

# Theology on the Web.org.uk

*Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible*

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

**PayPal**

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

---

A table of contents for *Irish Biblical Studies* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_ibs-01.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_ibs-01.php)

## PAUL AND APOCALYPTIC

Hamilton Moore.

There is no doubt that Paul was influenced by the apocalyptic beliefs of his day concerning the end time, and used apocalyptic symbols and terminology, particularly in passages like 1 Thess. 4, II Thess. 2(a) and 1 Cor. 15. Dunn examines I and II Thessalonians and finds them distinctively, though not entirely apocalyptic in tone and content. In 1 Thess. 4-5 the parousia is described in explicitly apocalyptic language as a descending from heaven with archangel and clouds, with a shout and trumpet blast and the resurrection of the dead; it would come without warning, bringing destruction for the unprepared, sudden and terrible, the birth pangs of the new age, and there will be no escape (2). II Thess. also clearly utilizes apocalyptic imagery. In chapter 2, Paul, concerned about apocalyptic enthusiasm getting out of hand, or false ideas of the parousia, reminds his readers that there will be a necessary interval before the End, and the opposition which they were already experiencing must first rise to a climax, with the appearance of the "man of lawlessness". This concept is the Christian equivalent to what is found in Jewish apocalyptic, where the eschatological opposition to God was often represented by a single figure - Satan, a dragon, a tyrant or false prophet hostile to God. In esoteric language, a typical stylistic feature in apocalyptic, Paul outlines how, when "that which restrains" is taken away, the man of lawlessness will take his seat in the temple of God and command worship till Jesus' intervention in judgment. Wenham also, like Dunn, has demonstrated how widespread is Paul's use of apocalyptic in the Thessalonian correspondence. Reference has already been made in ch. 3 to his comparison of I and II Thessalonians with apocalyptic passages in the Synoptics, particularly the Synoptic Apocalypse. He advocates the existence of solid parallels as far as subject matter is concerned, and links, not just at the level of individual sayings, but a common sequence of sayings, pointing to a probable underlying shared tradition (3).

As far as I Corinthians 15 is concerned, it appears that Paul is seeking to counteract a gnosticizing "over realised" eschatology held by some at Corinth. They knew themselves to participate in Christ, who had overcome death and the powers that rule this world. His resurrection power is appropriated to them and they share in the heavenly world of the Spirit. These 'pneumatics' conceived of themselves as enjoying a perfect redemptive state and an unconditional moral freedom, for human actions cannot compromise their mystic bond with Christ (4). In reply, Paul insists that the resurrection of Christ is a proleptic, apocalyptic event, the first fruits of the final resurrection, from which it derives its meaning. It has no simple ideological, isolated or completed meaning and cannot be separated from an apocalyptic world-view. The resurrection of Christ, the coming reign of God, the future resurrection of the dead and the transformation of the created order belong together (v23-28). Far from considering this apocalyptic world-view a husk, or a discardable frame, Paul insists that it lies at the very heart of the gospel and, if separated from it, the gospel itself will be torn apart! (v1-4, 13-19) (5). Paul's Apocalypticism to be Expected.

Paul's fundamental apocalypticism, which we have seen evidenced in the Thessalonican correspondence and I Cor. 15, is to be expected in the light of the prominence apocalyptic appears to have had in the Judaism of his day. This is suggested for example by Hengel, whose claims concerning the strong apocalyptic influence at that time, both in the piety of Palestinian Judaism (even Pharisaic Judaism) and in the Diaspora, have already been noted. (6) Apocalypticism was a buttress against Hellenistic mysticism and mystery religions. Its influence in Pharisaism is supported by the probable derivation of the apocalyptists from the Hasidim, by the numerous messianic eschatological passages in early Jewish prayers and in Targum Jer.I, and also the positive attitude of the Shammaite left-wing towards the Zealot movement (7). Therefore Hengel concludes,

"the fact that both early Pharisaism and the Greek-speaking Diaspora knew an intensive eschatological hope, with a picture of history to match, would finally also explain the apocalyptic foundation of the thought of Paul" (8).

