged degrees of reward, rather than, as Luther saw most clearly among the Protestant Reformers, on the motive of profound gratitude for God in Christ having already done what we could never do or merit.²⁷ Ironically, those who most emphasize rewards often also have a very broad definition of who (under the heading of the carnal Christian) can still just barely squeeze into heaven. By missing the point of the NT texts, they may be in fact including people that Scripture excludes, a point that becomes more obvious once we realize that several warning passages are about Christian entrance into the kingdom, rather than decrees of reward within it (*e.g.*, 1 Cor. 9:24-27; Phil. 3:10-14).²⁸ Indeed, if one couples the theme of equality in heaven with that of degrees of punishment in hell, the results fit in well with a consistent biblical asymmetry: that salvation is always entirely by grace, whereas judgment is just as consistently according to one's works. Grace leaves no room for gradation; works allow for endless degrees of differentiation. I am afraid that some popular Christian thought has entirely inverted this biblical model, promising degrees of reward in

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heaven, but seeing those who suffer in hell as experiencing identical agony.

The Intermediate State

²⁵ Though see P. Toon, *Heaven and Hell* (Nashville: Nelson, 1986).

²⁶ See further C.L. Blomberg, 'Degrees of Reward in the Kingdom of Heaven?' *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 35 (1992), pp. 159-72. In fact, E. Disley ('Degrees of Glory: Protestant Doctrine and the Concept of Rewards Hereafter', *Journal of Theological Studies* 42 (1991), pp. 77-105) notes that the development of the doctrine of differentiating degrees of reward was in part the legacy of non-Lutheran reformers trying to salvage something of the Roman Catholic notion of purgatory. The most recent attempt to argue for eternal rewards distinct from salvation (R.N. Wilkin, 'The Biblical Distinction Between Eternal Salvation and Eternal Rewards: A Key to Proper Exegesis', *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* 9 (1996), pp. 15-24) is aware of my article, misleads in its summary of my views and fails entirely to address its main arguments.

²⁷ *Cf.*, *e.g.*, Luther's Works (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1959) 51.282-83.

²⁸ This misunderstanding of Scripture has been epitomized in recent years perhaps best by Z.C. Hodges in his numerous writings.

Second, more attention needs to be devoted to the classic Christian understanding of the intermediate state. An important work which goes against the grain of much recent thought in this respect is John Cooper's *Body, Soul, and Life Everlasting*.²⁹ We are told these days by various philosophers, psychologists and biologists that the human person must be viewed as an indivisibly monistic whole. This claim has spawned major reinterpretations of what happens to a believer upon death, prior to the general resurrection accompanying the Parousia. Either believers look forward to 'soul-sleep', whereby their next conscious moment of existence is at their resurrection, or they receive a resurrection body immediately upon death.³⁰ But the former option commands almost no exegetical support, except for the use of the common Greek euphemism 'sleep' for death. And the latter view, arguably present in 2 Corinthians 5:1-10, seems to require an understanding of Pauline 'development' in which the apostle actually contradicts, or changes his mind from, his earlier views (see *esp.* 1 Thes. 4:13-18; 1 Cor. 15:51-55). The traditional exegesis of 2 Corinthians 5 remains the best.³¹ Paul does not desire to be absent from the body and home with the Lord as his ideal, but it is preferable to remaining in this life apart from the direct presence of God, if indeed it turns out that he will not live until Christ returns.³² It is not clear that philosophy or science has proved that no intangible or immaterial dimension of the human person exists apart from his or her body.³³ Exegesis, at any rate, dare not take apparent findings of modern, non-biblical world-views as its starting point.

The issue is not an insignificant one. The classic conception of the intermediate state allows Christians to console loved ones who have lost believers to death with the assurance that they are immediately in the presence of Jesus. It enables us to continue to defend one essential part of the *imago Dei*: humans are unique among the forms of life God created in having the capacity to be in a spiritual relationship with him.³⁴ And it makes sense of the rash of near-death experiences being reported these days of individuals sensing a disembodied life beyond the grave, without forcing us to view all of these experiences either as some biologically caused illusion or as necessarily accurate descriptions of the eternal state.³⁵ The intermediate state does not necessarily correspond to the nature of resurrection life, for either a believer or an unbeliever.

²⁹ (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989).

³⁰ The former is the more common recourse; the latter has become well-known via M.J. Harris, *Raised Immortal* (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1983; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985) pp. 98-101; following F.F. Bruce, *1 & 2 Corinthians* (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1971; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), pp. 204.

³¹ Cf. also I.K. Smith, 'Does 2 Corinthians 5:1-8 Refer to an Intermediate State?' *Reformed Theological Review* 55 (1996), pp. 14-23.

³² On the logic here, see *esp.* W.L. Craig, 'Paul's Dilemma in 2 Corinthians 5.1-10: A 'Catch 22'?' *New Testament Studies* 34 (1988), pp. 145-47. On the exegetical evidence for an intermediate state more generally, see J. Osei-Bonsu, 'The Intermediate State in the New Testament', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 44 (1991), pp. 169-94. Osei-Bonsu also deals well with the Corinthian text in *idem*, 'Does 2 Cor. 5. 1-10 Teach the Reception of the Resurrection Body at the Moment of Death?' *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 28 (1986), pp. 81-101.

³³ On the contrary, see the important research on the 'mind-brain' distinction by J.C. Eccles, *The Human Mystery* (Berlin and New York: Springer, 1979); *idem*, *The Human Psyche* (New York: Springer, 1980; London: Routledge, 1992).

