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THE DILEMMA OF IMMINENCE IN NEW TESTAMENT ESCHATOLOGY

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Did Jesus believe that his return and the end of the world would occur within the lifetime of his own generation? The early church certainly seems to have believed it and struggled to come to terms with its non-fulfilment. Within the Gospels and Epistles however there appear to be different strands of eschatological interpretation. Can these strands, taken separately or together, provide an answer to the dilemma created by the imminent eschatological expectation within the New Testament?

Interest in apocalyptic will always be with us, because apocalyptic is not confined to ancient biblical texts. It has a contemporary significance. In our day of nuclear weapons, global warming and "nine-eleven", apocalyptic themes have been reworked by novelists, film producers and political commentators. There will always be this interest in *the last things* because it is inevitable that some time in the future the world will come to a cataclysmic end. This is not just an eschatological expectation, it is a fact of physics. Predictions about this end-time however are an entirely different matter and much less certain.

Defining the term *apocalyptic* is not, of course, straightforward, but in our study we will use it in a loose inter-change with eschatology.[60] In general terms biblical eschatology works within the context of this world while at the same time sharing in some measure the more other-worldly context of apocalyptic. New Testament eschatology focuses on the expectation of Jesus' return or *parousia (1Cor.15:23; 1Thess.4:15)* and its heralding of the end-time. The actual term *parousia,* while more frequent in the Epistles, only occurs four times

[60] A detailed examination of the term apocalyptic can be found in R.E.Storm's article *Defining the Word Apocalyptic* which is his contribution to the Festschrift *Apocalyptic and the New Testament* published in honour J.Lewis Martin.

in the Gospels and all four verses are found in the twenty-fourth chapter of Matthew (vv3,27,37&39). Sometimes the word *appearance* (epiphany) is preferred (1Tim.6:14, 2Tim.1:10, 4:1&8, 2Thess.2:8, Tit.2:13) The *parousia* and the End are generally treated as one supra-historical event (Matt. 24:3). As well as the end of the world it is also associated with the key apocalyptic ideas of the Day of the Lord, the Last Judgement and the Ingathering of the Elect. These are not distinctively Christian associations as they are also found in Jewish eschatology.[61]

Eschatology in the Gospels and Epistles and its concern with the *eschata* or last things is not "history written in advance". It is rather an interpretation of the events and crises surrounding the kingdom of God associated with Jesus and his mission, with the emphasis on their future significance. This interpretation is expressed through symbolic language and imagery that does not always yield to easy understanding.[62]

In the New Testament Jesus' life is a story which in its eschatological setting is presented in terms of its future implications. It is a story that carries within it a final consummation, so that Jesus' death and resurrection-ascension do not mark the end-time but the beginning of the end-time. This last chapter of the story has still to be written. By the End is not meant the last in a series so much as goal and fulfilment.[63]

This final consummation is depicted through supra-historical images of Jesus' *parousia.* As such it conducts us beyond history properly speaking because it is portrayed in terms that transcend history. It opens up the mysterious world of biblical apocalyptic.[64] Sufficient to say that in this scriptural narrative the awaited *parousia* cannot be told as if it were the same as telling Jesus' past history. The *parousia*, by its very nature, cannot be a future event like the past

[61] J.D.G.Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press 1977)
[62] *The Cambridge Companion to Jesus* Edited by Markus Bochmuehl (2001)
[63] John Macquarrie, *Christian Hope* (Mowbrays 1978), P32
[64] Jurgen Moltmann, *The Experiment Hope* (Fortress Press 1975), PP60ff

event of the crucifixion, for example, because *parousia* as *eschaton* is the End or goal of all things as we have known them.

New Testament eschatology, of course, has been a source of controversy especially since the early years of the last century when Albert Schweitzer in particular drew our attention to its importance in understanding Jesus against the historical setting of his day.

In brief, Schweitzer saw Jesus as an eschatological prophet who believed that the End was imminent and God was about to bring history to its conclusion within Jesus' own generation. A few years earlier Johannes Weiss had arrived at a somewhat similar scenario maintaining that Jesus believed that the messianic age was imminent.[65]

Schweitzer's interpretation has proved seminal and enduring as a major approach to understanding the historical person who was Jesus of Nazareth. In more recent days the American New Testament scholar E.P.Sanders has continued along this same general line of approach to Jesus and his mission.[66] Both Schweitzer and Sanders consider the aspect of imminence as a crucial element in Jesus' eschatological vision. It's a vision that they also regard as being at one with the apocalyptic fervour of first century Judaism. There are, needless to say, other scholars like Dominic Crossan and Marcus Borg who take an entirely different tack and seek to disrobe Jesus of his "glittering eschatological cloak" placing him more within first century Greek and Roman culture. This non-eschatological interpretation is by and large reflected in the current work of the *Jesus Seminar.*

The fact remains however that across the decades of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first century eschatology has occupied the theological thinking of eminent theologians like Bultmann, Barth,

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[65] Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (Macmillan Co.1906) and Johannes Weiss, *Jesus' Proclamation of the Kingdom of God* (First published in 1892 and available in English today through the Scholars Press 1985)

[66] E.P.Sanders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus* (Penguin Books 1993)