Can Paul be a Pharisaic legalist and an apocalypticist at one and the same time? In the past "Pharisaic Judaism" was played off against "apocalyptic Judaism" as if both constituted distinct parties. Moore (9) depicted first century Judaism along the lines of "normative" Judaism (i.e. the Tannaite tradition after Jamnia (AD 90), when Pharisaism became the norm for Jewish religion) and "extraneous". This division was maintained by Rossler (10), who sees the period in Judaism from the Maccabean rising as being ruled by the two conflicting tendencies of apocalypticism and rabbinism, distinguished by attitudes to the law and history. More recently, however, it has become clear that this radical division can no longer be maintained. Sanders (11), in discussing the subject of apocalypticism and legalism, maintains that they do not contribute substantially different religious types or streams of thought in the Judaism of the period (12). The existence in Qumran of a strongly nomistic group, with a pronounced expectation of an imminent End, should be a major caution against accepting this simple dissection. In agreement with this position, Davies, Rowland and others, have given many examples of apocalyptic symbols in Pharisaism and rabbinic Judaism (13).

#### Apocalyptic - How Fundamental for Paul?

In a recent major work apocalyptic has been given a central position in Pauline theology. J.C. Beker (14) proposed making a distinction between the coherent centre (the basic core) of Paul's theology and its contextual contingency (the application of the coherent centre in the specific context of the letters). While the apostle has a basic structure of thought from which he will not judge, he is so deeply sensitive to the concrete situation that the basic structure is phrased so that it speaks to that situation. This approach is not new, but Beker's claim as to what comprises the coherent centre of Paul's theology is: it is not Christ-mysticism, or justification by faith but apocalyptic, as informed by

the Christ-event. As he expresses it in his preface, "I posit the triumph of God as the coherent theme of Paul's gospel: that is, the hope in the dawning victory of God and in the imminent redemption of the created order, which he has inaugurated in Christ" (15). Paul is therefore "an apocalyptic theologian with a theocentric outlook" (16). Apocalyptic is the basic core of Paul's theology - eventual apocalyptic triumph, as expressed proleptically in the resurrection of Christ and modified somewhat by the Christ-event itself. In keeping with this understanding, Beker maintains it will not be enough, as Käsemann did, to pay lip service to apocalyptic as "the mother of Christian theology". He had turned apocalyptic into a Pauline antidote to Hellenistic enthusiasm and then fixed on justification by faith as Paul's central theme. Apocalyptic must be given its independent status as a type of thinking which presses into service a wide range of symbols such as righteousness, justification, reconciliation and being in Christ, in order to make its understanding clear. Kasemann's mistake was to confuse one theme with "the" theme(17).

Is apocalyptic to be elevated to the place where it is seen as the coherent centre of Pauline theology? Scroggs(18), in seeking to assess this claim, explains apocalyptic in Paul both quantitatively and qualitatively. Quantitatively, the theme claimed to be central must be found in most or all of the documents. While it is clear that apocalyptic is found throughout the literary career of Paul, from the earliest letter (I Thessalonians) to the latest (Philippians), yet Galatians is a glaring omission and does present a real problem. Quantitatively the theme must not just be present, but determinative of all other themes, and here again it is difficult to ascribe this position to apocalyptic in Paul. We must agree with the Scroggs that it is better to see apocalyptic in Paul as part of his basic theological structure, rather than his coherent centre, which is difficult to determine. Again, as we shall see shortly, other themes such as a reign of Christ already begun (I Cor. 15v25), the experience of the "new creation" (II Cor. 5v17), mean that the triumph of God on a cosmic scale is not all that Paul's theology is about.

Apocalyptic in Paul - Only an Early Emphasis?