³⁴ On which, see R.W. Wilson and C.L. Blomberg, 'The Image of God in Humanity: A Biblical-Psychological Perspective', *Themelios* 18.3 (1993), pp. 8-15.

³⁵ See *esp.* D. Groothuis, *Deceived by the Light* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 1995).

At the same time, we must insist that even the glory of disembodied presence with God in Christ is not the ideal. Bodily resurrection vindicates God's initial purpose for creating men and women, just as the new heavens and the new earth

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re-establish God's original intention for the rest of his creation. Again, our popular Christian mindset, not to mention the culture of recent films enamoured with life after death, does not consistently appreciate how earthy and bodily the Christian hope is for the age to come. God originally created this world as 'good' and humans as 'very good' (Gn. 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31). We have corrupted ourselves and creation, but he will have the last word, redeeming and demonstrating as utterly good all of the material world. Much popular Christianity, as well as alternative world-views, not least in the so-called New Age Movement, are neo-Gnostic in comparison.³⁶

Exegesis of Key New Testament Texts

The Olivet Discourse

Professor G.R. Beasley-Murray has put us in his debt with an update and restatement of his classic analysis of Jesus' eschatological discourse (Mk. 13 and pars.).³⁷ After sketching out in comprehensive detail exegetical alternatives, he again cogently defends a 'historic' or 'classic premillennialist' interpretation.³⁸ The sermon begins (vv. 5-13) with things that must happen 'but the end is still to come' (v. 7). Verses 14-23 introduce us to 'the abomination that causes desolation' (v. 14), depicting the destruction of the temple by Rome in A.D. 70. Not until verses 24-27 is the Parousia directly in view, but no sign is ever given that enables us to calculate its timing. Not even Jesus, in the human limits of his incarnation, had access to this information (v. 32). The enigmatic verse 30, with its reference to 'this generation' (*he genea haut*) not passing away 'until all these things have happened,' must be interpreted in light of verse 29. The Greek word for 'these things' (*tauta*) in verse 30 is the identical word as its antecedent in verse 29. But verse 29 speaks of 'these things' happening so that 'you know' that 'it' (*i.e.*, Christ or his return) 'is near, right at the door.' It makes no sense therefore for 'these things' to include Christ's actual return because then the Parousia would no longer be simply near, close at hand; it would have arrived. *Tauta* must therefore refer to the preliminary events of verses 5-23, all of which were fulfilled, at least provisionally, within the first century, enabling the church to have the lively hope of an imminent return of Christ in numerous eras of its history ever since.³⁹ Indeed, the application with which Mark's version of the discourse closes (and which extends for an entire additional chapter in Matthew) stresses the practical application of Jesus' words (vv. 33-37). Far from encouraging contemporary events-watching, Jesus discourages attempts to discern when the end is at hand,

³⁶ Cf. *idem*, *Unmasking the New Age* (Leicester and Downers Grove: IVP, 1991).

³⁷ G.R. Beasley-Murray, *Jesus and the Last Days* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1993). Cf. *idem*, *Jesus and the Future* (London: Macmillan, 1954).

³⁸ To be differentiated from amillennialism and postmillennialism, on the one hand, and the better-known dispensational form of premillennialism, on the other hand.

³⁹ Alternative approaches prove less convincing. 'This generation' cannot easily be made to mean the last generation before the Parousia in view of its consistent usage elsewhere in the Gospels (cf. Mark 8:12, 38; 9:19; Matt. 11:16; 12:41-42, 45; 17:17, 23:36, etc.). Nor is the NIV marginal reading 'race' a lexically common meaning of the term.

mandating faithful, obedient service all the while instead. T. Geddert's fine study persuasively demonstrates that this interpretation of the Olivet Discourse matches Mark's purpose and structure more generally: to deter a theology of signs and promote humble discipleship that follows Jesus on the road to the cross.⁴⁰ Several other recent evangelical

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commentators and essay writers have taken a roughly similar tack to Mark 13 and parallels, at times dubbing it a preterist - futurist approach.⁴¹ But I do not sense that it has become well-known in our churches, and certainly not as well-known as the purely preterist or purely futurist options that consign all of Jesus' teaching (and like passages elsewhere in the NT) either to the first century or to an entirely future time.

As we approach the intriguing year 2000, I'm afraid we shall again encounter a rash of date-setters, much as we have seen, particularly in North America and in Korea, over the past decade.⁴² The argument lies ready at hand. It was an ancient Jewish belief, adopted by some early Christian writers, on the basis of Psalm 90:4 ('a thousand years ... are like a day'), that the millennium would come as God's sabbath rest for human history during its seventh thousand-year period.⁴³ When a date of roughly 4,000 BC is accepted for the creation of the earth, it is a short step to concluding that we are on the verge of that seventh millennium. But the sole NT citation of this Psalm (2 Pet. 3:8-9) applies it quite differently - as a rationale for the delay of the Parousia, rather than as a basis for predicting its arrival. And the uniquely Matthean sequence of parables created by Matthew's longer ending to the Olivet Discourse depicts quite poignantly all of the options for the timing of Christ's return. In the parable of the thief in the night (Mt. 24:42-44), Christ returns entirely unexpectedly. In the parable of the faithful and unfaithful servants (v. 45-51), he comes unexpectedly early. And in the story of the ten bridesmaids (25:1-13), he is unexpectedly delayed. Surely this calls Christians to prepare for all three logical possibilities⁴⁴ and rules out any attempt to imply, however cautiously, that we can ever predict a particular generation (or any period of time) in which Christ is most likely to come back.

