

The Eschatology of Ephesians

Stephen S. Smalley

[p.152]

New Testament study weekend at Tyndale House, Cambridge, in July, 1955, was devoted to an examination of the Epistle to the Ephesians, with special reference to recently published work on the authorship, relations, and theology of the Epistle. The following paper was one of those read in the course of the weekend.

"Self-Conscious" is an epithet we might well apply to contemporary eschatological thinking. So much is this so, that any present-day study of New Testament eschatology necessarily includes a re-examination of the presuppositions involved; and particularly will this be true of an exposition of the Last Things in the Ephesian Epistle.

"Eschatology is not the teaching about the last things after everything else but rather the teaching about the relation of all things to the 'last things'."¹ This useful definition of the scope of any eschatological action provides us with a clear starting-point. The eschatology as such of Ephesians, as indeed of the New Testament in general, is part of a continuous movement in and beyond time. We cannot, in this sense, separate out from the Epistles elements of Pauline thought, and put them on one side, labelled "eschatological, not to be opened until the Last Day", any more than we can legitimately impose a dichotomy between *kerygma* and *didache*, between ethics and eschatology in the teaching of Jesus. Because all Christian doctrine is accordingly "eschatological", the inevitable subject-division of these communications is convenient, rather than doctrinally sound. It is interesting as well as relevant in this respect, that when Professor Herbert Butterfield, in his *Christianity and History*, is dealing with the goal of human history, he should use the analogy of a Beethoven symphony: "the point of it is not saved up until the end, the whole of it is not a mere preparation for a beauty that is only to be achieved in the last bar" (p. 67).

[p.153]

There is, of course, an inherent danger in this view, of which we must beware—that of liberalizing, spiritualizing and historicizing away the definite, absolute and transectional nature of the End. As Oscar Cullmann says, the entire eschatological process "must unfold in time";³ nevertheless we cannot relegate the Parousia, as Bultmann would do, to an area of metaphysical non-occurrence. Cullmann equates the mid-point in the eschatological perspective of Primitive Christianity with the historical life and work of Christ, and in the light of this interprets the New Testament attitude towards the delay in the Parousia: "the hope for the future can now be supported by faith in the past".⁴ If in this way Cullmann tends to minimize, he by no means excludes the place of the returning Christ. In Christ, time is divided anew. The decisive battle has been fought and won, but the war is still on. "The centre has been reached but the end is still to come."⁵

¹Quoted from Lampert by J. A. T. Robinson, *In the End...* (1950), p. 124.

³ *Christ and Time* (1952), p. 92.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 86.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 84.

Yet the opposite danger is equally real, and quite as unscriptural that of regarding all eschatology, in Barth's phrase, as "innocent little chapters at the very end of Christian dogmatics". Professor William Manson's definition of eschatology, therefore, seems a fair one:

the religious determination of mind by which in the Bible men are impelled to think of all history and all life by reference to an ultimate transcendent Event, an End towards which, under the judgment and the mercy of God, the world is hastening.⁶

With these considerations in mind, let us now turn to an examination of the Ephesian material from the point of view of the movement and end of its eschatology.

It is well known that the eschatology of Ephesians is spiritualized. There is, for example, none of the imminence of the earlier Pauline Epistles,⁷ especially I and II Thessalonians; and, apart from the one reference to "sealing for the day of redemption" (ἀπογύρωσις) in Eph. 4: 30, no explicit mention of the Second Advent. The earlier expectations of the Lord's immediate return are projected into the future, and the Church meanwhile becomes the instrument of God's cosmic purpose—although the final consummation is of course to be beyond the mere unity of the Church. As Westcott says, "in the Epistle to the Ephesians St. Paul lays open a vision of the spiritual origins and influences and issues of things temporal".⁸ The Day of the Lord coming

[p.154]

as a thief in the night (I Thess. 5: 2) gives place to such a passage as Eph. 4: 11-16. The imminence and excitement fade, and, in Hort's phrase, a sense of present blessedness pervades the Epistle.⁹ The whole movement is drawn out, and images of growth, of development and building become prominent.