Moltmann and Pannenberg. They have taken up this aspect of the New Testament as a determining factor in biblical and theological interpretation, because for them eschatology is an inevitable consequence of Christian theology. Jesus' incarnation and mission must move towards a final consummation; to borrow a metaphor of Karl Heim's, once we have seen the lightning we can only wait for the thunder.[67]

New Testament eschatology therefore is a complex area of biblical study but the main focus of this article is quite limited; its chief concern is with one of the several interwoven strands that make up what we might describe as an eschatological tapestry. The reason why these various strands emerged is most probably because of the downward eschatological trajectory traceable in the New Testament and especially in the Epistles. The sense of urgency created by the molten and flowing lava of the early eschatological eruption, reflecting the apocalypticism of first century Judaism, begins very quickly to cool before the apostolic era closes. The early church, it seems, struggled to come to terms with this and in the struggle elucidated different interpretations to explain the changing eschatological emphases.[68]

It's the strand that creates the dilemma posed by the element of imminence that is our chief concern; but as we shall see, though the other strands are not unimportant in helping us consider the significance of imminence.

IMMINENCE

There is of course a sense in which the end-time of Christian eschatology is "perpetually imminent" – for who knows what tomorrow may bring (Matthew 24:37-44). This however does not provide an answer to the limited imminence of the Gospels' texts

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[67] Some of the theological implications of imminent eschatology can be found in an article in the *International Journal of Theology* Vol.9 No.3 July 2007. PP264ff. It is also available online at Blackwell Synergy.

[68] John Drane, *Introducing the New Testament* (Lion Publishing 1999), PP116ff

that posit the *parousia* within the lifetime of Jesus' own generation. This is the problem constituting our dilemma.

Did Jesus expect the *parousia* and with it the coming of God's kingdom in power to occur within the very near future, so that some of his followers would actually see it come to pass? Undoubtedly there are texts that appear to support this view. The early church certainly seems to have expected an imminent return of Jesus and for a time was baffled by its delay. It appears to be an expectation that has not been realized – even two thousand years on.

In his letter to the Romans the apostle Paul, probably writing in the mid to late fifties of the first century, sets out his basic Christian doctrine together with its implications for individual and communal life, both within the church and the world. The letter is charged with a high degree of urgency, because Paul believed the end of the current world order was not far off: "...it is already the hour for you to rise from sleep. For our salvation is now nearer than when we first believed. The night is far gone; the day is drawing near." (13:11-12) The End was perhaps not as near as Paul thought and this was to pose a serious problem for the Church as the years passed. This sense of urgency together with its non-fulfilment is a clue to an eschatological problem that like a dye colours, to greater or less intensity, not only Romans but much of the New Testament.

In John's Gospel, for example, we have two verses at 21: 22&23 presenting much the same kind of imminent expectation. It appears that words of Jesus were current among his early followers to the effect that the beloved disciple would not die before Jesus returned. As this undoubtedly created a real problem as time passed John seeks to put right a possible misconception. In these verses eschatological imminence, disappointment and attempted explanation all combine in a somewhat enigmatic and intriguing manner.

Martin Dibelius in his arresting little book *Jesus* puts the dilemma posed by this eschatological imminence quite bluntly: "It still looks as though a monstrous illusion lies at the base of the mission of Jesus, the illusion of something immediately impending which actually never came to pass."[69] In spite of this conclusion Dibelius argues for a surprisingly positive eschatological assessment. By contrast Rudolf Bultmann is much more negative and dismisses the eschatological expectation of the New Testament as an unfulfilled and mythical promise.[70]

If it be true that New Testament eschatology in its sense of imminence is an "illusion" then clearly this issue has serious consequences for how we interpret large swathes of the New Testament and how we understand Jesus' mission, and the extension of that mission in the early church, as well as its continuation in the church of today. The fact is however that New Testament eschatology does not present us with a homogeneous picture, but rather one that is disparate and made up of different strands. The strand of imminence is one of these but is intertwined with others that present a different perspective.

We will begin then with a general survey of the principal New Testament texts that appear to represent this strand of imminence and then add the wider perspective of a New Testament eschatology that is concerned with much more than imminence. It's like stopping a film to examine one particular frame and then allowing the film to roll again enabling us to view the bigger picture.

SIGNIFICANT NEW TESTAMENT TEXTS

In Mark's gospel, probably the earliest of the four, we have a defining text of this imminent understanding of the *parousia* in chapter 9:1 where Jesus says; "I tell you this, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they have seen the kingdom of

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[69] Martin Dibelius, *Jesus* (SCM Press 1963), P64. A prominent scholar in the sphere of New Testament eschatology like G.R.Beasley-Murray, for example, may not use a word like "illusion", but nevertheless he shares much the same position as Dibelius. In *Jesus and the Future* (1954) he concludes that Jesus believed in an interval between his resurrection and *parousia* and that he expected this interval to last no longer than a generation.

[70] Rudolf Bultmann, *History and Eschatology* (Edinburgh University Press 1957), PP38ff

God already come in power." The parallel verse in Matthew 16:28 transfers this prediction to the coming Son of Man. This is typical of Matthew who frequently links the eschatological future with the Old Testament and Inter-Testamental figure of the Son of Man. It also demonstrates the close relationship in eschatology between these twin themes of the kingdom of God and the Son of Man.