Romans 11:25-26

An enormous amount of scholarly literature continues to address Paul's treatment of Israel in Romans 9 - 11. Particularly controversial is the climax of his discussion in 11:25-26. Is there justification here for a future hope for ethnic Israel? One's views at this point will most likely colour one's interpretation of a variety of other scattered references in the NT that impinge on

⁴⁰ T.J. Geddert, *Watchwords: Mark 13 in Markan Eschatology* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1989).

⁴¹ Cf., e.g., D.A. Carson, 'Matthew,' in *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. F.E. Gaebelin, vol. 8 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), pp. 488-508; R. H. Gundry, *Mark: A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), pp. 733-800; D.E. Garland, *Mark* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), pp. 487-512. The term itself is found in D.L. Turner, 'The Structure and Sequence of Matthew 24:1-21: Interaction with Evangelical Treatments', *Grace Theological Journal* 10 (1989), pp. 327, who adopts this approach as well. For an advocate of a similar position outside of explicitly evangelical circles see B.K. Blount, 'Preaching the Kingdom: Mark's Apocalyptic Call for Prophetic Engagement,' *Princeton Seminary Bulletin Supplements* 3 (1994), pp. 33-56.

⁴² For a survey and helpful reply to a number of these at a popular level, see B.J. Oropeza, *99 Reasons Why No One Knows When Christ Will Return* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1994).

⁴³ The oldest Christian version of this belief preserved is found in the Epistle of Barnabas 15.

⁴⁴ So also D.A. Hagner, *Matthew 14 - 28* (Dallas: Word, 1995), p. 718.

the debate. We are particularly in debt to P. Walker for his recent book-length treatment of Jerusalem in the NT.⁴⁵ On this subject, Walker follows N.T. Wright's lead with respect to NT eschatology more generally, believing that the church has entirely superseded Israel as the chosen people of God.⁴⁶ This situation should not cause Christians to gloat; it led both Jesus and Paul to express great sorrow for their countrymen who were not responding to the gospel (Mt. 23:37-29 par.; Rom. 9:1-5). But there is no NT justification for seeing a final stage of eschatological blessing for literal Jews after 'the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled' (Lk. 21:24).

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Walker and Wright give us, I believe, profound insights into vast sections of the NT that are directly applicable to a debate that until recently went on almost entirely outside of evangelical circles. I speak of the so-called 'two covenants' approach to salvation: Jesus is Messiah for the Gentiles but Jews may be saved by remaining faithful to the Mosaic covenant. Inasmuch as one begins to find evangelical Christians articulating this position,⁴⁷ Walker and Wright provide massive evidence that the relevant texts will simply not bear this interpretation.

To the extent that many North American Christians uncritically support the current state of Israel, seeing it even as some fulfillment of prophecy, these correctives prove crucial. No text of the NT suggests any future for a socio-political entity such as the modern nation of Israel. Even less substantiable are views that require Jewish presence in Jerusalem to rebuild a literal temple just prior to Christ's return, given that the foundational role of the temple was to be the one divinely ordained place for offering sacrifices. The epistle to the Hebrews surely dispenses with the notion that literal animal sacrifices could ever again play a part in God's plans for His people. Writers like C. Chapman and G. Burge have pursued this theme in a related direction, noting that the vast majority of all Christians currently living in Israel are Palestinian.⁴⁸ And if there is no biblical mandate for a current socio-political entity in the historic lands bequeathed to the Jews, then a certain sympathy for the plight of the Palestinians must certainly be at the forefront of any Christian's social agenda.

But I fear that at times, particularly in the evangelicalism of the British commonwealth, these points are taken for granted, and possibly balancing emphases in the NT of a future, at least for *ethnic* Jews, is too hastily dismissed. Hints appear in Matthew 23:39 (par. Lk. 13:35).⁴⁹ Luke 21:24, Acts 3:19-21, and elsewhere, but ultimately discussion must focus attention on the more detailed conclusions of Romans.

⁴⁵ P.W.L. Walker, *Jesus and the Holy City: New Testament Perspectives on Jerusalem* (Grand Rapids and Cambridge: Eerdmans, 1997).

⁴⁶ Cf. N.T. Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1991), pp. 231-57.

⁴⁷ I am not aware of any *bona fide* scholarly defenses of this view by avowed evangelicals, but I have increasingly heard it promoted orally in both the US and the UK at the grass-roots level. A variation of this view, in which all Jews of all time are saved at the Parousia of Christ/general resurrection, by faith in Jesus in response to *his* preaching the gospel, appears in R.H. Bell, *Provoked to Jealousy* (Tubingen: Mohr, 1994), pp. 134-45. For representative recent literature of all the major exegetical options surrounding vv. 25-27, see D.J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids and Cambridge: Eerdmans, 1996), pp. 713-29.

⁴⁸ C. Chapman, *Whose Promised Land?* (Tring: Lion, 1983); G.M. Burge, *Who Are God's People in the Middle East?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993).

⁴⁹ On which, see *esp.* D.C. Allison, Jr., 'Mt. 23:39 = Lk. 13:35b As a Conditional Prophecy', *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 18 (1983), pp. 75-84.

