

New Testament Apocalyptic in Twentieth Century  
Discussion

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At the beginning of this century J. Weiss and Albert Schweitzer affirmed that Jesus was strongly influenced by Jewish apocalyptic and indeed that his proclamation of the kingdom and understanding of his mission were constitutively stamped with the characteristics of apocalyptic. /1 This view was in total contrast with the prevailing non-eschatological and spiritual understanding of the kingdom of God among earlier nineteenth century Protestant theologians. /2

Weiss on his part criticized Ritschl's understanding of the kingdom, with its emphases on the activity of men in building that kingdom, rather than on the activity of God. Instead of being advanced by the work of men, Weiss perceived the kingdom as involving the interruption of God as king into history. Contrary to Ritschl, he did not understand Jesus as intending to make a beginning of something that would develop into a moral organisation of humanity for this suggests a continuity of history in which the coming of Jesus marks the beginning of a new epoch. Rather for Weiss Jesus was conscious that he stood at the end of the world and of history. What lay ahead was the consummation of all things in which God would be all in all. The background to Jesus' understanding was to be found in the teaching of prophetic and apocalyptic Judaism.

Following Weiss's contribution, Schweitzer gave to Jesus an even greater apocalyptic understanding and interpretation. The kingdom of God in Jesus' teaching was an apocalyptic concept and its coming was expected in the immediate future. /3 The ethical teaching of Jesus was only an interimsethik, showing what was involved in true repentance and valid only for the short time before the kingdom arrived. /4 According to Schweitzer Jesus knew himself to be the designated Messiah, the one who would be revealed as the Son of Man when the kingdom came. When this failed to happen Jesus was determined to force its coming. Therefore he went to Jerusalem to his death, seeking to fulfil the messianic woes in his own person,

thus bringing in the kingdom and with it his manifestation as Son of Man. /5

Perrin /6 has explained that while Schweitzer's work was inferior to that of Weiss, yet because it was concerned with a subject of general interest at that time, i.e., the life of Christ, interpreting it in apocalyptic terms, it had an impact greater than that of Weiss who restricted himself to the teaching of Jesus. Thus it could not fail to reach a wide public and arouse an interest to which NT scholars must respond. Much of that response was an attempt "to escape from, or at least soften" /7 Weiss' and Schweitzer's presentation of the apocalyptic Jesus. Perrin outlines the response particularly in the English speaking world. /8 While at first many scholars had to bow before the force of Schweitzer's theory, they eventually came to terms with it by affirming that although Jesus had taken over certain elements from contemporary Jewish apocalyptic, he profoundly changed them and gave them a new spiritual meaning. /9 Subsequently this "transformation of apocalyptic" gave way for a period to the "denial" of apocalyptic /10 and then the eventual "triumph" of apocalyptic in the 1930s, which involved the recognition of the kingdom of God as an apocalyptic concept in the teaching of Jesus and the attempt to go on from there to seek to establish its significance for him /11 Perrin proceeds to highlight the great influence of Dodd in this discussion. /12

Dodd maintained that the concept of the kingdom of God was employed by Jesus in different ways. /13 It was used first of all in a way parallel to the usage of the rabbis i.e., the kingdom of God is realized in human experience by submission to the divine will. Again, the term is found as in prophetic-apocalyptic use i.e., in an eschatological sense. But also there are sayings which do not fall within this framework, sayings reflecting the prophetic-apocalyptic use of the kingdom but with this difference, the "eschatological" kingdom of God is proclaimed as a present fact which men must recognize whether by their actions they accept or reject it. It is this last group of sayings which Dodd takes as Jesus' unique contribution. The emphasis falls on the presence of the kingdom in his own person and ministry i.e., realized eschatology. /14

This approach has been very influential in Britain especially, and according to Tupper /15 much of Anglo-American NT exegesis throughout the first half of the century can be summarized as resistance to the thoroughgoing apocalyptic Jesus of Schweitzer and attraction to the realized eschatology of Dodd.

