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Eschatology and Ethics in 1 Peter

by Ronald Russell

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In an era when the "kingdom" motif in the teaching of Jesus was viewed as completely immanent, Johannes Weiss in the 1892 had published his *Preaching of Jesus Concerning the Kingdom of God* which insisted that the Kingdom was entirely future. Albert Schweitzer developed this thesis along with Weiss. To them the teaching of Jesus regarding the Kingdom followed apocalyptic lines. It was only through the final cataclysmic act of the transcendent God that the divine reign would break into the present world. The barrier of guilt which opposed the Kingdom's expression, however, in the mind of the Galilean visionary must be taken away, and this would be accomplished by the offering up of himself. After this event the power of the Kingdom would be triumphantly displayed in a through-going eschatology. Convinced that he is the Son of Man, he throws himself upon the wheel of the world. When it turns, it crushes him. "The wheel rolls onward, and the mangled body of the one immeasurably great Man, who was strong enough to think of Himself as the spiritual ruler of mankind and to bend history to His purpose, is hanging upon it still. That is His victory and His reign".¹ According to Schweitzer, His eschatological view shaped His idea of indifference toward the world and natural relationships as Jesus concentrated on the future world. In the crisis period before the Kingdom is realized an emergency character qualifies Jesus' moral teaching. The result is that a great deal of His teaching refers to the interim period. Not only are the eschatological views espoused by Jesus false but, also, the interim ethics are invalid for determining proper behaviour.²

Although Schweitzer's theory has been rejected, nevertheless the relationship of ethics to eschatology is still a perplexing difficulty. The impending catastrophe seems to have determined the content of ethical expression in certain New Testament passages. Because the

1 Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1968 ed.), pp. 370-1.

2 L. H. Marshall, *The Challenge of New Testament Ethics* (London: Macmillan Co., 1956), p. 192.

Kingdom is near, repentance is urged (Mk. 1: 15). The "present distress" suggests that the unmarried remain in that state (I Cor. 7: 29 f.). Since the world and angels will be judged by Christians, believers are urged not to take each other to court (I Cor. 6: 1-4). In I Pet. 4: 7-11 with the end at hand, prayer and love are exhorted. This ethic would seem to be like that of Qumran. The sectarians living in the age of enlightenment before the coming of God's rule have an ethic which is eschatologically motivated. This interim ethic is expressed in the Manual of Discipline (IX 13): "do God's will in accordance with all which is revealed in each time". The rule of God would come if Israel obeyed God, thus they strived to establish the New Israel as a wholly moral community.³ The sectarians were to love their community neighbour but were to hate those outside the New Israel, only until the time of God's Judgment.⁴ Both the N.T. and the Dead Sea Scrolls came from a similar milieu; both were conditioned by eschatology. But to what extent did this conditioning extend in Christianity? The attempted answer will come from an investigation of a scriptural section containing both ethical and eschatological material—the First Epistle of Peter. The First Epistle of Peter would seem to be a letter of hope written from Rome by Silvanus (5: 12) as Peter's secretary to Gentile Christians persecuted by unbelievers in Asia Minor (c. A.D. 64). The reference to "the exiles of the Dispersion" (1: 1) is a figurative expression characterizing the people of God, Jews and Gentiles, as the true Israel (1: 14; 2: 9-10), possibly reflecting Pauline thought (cf. 3: 16; 5: 10, 14). The Epistle, encouraging perseverance in the face of suffering, contains baptismal material (1: 3-2: 10), hymnic portions (2: 6-8, 21-25; 3: 18-22) together with the *Haustafeln* (2: 18 ff.) and paraenesis (3: 8 ff.).⁵ The theme of "joy in suffering" (1: 6) reflects the thought of the primitive church where suffering was an eschatological necessity. Indeed eschatology is the framework for much of the exhortation. E. G. Selwyn remarks that "there is no book in the New Testament where the eschatology is more closely integrated with the teaching of the document as a whole".⁶ Johannes Schattmann goes so far as to say that I Peter is a commentary on the

³ J. G. Harris, "Aspects of the Ethical Teaching of the Qumran Covenants", *THE EVANGELICAL QUARTERLY*, 37, 1965, pp. 142-146.

⁴ E. F. Sutcliffe, "Hatred at Qumran", *Revue de Qumran*, 2, 1959-60, pp. 345-355.