At first glance, the approach adopted by Walker and Wright makes eminent sense. Romans 11:26 begins with a 'so' or 'thus,' not a clearly temporal connective such as 'then.' In the earlier stages of salvation history Jews were God's chosen people; then came the Christian age in which Gentiles predominated (v. 25). Thus together 'all Israel' (that is, God's people of all ages or dispensations) 'will be saved' (v. 25a). On the other hand, the immediate, surrounding context of verses 23 and 28 promises literal Jews that they can be grafted in again to God's people if they do not persist in unbelief. And the larger narrative flow of chapters 9 - 11, speaking of a succession of ages in salvation history, makes it most natural to take the 'thus' of verse 26 as referring to a third and final stage in conjunction with the Parousia (vv. 26b-27). While it is true that Romans 9:6-13 and other passages distinguish between literal, ethnic Israel and a remnant who are the true spiritual Israel, and while Paul may even refer to the entire

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Christian church as 'the Israel of God' (Gal. 6:16), it is not clear that the immediate context of Romans 11:25-26 allows any distinction in meaning between the literal Jews of 'Israel' in verse 25 and the people implied by 'all Israel' in verse 26. It is better, therefore, to follow the majority of commentators in seeing Paul as promising a large-scale outpouring of belief in Jesus as Messiah among literal, ethnic Jews, not necessarily concentrated in any piece of geography, in conjunction with events immediately leading up to Christ's return.⁵⁰

If this is so, then the church needs to rethink carefully its relationship with Jewish people. On the one hand, in a post-Holocaust age any form of dialogue that is not highly sensitive to the horrors and prejudice of anti-Semitism throughout Christian history does not deserve the title Christian and is, in any event, likely to prove counterproductive. On the other hand, engaging contemporary Jews as partners only in a religious dialogue that sidesteps the unique, salvific claims of Jesus in the NT risks ultimate irrelevancy. D. Bloesch puts it more pointedly: 'The church is betraying its evangelistic mandate if it withholds the gospel of salvation from the very people who gave us the Messiah and Saviour of the world. Such an attitude could be construed as the worst kind of anti-Semitism...'⁵¹ It is even arguable, on the basis of the salvation-historical priority of the Christian mission to the Jews in Romans 1:16, and the pattern of early Christian preaching in the book of Acts more generally, a pattern which even the end of the Book of Acts does not seem finally to abolish,⁵² that evangelizing Jewish people might still retain a certain priority in our age.⁵³

⁵⁰ E.g., Cranfield, *Romans*, vol. 2, pp. 574-79; Dunn, *Romans 9 - 16* (1988), pp. 690-93; Moo, *Romans*, pp. 719-26. B.W. Longenecker ('Different Answers to Different Issues: Israel, the Gentiles and Salvation History in Romans 9 - 11,' *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 36 (1989), pp. 95-123) is particularly helpful in showing how Paul's logic here develops out of thoroughly Jewish (and *esp.* Old Testament) eschatology.

⁵¹ D.G. Bloesch, 'All Israel Will Be Saved': Supersessionism and the Biblical Witness', *Interpretation* 43 (1989), pp. 140-41. Some have argued that God will save Israel through faith in Christ by extraordinary means apart from the preaching of the gospel, but *cf.* S. Hafemann, 'The Salvation of Israel in Romans 11:25-32: A Response to Krister Stendahl', *Ex Auditu* 4 (1988), pp. 54: 'The future salvation of ethnic Israel must correspond to the nature of the remnant's salvation in the present, since the future nature of ethnic Israel is inextricably tied to the present nature of the remnant (11:16).'

⁵² See *esp.* R.C. Tannehill, 'Israel in Luke-Acts: A Tragic Story,' *Journal of Biblical Literature* 104 (1985), pp. 69-85.

⁵³ F.D. Bruner, *The Christbook: Matthew 1 - 12* (Waco: Word, 1987), 64 p. 372, 'Israel always has precedence'.

The Book of Revelation and Apocalyptic

A huge bibliography of recent works again attaches itself to this third significant portion of Scripture. There is now widespread agreement that the book of Revelation must be seen in light of three biblical genres: apocalypse, prophecy, and epistolary literature. But the greatest of these is apocalyptic. A widely quoted and highly influential definition of apocalyptic comes from John Collins in his *Semeia* symposium

Apocalypse' 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.⁵⁴

A comprehensive anthology of English translations of the so-called pseudepigrapha has appeared in two volumes, one of them entirely devoted to apocalyptic and related literature, under the editorship of Princeton scholar James Charlesworth.⁵⁵ A more selective and readable collection, for one wishing to familiarize him or herself with snippets of Jewish,

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Christian and Greco-Roman apocalyptic most relevant for interpreting the Bible, is now found in the volume edited by Reddish.⁵⁶ Large, even multi-volume, commentaries on Revelation have either appeared or are imminent, and, as with the interpretation of Jesus' Olivet Discourse, tend to defend the classic 'Preterist (or amillennial) and futurist (or dispensational) option.⁵⁷ But again, a historic or classical premillennialist (and post-tribulational) view, to be sharply distinguished from the better-known and more widespread dispensational (and pretribulational) premillennialism, still remains best. The trio of commentaries, by Mounce, Ladd, and Beasley-Murray, all from the 1970s and, with varying nuances, all reflecting the classical premillennialist view, probably remains the best and most manageable package to hand a would-be interpreter of the final book of the NT canon.⁵⁸ The entire Revelation is written from a clear end-of-the-first-century perspective. John's visions, symbolism, and imagery would have all been more quickly understood by a first-century Christian audience in western Asia Minor than they often are today. As Fee and Stuart in their hermeneutical handbook put it so aptly, 'The primary meaning of the Revelation is what John intended it to mean, which in turn must also have been something his readers could have understood it to mean.'⁵⁹ Yet at the same time,

⁵⁴ J.J. Collins, 'Introduction: Morphology of a Genre', *Semeia* 14 55 (1979), p. 9.

⁵⁵ J.H. Charlesworth, ed., *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 2 vols. (Garden City: New York; London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1983-85).

⁵⁶ M.G. Reddish, ed., *Apocalyptic Literature: A Reader* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1990; subsequently reprinted by Hendrickson).