These words in Mark seem clear enough but in the world of eschatology words and images are slippery and their meaning is often uncertain. For example, some commentators argue that the perfect tense of ἐληλυθυῖαν (has come) means that the coming of the kingdom of God "in power" has already taken place. This is used as an argument for realized eschatology which we will examine later. It is generally agreed however that this interpretation is not required by the grammar and the context also argues against it.[71]

Further evidence of just how elusive clarity can be in this area lies in Jesus' use of the term kingdom of God. We find it in one of the earliest summaries of Jesus' preaching at Mark 1:15, which possibly also supports an imminence eschatology. Jesus launches his ministry with the declaration that "The time has come, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe the Good News."[72]

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[71] For opposing interpretations of Mark 9:1 see R.T.France, *The New International Greek Testament Commentary on the Gospel of Mark* (Eerdmans Publishing and the Paternoster Press 2002). France interprets this verse as referring (possibly) to Jesus' death or resurrection or ascension and exaltation or the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost. He also includes as possibilities the dynamic growth of the church, the fall of Jerusalem in A.D.70 and indeed the list, he suggests, can be extended to other events within the lifetime of some of Jesus' contemporaries. Any identification of this verse with the *parousia* he describes as "perverse". D.E.Nineham, *Saint Mark* (Penguin Books 1973) takes quite the opposite view seeing no good reason for treating this verse as other than referring to the *parousia*. A more recent commentary by C.S.Rodd, *The Gospel of Mark* (Epworth Press 2005) also identifies this verse with the *parousia*. Eduard Schweizer, *The Good News according to St.Mark* (John Knox Press, Richmond, Virginia 1970) regards the saying as inconsistent with Jesus refusal to attempt to predict the End. Therefore he considers it a production of the church and not authentic words of her Lord.

[72] For a helpful survey of the concept the kingdom of God see G.Stanton, *The Gospels of Jesus* (Second Edition, Oxford University Press 2002), PP203ff

In these two Marcan texts alone we face problems of interpretation; what does the kingdom "come in power" mean and also what is meant by its being "at hand"? Efforts to identify the words "come in power" at 9:1 with Jesus' resurrection, or the transfiguration, or the gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost I find less than convincing.[73] They fly in the face of the context in which these words have been placed by the evangelist. The words follow on from chapter eight where Jesus has been talking about the *parousia* and the coming of the Son of Man "in the glory of his Father and of the holy angels." (8:38)

When Jesus also speaks of the nearness of the kingdom as being close "at hand" at 1:15 does this indicate the imminence of the End? Or does it simply mean that in Jesus himself the kingdom and therefore God's reign over all things has come closer to women and men? Or, as has been suggested, is Jesus speaking simply of a moral urgency brought about by the nearer presence of God through his own person?[74] It has been argued that underlying the Greek ἤγγικεν is an Aramaic word which suggests something that "has already arrived" rather than "at hand". The precise meaning of Jesus' words is open to different eschatological interpretations and indeed may not be eschatological in their import at all.

So, in handling this material we need to exercise caution and constant vigilance over trying to keep integrity with the texts. We need to be alert to the fact that because Jesus expected God to act does not necessarily always translate into the fine eschatological detail of imminence.

That said however, the sense of imminence apparent in Jesus' expectation in Mk.9:1 is a view that seems to be underscored by Mark's so-called *little apocalypse* in chapter 13, and particularly in

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[73] See *The Cambridge Bible Commentary* on this verse for a survey of alternative interpretations.

[74] William Manson, *Jesus and the Christian* (James Clarke&Co.1967), PP168-9 Also W.G.Kummel, *Promise and Fulfilment* (Studies in Biblical Theology No.23 SCM Press 1961), PP19ff

verses 29 and 30. Jesus has just given an outline of signs and events premonitory of the End and then he adds: "...when you see all this happening, you may know that the end is near, at the very door. I tell you this: the present generation will live to see it all."[75]

I need hardly go on pushing at an open door because it seems undeniable that what we hear in these forecasts, even allowing for different interpretations, is a clarion note of eschatological imminence. The same conclusion appears to present itself in Matthew's and Luke's parallel accounts, especially Matthew 24:34 and Luke 21:32. There also is an apparent endorsement of all this in Matthew's highly controversial words of Jesus where, echoing the apocalypticism of the Old Testament book of Daniel, he says to his disciples: "I tell you solemnly, you will not have gone the round of the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes." (10:23)

When we examine the letters of Paul, especially those of early provenance like 1 and 2 Thessalonians and 1 Corinthians, the impression is given of communities that are already feeling they have

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[75] There are those commentators who maintain that this *little apocalypse* is probably from some later Christian eschatological tract written some time after Jesus' death but delivered in his name in order to give it greater authority. This may be true but the evidence is speculative rather than substantive. Certainly this chapter in Mark is unlike anything else in the usual content of Jesus' teaching and employs fantastic imagery that does not seem to be typical of Jesus. That however does not mean Jesus could not have spoken these words. Other commentators suggest that what we have here is a collection of occasional sayings of Jesus which have been woven by another hand into a kind of apocalyptic patchwork quilt. It was not unusual in Judaism to string together the sayings of a teacher into a *sharsheret* (necklace). There are innumerable commentaries on Mark's Gospel but for *the little apocalypse*, even fifty years on, few surpass G.R.Beasley-Murray's *Commentary on Mark Thirteen* (1957). Of some relevance too is his *Jesus and the Last Days* (Hendrickson Publishers 1993). Two major views seem to dominate the interpretation of Mk.13. One view maintains that the *parousia* hope was integral to this chapter from the beginning. The other argues that it was incorporated into it at a later stage of its development. Personally I find the second theory a hypothesis without convincing evidence to support it. So I see no good reason to abandon the first view and therefore I have treated the discourse, however compiled, as an authentic representation of Jesus' own belief.

waited longer than anticipated for the Lord's return. So they are pressing Paul to explain more clearly when the *parousia* will take place. Disappointment and embarrassment over its delay are clearly discernible.[76]

The question that is pushing itself to the forefront in all of this is of course was Jesus mistaken in his expectation of the imminence of the End? And did the Early Church, in its equation of the End with the *parousia*, share in this misunderstanding?

