

**Paul and Apocalyptic Eschatology:**  
*A Look at 1 Corinthians 15 and Romans 5*

**Introduction:**

Post-modern philosophy has greatly pushed the contemporary Church in the West to recognize the way in which narrative shapes both individual and communal life. This narrative is the framework through which the community or individual interprets their experience of the world. A large part of this narrative is language. It is only through language that human beings can learn and interact with the world, and thus, the modes of thought that influence language are indelibly imprinted upon the human psyche. When the biblical text is read, it presents us with a framework wholly different from that of our Western, twenty-first century minds. Thus, in order to understand what is being said in the biblical witness, we must understand that narrative of those who penned it. Only then are we able to read the text well and understand what is being said. One such framework that is immensely important in Paul's thought is that of apocalyptic eschatology. Apocalyptic eschatology was basic to Pharisaical thought and, consequently, it is the framework through which Paul interpreted the Christ-event.<sup>1</sup> Thus, in order to understand Paul's authoritative interpretation of the Christ-event, we must understand how apocalyptic eschatology has shaped that interpretation. Then, from this understanding, it must be hoped that this narrative active in the biblical witness will influence our own narratives. Through a historical interaction with the Jewish roots of Paul's thought, and an ideological approach to 1 Corinthians 15 and Romans 5, the question of the helpfulness of apocalyptic eschatology in interpreting Paul will be explored.

---

<sup>1</sup> J. Christiaan Beker, *The Triumph of God: The Essence of Paul's Thought* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990) 19.

## **Jewish Apocalyptic Eschatology and Paul's Appropriation:**

The characterization of Jewish apocalyptic eschatology is a difficult task, which nonetheless, must be undertaken. J. Christiaan Beker draws upon the work of Klaus Koch in setting out the basic tenants of Jewish apocalyptic eschatology. These are: first, the urgent expectation of the impending overthrow of earthly conditions in the immediate future; second, the belief that the end will be a vast cosmic catastrophe; third, the conception of the temporal history and future of this world as divided into segments; fourth, armies of angels and demons are used to explain the course of historical events and the happenings of the end times; fifth, a new paradisaal salvation is expected to appear after the final catastrophe; sixth, the transition from disaster to redemption will be accomplished by means of act issuing from the throne of God, hence, the visibility of the kingdom of God on earth; seventh, the introduction of a mediator with royal functions; eighth, the catchword “glory” is used to describe final state of affairs.<sup>2</sup> These can be further distilled to three foci: first, historical dualism; second, universal cosmic expectation; third, the imminent end of the world.<sup>3</sup>

Further, within the broad conception of Jewish apocalyptic eschatology, two heuristic schools of thought emerge, more or less clearly, from the various sources. After undertaking an extensive reading of both biblical and apocryphal Jewish sources, Martinus de Boer is able to characterize these schools. He sees the first of these schools, which he calls the “forensic” school, as concerned primarily with human responsibility.<sup>4</sup> This formulation understands the Law to be given as a way to remedy individual destiny in the final, universal resurrection that

---

<sup>2</sup> J. Christiaan Beker, *Paul the Apostle: The Triumph of God in Life and Thought* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980) 136.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Martinus C. de Boer, *The Defeat of Death: Apocalyptic Eschatology in 1 Corinthians 15 and Romans 5* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1988) 86.

will take place for the purpose of judgment.<sup>5</sup> The penal character of death is emphasized and this world is seen as the sphere of death and human rebellion. However, the “cosmological” school understands things a bit differently. At the center of this formulation is the question of the premature demise of those who are righteous. The righteous remnant of the people of God awaits God’s deliverance from demonic powers that only God can overthrow.<sup>6</sup> Thus, death is seen as a mark of demonic dominion prefigured in moral death that will culminate in eschatological death – a situation that only God can rectify by dethroning the demons and resurrecting the righteous.<sup>7</sup>

Paul, as a Pharisee, certainly inherited these emphases. Some have argued that the Pharisees were not apocalyptic because this mode of thought was downplayed by the Rabbinic literature after the fall of the temple in Jerusalem at the hands of the Romans in C.E. 70. However, this is not a solid position. While the Rabbis were descendants of the Pharisees, it is academically difficult to read them back upon the second temple era. Further, it makes perfect sense that apocalyptic thought would be toned down after the destruction of such a central symbol as the temple. Such a blow would very easily initiate a movement away from traditional understandings and toward a new way for the Jewish people to conceive of themselves. Beker feels confident in asserting Paul’s inheritance of the apocalyptic world-view from his time as a Pharisee,<sup>8</sup> and this author has found no reasons to seriously question this position. Therefore, the question is not whether Paul worked with an apocalyptic framework, but how this framework was modified in response to the Christ-event.