⁵⁷ Contrast D.E. Aune, *Revelation*, 3 vols. (Dallas: Word, 1997); with R.L. Thomas, *Revelation*, 2 vols. (Chicago: Moody, 1992-95). G.K. Beale's forthcoming NIGTC offering on Revelation will be bound as one volume but is long enough to have been easily divided in two.

⁵⁸ R. H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977; currently being revised); G.E. Ladd, *A Commentary on the Revelation of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972); G.R. Beasley-Murray, *The Book of Revelation* (London: Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1978, 2nd ed.).

⁵⁹ G.D. Fee and D. Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), p. 209.

from at least chapter 7 onward, it seems crucial to insist that the events to which John's visions point have not yet been consummated.

None of this commits us to discount the greatest strength of the non-futurist positions, namely, an appreciation that Revelation is not attempting to depict events immediately preceding the Parousia in any consistently literal fashion. Nor dare our readings lead us to dilute a healthy Christian social ethic, based on the assumption that things immediately preceding the end will merely go from bad to worse anyway. We must recognize that the primary purpose of apocalyptic is increasingly agreed to be to provide comfort for those who are experiencing persecution, oppression, or some other form of social marginalization, or who at least form part of a community who perceive themselves to be subject to such marginalization.⁶⁰ Again, with writers out of the recent African and Latin American strands of liberation theology, we must remember that Revelation, like much apocalyptic literature more generally, functions as a literature of protest, though without any clear indications that such protest may ever turn violent.⁶¹ By depicting the perfect justice of the world to come, the injustices of present socio-political realities are unmasked. Governments may be divinely ordained (Rom. 13) but they may also be demonic, requiring civil disobedience (Rev. 13).⁶²

In the final analysis, the case for historic premillennialism rests on the narrative flow of Revelation 19 - 20. It seems impossible to insert a literary seam in between Revelation 19:20-21 and 20:1 as amillennial and postmillennial perspectives are forced to do. Chapter 19 ends with the eternal punishment of

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two-thirds of the unholy trinity of chapters 12 to 13: the first beast and the false prophet. But what is the fate of the dragon, *i.e.*, Satan, the third individual and chief person of this demonic trio? This question is not answered until 20:1-3. But, given that there is no logical or chronological break before verse 4, the millennium that is described in the rest of chapter 20 must of necessity follow the return of Christ, with which chapter 19 concludes.⁶³

Nor is this merely a literary observation. Theologically, just as it is crucial to insist that human bodies will be redeemed via their resurrection, so also God's initial plans for this world, not merely in a wholly recreated heavens and earth, will be vindicated, in a millennium that falls just short of the utter perfection of the new cosmos described in

⁶⁰ Cf. esp. A.Y. Collins, *Crisis and Catharsis: The Power of the Apocalypse* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984); with E. S. Fiorenza, *The Book of Revelation: Justice and Judgment* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985). Collins has now advanced her discussion considerably in *Cosmology and Eschatology in Jewish and Christian Apocalypticism* (Leiden: Brill, 1996).

⁶¹ For an extreme liberation theology reading that turns Revelation into a mandate for merely socio-political change, see P. Richard, *Apocalypse: A People's Commentary on the Book of Revelation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1995). For a balanced blend of evangelical historic premillennialism with a cautious liberation theology, see R. Foulkes, *El Apocalipsis de San Juan: Una lectura desde América Latina* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Buenos Aires: Nueva Creación, 1989).

⁶² From South Africa at the height of apartheid, cf. A.A. Boesak, *Comfort and Protest: Reflections on the Apocalypse of John of Patmos* (Philadelphia: Westminster; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1987); cf. also C. Rowland, 'The Apocalypse: Hope, Resistance and the Revelation of Reality', *Ex Auditu* 6 (1990), pp. 129-44.

⁶³ Cf. Beasley-Murray, *Revelation*, pp. 283-92.

Revelation 21 - 22. Far from being a disincentive to an appropriate Christian social or environmental ethic, a healthy chiliasm, akin to the dominant strand of the pre-Augustinian church in the first centuries of its history,⁶⁴ and shorn of nineteenth-century dispensationalist novelties (most notably a pre-tribulational rapture⁶⁵), flows directly from the conviction that God himself in Christ will complete with this current earth precisely what Christians through His power are unable to complete prior to the Parousia. Nevertheless, there is wisdom in the old line about the individual, who at the end of tedious debates among the various branches of millennialism, declared himself simply to be a pan-millennialist: 'I believe that it will just all pan out in the end.' Few exegetical conundra in Revelation need prove divisive, particularly in light of apocalyptic's avowed purpose of offering comfort to the oppressed (*cf.* also 1 Cor. 15:58). If we can agree that Christ is indeed coming back and that this is the central eschatological theme of Revelation, we can disagree amicably on almost everything else.⁶⁶

Demythologizing the Parousia?

The final significant development in recent evangelical eschatology which I wish to address nevertheless challenges even this broad conclusion. It has long been noted that certain passages in the NT, often taken to refer to the Parousia, may make better sense on a different interpretation. For example, in evangelical circles R.T. France has championed a view of Mark 13:24-27 and parallels that sees Jesus' coming on the clouds not as a reference to His return at the end of human history as we know it, but to God's coming through Jesus in judgment on the nation of Israel at the time of the destruction of the temple in A.D. 70.⁶⁷ Whether or not this is the best interpretation of this passage, it is an approach that fits the text's immediate context about the destruction of the temple. But now N.T. Wright has pressed the case substantially further. In a massive and magnificent recent publication, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, Wright disputes the traditional interpretations of all of the so-called Parousia passages in the Gospels, taking

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them apparently in their entirety to refer to Jesus' invisible coming in judgement on Jerusalem in the first century.⁶⁸

⁶⁴ A.W. Wainwright, *Mysterious Apocalypse: Interpreting the Book of Revelation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993), pp. 21-31. Wainwright's book is also an excellent, readable history of the interpretation of Revelation more broadly.