In order to try and edge towards an answer to this problem – if answer there is – we need to approach this aspect of eschatology within the wider context of the New Testament as a whole. This is essential because when we examine individual texts we always run the danger of not seeing the wood for the trees.

So, to return to my earlier metaphor, having focused on one frame of the film we now set it rolling again in order to view the larger scene. When we do, then other eschatological strands, besides this one of imminence, begin to emerge. These other strands have been variously designated as *futurist*, *realized* and *inaugurated* eschatology. We will take a brief look at each of these in turn as they paint a different eschatological scene than that of imminence.

Futurist Eschatology

The term "futurist" in relation to New Testament eschatology obviously refers to the future but the future from Jesus' point of view not the future as we view it from the present day. It is the future contained within Jesus' eschatological expectation and then extending out into the early church's expectation.

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[76] John Ziesler, *Pauline Christianity* (Oxford University Press 1990), PP28ff. But even in the Thessalonian letters and the white heat of their eschatological expectation (such was the level of excitement that it appears that some were even assembling together to wait for Christ's appearance) Paul encourages restraint in anticipating an immediate return of Christ. He argues too against any interpretation of the *parousia* that suggests the day has already arrived (2 Thess. 2:1-12).

Even within the imminent eschatological tradition, there are already traces of a less definite timetable stretching beyond the future circumscribed within Jesus' own generation. In Mark's little apocalypse the cautionary words are included: "But about that day or that hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, not even the Son; only the Father."(13:32) Jesus further adds a warning to be alert because "...you do not know when the moment comes". While this less definite dating may still be within the time frame of "the present generation" it is an opening of the door to a longer time scale than imminence might suggest.

In Matthew's final commission Jesus envisages the end only after the gospel has been preached throughout the whole earth to every nation (28:18-30). Some scholars argue that these are not authentic words of Jesus, regarding them as a later church construction. But they are found in all the MSS and versions and there seems little doubt that they belong to the original text of Matthew.

What Jesus commands in this great commission is hardly possible in a short time scale, and certainly not in his own lifetime and generation. This commission is underscored in the little apocalypse, of all places, where Jesus states quite categorically that before the end "...the gospel must be preached to all nations." (13:10). What is assumed here is surely a mission stretching well into the future.

While Matthew deals with the delayed *parousia* by stressing the future reference of the kingdom, Luke tends to place the emphasis on the present by concentrating on sayings which speak of the kingdom as an already present reality; though this does not rule out a future finality. Luke's version of the important, if complicated, *parable of the pounds* (19:11- 27) is of relevance with regard to this point of view. While the emphasis is on the present it also envisages a more prolonged period before the return of Jesus.

This is almost certainly an eschatological parable. Matthew's parallel account places it in his highly charged eschatological chapter twenty-five. The parable, and verse 11b in particular, clearly indicates that those around Jesus anticipated the breaking in of God's kingdom in the immediate future. As such, the parable has an eschatological interest but it was told as a warning against any kind of imminence expectation. In the parable the absence of the master is of considerable duration before he returns. The point is that while he is away his followers are to concentrate on their present responsibilities, rather than anticipating or dreading the time when he will come back.[77]. We also find a call for patience in the Letter of James at 5:7-11. If James is a Jewish tract with later Christian interpolations it is interesting how an appeal for patience was felt to be necessary.

When we move into the later New Testament letters the imminence tradition in eschatology begins to drop away to a point where it seems to disappear almost completely. Indeed even in the early eschatological heat of 1 Thessalonians Paul can write about how he is unwilling to argue over "dates and times..." (5:1) Certainly his belief that the *parousia* would take place while he was still alive (4:15) gives way to his reckoning with the fact that it will not happen in his lifetime (2 Cor.5:1). This change of opinion is also evident elsewhere in Paul's later letters as for example Philippians 1:23.