As far as German NT scholarship was concerned Koch /16 explains that in the years following Weiss and Schweitzer there appears to have been a greater readiness to admit an apocalyptic stamp for Paul and the early church than for Jesus. Around the time of the first world war apocalyptic ceased to be of 'topical interest and the rabbinic writings pushed themselves more and more to the fore in the search for the background to the NT. Where the special character of apocalyptic was admitted at all it was declared to be the esoteric property of the scribes. For Jesus and primitive christianity the result was a modified prophetic theory. /17 Even when in the period salvation history was discovered to be the centre of the NT faith and Jesus was seen at the centre of time between creation and the end, /18 "no one", according to Koch, "investigated a relationship to a possible understanding of history on the part of the preceding apocalyptic. On the contrary, importance was attached to the fact that the NT view is 'radically different' from that of Judaism in its global aspect." /19 However, among many NT scholars who viewed apocalyptic with suspicion and mistrust, there were a few who continued to accept apocalyptic as having an importance of its own for the NT and for interpreting Jesus. One such was Bultmann who was convinced through the earlier work of Weiss of Jesus' apocalyptic conception of the coming of the kingdom of God. However, as Bultmann explains, the fulfilment of history in the arrival of the kingdom of God failed to appear. "History did not come to an end as every schoolboy knows, it will continue to run its course." /20 Tupper /21 has pointed out that Bultmann's conviction concerning Jesus' unfulfilled hope for the eschatological kingdom of God illumined for him the mythological character of Jesus' apocalyptic eschatology and the mythical element in the NT's world view. This propelled Bultmann into the

program of demythologizing which attempted to discover the deeper meaning behind the mythological conceptions of the NT, a meaning which called men to decision. Apocalyptic therefore played an important role for Bultmann as far as Jesus and the NT was concerned but in a completely negative way.

In 1960 Ernest Käsemann published his essay, "The Beginnings of Christian Theology" /22 which helped to spark off a revived interest in apocalyptic. According to Käsemann, Jesus' ministry was bracketed between the apocalyptic expectations of John the Baptist on the one hand and the eschatological hopes of the early Christians on the other; but while taking his start from the apocalyptically determined message of the Baptist, Jesus' own preaching "was not constitutively stamped by apocalyptic, but proclaimed the immediate nearness of God." /23 The apocalyptic statement on the lips of Jesus in the Synoptic tradition reflects the reversion to apocalyptic by the early Christians, under the influence of the Easter-event and the coming of the Spirit. Therefore "Apocalyptic - since the preaching of Jesus cannot really be described as theology - was the mother of all Christian theology." /24 Arriving at this position Käsemann focussed his attention on certain texts in Matthew's Gospel, and here found evidence of a vigorous Jewish-Christian group within the early church, led by prophets and marked by strong apocalyptic traits. /25 He claimed, "We block our own access to the earliest Easter kerygma if we disregard its apocalyptic context," /26 and concludes, "My own claim is that post-Easter apocalyptic is the oldest variation and interpretation of the kerygma." /27

What of this "oldest form" and "variation" as time passed? Käsemann claimed that the apocalyptic theology collapsed when the expected parousia failed to occur, and as Christianity spread beyond Palestine Hellenistic enthusiasm transformed apocalyptic to such an extent that it abandoned any kind of future hope. /28 For example, the Corinthian enthusiasts whom Paul contends with, believed that the goal of redemption had already been attained with baptism and the redeemed were risen and enthroned with Christ in heavenly existence. An expectation of the parousia was meaningless because everything that

