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Colossians 1:24 Again: The Apocalyptic Motif

by Richard J. Bauckham

Dr. Bauckham's note on Col. 1: 24 was stimulated by Dr. L. Paul Trudinger's "Further Brief Notice" on that verse in the January-March 1973 issue of the QUARTERLY, which in turn endeavoured to carry forward the study of the verse from the point reached by the Rev. Roy Yates in April-June 1970.

RECENT articles in the QUARTERLY by Mr. R. Yates¹ and Dr. L. P. Trudinger² have shown that there is still much room for discussion about the meaning of this *crux interpretum*. I venture to enter the fray because, while I share Dr. Trudinger's misgivings about interpretations in terms of corporate personality, I nevertheless find that his own exegesis in the light of Phil. 3: 10 leaves much to be desired. Paul there speaks of his own striving to be fully conformed to the sufferings of Christ: the reference is individual and (3: 15 ff.) exemplary. If this then is the thought in Col. 1: 24, it is hard to see how Dr. Trudinger succeeds in extending a clear reference to Paul's individual suffering into a wider reference to "the Church's suffering". If the deficiency is in the Church's conformity to the sufferings of Christ, then in what sense do Paul's personal sufferings supply the deficiency? On Dr. Trudinger's interpretation, surely not vicariously. We can suppose that Paul rejoices in personally taking a large share of suffering on the Church's behalf only if we accept the interpretations by which the Church supplements, complements or completes the sufferings of Christ, not if we insist that the reference is to no more than participation in those sufferings. The latter, in Philippians, is the duty of every Christian, but it would strain our text unbearably to import the teaching of Phil. 3 about the exemplary value of Paul's suffering. We are therefore left only with the unsatisfactory sense that Paul is "doing his bit" (and no indication in the letter that the Colossians are doing theirs).

The verse requires that Paul's sufferings be given more than the personal significance which they have in Phil. 3: 10. Moreover, as most interpreters recognize, the context (the universal preaching of the Gospel and Paul's peculiar role in this) demands that this significance be the sufferings appropriate to the apostle to the

¹ "A Note on Colossians 1: 24", *EQ* 42 (1970), pp. 88-92.

² "A Further Brief Note on Colossians 1: 24", *EQ* 45 (1973), pp. 36-38.

Gentiles (those predicted in Acts 9: 16, the missionary charge which Paul is evidently recalling in this passage).

Is there any sense (without resort to the idea of corporate personality) in which Paul's sufferings *as a minister of the Gospel* may be said to make up the deficiencies in the afflictions of Christ? I suggest that Professor Best's interpretation in terms of the "Messianic woes" be given further consideration.³ Most modern commentators take it into account as an aspect of Paul's thought here, but regard it as inadequate to explain the verse.⁴ What is usually neglected is the Christian rethinking of apocalyptic concepts which may be supposed to lie behind Paul's language. The Jewish idea was of a period of worldwide tribulation, occasioned by the rising tide of human sin, a period which was to be both the death-throes of this age and the birth-pangs of the next: neither the sufferings of the Messiah nor those of his people were ordinarily a prominent part of this picture.⁵ By contrast the Christian reinterpretation, made in the light of the Cross and Resurrection and understanding these as proleptic and determinative apocalyptic events, focussed attention on the sufferings of the Messianic community, which must first share the sufferings of Christ if it would also share his glory (Rom. 8: 17; I Pet. 4: 13, etc.). But the idea of the Church's apocalyptic future as conforming to the pattern provided by Jesus also brought suffering and witness into indissoluble connexion in early Christian thought (Rev. 1: 9); and once the idea of universal mission is introduced into apocalyptic thinking an intelligible pattern emerges to which all the major apocalyptic passages of the New Testament conform. It is the worldwide preaching of the Gospel which involves the Church in worldwide persecution, and the movement is towards both a climax of persecution for the Church and a climax of judgment for those who reject the Gospel. The two great "not yet" aspects of New Testament apocalyptic are universal Gospel-preaching and universal tribulation.⁶ Their necessary connexion in early Christian thought is quite sufficient to remove the sense of arbitrary determinism from the idea of a "quota" of suffering which must be fulfilled before the End (IV Esd. 4: 36; Rev. 6: 11): the suffering required is that which the task of witness demands.

³ E. Best, *One Body in Christ* (London, 1955), p. 136; *I Peter* (London, 1971), pp. 162 f.

⁴ E.g. C. F. D. Moule, *Colossians* (Cambridge, 1962), p. 76; J. L. Houlden, *Paul's Letters from Prison* (London, 1970), pp. 177 f.; R. P. Martin, *Colossians* (Exeter, 1972), pp. 63 f.

⁵ This last point is somewhat disputed, but cf. my "The Great Tribulation in the Shepherd of Hermas", *JTS* n. s. 25 (1974), pp. 27-40.

⁶ Mt. 24: 9-14; II Thess. 2—whatever the identity of the "restrainer", Gospel-preaching is presupposed in v. 11.

With this background, Paul's sufferings in Col. 1: 24 may be understood as ὑπὲρ τοῦ σώματος both because they are involved in his ministry of the Gospel to the Gentiles (v. 23) and because, in the apocalyptic perspective, they are involved with that ministry in hastening the day of glory (v. 27). I am not suggesting that αἱ θλίψεις τοῦ χριστοῦ be taken merely as a technical term (=“the great tribulation”) without reference to Christ himself: even if this were credible in Pauline usage, the phrase ὑπὲρ τοῦ σώματος αὐτοῦ requires an antecedent Christ Jesus. But the force of τοῦ χριστοῦ is not that Christ (individual or corporate) suffers: it is that suffering is required by the ministry of bearing witness to Christ. The afflictions are “Christ’s” in precisely the sense in which Luke conceives the Church in Acts as continuing the work begun by Christ in his earthly ministry. They are not the redemptive sufferings of Christ (for which θλίψις is never used), but those subsequent afflictions of the Church through which the new age is being brought to birth. They are “deficient” so long as the work of suffering witness is incomplete, i.e. until the parousia, but Paul sees himself as playing a large part in marking up the deficiency by virtue of his apostolic ministry. This interpretation of Col. 1: 24 meets the requirements of its context as Dr. Trudinger’s does not, but at the same time avoids the difficult notions of corporate personality or mystical union and can only be accused of detracting from the sufficiency of Christ’s sufferings if the missionary task of the Church be thought to do that.

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