In 2 Peter, written probably at the end of the first century or beginning of the second, there is still an acknowledgement of the unease that has been evident in the Early Church over the delayed *parousia.* Some scoffers have taunted the church members with the issue: "Where now is the promise of his coming?" (3:4). The writer then offers an explanation for this delay. He does so by arguing for an expanded view of time. In God's reckoning one day is just the

[77] It may be that this parable is to be interpreted in the light of the historical background of the early years of the first century and especially the rival claims for the kingship of Judaea made by Archelaus and Antipas in succession to Herod the Great. If so it probably reflects Luke's interest rather than Jesus' original meaning. It would be in line with how Luke treats Mark's *little apocalypse.* But this interpretation of the parable seems somewhat strained and unnecessarily complicated. Among various commentaries on Luke see G.B.Caird, *Saint Luke* (Pelican Books 1963), PP208-211 and Hans Conzelmann, *The Theology of Saint Luke* (Faber and Faber 1964), PP95-136 and Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus* (SCM Press Revised Edition 1963), PP68ff and C.H.Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom* (Collins Fontana Books 1965), PP108ff.

same as three hundred and sixty five thousand days (3:8). His point seems to be that people have been trying to measure divine time as if it were the same as our human reckoning. Hence people have got into this mess over the precise dating of the *parousia.* It only seems late to us. It is not late to God. It may well be a long way off in the future. How convincing this argument was, or is, depends on our own judgement. The point is that the whole imminence problem has reached a stage where an attempt is now being made to explain the delay by an eschatology that allows for an greatly extended time scale.

The First Letter of John is also significant in this regard. If we allow for a dating of around the nineties of the first century it is interesting to find remaining some hints of eschatological imminence (2:18). But the overall scene is not one of great eschatological urgency. The import of futurist eschatology seems to be that the last days may be near but then again maybe not. So that while it would appear that right up to the turn of the first century traces of an imminent hope are still discernible, they are more in the nature of a fading footprint in sand. As we move through the New Testament to the later epistles the evidence would seem to indicate that the stress on imminence gives way to a more extended futurist dimension.

Realized Eschatology

There is another eschatological strand in the New Testament that shifts the emphasis back again from the future to the present. It is the present viewed quite differently however than through the lens of imminence. It is popularly known as realized eschatology and associated with the work of the twentieth century British scholar C.H.Dodd. His position cannot be ignored in any eschatological debate.

We may try to rationalize realized eschatology by arguing that it simply means an expectation of a future event in such a way that it becomes proleptically present. This line of reasoning does not do justice to Dodd's position, neither does it treat it with the seriousness it deserves. For him the future is present in a definite and real sense which is more than mere anticipation; the defining moment has arrived in Jesus. Expectation has passed over into fulfilment.

Dodd does not eliminate entirely the future dimension of eschatology but his stress is on its present realization rather than some indefinite date in the future. He argues that the kingdom has already come in power through the appearance of Jesus and his mission. In his *Parables of the Kingdom* (1935) Dodd radically re-read many of the parables that were traditionally interpreted as referring to the *parousia* and final judgment. He located their impact in terms of what was happening in Jesus' own day. In this way he regarded the notion of an imminent future cataclysm as a mistake made by the early church rather than by Jesus himself.

One of the obvious ways we see realized eschatology at work in the gospels is the change of emphasis we can discern in Matthew's and Luke's parallel accounts of *the little apocalypse* in Mark 13. In Matthew there is a quite deliberate intention to turn the focus of Mark away from the future to the present (24:9-14 and 24:15-16). Luke does the same when he treats the apocalyptic forecast of Mark as essentially a political prophecy of the sufferings and catastrophe awaiting the Jews with the fall and desecration of Jerusalem at the hands of the Romans (21:21). This event took place in AD70 and was a national disaster of which their readers would have been well aware since both Matthew's and Luke's Gospels were written post AD70 – Matthew's perhaps as late as AD80 and Luke's AD75-85.

In Luke's Gospel we have some crucial verses on this whole matter at 17:20 & 21. The Pharisees have asked Jesus about the timing of the coming kingdom of God. He replies by telling them that the kingdom is not like that; it is not something to be observed through some cosmic event in the future. The kingdom, says Jesus, is already "among" you. We may dispute whether the adverb ἐντὸς means "among" or "within" but either way the point is that Jesus posits the kingdom in the here and now. It has come! As such he clearly parts company with apocalyptic prophets who want to set out timetables and omens that will intimate the end-time. Even in the following verses of this chapter which develop into a more apocalyptic genre with an emphasis on the coming Son of Man, Jesus maintains that of that day we will not be able to say "Look there!" or "Look here!" as if the kingdom were open to physical sight. Highly significant too is Jesus' declaration "...If it is by the finger (Spirit) of God that I cast out demons, the kingdom of God has come upon you."(Lk.11:20 & Matt. 12:28) Jesus' works of exorcism are seen as signs that the kingdom has already broken into people's lives.

When we examine the eschatology of the fourth gospel the realized element becomes even more pronounced. John speaks of "the hour that will come – in fact it is already here – when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and all who hear it will live." (5:25) Some commentators refer these words to the spiritually, rather than the physically, dead.[78] The context of the verse is an apocalyptic forecast of a crisis of judgement and resurrection of the dead which is linked to the Danielic Son of Man. But the forecast is treated by John as a pronouncement by Jesus about the present crisis of judgement already brought about by his ministry. This seems to be endorsed by his own sense of call (12:31-32). However, none of this rules out a future Final Judgment (5:28).