apocalyptic still hoped for appeared to them to have been realized. Paul represents a mid-point between post-Easter apocalyptic and Hellenistic enthusiasm. According to Käsemann Paul sought to maintain a futurist eschatology and the apostle's anti-enthusiastic battle was "in the last and deepest analysis fought out under the banner of apocalyptic." /29 Paul understands that those who are christian, "already deliver over to Christ in bodily obedience the piece of world which they themselves are, they testify to his lordship as that of the cosmocrator and thereby provide an anticipatory sign of the ultimate future, of the reality of the resurrection and the unrestricted regnum Christi." /30 Käsemann maintained that even Paul's central doctrine of justification was derived from apocalyptic, for ultimately it is concerned with the rule of God and his triumph in the world. "Pauline eschatology....centres round the question whether God is indeed God and when he will fully assert himself as such. (Pauline theology)..proclaims the sovereignty of God in apocalyptic." /31

So Käsemann argued for a profound indebtedness of christian theology to post-Easter apocalyptic. Its central motive was the hope of the epiphany of the Son of Man coming to his enthronement, and he maintained "it is a question whether christian theology can ever make do or be legitimate without this motive which arose from the expectation of Easter and determined Easter faith." /32

Käsemann's understanding has aroused much attention and debate. Such a standpoint was not expected from a pupil of Bultmann and he had stated his view in a much more radical form than any other writer had done. As Koch has explained, "Up to then apocalyptic had been for biblical scholarship something on the periphery of the Old and New Testaments - something bordering on heresy. Käsemann had suddenly declared that a tributary was the main stream from which everything else at the end of the Old Testament and the beginning of the New was allegedly fed." /33

Travis outlines some of the criticisms which have been made of Käsemann's view. /34 First, he mentions Ebeling /35 who in a critique published a year after

Käsemann claimed that if primitive christianity was as indebted to Jewish apocalyptic as Käsemann maintains, it is surprising that the christian production of apocalypses was a late development. "It is no accident that the characteristic literary form of Christianity was the gospel and not the apocalypse." /36 Käsemann also has not taken enough account of the way apocalyptic ideas have themselves been changed through their link with Jesus. We should not "merely interpret Jesus in the light of apocalyptic, but also and above all interpret apocalyptic in the light of Jesus," /37 and how could the supposedly non-apocalyptic preaching of Jesus be followed by the apocalyptic preaching of the early church as a response to his life and message?

Fuchs believes Käsemann has minimized the element of "realized" eschatology in primitive christianity. He asks, "Is the primitive christian expectation not at once combined with the proclamation of the already accomplished heavenly enthronement of Jesus as the Son of Man, that is, of the crucified Christ as the world judge (Acts 2.36)?"

/38 For Fuchs even if apocalyptic was the initial form of christian response, that does not prove it to be a permanently valid response. The main difference between Fuchs and Käsemann, as Travis has pointed out, is that the former criticizes apocalyptic for expressing itself in terms of propositional truths, while he believes that revelation cannot be identified with propositional truths.

/39 Käsemann, writing in response to Fuchs was more than sceptical towards this position, "preaching, confession, and even hermeneutics without stated truths, and even without 'conceptions' - what is that supposed to mean?" /40

We may add that while Fuchs' objection to Käsemann's outline of the history of early christian tradition and language was raised out of a linguistic-theological defence against all propositional truths, Conzelmann directs his attack from precisely the opposite direction. Theology always has to do with concrete sober doctrine and therefore he is disturbed by the apocalyptic enthusiasm which Käsemann ascribes to the members of the primitive church. He finds a lack of evidence in the texts. Instead he finds credal formulations like the ancient tradition in 1 Cor. 15 which clearly pass on the faith in the form of

doctrine. "These, not apocalyptic fantasies or spiritual experience...are the wellspring of christian theology." /41

