

# **NO ESCAPE—INTO PARADISE: Eschatology in the New Testament**

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## **Introduction**

Eschatology in the New Testament is essentially another way of speaking about salvation. The word itself—eschatology—means, of course, speech about last things or the end of the present age. This is one of the reasons why sometimes the topic is a source of fear, instead of hope, evoking as it does the specter of God’s wrath on Judgment Day. In the New Testament, however, this horizon is typically seen as the dawn of a new day of salvation, at least for those in Christ. Salvation, in turn, means basically well-being, or health, or a full measure of the good life. Eschatologically speaking, this could be stated: Let the good times roll!

In the New Testament, one needs to speak this way because, it appears, the present age was not perceived by most early Christians to be the best of times. It was certainly possible to imagine better times and, in fact, quite easy to find reasons why these should start sooner rather than later. Thus one speaks eschatologically in the New Testament, first, not out of curiosity about the future but, rather, because one knows the present to be inherently unsustainable, because unbearable, deadening, dangerous to one’s health, both long-term and short-term.

Another reason why many of us may find it difficult to deal with this way of speaking in the New Testament is our different experience of the present. Many of us now—at least in Canada, in the United Church of Canada, among those who belong to the economically middle and upper social classes, who are employed, retired with a pension, educated, warm and regularly fed, the so-called free and secure—on any given day feel more or less at home in the world as it is. We do not really long for the end of

things: perhaps something, now and then, but typically not so-called reality or the daily round.

### **The Four Gospels (and the historical Jesus)**

It is not clear to me that eschatology in the New Testament has anything especially to do with either the historical Jesus or even the canonical gospels—except, perhaps, for the occasional mention of God’s wrath as historical horizon. This also belongs to the discourse of these texts, but it never constitutes a narrative goal. Thus, while each of the four canonical gospels contains, for want of a better description, some eschatological elements (including one or two little “apocalypses” in the three synoptic gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke), these materials do not define the kind of story each evangelist ultimately aims to tell. Rather, by seeking to communicate some sense of the earthly life of Jesus, the four evangelists each end up recounting not the end of things but a “middle passage,” in which a particular way of being in the world between birth and death is displayed through the figure of Jesus. Thus the storyline of all four gospels after the resurrection of Jesus inevitably folds back onto, or into, one or another aspect of the preceding history—as though all of the interesting action went forward within the tale just told.

### **The Writings of Paul (and a few of his friends)**

The case of the apostle Paul and the Pauline corpus is very different—at least, those Pauline writings that are generally assumed by scholars to be historically “authentic” and thus expressive of the voice and mind of Paul himself. These are the seven biblical books of Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians, and Philemon.

1 Thessalonians is the earliest of the Pauline writings in the New Testament; indeed, it is most likely the earliest text of the

New Testament as a whole. Thus we have here the oldest extant statement of early Christian faith. In this letter, Paul's gospel is decidedly eschatological in nature. At the beginning, Paul recalls his initial "inroad" among the Thessalonians, "and how you turned to God from Idols, to serve a living and a true god and to wait for his son from the heavens, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus, who is rescuing us from the wrath that is coming" (1Thess 1:9-10; all translations of biblical texts in this article are my own).

Reflected here, in every way except for the reference to Jesus, is conventional Second Temple Judaism. The early Christian "wobble" at this point is limited to Paul's offer of a mediator, namely, God's son Jesus, to "rescue" those who are waiting for him from the wrath that is coming. Early Christian salvation means here, specifically, escape from impending judgment. In other words, salvation only happens on the day of wrath. Until then, there is only waiting.

It seems that everyone in Thessalonica, including Paul, expected that the day of wrath would happen very soon, since no one appears to have anticipated the possibility that someone might die before it occurred. Paul writes 1 Thessalonians especially to address this unforeseen problem. The solution Paul gives in 1Thess 4:13-18 regarding the fate of those "who have fallen asleep" remains entirely eschatological. Basically, Paul says that as soon as the Lord himself comes down from heaven with all the trappings of an ancient imperial procession, before anything else takes place "the dead in Christ will be raised first; then we who are living, who are left here, together with them will be snatched up, in clouds, to greet the Lord, into air. And thus we will always be with the Lord" (4:16-17).