Hort sees the eschatological action of Ephesians as developing in two interrelated directions: the perfecting of the Christian community (5: 27) which includes, secondly, the gathering in of the human race to this community. Certainly these two notions are woven together as the author considers, in the first three chapters (1) the extent of the Christian inheritance, and the seal of the Holy Spirit—which is the guarantee of a future coming; (2) the implications of the Christian gospel, and (3) the gospel itself. The exhortation which characterizes the last three chapters of the Epistle (4-6) underlines the necessity for a right appreciation and pursuit of the Christian vocation on the part of all believers (4: 1), as the basis for a bold proclamation of the mystery of the gospel (6: 19).

Within the general and gradual movement towards inclusiveness which is characteristic of the Ephesian eschatology, the dominant and related notions of hope and "the mystery" (μυστήριον) are considered. There is first of all the thought of Christ as the hope of the world of men, the hope too of the entire universe (1: 12 and 1: 10). The hope of glory is a glorious hope: "that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints" (1: 18).¹⁰ And it is a real hope: already, the writer states,

⁶ *Eschatology in the New Testament*, in the S.J.T. publication *Eschatology*, p. 1.

⁷ For the purposes of this article, the Pauline authorship of Ephesians is assumed.

⁸ *Ephesians* (1906), Introduction, p. lxxv.

⁹ *Prolegomena to Romans and Ephesians* (1895), p. 142.

¹⁰ The Biblical quotations throughout are taken from the Revised Standard Version.

you have been saved, and raised with Christ (2: 4-6). Not only so, but also, and this is the particular μυστήριον which the Apostle has been commissioned to preach, the new hope, and thus the new life, in Christ are available for Jew and Gentile alike. So in Col. 1: 27 Paul says: "To them (that is, to His saints) God chose to make known how great *among the Gentiles* are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you (χριστός ἐν ὑμῖν), the hope of glory". "To me... this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ" (Eph. 3: 8). By the gift of the Holy Spirit, the knowledge of the fulness of the divine purpose becomes possible. Paul is able to pray, accordingly, that you "may have power to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the

[p.155]

love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fulness of God" (3: 18 f.). In the unity of this same Spirit the Body of the Christ moves towards maturity (4: 4, "there is one body and one Spirit"), having gifts from above bestowed upon it by the ascended Lord (4: 8), who recalls to the writer's mind the victorious king of Psalm 68: 18, ascending the heights of sacred Jerusalem to distribute his largesse from the spoils of war: "When he ascended on high he led a host of captives, and he gave gifts to men".

This may be a convenient point at which to consider the so-called *descensus ad inferos* which some discover in the verses following this last passage (4: 9-10). This touches rather more on the point of authorship, as the *descensus* is not referred to in any other Pauline Epistle—indeed, some critics claim that the doctrine was formulated later than any of the Pauline Epistles. Others claim an earlier date for the doctrines of the Ascension and Descent on the grounds of I Peter 3: 19 f. and 4: 6, although others again do not accept an early date for I Peter. But the doctrinal reverse of the Ascension is, surely, the Incarnation—as we have it in the Nicene Creed, "He was incarnate, and He rose again". So that the difficulty is removed if we regard these verses as carrying no reference to the *descensus ad inferos*, but as forming rather a movement paralleled by that in Phil. 2: 6 ff. The descent was "below" the earth, as the ascent was "above" the heavens. This comprehensive movement within the universe is part of the divine purpose of fulfilment.¹¹

There are thus, to return, three main eschatological stages in the Ephesian Epistle: the mystery of the Gentilic inclusion, the growth of the Body within the unity of the Spirit, and thirdly the all important end of the entire eschatological movement, the attainment of the divine ideal by the summing up of all things in Christ (1: 10; ἀνακεφαλαιώσασθαι τὰ πάντα ἐν τῷ χριστῷ), when the stage of imperfection will become the final stage of perfection, and when the issue of the present spiritual conflict, already determined, will be resolved (6: 10 ff.). Even now Christ is enthroned (the verb in 1: 10 is in the aorist of timeless action), and all things have already, though proleptically, been subjected to Him (1: 22, where ὑπέταξεν is also in the aorist). But finality has not yet been reached, God has yet to be "all in all" (I Cor. 15: 28)¹²,

[p.156]

¹¹ Cf. J. Armitage Robinson, *Ephesians* (1914), pp. 96 f., and *ad loc.*; Westcott, *op. cit.*, *ad loc.* For a fuller discussion *vide* Mitton, *Ephesians* (1951), pp. 239 ff.