Travis also outlines Rollins' criticisms of Käsemann's approach. /42 He suggests that the use of texts from Matthew is arbitrary; nowhere does he present arguments to justify his claim that these texts reflect the theological tensions of the earliest church. What evidence we have (e.g., from 1 Cor.15) suggests that the earliest form of the kerygma did not use apocalyptic concepts such as Son of Man and Parousia. For Rollins, even if the texts cited by Käsemann indicate the existence of an apocalyptic "strand" or apocalyptic groups in the primitive church, they hardly demonstrate that apocalyptic was the controlling theological attitude of the earliest church. It was "not the mother of all christian theology, but at best one of many brothers, whose particular brand of theology would have stood in obvious tension with the teaching of Jesus and the theology of the earliest church." Changing the metaphor, Rollins suggests that the role of apocalyptic was not that of mother but midwife. The Christ-event itself was what produced the theologies of the first Christians; Jewish apocalyptic supplied only a mode of conceptualizing the Christ-event./44 Also in proclaiming Jesus as Messiah the early church reclaimed history and the world as the locus of God's self-disclosure, thus displacing the pessimism of Jewish apocalypticism. Rollins interprets this as "a tacit rejection of Jewish apocalyptic eschatology and a return to prophetic Heilsgeschichte." /45 Again from the earliest beginnings he sees in the church opposition to apocalyptic. According to Rollins what should surprise is not that we find apocalyptic material in the NT, but that we find so little of it. None of this material can be traced to the earliest church and even within the apocalyptic sections there are some "anti-apocalyptic elements" such as the rejection of calculation of the end by means of signs (Mk 13.32; Lk 17.20f). Therefore, "one can speak of the apocalypticism of the NT only with extreme caution." /46 Criticisms like these are impressive and must be given serious consideration.

We must agree with Ebeling when he reminds us to take note of how apocalyptic ideas have been altered through their link with Jesus, and also how difficult it is to see the apocalyptic preaching of the early christians as a response to a supposedly non-apocalyptic Jesus. Again we accept Fuchs' warning not to minimize the "realized" eschatology of primitive christianity, and Conzelmann's support for concrete doctrine. We may acknowledge also with Rollins our doubts concerning the claims Käsemann makes for certain texts in Matthew and add our own assent to his insight that the Christ-event itself was what produced the theologies of the early Christians - yet we may still feel apocalyptic has a more influential place in early christianity than some of these scholars are willing to allow.

#### Notes

1. J. Weiss, Die predigt Jesu vom Reiche Gottes (Göttes, 1892)  
A. Schweitzer, Geschichte der Leben-Jesu Forschung (1906)
2. Two examples of the spiritual understanding are (1) Schleiermacher, Die Christliche Glaube (ET 1928); for Schleiermacher the kingdom of God is the corporate human God-consciousness which is the existence of God in human nature and which comes into being as a result of Christ's God-consciousness (164.1) (2) A. Ritschl, Rechtfertigung und Versöhnung (1888); Ritschl criticized Schleiermacher for not having done justice to the theological nature of the kingdom of God as the Divine end. Arising out of redemption (the other focal point of christianity) the kingdom is the moral organization of humanity through actions inspired by love.
3. op.cit., 238
4. ibid., 352
5. Ibid., 386
6. N. Perrin, The Kingdom of God in the Teaching of Jesus (London 1963), 34f
7. J. Dunn, Unity and Diversity in the New Testament (London 1977) 316.
8. Op.cit., 33ff
9. Perrin cites as one example W. Sanday, The Life of Christ in Recent Research; "The Apocalyptic Element in the Gospels, Hibbert Journal 10(1911) 83-109
10. Perrin makes reference to the "Symposium of Eschatology written by a representative group of scholars and published in JBL 41 (1922) 1-204. Contributors were K. Fullerton, N. Schmidt, L. Ginzberg, E.F. Scott and B.W. Bacon. Scott maintained that underlying the apocalyptic element in the teaching of Jesus was a practical religious purpose which meant more to him than the

forms in which he articulated it. The function of the apocalyptic teaching "is to enforce a message which is not apocalyptic...He demand was for a new kind of life, a new relation to God..." 138