There are various suggestions concerning Paul's enthusiasm with regard to apocalyptic throughout his career. Anderson maintains that initially Paul's Use of apocalyptic symbols and terminology is "not in doubt"(19). Nevertheless, the view that early apocalyptic hopes, as revealed in I Thessalonians, were subsequently toned down and reorientated towards the individual and his destiny by the time of II Corinthians (see ch.5) "remains a distinct possibility"(20). Mearns (21) proposes the rather unique theory that Paul's early eschatological theology appears to have undergone no less than four radical changes from his conversion until the late forties and early fifties. He finds support for such changes from an exegesis of the Thessalonian letters. First of all, before the Thessalonian correspondence, he suggests that Paul appears to have shared with other Christians an early radical realised eschatology. It was believed that in Jesus' death and resurrection the new aeon had arrived and the new creation had already been formed. The healing powers of the gospel were so powerfully abroad that even death itself might seem to have been overcome, and Christians had passed over the threshold into a life eternal in its quality. Again, eschatological or parousia expectations were probably conceived of as having their fulfilment in the exaltation of Christ. This realised eschatology, shared with the Thessalonians in Paul's early ministry among them, was called into question when believers started to die and the end of the present world-order failed to occur. Also, a corrective to over-enthusiasm among those who accepted the realised eschatological position became necessary. Paul answers this anxiety about the deceased, and the dangerously inflated conclusions about the present enjoyment of the kingdom of God, by reconceptualizing the parousia in the form of a "second coming", together with a final resurrection (1Thess.4v13ff). Thus, in I Thessalonians he modifies his earlier teaching and comes to the second phase of his Christian eschatology, approaching it cautiously in ch.1 until the "oracle of the Lord" is revealed in ch.4. A third stage in his eschatological viewpoint is reached in II Thessalonians. The teaching

of the imminent Day of the Lord needed to be modified and so, between I and II Thessalonians, Paul moved swiftly to introduce a "signs scheme", which must occur before the last day(22). This scheme served the purpose of checking the enthusiastic excesses of an extreme imminentist hope. Finally, the fourth factor which converged with the other three to produce the complete revolution in Paul's early eschatology, was the development, from the stock of apocalyptic, of a Christian anti-Messiah symbol, out of the excitement generated by the Caligula episode and the attempt to set up an image in the temple.

In response to Mearns, we can acknowledge that he has clearly highlighted an important factor which may have led to the development of Paul's thought in new directions. Rather than the theory of gradual development, new insights appears to have been gained in facing different situations and challenges. Yet it is difficult to find the radical changes Mearns claims took place in Paul's eschatological viewpoint in the Thessalonian correspondence. Before the letters were penned, could Paul's understanding and that of the Thessalonian believers be described as an overrealized eschatology? Would that understanding not be better defined as simply an over-enthusiasm, because of an emphasis on the imminence of the parousia, an enthusiasm which persisted in spite of the first warning? (cf. 1 Thess. 4v11 and II Thess. 3v10). Again, ch.5v1 claims that the Thessalonians had a clear apocalyptic-type conception of the day of the Lord before the writing of the first epistle, rather than a realized understanding. I Thess. 4 does not suggest that Paul had given no teaching to them about the parousia earlier, but simply that the question of the position of believers who had died, in relation to that coming, had not been made clear. Again, Paul's teaching on the parousia in I Thessalonians is not introduced gradually and gently (as Mearns suggested), because it reflected a change of mind, but is clearly stated from the first,(1v10). The different emphases said to be present in I and II Thessalonians concerning an unexpected parousia and a parousia with signs, do not point to a change of view by Paul. Bruce has insisted that we find the same

ambivalence in the eschatological teaching of Jesus and the Synoptic gospels (23). Also, the unexpected nature of the parousia is not as complete in I Thessalonians as some would suggest. Chapter 5 does remind us that it will overtake the ungodly man without warning, but believers being children of light be awake and prepared for it (24).

Beker has pointed out that apocalyptic is not just present in Paul's early writings, but is found right throughout his literary career. This does not mean that there may be a different emphasis in certain earlier and later works because of changing circumstances. Bruce (25) has suggested that I Thessalonians was written at a time when Paul was aware of the changing situation in the Roman empire. Mounting unrest in Judea, his own unfortunate experience at Thessalonica and elsewhere, news of the expulsion of Jews from Rome appeared to point to the fact that, while Roman law and order were still in control of affairs, it was only too clear that the "hidden power of lawlessness" was already at work and would probably soon sweep all before it. Gallio's encouraging judgment at Corinth a few months later (26) may have led to a modification of this viewpoint. Yet, while it is true that in later letters he does not always express himself in the apocalyptic terms of the Thessalonian correspondence, there is no radical change of viewpoint and very much the same perspective can be seen in the maturity of his letter to the Romans (27).