Further to this John presents not only a realized eschatology but a moral and spiritualised eschatology, that is one where it seems that the Holy Spirit sent in Jesus' name is to be understood as none other than the returned Christ (14:15-18 & 25ff). In such Johannine theology the issue of the delayed *parousia* does not even arise. Jesus' followers would see the kingdom come in power through the Holy Spirit in their own day. This is not to deny that in the fourth gospel there is a sense of promise and future fulfilment as well. In fact Jesus' last words are "until I come"; words reflecting the earliest Aramaic prayer to Jesus "Our Lord come". But in the context of

[78] See for example C.K.Barrett, *The Gospel According to St.John* (SPCK 1962) and Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel according to John* (Vol.1 The Anchor Bible, Chapman 1975) and Craig.S.Keener, *The Gospel of John* (Vol.1 Hendrickson Publishers 2003). Sir Edwyn Hoskyns in his commentary, (*The Fourth Gospel* Vol.1 Faber and Faber 1936) treats John 5:24-29 as eschatological in the sense that "the eschatological occurrence" has already taken place and the call for "eschatological decision" has come.

John's emphasis on the Holy Spirit they are given a more contemporary significance because in John's Gospel the gift of the Holy Spirit is bestowed on Easter Sunday evening (20:19ff). This departs from the Lucan scheme which places it at the end of the period leading from the Passover to Pentecost.

C.K.Barrett may not be claiming too much when he argues that it was John's eschatological understanding that enabled Christianity to survive the trauma of the Church's disappointment and struggle over the non-fulfilment of it's expectation of an imminent return of Jesus. That it was able to live with the tension of both realization and hope "...was due in no small measure to John's contribution to eschatological thought.[79]

We may possibly find a similar theological understanding in Paul's recognition of his readers as those "upon whom the end of the ages has come."(1Cor.10:11) Presumably the implication is that since Jesus' resurrection has taken place and the Spirit has been bestowed at Pentecost then the decisive eschatological events have already happened, even though they also have a future dimension. It is this present and future dynamic that leads us to the third eschatological strand to be considered.

Inaugurated Eschatology

Inaugurated eschatology is a synthesis of the present and future in the expectation of the New Testament. As such it may present a middle way that holds the two together without denying validity to either. It provides another approach based on both futurist and realized eschatology without separating or isolating them. It promises to keep faith with the conflicting texts that we have looked at so far by holding them in a creative tension.

The thrust of this inaugurated eschatology is that the decisive event in the coming of the kingdom has already taken place in Jesus, but still awaits its final consummation. Cullman suggested a helpful

[79] C.K.Barrett, The Gospel According to St.John (SPCK1962), P116.

illustration of this in his analogy of D-Day and V-Day at the end of the Second World War.[80] In inaugurated eschatology the decisive signs of the *eschaton* are the events of Easter and Pentecost which herald the beginning of the time of the End, a time which in its duration is not for us to know.

If we cannot go all the way with Dodd but nevertheless recognise the truth in his position, then J.A.T. Robinson offers to help us. He was greatly influenced by Dodd, and attempted in his books *In the End, God...*(1950) and *Jesus and His Coming* (1957) to buy into realized eschatology while skewing it towards a more inaugurated concept. It was in fact Robinson who coined the phrase "inaugurated eschatology". Other leading scholars along this line of interpretation are Oscar Cullman and R.H.Fuller together with figures like G.E.Ladd and Joachim Gnilka. Gnilka, for example, comments on the term "nearness" and what it means in New Testament eschatology and in Jesus' usage. He argues that "... the nearness of God's reign is based on the fact that what is essentially future, the future itself, has already become present."[81]

Inaugurated eschatology appears to cut the Gordian knot tied by the apparent conflict of present and future elements in the New Testament's doctrine of the last things. But appearances can be deceptive. In the interests of theological neatness it may seem appealing to draw together the loose ends of the eschatological strands and weave them into a unified pattern. I am not sure however that such a systematic resolution truly reflects what we find in the New Testament texts. There, I feel, we are left with a tangle of strands on our hands which are not so easily drawn into an orderly eschatological programme. Neither the Gospels nor the Epistles present us with a consistent picture. Rather we find not merely different but conflicting eschatological trends vying for attention. If this was not the case why should eschatological studies have had such a long and tumultuous career? Helpful as inaugurated eschatology is, the fact remains that we have a dilemma created by

80 Oscar Cullmann, *Christ and Time* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press 1950), P141
81 J.Gnilka, *Jesus of Nazareth* (Peabody: Hendrickson 1997), PP149-150

the imminence eschatology in the New Testament that inaugurated eschatology does not overcome.

So let us return then to the vital question; does this survey of the broad eschatological landscape of the New Testament bring us any nearer to a resolution of the problem posed by the feature of imminence in this landscape? In truth it would appear not. But that does not necessarily mean a totally lost cause. Some helpful conclusions may be drawn from this survey that may enable us to live more comfortably with the perplexing aspect of eschatological imminence even if not wholly at ease. To these conclusions we now turn together with some final comments.

CONCLUSIONS

These conclusions, while not providing us with a definitive answer to our question on whether or not Jesus expected the *parousia* and wind-up of history within his own generation, do provide some idea of the direction in which this study has led us.

1. That Jesus and primitive Christianity expected the *parousia* and its consequences in the immediate future is evident in parts of the New Testament. The fact that other eschatological strands dealing with its delay emerged, at a later stage in development, bears its own witness to the dilemma posed by this imminence element for the next generation of Christians, and for succeeding generations. It is not without significance that these apparently later strands bear upon them an imprint of the unease caused by this delay. The subsequent embarrassment over this unease is itself an indication of how the imminence expectation goes back a long way in the tradition.