⁵ Cf. W. G. Kümmel, *Intro. to N.T.* (London: SCM Press, 1965), pp. 292-299, Donald Guthrie, *N.T. Intro: Hebrews to Revelation* (Chicago: Inter-Varsity Press, 1966), pp. 95-136, R. P. Martin, "Composition of First Peter in Recent Study" in *Vox Evangelica* (London: Epworth Press, 1962).

⁶ E. G. Selwyn, "Eschatology in I Peter", in *Background of N.T. and Its Eschatology* (Cambridge: UP, 1964), pp. 374-401.

authentic eschatological material of Mark 13.⁷ The Petrine eschatology contains both realized and futuristic elements. I Pet. 1: 5 looks forward to the "last time" when final salvation is revealed while 1: 20 affirms that the foreordained Servant (Isa. 53) has been manifested for the crucifixion event "in these last times". The end has already appeared (4: 7) in the advent of the predestined Messiah with His death, resurrection, and the existence of the New Israel. "The situation is similar to that which meets us not only in Acts but also in the Synoptic Gospels, where the Kingdom of God is conceived of as both present and future . . .".⁸ This as well follows the Petrine sermon summary in Acts 2-3 where fulfillment is stressed (2: 16) (cf. I Pet. 1: 12) together with the "not yet" in 3: 19 ("times of refreshing") and 3: 21 ("restitution of all things"). The favourite expression for the End in the Epistle is "the revelation of Jesus Christ" (1: 13), while the usual technical eschatological term "parousia" is not mentioned. The dominion of Christ over supernatural orders has already been accomplished in 3: 22 (cf. I Cor. 15: 24-28 which has dominion as an element of the Final Day). In I Peter 2: 12 the "day of visitation" refers, as in the Old Testament and Qumran, to the intervention of the sovereign God into the affairs of men.⁹ The heathen having reflected on the performance of good works in the age of the church, on this day glorify God. In 4: 17-19 suffering and judgment are connected. The persecutions of Christians constituted for the early church a foretaste of the final Judgment. Divine judgment is already operating in the trials brought on Christians as a refiner's fire. This judgment will increase in severity toward the unbelievers.¹⁰ Finally in 3: 19-21 the raised Christ proclaims the victory of His crucifixion to the spirits of the doomed. It would seem that the experience of real suffering necessitated the appeal to realized eschatology as a basis of hope. Circumstances may be more important in N.T. eschatological variation than reasoned development.¹¹

In the initial stage of gospel enthusiasm with the founding of the early Jerusalem church, little codification of moral teaching would be needed, but as the missionary stage was inaugurated the pastoral situation demanded explicit moral codes. It is probable, though no distinct text now exists, that catechetical material was circulated

⁷ Johannes Schattenmann, "The Little Apocalypse of the Synoptics and the First Epistle of Peter", *Theology Today*, 11, 1954, pp. 193-8.

⁸ E. G. Selwyn, *The First Epistle of St. Peter* (London: Macmillan Co., 1964), pp. 112.

⁹ J. R. Michaels, "Eschatology in I Peter 3: 17", *N.T.S.*, 13, 1966-67, pp. 394-401.

¹⁰ Cf. Selwyn, pp. 226-227.

¹¹ C. F. D. Moule, "The Influence of Circumstances on the Use of Eschatological Terms", *J.T.S.*, n.s., 15, 1964, pp. 1-15.

orally and finally in written form embodying the ethical injunctions of Jesus. These instructions took various forms: catalogues of vices and virtues such as the Pauline fruit of the Spirit and works of the flesh, the contrast between two ways as in Mt. 7: 13-14 which has a Semitic background and is further developed in the Didache and Barnabas, baptismal catechetical material (i.e. I Pet. 2: 1, 5, 13, 18; 3: 1; 4: 7; 5: 8-12) and lastly the moral code which assigns virtues to certain household groups (cf. Eph. 5: 22-6: 9). The raw material of social behaviour was taken from either Jewish or Hellenistic attitudes or both and was given meaning in the Christian context to the believer by the appeal to the *imitatio Christi* and His teaching.¹²