#### Paul's Modification of Apocalyptic

The question of Paul's handling of apocalyptic has been variously assessed. Anderson, for example, while acknowledging Paul's participation in the Jewish apocalyptic heritage maintained, The apocalyptic 'tendency' in the apostle is in fact clearly refined by the specifically Christian understanding of existence, for which the 'new creation' or the 'new man' has already become a reality through the redemptive death of Christ" (28). Audet claims that, although Paul was influenced by the apocalyptic current, he is very reticent towards apocalyptic speculation. "Moreover he has transformed several apocalyptic schema into a soteriology where the realized eschatology holds an important place" (29)



Sanders suggests that the similarity between Paul's view and apocalypticism is general rather than detailed. Paul did not calculate the times and the seasons, he did not couch his predictions of the end in visions involving beasts, and he observed none of the literary conventions of apocalyptic literature. Therefore, since the conventions of apocalyptic had so little influence upon him, the hypothesis might be put forward that before his conversion and call Paul was not especially apocalyptically orientated. This view has relevance for an assessment of Paul's handling of apocalyptic concepts, because it means, for Sanders, that Paul did not begin with a set apocalyptic view and fitted Christ into it (30).

How then shall we evaluate apocalyptic in Paul? Certainly we can agree with Dunn (31), who in discussing Paul's Thessalonian correspondence, claims that distinctively Christian features have clearly emerged. We notice particularly that the divine agent who will bring about the end is identified with Jesus. This, for Dunn, marks Christian apocalyptic off from Jewish apocalyptic, where the same obscurity surrounds the apocalyptist's vision of the agent of God as surrounds his vision of the opponents of God. Again, while in Paul's early letters there is not the same note of realized eschatology - the expectation of an imminent parousia appears to have drowned its note - this emphasis comes steadily to the fore in later works. Also the same cautionary note found in Jesus' preaching is present here as well: the  $\kappa\alpha\tau\epsilon\chi\omicron\nu\nu$  is still operative; the flood of end-time evil and tribulation is still quite a way short of its peak - compare "the end is not yet" of Mark 13.

Ladd, in an article on "Apocalyptic and New Testament Theology" (32), suggested that the Jewish apocalyptists lost the prophetic view of the reality of God acting in history. God was conceived of as having abandoned His world and human history until the end of the age (33). This loss was recovered in the New Testament, where history is again understood to be the scene of the conflict between the kingdom of God and the powers of evil. In the Synoptics the kingdom is presented as

having invaded history, to bring to men living in the old age the blessing of the age to come. This "historizing of eschatology" is found also in Paul's teaching about the resurrection, justification and the Spirit. Christ's resurrection is the first fruits of the eschatological resurrection (1 Cor. 15v23) and justification, essentially the sentence of righteousness by the divine judge in the eschatological day of judgment, has already been announced by God (Rom.3v24). The gift of the Spirit is the eschatological promise of the Spirit, fulfilled in history to those who believe (Joel 2v28-29). Paul calls the gift both "the first fruits" (Rom. 8v23) and a "guarantee" (II Cor. 1v22, 5v5) of the eschatological fullness (34). While not everyone would agree with Ladd that the apocalypticists have so completely abandoned history, his outline of Paul's modification of the apocalyptic view, because of the Christ-event, is helpful.

Beker's understanding of Paul and his theology also merits serious consideration (35). In his major work mentioned earlier, he maintains that Paul's apocalyptic conviction was not initiated by his conversion to Christ, but formed the background of his Pharisaic world-view. The discontinuity between Paul the Pharisee and Paul the Christian lies in a different posture toward the relationship between the Torah and the Messianic promises. Beker is convinced that apocalyptic was not a peripheral curiosity for Paul, but was the central climate and focus of his thought, as it was for most early Christian thinkers. His gospel was formulated within the basic components of apocalyptic thinking. Yet Beker does admit that apocalyptic has undergone a profound modification in Paul because of the Christ-event(36). Paul does not employ, to any extent, the traditional apocalyptic terminology. He does not engage in apocalyptic time-tables, or delight in descriptions of the architecture of heaven and the bliss of the redeemed, or the torture of the wicked. This reduction of apocalyptic terminology and the absence of apocalyptic speculation signifies that the Christ-event has strongly modified the dualistic structure of normal apocalyptic thought. Although death is "the last enemy" ( I Cor. 15v26), Paul strongly emphasises both the openness of the