⁶⁵ Of particular value for laypeople now is B. Gundry's updated popular-level defense of post-tribulationalism: *First the Antichrist* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997).

⁶⁶ Recent study of Revelation has generated several helpful studies of its theology, demonstrating the rich breadth of topics, even besides eschatology, that are addressed. See *esp.* G. Goldsworthy, *The Gospel in Revelation* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1984); D. Guthrie, *The Relevance of John's Apocalypse* (Exeter: Paternoster; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987); R. Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); *idem*, *The Climax of Prophecy: Studies on the Book of Revelation* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1993); S.S. Smalley, *Thunder and Love: John's Revelation and John's Community* (Milton Keynes: Nelson; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994).

⁶⁷ R.T. France, *The Gospel according to Matthew* (Leicester: InterVarsity; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), pp. 333-36, 343-48.

⁶⁸ (London: SPCK; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996) *esp.* pp. 360-67; building on *idem*, *The New Testament and the People of God* (London: SPCK; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), pp. 280-338.

Before placing a significant question mark in front of this perspective, I want to commend Wright's work for offering perhaps the most important contribution to the so-called third quest of the historical Jesus of any in our time.⁶⁹ Wright begins with an impressive demolition of the increasingly popular view, particularly in the United States, that sees the core of the Gospels that can be attributed to the historical Jesus as portraying a radically non-eschatological and non-apocalyptic, itinerant Cynic sage.⁷⁰ Wright's own thesis that Jesus must be placed into a thoroughly intelligible Jewish milieu that was above all grappling with the problem of the Jews' failure to experience God's promises of freedom, peace and prosperity in their land is almost certainly on target. He correctly emphasizes the corporate dimension of this plight, reading afresh many texts in the Gospels as the unique answer of Jesus and his followers to the question of what is to be done about the Romans. In short, for Wright the biggest problem for the Jews was not human oppression but satanic enslavement. The greatest distinctives of Jesus' ministry and message were his claims that the kingdom had arrived, the Messiah was present, the resurrection had begun, and the problem of Jewish exile had been solved, all despite no appearance of any outward socio-political changes in Israel. It would be a pity if evangelicals, who I suspect will widely question what Wright does with the Parousia passages, would miss in the process the immense contribution he has made to historical Jesus research more generally. Nevertheless, in the context of this brief discussion of eschatology, serious questions do need to be raised about Wright's reinterpretation of Christ's return, even as we agree that we must restore a historically plausible, Jewish, apocalyptic dimension to our reading of the Gospels. In short, Wright's claim is that Jewish apocalyptic literature never looked forward to the end of history in terms of a changed space-time order of the universe as we know it. Instead, passages that refer to cosmic upheaval regularly stand as ciphers for socio-political transformation. Within a spectrum of seven possible definitions of eschatology, ranging from one extreme in which it refers to the end of the world, that is, the end of the space-time universe, to the opposite end in which it functions merely as a 'critique of the present socio-political scene, perhaps with proposals for adjustments,' Wright believes that the best definition of eschatology is 'the climax of Israel's history, involving events for which end-of-the-world language is the only set of metaphors adequate to express the significance of what will happen, but resulting in a new and quite different phase *within* space-time history.'⁷¹ But between the first of these definitions and Wright's preferred definition, he allows only for the alternative, 'eschatology as the climax of Israel's history, involving the end of the space-time universe.'

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Granted that Israel's future hope was always grounded in restoration from exile, if not in a restored earth more broadly, it seems that Wright has left out the option that most adequately encompasses a substantial percentage of Jewish apocalyptic (including NT perspectives), namely, eschatology as the climax of Israel's history, using metaphorical language for *both* socio-political transformation *and* cosmic renewal of a kind made

⁶⁹ A full-orbed, multi-author critique of Wright's work from a mostly evangelical perspective is in preparation for IVP in the US under the editorship of C. Newman.

⁷⁰ *Esp.* B.L. Mack, *A Myth of Innocence: Mark and Christian Origins* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988); M.J. Borg, *Jesus: A New Vision* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1987); J.D. Crossan, *The Historical Jesus* (San Francisco: Harper SanFrancisco; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1991).

⁷¹ Wright, *Jesus and the victory of God*, p. 208. Wright is building especially on various brief treatments by his former doctoral supervisor, G.B. Caird.

possible only by God's supernatural intervention into history, yet still without bringing about the end of the space-time universe.⁷²