In I Peter after a doctrinal section in chapter 1 calling the believers to a life of holiness, more specific teaching is included in the remaining chapters. The moral code appears in 2: 13-25; 3: 1-8; 5: 5-6. This section finds similar expression in James 4: 6-10; Rom. 13: 1-7; Col. 3: 12-4:1; Eph. 4: 1-5: 23; I Tim. 2: 1-15; Titus 2: 4-10; 4: 1-2, and Heb. 12: 9; 13: 17. This common material has led many to believe that I Peter is dependent upon Paul (Beare, Mitton). The form which I Peter uses can be better explained as independent of Paul. The Petrine outline: obedience to civic authority (2: 13-17), obedience of servants (2: 18-25), obedience of wives (3: 1-6), and the duty of humility (3: 8; 5: 5-6), is more developed than that of the Pauline code. The most developed Pauline expression is in Col. 3-4 and Eph. 4-5 which are similar in outline having family, servant, master, and humility statements in different order with no reference to civic authority. Further, the possible existence of a *testimonia* tradition is found in the use of Prov. 3 in I Peter (Prov. 3: 25 in I Pet. 3: 1-6, wife section, and Prov. 3: 34 in I Pet. 5: 5, humility section) and in the James 4: 6 (Prov. 3: 34) humility portion. The supposed *testimonia* are not used in the Pauline code.¹³ I Peter also has at least twice the use of the unattached participle (2: 18; 3: 1) in the *Haustafeln* section where Paul does not. This usage is similar to the Hebrew practice of the omission of the verb "to be" with participles in the Tannaitic codes.¹⁴ This lends evidence that I Peter is independently using early church catechetical material.

The submission cycle begins in I Peter 2: 13-25 where the model for submission to civic authority and for servants to their masters is the *imitatio Christi*, Christ's suffering at His crucifixion being made

¹² Cf. J. W. C. Wand, *General Epistles of St. Peter and St. Jude* (London: Methuen & Co., 1934), pp. 3-9, for Hellenistic background, and W. D. Davies, *Paul and Rabbinic Judaism* (London: SPCK, 1955), pp. 111-146.

¹³ Selwyn, p. 423.

¹⁴ David Daube, *The N.T. and Rabbinic Judaism* (London: Athlone Press, 1956), pp. 102-4; W. D. Davies, "Ethics in N.T.," in *Interp. Dict. Bible*. E-J (New York: Abingdon Press, 1962), pp. 167-176.

manifest at the "end of time" (1: 20) (cf. Phil. 2: 5-11). The Christian's duty of loyalty to government in I Peter 2: 13-17 is probably related to the *verba Christi* of Mt. 17: 26 f. where Peter is directly involved. Jesus did not accept the present Roman State as the final divine institution (Lk. 22: 25-27), yet He opposed its overthrow (Jn. 6: 15; 18: 10-11; Lk. 13: 31-33; Mt. 17: 26 f.; Mk. 12: 17). These sentiments are implicit in I Pet. 2: 13-17; civil government is of divine sanction to function as a restrainer to crime, encouraging well-doing.¹⁵ The phrase "for the Lord's sake" (2: 13) may relate to the motive for this action, that unwarranted aspersions would not be made on the cause of Christ in the eschatological "now". E. Bammel believes that I Pet. 2: 13-17 is an original Jewish document with the *dia ton kurion* merely added along with the theological reflection of the *hoti* clause in 3: 15.¹⁶

With the subjection of servants to household masters (2: 18-25), the theological model of the *imitatio Christi* of the eschatological "now" more nearly relates. The use of *oiketai* rather than the Pauline *douloi* reflects that the apostle has in mind the relation of the servant to the household family, not his social class. The slave is to be subject humbly to fair and unfair treatment, and to the latter with patience since this approach is acceptable to God. The meekness of the believer becomes similar to that of Christ in His death, the dying life being the unifying principle (cf. Mk. 8: 34); this is expressed further in 4: 12-13.¹⁷

In I Peter 3: 1-7 the subjection of wives to husbands is discussed and the latter's reciprocal action. The submissive attitude of the wife is to be such as to arouse her husband's admiration; in this way the unbelieving husband may be converted in the present age. The example to follow is the obedience of Sarah, who "obeyed Abraham, calling him lord" (I Peter 3:6). The pattern of subjection included modesty of dress. The spiritual equality of the wife and husband, the mutuality of love in marriage, and that the woman economically and legally in that day is weaker, are to be recognized by the husband. With this realized, the religious duties of married life are not hindered.¹⁸

¹⁵ O. Cullmann, *State In The N.T.* (New York: Chas. Scribner's Sons, 1956), p. 51: "As soon as the State's demands transgress God's demands, the disciple of Jesus is relieved of all obligation to this requirement of a totalitarian state (i.e. emperor worship in Rev.); however taxes as necessary to the existence of the State are not denied".

¹⁶ E. Bammel, "The Commands in I Peter 2: 17", *N.T.S.*, 11, 1964-65, pp. 279-81.

¹⁷ Selwyn, p. 97.