---

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 86-7.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 85.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 86.

<sup>8</sup> Beker, *Paul the Apostle: The Triumph of God in Life and Thought*, 43-4.

Beker detects three primary modifications in Paul's apocalyptic framework. First, "Paul does not employ the traditional apocalyptic terminology of 'this age' in conjunction with 'the age to come.'"<sup>9</sup> Paul does not enter into conjecture upon such things as the structure of heaven or apocalyptic timetables or descriptions and accounts of angels and demons. Instead of angelic and demonic armies, the major apocalyptic forces for Paul are ontological concerns within God's created order. In Paul's understanding that 'the age to come' is already being present, it becomes clear that the Christ-event has radically changed his conception of the dualistic account of the world seen in apocalyptic writing. Second, Paul modifies the conception of the escalation of the forces of evil in the end time. Because the new age is currently in the old, the modification of this concept is necessary. Instead, Paul speaks of the "present suffering" and "coming glory." Yet, Christians can still rejoice in God's manifestation of power in the midst of suffering.<sup>10</sup> Finally, Paul rarely speaks of the kingdom of God. Since the new age is already present in the old, Paul does not need to speak of the kingdom of God as a future coming salvation.<sup>11</sup> In many ways, where Jewish apocalyptic eschatology focused on the polarity of the world, Paul is able to conceive of a world in, or at least progressing to, unity in Christ.<sup>12</sup>

Paul's recasting of Jewish apocalyptic eschatology is what provides the impetus for his ministry and the intensity with which he lives. This intensity is born out of the relationship between faith and hope. The unique thing about the hope that Paul preaches is that this hope has very specific objects relating to the blessing of the new age in Christ.<sup>13</sup> More specifically, this hope is fixed upon the glory of the age to come, cosmic peace, the parousia of Christ etc. Faith,

---

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 145.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 146.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> J. Louis Martyn, *Theological Issues in the Letters of Paul*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997) 119.

<sup>13</sup> Beker, *Paul the Apostle: The Triumph of God in Life and Thought*, 147.

which grasps onto this concrete hope, is the first installment of the future fulfillment of God's salvation now possessed in Christ.<sup>14</sup>

This brief discussion of Jewish apocalyptic eschatology, and Paul's appropriation of the same, presents a potential hermeneutic goldmine as far as interpreting the Pauline corpus goes. It must be discovered whether this potential will play out and prove to supply insight into the biblical witness. To that end, two passages will be examined with attention paid to the presence of themes concurrent with apocalyptic eschatology.

### **Apocalyptic Eschatology and 1 Corinthians 15:**

As is normal for Paul's correspondence, the letter that we know as 1 Corinthians grew out of a problem within the church at Corinth. It is generally understood that the problem in Corinth was believers who had not abandoned the platonic dualism of their pagan worldview. Because of this, it was natural for them to misunderstand Paul. It is not necessarily that they tried to twist Paul's words, but that Paul's words came out of a very specific apocalyptic framework that had no equivalent in Hellenistic thought. These "misinformed" believers at Corinth could simply not understand Paul's language and inadvertently translated it into their own philosophical categories. In 1 Corinthians 15, this difference in understanding is tackled by Paul on the topic of the resurrection of the dead.