present to the future glory of God and the incursion of the future into the present. "No apocalypse ever posits the intimacy of communion in 'this age' between God and 'Abba' and the believers as His 'children' and and 'sons' (Gal. 4v6, Rom. 8v15). The age is already present, so the Christian can already rejoice, can already claim 'the new creation' and can already live in the power of the spirit" (37). In addition, although Paul adopts the contrast of "the sufferings of the present time", verses "the coming glory" from Jewish apocalyptic (Rom. 8v18), he modifies the doctrine of the messianic woes. Christians do not simply "endure" the sufferings of the end-time, or "wait" for God's new age; they rather "rejoice" in sufferings (Rom. 5v3), because God's power is already manifest in the midst of suffering. Also, the reason for Paul's sparing use of the terminology of "kingdom of God" is because of the proleptic presence of the new in the old. Finally, Beker claims that the intensity of Paul's apocalyptic religion is characterized by hope, not a Bultmanian hope (38), which is simply a component of faith, but hope with a specific object, and hope in a coming reality, i.e. the reality of glory which the Christ-event has opened up for the future (Rom. 8v18-30, cf. Col 1v27). His resurrection has marked the beginning of the process of transformation.

Beker's approach perhaps needs to be tempered by reminding ourselves, as Anderson does, that while Paul's life and thought are directed towards the consummation God would bring in the (near) future, apocalyptic expectation is surely not the whole of Paul (39). Nevertheless, the apocalyptic view does play a fundamental part in Paul's thought and his modification of it in the light of the Christ-event is not such a modification that it is demythologized into existential self-understanding (40), or dismantled in terms of a psychological development of his thought (42), but still retains the reality of its expectation.

#### NOTES

1. In this chapter the Pauline authorship of II Thessalonians is assumed. For a useful discussion of this question see F.F. Bruce, "St. Paul in Macedonia", BJRL, Vol.62 (1978-80), pp.328ff.
2. Dunn, Unity and Diversity, pp.325ff.