¹⁸ J. H. Hart, "The First Epistle of Peter", in *Expositor's Greek Testament* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1961), p. 65; Bo Reicke, *The Epistles of James, Peter, and Jude* (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1964), pp. 101-104.

The relationship of children and parents, younger and older, elders and laity is expressed in I Pet. 5: 5. This verse continues the theme of meekness and humility as related to the understood *imitatio Christi*, being grounded in the nature of God (resisting the proud, but showing grace to the humble).

The listing of virtues, another item in the moral teaching, is found in 3: 8-11, with the Greek words *homophrones*, *sympatheis*, and *eusplagchnoi* only here appearing in the New Testament. The "well-doing" (2: 20; 3: 6, 17; 4: 19), only appearing in III Jn. 11 and in I Peter outside the gospels (4 times), is better connected with "being" than with "doing". This follows Jesus' emphasis on good deeds springing from inner goodness or holiness. The list of vices occurs in 2: 1 (sins which should be removed by catchumens), 4: 3 (pagan vices), and 4: 15 (offences against the State).¹⁹

The ethical teaching and eschatology of I Peter are related but not so as to be termed "interim ethics". The content of moral teaching is not here determined by the "not yet". Petrine eschatology is influenced more by the incarnation than by the coming in judgment. The crucifixion event has occurred in these last times (1: 20), and this act explains the moral theology. Yet the "last time" (1: 5), when final and complete salvation is given, is longed for. Petrine moral teaching is eschatological in so far as it is based on the "new situation", the eschatological "now" when the promised Messiah has come to bring salvation to man to institute the Kingdom of God, and to begin His domination over hostile spiritual forces. The author of I Peter gives a theological reason for his moral exhortation (1: 16; 2: 15, 21; 3: 9, 12, 18; 4: 1, 14, 17; 5: 5, 7).²⁰ A. R. Jonsen finds the allusions to baptism and its liturgical background as the sacramental basis for Petrine ethics.²¹ However, the apparent doctrinal scheme behind the ethical teachings is otherwise. The *foundational principle* is the nature of God. The statement, "you shall be holy, for I am holy" (1: 15-16), and its explication through the revelation of Christ provide the pivot of the letter's entire theology. This is the basis of the beginning doctrinal section (1: 3-25) from which later applications are made. The nature of God is expressed as well in the "humbleness" or "meekness" motif which springs from 2: 21-25. From humility the writer goes to the passion of Christ and the resurrection (1: 18-21; 2: 21-25; 3: 18-4: 1). The unifying thought

¹⁹ Lindsay Dewar, *Outline of N.T. Ethics* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1959), pp. 230-41; cf. W. C. van Unnik, "The Teaching of Good Works in I Peter", *N.T.S.*, 1, 1954-55, pp. 92-110.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ A. R. Jonsen, "The Moral Teaching of the First Epistle of St. Peter", *Sci. Eccl.*, 16, 1964, pp. 93-105.

here is the "dying life" concept (Mk. 8: 34).²² The *framework* for the material is the present eschatological kingdom, the "now" of Christ's work, death, and resurrection. The *motives* include the eschatological "not yet" (4: 7) evangelistic mission (2: 15; 3: 1), being pleasing to God (religious duties 3: 7), and the reward of partaking of Christ's sufferings (2: 20; 4: 13; 5: 5). The *model* for the moral teaching is Christ unless the situation prompts another as with Sarah in 3: 6. The basis for ethics in Peter is the nature of God expressed in the eschatological "now", not the impending divine catastrophe in the near future. The "not yet" is only used as a motive in Petrine ethics (4: 7), not as the basis.

"New covenant ethics", to use A. N. Wilder's terms, are the ethics of a new heart and spirit, a new creation, and a New Israel. They are ethics which are determined by the revelation of Christ. Early enthusiasm for an imminent parousia produced some statements of moral behaviour that were determined by that event (i.e. I Cor. 7: 9 ff.; II Thess. 3: 6), but the passing of time brought another perspective. The ethics of the early church came from the milieu of the *Koinonia* where the *imitatio Christi* was of supreme importance and the fruit of the Spirit was horizontal love.²³

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²² Selwyn, pp. 90-101. Lev. 11: 44 (I Pet. 1: 16) is mentioned in essence in the Sermon on the Mount (Mt. 5: 48).

²³ A. N. Wilder, *Eschatology and Ethics in Teaching of Jesus* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1950), pp. 145-162; W. D. Davies, "Ethics in N.T."; C. H. Dodd, *Gospel and Law* (New York: Columbia UP, 1951), pp. 25-45.