The text is remarkably straightforward in its account of how things will proceed upon the Lord's arrival, which presumably

inaugurates the day of wrath. Note that the promise of a resurrection here only applies to “the dead in Christ.” There is no general resurrection of the dead such as the one implied by the Gospel of Matthew in its parable of the sheep and the goats (25:31-46, esp. v. 32). Moreover, those “who are living, who are left here,” are imagined to proceed directly to their eternal reward with no mention made of any other transformation required. Salvation thus happens whenever everyone who was promised rescue now clarified to include both the resurrected dead in Christ and the never-dead members of the early Christian community in Thessalonica—all have been “snatched up” from the earth, in clouds, into the sky, where the Lord appears.

Eschatology is everything in this scenario. That is why it was a problem for the Thessalonians that some of them already had died. The unexpectedly defunct now would miss out on the end-of-the-age party they had been promised! Why buy a fire-insurance policy if you’re not going to be alive when the fire happens? Who needs to be rescued after death?

In 1 Corinthians, which is written to a very different kind of early Christian community, Paul faced a very different set of issues, most of which had little to do with eschatology. Instead, the early Christian community in Corinth quickly began to confront Paul with a full range of social and moral questions concerning life on the ground here and now. Predictably, perhaps, Paul was basically unprepared to resolve these questions, in part because, as we have just seen in 1 Thessalonians, his gospel initially assumed that very soon all such questions would be beside the point. Even so in 1 Corinthians 15, eschatology once again stands front and center.

It appears that some of the Corinthians—likely the so-called “strong” or “pneumatics”—were effectively liberal Protestants before their time. They found the promise of a resurrection of the

dead unnecessary, embarrassing, unintelligible, at least not worth the effort required to claim it (15:12). Paul could hardly have disagreed more and so set out to provide every reason he could muster in arguing the contrary case, including a reminder of Christ's own resurrection from the dead as part of the early Christian gospel since the beginning (15:1-11). Nonetheless, toward the end of this extended effort to demonstrate why there must be—for Christian faith—a resurrection of the dead, Paul seems to acknowledge his awareness that his demonstration may not be entirely successful.

Thus in 1Cor 15:50 Paul states, first, his bottom-line: namely, “flesh and blood cannot inherit God's kingdom, nor will what decays inherit what does not decay.” This is, of course, exactly not what Paul first wrote to the Thessalonians, some of whom Paul promised integration into the heavenly lord's entourage without ever ceasing to be flesh and blood, being still alive on the day of his arrival. In 1Cor 15:51, Paul then says: “Look, I tell you a mystery . . . ,” which means: whatever may be the way in which it actually works, here is my conviction: “All of us will not fall asleep (die), but all of us will be changed, in an instant, in a blink of an eye, at the last trumpet. For it will blow, and the dead will be raised without decay, and we will be changed” (15:51-52).

As in 1 Thessalonians, Paul continues to imagine in 1 Corinthians that the defining moment of the early Christian drama has not yet happened, but is due to occur soon, since not everyone will have to die before the good news of full-body salvation finally takes place. Moreover, exactly as in 1Thess 4:16 the third of the three signs of this moment being at hand remains the sounding of God's trumpet, called now the last trumpet.

Notably, however, in 1Cor 15:52 the first two signs, which in 1Thess 4:16 describe quite literally the standard fanfare of an

imperial procession, now become more metaphysical in nature, less concrete. And most significantly, Paul now insists (twice) that “we will (all) be changed.” Eschatological salvation now means not merely rescue from the wrath that is coming but some kind of deep transformation for everyone. No one gets into the kingdom of God without first shedding standard-issue skin and bones. At the same time, this salvation continues to be a thing of the future; it is not yet a present truth.

In 2 Corinthians, Philippians/Philemon and Galatians, slowly a shift becomes visible in Paul’s thinking about salvation and eschatology. This does not mean, however, that Paul ever abandons the traditional Jewish horizon of a day of divine wrath, which still stands at the forefront of Paul’s final epistle to the Romans (1:18) as clearly as it did in 1Thessalonians (1:10). Thus, for example, in Phil 3:20 Paul continues to write matter-of-factly: “For our state is in [the] heavens, whence we await also a Saviour, Lord Jesus Christ.” The language here is as politically charged—i.e. Roman imperial language—as it was in 1Thess 4:15-17, and the scenario in view likewise provides no cause for a less-than-literal interpretation. In Phil 3:21, moreover, it continues to be in the future (tense)—as in 1Cor 15:50-52—that the still-absent Lord Jesus Christ “will transform our humiliated body in conformity with his glorious body” as part of his eventual subjugation of all things to himself—as earlier in 1Cor 15:20-28.