¹² R.S.V. translates "everything to everyone".

when all things will return to their creative source, through Christ to God: "for from him and through him and to him are all things" (Rom. 11: 36). For the individual this consummation is to be in eternal life beyond the grave, for the universe in the final ἀποκατάστασις.

The difficulty about such an exposition, which seems to be the obvious one, is that it involves universalism. We have to decide whether such a doctrine is in fact a logical deduction from the movement of Paul's thought, and if so whether it is in harmony with it.

Bishop Moule, in his *Ephesian Studies* (p. 33, n. 2), limits τὰ πάντα in 1: 10 to mean not existence in its universality, but the "things" which the context suggests. What he takes "things" to mean in this case is still not really clear, but it is important to realize that the emphasis in this passage falls, at least to my mind, on ἐν τῷ χριστῷ.¹⁴ As Bishop Moule goes on to say, the redemptive plan of God is to be fulfilled so that its result will correspond to the divine ideal, namely "the glorification of Christ as the Head of all things; Centre, Ruler, Life, of whatsoever He has blessed". Bishop Westcott, on the other hand, claims that in this form τὰ πάντα cannot be limited, and interprets the phrase to mean "all things in their unity".¹⁵

Shifting ground somewhat, Brunner, in his *Eternal Hope* (published at Zürich in 1953, and appearing in translation in 1954), takes initially an unequivocal view of this problem. He refers to Eph. 1: 9 f. as "the revealed Will of God and the plan for the world which He discloses, a plan of universal salvation", and goes on: "We hear not one word in the Bible of a dual plan, a plan of salvation and its polar opposite. The Will of God has but one point, it is unambiguous and positive. It has one aim, not two" (p. 182). Nevertheless, he is equally concerned not to explain away the finality of the last judgment, and will not agree that αἰώνιος means simply "eschatological". His conclusion is that "both aspects remain juxtaposed in their harsh incompatibility... both voices are the Word of God". The one produces fear, the other love.¹⁷

John Robinson's view is in some ways similar. To him, the ἀποκατάστασις is a reality not a possibility, for "the τέλος been declared in the *fait accompli* of Jesus Christ".¹⁸

[p.157]

The latter part of *In the End, God...* consists of an elaborate apologia designed to show that although a universalist, the author is one in the very best sense of that word. He says that there are two myths of the End-universal salvation and judgment—but that justice is merely a quality of God's love, and God's love must triumph in the end. The End is settled, but a choice—by which he means making oneself a subject in the *I-Thou* relation—remains. Where the non-universalist errs, Robinson says, is in making objective two myths which are essentially subjective, in regarding καιρός as χρόνος.¹⁹

One can only say that these explanations are satisfactory when viewed from any but a Biblical standpoint. If by "subjectivizing" the whole eschatological movement we eliminate, *inter alia*, the element of God's justice which at least Jesus conceived objectively, the result may be an

¹⁴ It is pointed by ἐν αὐτῷ in the following verse.

¹⁵ *Op. cit.*, p. 187.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 183.

¹⁸ *In the End, God...*, p. 99.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 121.

intellectually convincing *tour de force* (it would certainly have to be that), but it will not be true to the New Testament. Again we must remind ourselves that the final ἀποκατάστασις is to be in Christ, recalling the significant use elsewhere of that Pauline phrase, and notice such an expression in the very same first chapter of Ephesians, as "he chose us in him (ἐξελέξατο ἡμᾶς ἐν αὐτῷ) before the foundation of the world" (v. 4). Meanwhile God's plan now for the fulness of time, is "to unite all things in Him, things in heaven and things on earth".

© 1956 Stephen S. Smalley. Reproduced by kind permission of the author.

Prepared for the Web in September 2007 by Robert I. Bradshaw. Footnotes 2, 13 & 16 missing in original.

<http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/>