Certainly this is the way the vast majority of scholars of eschatology and apocalyptic across all major theological traditions have read the relevant Jewish literature. Given the proper concern to situate Jesus squarely within this milieu, it is not clear why we must use certain metaphorical texts about socio-political upheavals (e.g., Is. 13:9-11; 39:3-4; Ezk. 32:5-8) monolithically to label all metaphorical language in apocalyptic as no different.⁷³ Given the Christian conviction that what happened to Jesus at his resurrection happened within this space-time universe and yet involved God acting supernaturally to transform the nature of Jesus' existence into something that transcended what socio-political liberation could accomplish, and given the consistent Christian linkage between what happened at Jesus' resurrection and what will happen at the general resurrection of believers at the end of time (see *esp.* 1 Cor. 15:12-28), surely the most consistent view is to adopt this 'both/and' approach of *both* social transformation *and* cosmic intervention for the eschatology of the NT in general. Specific texts and exegetical details further support this suggestion. In Mark 14:62 Jesus' reply to the high priest that 'you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven' does not easily fit Jesus' *invisible* coming to God to receive authority, as some have argued.⁷⁴ Granted that Daniel 7:13-14 has the Son of Man coming on the clouds as he goes to God's heavenly throne, rather than to earth, the sequence of Jesus' wording reverses these actions here. He is *first* sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and *then* coming on the clouds of heaven. In this context, only the earth can be the destination for the Son of Man's travel.⁷⁵ This interpretation meshes with Luke's words in Acts 1:11, quoting the angels' declaration, 'This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen Him go into heaven.' But the claim that the disciples literally saw Jesus disappear from their midst suggests that his return must be a similar public, visible, and glorious event, ruling out the interpretation of the Parousia as Christ's invisible coming to earth in judgment on the temple in AD 70. Space precludes an exegesis of the various Parousia passages in Paul or of the imagery of cosmic destruction and renewal in 2 Peter 3:10-13, but it is hard to see how Wright's consistent interpretation of the Parousia motif in the Gospels could be convincingly extended to the rest of the NT.⁷⁶

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⁷² Cf. *esp.* D.C. Allison, Jr, 'A Plea for Thoroughgoing Eschatology,' *Journal of Biblical Literature* 113 (1994), pp. 651-68; with idem, *The End of the Ages Has Come* (Philadelphia: Fortress; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1985), pp. 84-90.

⁷³ See the data assembled in Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, pp. 354-60.

⁷⁴ E.g., France, *Matthew*, p. 381.

⁷⁵ B. Witherington III, *Jesus, Paul and the End of the World* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity; Exeter: Paternoster, 1992), p. 172 - in another enormously useful recent evangelical treatment of New Testament eschatology.

⁷⁶ In private conversation, P. Walker informs me that Wright, in a recent seminar, did not wish to extend this interpretation but left unanswered the subsequent question of where this new motif originated. To distinguish Jesus' pre-resurrection Parousia hope from later NT teaching is particularly difficult given the verbal allusions to Jesus' teaching on the topic in Paul and elsewhere. See *esp.* D. Wenham, *Paul: Follower of Jesus or Founder of Christianity* (Grand Rapids and Cambridge: Eerdmans, 1995), pp. 305-28.

For the credibility of Christian witness, Wright's reinterpretation of the classic Christian hope for Christ's visible return at the end of human history differs little from Bultmann's more well-known existentialist, demythologizing programme,⁷⁷ save that it is at least conceivable in a first-century Jewish milieu. As we focus on relevance for the church, it is important to stress that theologically Wright's reinterpretation may not grant any more hope for the future than Bultmann's. It is true that the seemingly mythological language of the NT can prove an embarrassment today, and that great edifices can be erected on the hypothesis that NT theology changed in substantial ways after early Christians perceived an apparent delay in Jesus' return. But as R. Bauckham helpfully pointed out almost two decades ago, and as C. Holman has stressed in a recent book-length treatment, the so-called delay of the Parousia was not a distinctively Christian problem.⁷⁸ Jews from the eighth century BC on had been wrestling with their prophets declaring the day of the Lord was at hand without any apparent fulfillment. Jewish and Christian use of Psalm 90:4 consistently stressed simply that God's time was not the same as human time. If God seems to delay, it is so that more will have an opportunity to repent. The church at the end of the twentieth century may be embarrassed by the seemingly mythological language of the NT with respect to Christ's return and by the apparent delay of two millennia that a waiting for a literal fulfillment of the Parousia passages appears to create. But we would do well to take a similar tack and recognize God's compassionate strategy in allowing for more time for us to fulfill the Great Commission and get His message out.

Conclusions

At the beginning of our paper we suggested that too often Christians have either neglected the theme of eschatology as irrelevant or fueled the fires of those who would stereotype and caricature us as grotesquely misinterpreting apocalyptic in terms of current events-watching. A third approach, particularly in mainline Protestant and Roman Catholic circles, has attempted to rehabilitate the relevance of apocalyptic and eschatology for the church in our day by pointing to the real horrors of worldwide wars experienced throughout this century, and to the even more horrible threat of a nuclear holocaust.⁷⁹ But in its own way, this attempt to make eschatology relevant also demythologizes it. Unless we recognize a supernatural dimension to NT eschatology that goes beyond the good and evil that human structures can generate we will not do full justice to the text. Nor, paradoxically, will we prove to be as relevant, once we realize how limited the long-term changes are that human institutions can create.

The most important thing that needs to be said about the eschatology of the NT is that it shares with the message of

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⁷⁷ R. Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, vol. 1 (London: SCM; New York: Scribner's, 1952) 4-11. Cf., too, the quite recent study by J.D.G. Dunn, 'He Will Come Again', *Int* 51 (1997), pp. 42-56, in which affirmation of Christ's return means simply that the end of human history is particularly Christ-centered and empowered.

⁷⁸ R. Bauckham, 'The Delay of the Parousia', *Tyndale Bulletin* 31 (1980), pp. 3-36; C.L. Holman, *Till Jesus Comes: Origins of Christian Apocalyptic Expectation* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1996).