Nonetheless and likely as a consequence of Paul’s unforeseen encounter with the prospect of his own untimely death through imprisonment (see, e.g., Phil 1:12-14, 19-20; 2:17; 2Cor 1:8-10; 4:7-12), Paul begins to discover at this point also within or at the edge of his present experience what earlier he had described exclusively as a feature of the future. Thus, for example, when Paul evokes the temptation of suicide as part of the situation out of which he writes to the Philippians, while

acknowledging his deep desire to “let go” or undo whatever still might keep him alive “in the flesh,” somehow he now knows that this would take him directly “to be with Christ, which is better by far” (1:23). In 2Cor 4:10, this sudden proximity of Christ is expressed even more dramatically as “always carrying around the deadliness (necrosis) of Jesus in the body, so that also the life of Jesus might be made visible in our body.” The previous eschatological horizon, first, of escape and, then, of deep transformation now also begins to inhabit the daily round and, more specifically, this mortal coil of failing flesh.

By the time Paul writes to the Galatians, he is able to assert: “I have been crucified with Christ. I live—no longer I but Christ lives in me” (2:19-20). “For as many of you as were baptized into Christ, you put on Christ” (3:27—in sharp contrast to Paul’s essentially dismissive comments about baptism in 1Cor 1:14-17). This is why—and what it means when—at the end of Galatians Paul writes: “For neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything, but [what matters is] a new creation” (6:15). In 2Cor 5:17, this is stated more fully: “. . . If anyone is in Christ, he or she is a new creation. The first things have passed away; look, new things have come into being.”

For this reason, Paul is able to imagine in Gal 3:28 that already in the early Christian community essentially a new world has appeared, in which those forms of life that Paul otherwise and conventionally thought were inscribed in the natural order of things, namely, being a Jew or a Greek, slave or free, male and female, no longer existed, “for you are all one [new creation] in Christ Jesus” (cf. 1Cor 12:13). We should be stunned at how much has shifted here in Paul’s understanding both of his gospel and of eschatology. Salvation now is already underway within and against the present order of things.

In Romans, Paul does not cease to surprise. The letter is

Paul's "swan-song," written when, in his own words, he had become apostolically unemployed in the very regions where he otherwise had worked his whole early Christian life (see Rom 15:23). He is hoping that the early Christian community in Rome will help him find another job "out west" in Spain (see 15:24).

In Romans 8—in my opinion, the centre of gravity around which all the other elements of this book have their orbit—Paul states remarkably: "For I reckon that the sufferings of the present time are not worth considering in comparison with the glory about to be unveiled to us" (8:18). Notably, this expectation now becomes a feature of what Paul formerly might have called the first things or the old creation; which together with the sons and daughters of God are said here to have been subjected to a profound stupidity, "not willingly" but for other reasons, including the hope that "also creation itself will be freed from the slavery of decay" to enjoy the same "glorious freedom of the children of God," since Paul says that we know that "the whole creation groans and suffers birth-pangs together until this very moment" (8:20-22).

The world as such is now said to yearn as we do, as though it, too, shared the same spirit that otherwise has us eagerly awaiting divine adoption and the full redemption of our body, and finally able to insist that "neither death nor life nor angels nor principalities nor things present nor things to come nor powers nor height nor depth nor any other creation will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our lord" (8:38-39).

When push comes to shove, in the ashes of an apostolic career finally gone nowhere, Paul finds his enduring hope inscribed within the very world he first dreamed to escape before its imminent implosion. Paul knows now that there is no escape but, rather, the dawning disclosure of a great gestation, in which

the world itself works with us, or we with the world, to usher in, or issue forth, whatever is coming next, unafraid and hopeful.