2. This however is not the whole story. We need to bear in mind that besides the imminent sayings, we also have well attested words of Jesus that suggest he did not necessarily expect a speedy implementation of his eschatological vision. The near or distant future also features in the chronology. For example, even though they are highly problematical, Jesus' references to the church or *ecclesia (Matt. 16:18 & 18:17)* obviously envisage a timescale lasting well beyond Jesus' own generation. So we have conflicting material pointing in different eschatological directions. Jesus' views on the issue become like the rainbow that recedes the more we advance towards it.

3. Realized eschatology and its role in locating the decisive eschatological event in the person and ministry of Jesus is highly significant. The truth uncovered in this area by Dodd is helpful with regard to the dilemma of imminence. Theologically Emil Brunner occupies much the same ground in his Dogmatics: "...the reason why faith is comparatively independent of the chronological element of the immediate expectation is that primitive Christianity, unlike Jewish apocalyptic, believes that the decisive event of saving history has already happened."[82] This theological perspective needs to be constantly borne in mind.

Nevertheless realized eschatology, important as it is, does not do the whole work of interpretation. Its stress on the present runs the risk of understating the importance of the Christian outlook that is anchored to the future; the time when every knee shall bend and every tongue confess Jesus as Lord (Rom.14:11& Phil. 2:10). Gunther Bornkamm sums up this present - future eschatological expectation thus: "God's future is God's call to the present, and the present is the time of decision in the light of God's future." Therefore while there undoubtedly is a realized eschatology there is also what William Manson describes as "an eschatology of the unrealized."[83]

4. The kingdom of God is a central feature of New Testament eschatology, but so too is the concept of the Son of Man. The Gospels speak of the coming Son of Man in apocalyptic terms as a heavenly judge descending with glory from the clouds at some future point in history and possibly the near future. Matthew provides a detailed description of this hope at 24:29-31. The classic texts are

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[82] Emil Brunner, *Dogmatics* Vol.3 (Lutterworth Press 1964), P199

[83] Gunther Bornkamm, *Jesus of Nazareth* (Hodder and Stoughton Ltd.1960), P93 and William Manson, *Jesus and the Christian* (James Clarke and Co. Ltd. 1967), P190.

found in the Old Testament book of Daniel at chapter 7 and Mark 8:38 and 14:62 (Matt. 25:31ff. 26:64; Lk. 22:69). This heavenly figure is also found in 1Enoch.

This whole field is fraught with difficulties.[84] It involves the vexed notion of Jesus' messianic self-consciousness. The only point I wish to make is that this debate signals that it is possible that originally Jesus did not identify himself with this apocalyptic figure. That identification may have been made later by his disciples and so entered the mind of the early Christian community. If it be true that Jesus did not think of himself as this apocalyptic Danielic heavenly figure then the whole question of his return, linked to this Son of Man, has to be rethought. In the world of eschatology nothing is simple and unambiguous.

5. Scholars like O.Cullman and W.G. Kummel maintain that the delay of the *parousia* as a New Testament problem has been greatly exaggerated. They argue that the texts reveal few signs of any disappointment over this delay. They suggest that only three texts, in fact, cast the *parousi*a within an immediate timescale (Matt. 10:23, Mk. 9:1 & 13:30).

The rest are less precise. I mention this line of thought because it derives from such authoritative New Testament scholars of a former generation whose work is still influential in this area of New Testament study. It is a corrective against a too intensive concentration on the imminence issue.

I find their position however less than convincing. I think we can indicate a definite disappointment in the later epistles over the delayed *parousia* and an attempt to provide an explanation for this delay. Also, even if only three texts record Jesus as speaking of an imminent end-time, one would be enough to create the problem. As a

[84] C.K.Barrett in his 1965 Shaffer Lectures at Yale (now published under *Jesus and the Gospel Tradition*) provides great help in this highly complex and specialised area.

critic of Cullman points out, his solution to the issue of the delayed *parousia* runs the risk of appearing to "trivialise" it.

Cullman's and Kummel's slant on the eschatological debate is nevertheless a timely warning about rushing too foolishly into definite or clear-cut conclusions. Kummel's position in his *Promise and Fulfilment* is perhaps one of the most helpful studies on eschatology even though it was first published in the middle of the last century.

6. Scholars such as C.E.B.Cranfield, S.S.Smalley and G.E.Ladd provide another line of interpretation which regards many of Jesus' eschatological predictions as being essentially political forecasts. These forecasts refer primarily to the political conditions of Jesus' day and Palestine's inevitable showdown with the Roman occupying powers at some point in the near future. This can be shown through a comparison of the *little apocalypse* in Mark 13 with aspects of the parallel accounts in Matthew 24 and Luke 21 where Jesus' signs of the coming eschatological crisis are interpreted as signs of the fall of Jerusalem.[85] This event took place some years later at the hands of the Romans under Titus.

A present-day scholar worthy of mention in this regard is N.T.Wright who argues for a much more this-worldy interpretation of eschatology and even of first century Jewish apocalypticism.[86] While he sees Jesus as an eschatological figure, he maintains that his teaching should be understood more within the socio-political climate of his day than that of an other-worldly apocalyptic. So that

[85] Both Matthew 24 and Luke 21, appear to be partly apocalyptic and partly political forecasts. In Luke, his Marcan material is largely apocalyptic in outlook while his own particular source material (the theoretical L) is more politically oriented towards warnings about the siege of Jerusalem. Luke's imminence sayings are not drawn from L but fall within his Marcan source.