⁷⁹ Of many possible examples, see D.S. Russell, *Divine Disclosure: An Introduction to Jewish Apocalyptic* (Minneapolis: Fortress; London: SCM, 1992), p. xx, whose work overall remains an excellent introduction to the topic.

the kingdom, and with NT theology more generally, the same 'already-but-not-yet' framework. In the words of A. Cunningham,

We ... the Church - are called to proclaim that the world is oriented not to catastrophe and disaster, but to final transformation, assured in the victory of a peace that is not the world's to give. That is the reason for our search to live a life worthy of the gospel: a life of hope, love, service, and transformation of suffering and evil through faith and worship.⁸⁰

It is precisely because we understand God's plans to supernaturally transform our universe that we can function as little outposts of heaven to model his designs for the universe. We pray 'your will be done on earth as it is in heaven' (Mt. 6:10). A healthy understanding of the inaugurated eschatology of the NT will save us from the twin errors of a despair or defeatism that attempts to do nothing for this world but save souls from it and the currently more prominent mistake of replacing a hope for a supernaturally recreated universe with utopian socio-political programs for this world. Only God knows how much good we as Christians can bring about socially, politically, ethically, and ideologically in our world. We have seen in our time relatively peaceful revolutions in Europe and the former Soviet Union due in part at least to Christian intercession and non-violent action. It is not a little perverse when certain North American dispensationalists continue to see European unity as a sign of the fulfillment of prophecies in the book of Revelation of satanic activity.⁸¹ But euphoria over the collapse of the Iron Curtain quickly gave way to grief over mass genocide in Rwanda, a country boasting eighty percent of its population as professing Christian! So, quickly on the heels of events seemingly influenced by the divine came the demonic again, and the tribalism that generated that African holocaust in less extreme ways tends to fragment our world on every continent at the end of this second Christian millennium, notwithstanding all attempts to create structures reflecting socio-political or even ecclesiastical unity.

Reflecting on several of the key themes of Revelation may provide an apt summary and conclusion to a survey of NT eschatology more generally. It is ultimately only eschatology which completes an adequate Christian theodicy.⁸² Christ began the decisive work of defeating sin and evil on the cross. But that process will not be completed until his return. Meanwhile we may be assured of and confidently proclaim at least four key propositions: (1) God is still sovereign, even when circumstances, personally, nationally, or even globally, suggest otherwise. (2) History has a goal and terminus, in which justice will prevail. When we ask why God does not intervene to bring about perfect justice now and destroy his enemies, a major part of our answer must be that such intervention would require destroying ourselves as well and hence history as know it,

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⁸⁰ A. Cunningham, 'From Strangers to Citizens: Eschatology in the Patristic Era', *Ex Auditu* 6 (1990), p. 83.

⁸¹ Particularly balanced, in part as a response to this mentality, is F. Catherwood, *Pro-Europe?* (Leicester: InterVarsity, 1991).

⁸² On Revelation as theodicy, see *esp.* G.R. Osborne, 'Theodicy in the Apocalypse', *Trinity Journal* 14 (1993), pp. 63-77.

inasmuch as we are all intricately involved in the perpetration of evil. (3) We need not avenge those who wrong us, however prophetically we may speak out in critique of injustice in our day, precisely because we have the confidence that ultimately God will right all wrongs. (4) In the words of the shortest summary of NT eschatology that I have ever heard, 'Jesus Wins.'⁸³ That hope is enough - or should be - to sustain us until the day when we see it accomplished in our midst.

The scholar in whose name this lecture was originally given retitled his best-selling book *The Goodness of God*, in a revised edition, *The Enigma of Evil*.⁸⁴ Questions of theodicy were a major concern for J. Wenham in this work that has helped a large number of theological students and other Christians around the globe for many years. Among other points, Dr Wenham stressed that suffering is limited and that retribution, however beneficent, is real. If he also supported one of the doctrines that this lecture has called into question, namely, annihilationism,⁸⁵ I believe that he would have well applauded our concluding insistence that Christian eschatology continue to make room at its center for a belief in a visible, public return of Christ to initiate an age of justice that will make all of our current injustices pale in comparison.

If there is a theme that unites the disparate topics treated in this rapid survey, it may be that we ought not lightly to dismiss classic Christian options with respect to the future and the last days, even while recognizing at times the diversity of answers that historic Christianity has given to those questions. Ultimately, we can but echo the apostle Paul, who marveled, 'Behold, therefore, the goodness and severity of God' (Rom. 11:22, AV). We dare not jettison either attribute in our study or in our ministry. Or, to quote Dr Wenham at some length,

It is contrary both to Scripture and to experience to believe that all will yield to gentle persuasion. It is not true even of those who are soundly converted. When we pray 'Thy kingdom come,' we pray for the overthrow of evil. We know that the answer to that prayer will be partly by grace and partly by judgment. It is not for us to choose which it shall be. We shall rejoice with the angels over the sinner that repents. And when God himself makes plain that they will not yield to his love and that the day for anguished intercession is over, we shall rejoice with all the servants of God at the destruction of those who sought to destroy God's fair earth.⁸⁶

Meanwhile we long for God to establish his kingdom in all its fullness and we work by the Spirit to create a colony of that kingdom in the communities of the redeemed we call his church. *Maranatha*; our Lord come!

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⁸³ Attributed to A.Y. Collins at a conference at North Park Seminary in the early 1990s and reported to me by my former colleague and one of the conference participants, Dr T.P. Weber.

⁸⁴ J. Wenham, *The Enigma of Evil* (Leicester: InterVarsity; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985; orig. edition, *The Goodness of God* (Leicester and Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1974)).

⁸⁵ J. Wenham, *Goodness*, pp. 27-41.

⁸⁶ J. Wenham, *Enigma*, p. 165.

Craig Blomberg, "Eschatology and the Church': Some New Testament Perspectives," *Themelios* 23.3 (June 1998): 3-26.

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