11. Perrin claims that the "triumph" of apocalyptic can be seen in papers presented to a conference of six English and six German theologians held at Canterbury in 1927 called to discuss the nature of the Kingdom of God and its relation to human society. These papers were published in Theology 14 (1927), 249-295. Among the four scholars who concerned themselves particularly with the NT and the teaching of Jesus there was absolute unanimity in regarding the kingdom of God as an apocalyptic concept. One of these scholars was C.H. Dodd.
12. The numerous contributions of Dodd on the subject include the following: "The This-Worldly Kingdom of God in our Lord's teaching," Theology 14 (1927), 258-260; "The Gospel Parables," "The Kingdom of God has come," ExpT 48 (1936-37) 138-142; The Apostolic Preaching and Its Developments (London 1936); The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel (1953)
13. e.g., Parables , 34-44
14. In later years Dodd hinted at certain modifications to his view. See The Coming of Christ (Cambridge 1951); following J. Jeremias' The Parables of Jesus, (London 1954), Dodd appears to have agreed to the description of the emphasis of Jesus as "an eschatology that is in process of realization," 159; See Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel, 447 N1.
15. E.F. Tupper, "The Revival of Apocalyptic in Biblical and Theological Studies," Review and Expositor Vol LXXII No 3 (1975) 286.
16. K. Koch, The Rediscovery of Apocalyptic, (London 1972), 58f.
17. Koch points out that it is this conviction which lies behind Kittel's Theologisches Wörterbuch zum NT, "a work which like no other moulded the understanding of the NT for whole generations of theologians and in which apocalyptic is hardly given separate treatment at any point." *ibid*, 60. (There is a difference with articles which appear after 1960).
18. O. Cullmann, Christ and Time, (London 1951)
19. *Op.cit.*, ,61
20. R. Bultmann, "New Testament and Mythology," Kerygma and Myth Vol. I, ed. By H.W. Bartsch (ET London 1953), 5
21. *Op.cit.*, 288.
22. E. Käsemann, "The Beginnings of Christian Theology," JTC 6 NYork 1969), 40ff
23. *Ibid.*, 40
24. *Ibid.*, 40
25. S. Travis, Christian Hope and the Future of Man, (Leicester 1980), 42ff. Travis summarized (1) a theology of history which sees the history of salvation and the history of damnation running parallel to each other, which divides history into "clearly distinguishable epochs." (2) ethical

exhortations which appeal to an eschatological ius talionis (i.e. the principle of "an eye for an eye.") (3) expectation of a transformation of values in the last days; (4) re-establishment of the twelve tribes at the parousia; (5) confirmation of the Mosaic law and opposition to the gentile mission; (6) hope of the epiphany of the Son of Man coming to his enthronement and near expectation of the parousia.

26. "On the Topic of Primitive Christian Apocalyptic," JTC (1969). 106.
- 27/29 Ibid., 107 N.5                      28. Ibid. 1119                      29. Ibid. 127
30. Ibid. 133
31. "An Apologia for Primitive Christian Eschatology," Essays on NT Themes, (ET, London 1964), 182.
32. JTC, 46
- 33/4. 33: Op. cit. 14                      34. Op.cit. 43ff
35. G. Ebeling, "The Ground of Christian Theology," in JTC 6, (NYork 1969), 47ff.
- 36/37. 36. Ibid., 53.                      37. Ibid, 58
38. E. Fuchs, "On the Task of a Christian Theology," JTC 6, (NYork 1969), 72
39. Ibid. 81f
40. "On the Topic of Primitive Christian Apocalyptic," 113.
41. H. Conzelmann, "Zur Analyse der Bekenntnisformel 1 Cor.15. 3-5, Ev. Th. 25 (1965), 9.
42. W.G. Rollins, "The New Testament and Apocalyptic," NTS 17 (1970-1971), 454ff.
- 43/45. 43: Ibid 468.                      44. Ibid. 472                      45. Ibid 473.
46. Ibid. 475
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