[86] N.T.Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (SPCK 1996). See also *The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions* by M.J.Borg and N.T.Wright. (HarperSanFrancisco 1998). Marcus Borg argues for a non-eschatological interpretation of Jesus. As such he lines himself up with Dominic Crossan whose various books on Jesus portray him as essentially a Jewish peasant, who as a teacher has more in common with Greek philosophy than with Old Testament messianism.

even if Jesus did believe in an imminent intervention of God in the near future this does not necessarily translate into an apocalyptic end-time scenario. Also, Jesus was such an original thinker and possessed such authority (ἐξουσία) that he could well have taken the Jewish apocalypticism of his day and reworked it into a socio-political message and prediction of the national catastrophe looming for first century Palestine, a coming catastrophe obvious for those with eyes to see and ears to hear. Even in the final hours before his crucifixion Jesus' primary concern is for the people and their impending confrontation with the occupying forces of Rome (Lk. 23:28-3). It is as if his crucifixion is premonitory of the crucifixion of the nation.

Tempting as this is as a way out of the dilemma of eschatological imminence, it hardly accounts for all of the material we have looked at. But it is another indication that there are other ways of handling at least some of the eschatological passages in the Gospels. As such it provides at some points an avenue of interpretation which cannot be ignored.

7. Important as eschatology may be in relation to the historical Jesus and a better understanding of some aspects of the early church, faith in God through Jesus Christ is not dependant on the accuracy or inaccuracy of apocalyptic schedules. In an unexpected way this is borne out by the apparent evidence that the apostle Paul changed his mind over the imminence of the *parousia* – a change that appears to be traceable through his letters. His change of direction is not without value in itself in that it is a reminder that we need to keep the place of eschatology in the New Testament in perspective. It is not an exact science and its predictions are not set in stone.

Paul's realization, that he would probably not live to see the End as he may have previously believed, was undoubtedly a disappointment, but it has left no trace of anxiety over this altered expectation. Emil Brunner makes a salient point with regard to this when he writes how Paul was "...in no way disturbed in his faith in salvation as based on Christ alone" because of the delayed *parousia*. "This undeniable fact" Brunner continues "can be explained only on the assumption that the question of the date of Christ's return had not such central importance (for Paul) as is claimed."[87] This note of caution is a timely reminder that we do need to keep the role of eschatology within the overall teaching of Jesus in perspective. It does provide an important context for an attempt at understanding Jesus and his mission, but it is not necessarily a governing one.

Where then does all this leave us? It certainly leaves us with the fact that none of the attempted resolutions of our dilemma, posed by the element of imminence in New Testament eschatology, leads to its solution. Our study seems to indicate that the various texts and their different eschatological emphases lead us in different directions.[88] We are left therefore with many questions unanswered or partly answered. Perhaps the best that we can do is to acknowledge that the conflicting strands are there in the New Testament and cannot be reconciled satisfactorily into a unified and harmonious eschatological vision.[89]

What Jesus actually believed may lie beyond our powers to retrieve from the texts, because it is far from clear whether Jesus identified himself exclusively with any one strand of the Gospels' eschatological expectations.

It may be that this fragmentation itself, together with its untidiness, is a salutary reminder that when it comes to the precise nature, form and chronology of the *parousia* we see "through a glass darkly" or as in a distorted mirror, where little if anything can be seen in sharp definition and with clarity. We may have to settle too for the conclusion that in this whole area of eschatological expectation the New Testament, at many points, tells us more about what the early church believed than what Jesus believed.[90]

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[87] Emil Brunner, *Dogmatics* Vol.3 (Lutterworth Press 1964), PP396-7

[88] *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Doctrine* Edited by Colin Stanton (2002)

[89] John Macquarrie, *Christian Hope* (Mowbrays 1978), PP103-4

[90] With regard to this point see Clive Marsh and Steve Moyise, *Jesus and the Gospels* (Cassell 1999).

In the strange and often perplexing world of biblical apocalyptic, it seems that few things are certain and much is concealed behind language and imagery borrowing from thought forms and visions of the future that often remain inaccessible to us. I know of no one who has expressed this more succinctly and poetically than Karl Barth when he wrote as follows: "God is not hidden to us; he is revealed. But what and how we shall be in Christ, and what and how the world will be in Christ at the end of God's road, at the breaking in of redemption and completion, that is not revealed to us; that is hidden. Let us be honest: we do not know what we are saying when we speak of Jesus Christ's coming again... For we do not know what will be revealed when the last covering is removed from our eyes, from all eyes: how we shall behold one another and what we shall be to one another..."[91]

Barth surely is right, and this article has led to much the same conclusion. We will have to struggle as best we can with this eschatological ambiguity and make our way along the New Testament's apocalyptic road with a great deal of caution. We are like people who travel through a strange terrain with no detailed or accurate map.

However this is the essence of faith – to go out, Abraham-like, not knowing where we go and with no unclouded vision of journey's end. But we travel believing that God must hold in his hands the last things as he does the first. In Jesus Christ he is the Alpha and the Omega, even if the end of human history is as perplexing as its beginning.

Derek Drysdale

[91] *God Here and Now*, a collection of Karl Barth's essays and addresses (Rutledge Classics 2003) See also 1 John 3:2