3. Wenham, "Paul and the Synoptic Apocalypse", p.345ff.  
See ch. 3 p.82f.
4. J.C. Beker, Paul The Apostle: The Triumph of God in Life and Thought, (Edinburgh, 1980), pp.164ff.
5. Ibid., pp.166f.
6. See ch. 2. p.46, Hengel, Judaism and Hellenism, pp.252-254.  
Its influence in the Diaspora is evidenced by the Jewish sibyllines, the Slavonic book of Enoch and the translation of many apocalyptic works into Greek.
7. Ibid., p.253.
8. Ibid., p.254.
9. G.F. Moore, Judaism Vol.I, 1932, p.125.
10. D. Rössler, Gesetz und Geschichte, (Neukirchen, 1960).  
Rössler's views are outlined, for example in Beker, op.cit., p.137, Koch, op.cit., pp.40f.
11. E.P.S. Sanders, Paul and Palestinian Judaism, (London, 1977), pp.423ff.
12. Sanders does not deny that some Jews were more concerned with apocalyptic expectation than others, but that in itself does not mean that they should be constituted a distinct religious type.
13. W.D. Davies, "Apocalyptic and Pharisaism" in Christian Origins in Judaism, (London, 1962), pp.19ff. Cf. Rowland, The Open Heaven, pp.29-37, 269ff. Also cf. Saldarini's articles "Apocalyptic and Rabbinic Literature", CBQ, 37 (1975), pp.348ff. and for continuing interest albeit less intense, "The Uses of Apocalyptic in the Mishna and Tosefta", CBQ, 39 (1977), pp.396ff mentioned on p.23, n.62.
14. Beker, op.cit., pp.11ff. 15. Ibid., p.IX. 16. Ibid., p.362.
17. See R.P. Martin, RV of Beker, JBL, 101, No 3 (1982), p.463.
18. R. Scroggs, "Apocalyptic" as the centre of Paul's Gospel" RV p.74-77 in Interpretation. 36, No. 1(1982), pp.74ff.
19. Anderson, "A future for Apocalyptic" p.65.
20. Ibid., p.65.
21. C.L. Mearns, "Early Eschatological Development in Paul: The Evidence of I and II Thessalonians" NTS, 27 (Ap.1981), No. 3 pp.137-157.
22. Ibid., p.157. 23. F.F. Bruce, "St. Paul in Macedonia", p.342
24. Ch. 5 v 1-11. 25. Op. cit., pp.344ff. 26. Acts 18v14-16.
27. Ch. 13v11-13, and this following a very positive assessment of "the governing authorities" in v 1-7.
28. Anderson, A Future, p.65.
29. Audet, "L'influence de l'apocalyptique sur la pensee de Jesus et de l'eglise primitive", Science et Esprit, XXV, (1973)p.51.
30. Sanders, op.cit., p.543f. 31. Dunn, Unity and Diversity, p328f
32. G.E. Ladd, "Apocalyptic and New Testament Theology", Reconciliation and Hope Essays Presented to L. Morris, (Exeter, 1974), pp.275-284.
33. As an example of this pessimism with regard to history, Ladd makes reference to the Dream Vision of Enoch. God was presented as having personally guided the experience of Israel until the Babylonian captivity. Then God withdrew His personal leadership and eventually turned the fortunes of the nation over to 70

33. shepherds, who were self-willed and faithless and fearful evils befell the people while God remained unmoved. Therefore, between the years 586-165BC God is conceived to be inactive in the fortunes of Israel and no deliverance could be expected before the messianic era.
34. Ladd, op.cit., p.294f.
35. Beker, op.cit., pp.144ff.
36. Ibid., p.145.
37. Ibid., p.145.
38. Ibid., p.147
39. Anderson, p.65.
40. R. Bultmann, Theology of the New Testament, (New York, 1951-1955), pp.185-352.
41. H.G. Conzelmann, "On the Analysis of the Confessional Formula in I Cor.15: 3-5" Int. 20 (1966), pp.15-25.
42. C.H. Dodd, New Testament Studies, (New York, 1954), pp.67-128.

Joyce G. Baldwin: The Message of Genesis 12 - 50, from Abraham to Joseph.  
The Bible Speaks Today, I.V.P., 1986, pp224.

The Message of Genesis 12 - 50 is a further volume in the series 'The Bible Speaks Today'. The series has a threefold ideal: 'to expound the biblical text with accuracy, to relate it to contemporary life and to be readable'. The author too in her preface hopes and prays 'that Genesis will indeed speak, not only to those who already know the patriarchs well, but also to those who are still making their acquaintance'. This ideal, hope and prayer has surely been furthered by this commentary.

While from the outset the intention is not that this should be a critical study the introduction does deal briefly yet informatively with the dating of the patriarchs and places them between the 21st and 19th centuries B.C. In the comments on the ratification of the Abrahamic covenant the two accounts are seen as separate and complimentary rather than the result of various sources; chapter 15 is private and personal to Abraham whereas chapter 17 relates to a public ceremony. Lack of critical discussion is summed up by the author when she writes, 'the book of Genesis itself is of greatest value, and a study of it, as opposed to writing about it, remains a pearl of great price.... it deserves to be read again and again.' However from the ample supply of footnotes and much archaeological evidence one is left in no doubt that scholarship marks this commentary at every stage and gives the reader confidence in the author's credentials and also provides diverse tools for further study.

Throughout the exposition great heed is paid to the biblical and historical context and because of the serious attempt to let the Bible speak the reader is drawn into the life and times of the patriarchs and their families. The commentary has plenty of practical application and the eternal nature of the covenant is emphasised throughout and its christian implications drawn out. The explanation of the ritual involved in covenant making (chapter 15) and the notes on the destiny