### **The One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Apocalypse**

At the other end of the New Testament chronologically from its beginnings with the writings of Paul, we find so-called 2 Peter, which may be the latest of all the texts making up the New Testament. Surprisingly, explicit reference is made here to Paul in the final chapter of the epistle (3:15). Paul is said to have spoken in all his letters about “these things,” which in the first part of 2 Peter 3 have just been discussed under the aegis of the sardonic question: “Where is the promise of his [eschatological] appearance?” (3:4). Although the writer of 2 Peter acknowledges that there are in Paul’s letters “some things that are difficult to understand” (3:16), a rather desperate effort is made before this admission to render plausible—at least from the perspective of eternity—the traditional expectation of a “Lord’s day” scheduled to arrive “as a thief, when the heavens will pass away with a loud noise,” etc. (3:10-12). On this basis, it is then concluded: “we await new heavens and a new earth according to his promise, in which righteousness will dwell” (3:13). One has the sense that eschatology in 2 Peter has become essentially a theoretical issue, which is to say the flashpoint of an ideological dispute, to be defended against anyone who might choose to make light of its literal truth—as though this truth must be reiterated, no matter how difficult it may be to correlate its claim with lived experience. In a sense, we are back where we began in the introduction to this article, albeit on the other side of a great divide.

By contrast, when the book of Revelation invokes the same expectation of “a new heaven and a new earth” (21:1), it does so only after a scathing review of the world as it is with such

powerful longing and violent fervor that most of us in North America and Europe once again typically feel fear and revulsion in the face of its ardent utopian desire. And there is no doubt that the book of Revelation imagines exuberantly—even indulges excessively in its depiction of—at least three “market cycles” of ever greater catastrophe (marked by the seven seals [5:7-9; 6:1-8:1], the seven trumpets [8:2-14:20], and the seven bowls [15:1-20:15]). These cycles, however, with their multiple disasters are essentially just “special effects” to underscore the evident fact that business as usual in the world as it is has no lasting future, because it is unsustainable. This is cultural critique, if you will, with a vengeance, prophecy with its teeth bared, or how the nightly news would sound if it were not so heavily censored and regularly reduced to sound-bites and easily digested images.

At the end of the book of Revelation, what finally comes into view is “the holy city Jerusalem coming down from heaven from God, having the glory of God” (21:10-11), although it has no temple (or church), “for the Lord God Almighty is her temple,” etc. (21:22-27). Notable here, I think, is the fact that the ultimate destination of this heavenly construction is the very earth where previously the endless plagues and other horrible things occur and recur *ad nauseam*. Here, too, eschatology is good news only when it rejoins the body of the world being ravaged, and insists that enough is enough, this is not as good as it gets, do not go gently into that dark day but rail, rail against the wholesale slaughter of delight, sober and awake, singing and dancing for the sake of a world beyond your wildest nightmare.

In other words, let the good times roll, sooner rather than later, for the crying love of Jesus Christ Almighty (which basically brings us back to the four gospels – final trumpet, please).

necessity of the institutional? Or, to rephrase Milbank's question, how according to the Illich-Taylor model, does one comport oneself in an enfolded way *vis-a-vis* institutions or codified rules? If institutions and rules are inescapable for earthly politics and ethics, how does Incarnation reshape them agapeically? Or, alternatively, what does an "embodied" institution or law look like?

I think these are important questions to ask of the Taylor-Illich perspective, not simply to point out the shortcomings of the view, but rather to identify possible points of departure for further political, moral or theological engagements. Of course, we should not be surprised that Taylor offers no easy answers here given his recognition that the eschatological character of Christianity implies that humans live in the "not yet," in a time when the extent of God's reconciliation in the world remains not fully disclosed.

Though it may be a shortcoming of *A Secular Age* that it does not provide any straightforward answers on this issue, the book does present an interesting point of departure for those interested in the various intersections of religion and politics. At the very least, one major achievement of Taylor's book is that it highlights the ways that Christianity itself is implicated in the sidelining of the body, characteristic of secular modernity, and equally importantly that it directs its readers to valuable religious resources that can remedy the movement to excarnation. In all of this, he departs radically from those who conceive of secularity in terms of the mere subtraction of religion, a view which *A Secular Age* demonstrates to be far too narrow.

— Carlos Colorado