This notwithstanding, de Boer identifies four possible understandings of the "deniers of the resurrection." The first position asserts that they did not believe in life after death, or this is what Paul thought. Secondly, they might have believed that only those alive at the parousia would participate in it. These first two positions appear to be untenable because they contradict

---

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 149.

the mention of baptism for the dead.<sup>15</sup> A third position argues that they denied not life after death but bodily resurrection, thus focusing on the immortality of the soul. Finally, it may be argued that the “deniers” were Gnostics who’s anthropology urged them to believe that they had already been transformed into the final “spiritual” existence at the time of their baptism, thus providing for an understanding that the resurrection had already occurred.<sup>16</sup> The key to parsing these options is to bear in mind what it is that Paul is arguing against. Paul comments that some Corinthians argued against the resurrection of the dead. Thus, it is for the resurrection of the dead that he argues.<sup>17</sup> As far as the position of the deniers is concerned, de Boer states it well when he says, “In short, then, the claim that ‘there is no resurrection of the dead’ on the part of the Corinthians was an outgrowth of their appropriation of the baptismal motif of dying and rising with Christ in accordance with their gnostic anthropological presuppositions and pneumatic experience.”<sup>18</sup> Therefore, it is the conjunction of the third and fourth proposed positions that best describes the position of Paul’s opponents at Corinth.

This Corinthian position, as has been alluded to, is the result of Christology not being seen through Paul’s framework of apocalyptic eschatology, but through a proto-gnostic anthropology. Thus, Christ’s resurrection was taken by the deniers to be his bodiless ascent into heaven. If this is true, then all of the church’s speech about participation in Christ, especially in relation to baptism, can easily be taken to mean the liberation of the soul from this evil, material world. From this develops spiritual triumphalism and a disdain for anything that smacks of the old material existence. In verses 5-8, Paul reinforces to the Corinthians the physical nature of Christ’s resurrection. This resurrection was not the ascent of his spirit to heaven. Rather, he was

---

<sup>15</sup> de Boer, 96-97.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 97.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 105.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 104.

raised in a visible, and by implication, bodily form. Verses 12-16 then make the obvious point that if Christ experienced this very real and physical resurrection from the dead, then so will Christians, and vice versa.<sup>19</sup> Further, if this is not true, then the faith of believer's is worthless since the possibility of redemption is predicated upon Christ's bodily resurrection and the eschatological defeat of death therein.

In Paul's discussion of Adam and Christ in verses 20-23, the two are set up as opposing forces. The framework of apocalyptic eschatology enables us to recognize that the Adam-Christ dichotomy is an eschatological dualism of the ages.<sup>20</sup> In Adam, death became the cosmological power that defined human existence. Yet, because of Christ, and seen in his own resurrection, this era is passing away and death will eventually be subdued under God and Christ. This is very obviously drawing on the cosmological school of Jewish apocalyptic eschatology and its focus on the cosmological conflict of powers to exercise dominion over humanity. "Paul makes physical death into a 'problem' for the Corinthians, a cosmic problem that can and must be perceived as such in view of the cosmic 'solution', the resurrected Christ who is the first-fruits of those who have fallen asleep."<sup>21</sup> Thus, the final resurrection for believers is a resurrection to full salvation and freedom from this last cosmological power of bondage, death.

Further in the argument, Paul moves to break down the triumphalism of the Corinthians. Once again, he calls on the cosmological power of death in order to do this. By insisting that believers must put on immortality of the body in verse 42, which it is obviously impossible without the eschatological resurrection, Paul shows that his opponents have no basis for their

---

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 108.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 111.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 114.

triumphant attitudes since they are obviously still under the bondage of death.<sup>22</sup> He then firmly connects this ontological transformation to the resurrection.

The framework of apocalyptic eschatology has enabled us to better understand Paul's thought in this passage by highlighting the cosmological problems and solutions beings argued. It should once again be noted that this problem was produce by the inability for a non-apocalyptic world-view to understand Paul's interpretation of the Christ-event. In Paul's understanding, Christ has shown that behind the universal reality of physical death, there is an inimical, cosmological power at work and that this power is doomed for destruction.<sup>23</sup> This is a completely different read of salvation than is often produced by the modern Church and its preoccupation with a forensic mode. Yet, it must be wondered whether this mode is the most complete witness to Paul's understanding. Traditionally, the letter to the Romans has been the bastion of forensic argument, and it is to Romans that we next turn.

### **Apocalyptic Eschatology – Cosmological Motifs in Romans 5:**

It is difficult to get behind the scenes in Romans and figure out exactly what the occasional context is. It is generally assumed that Paul writes out of concern for his plans to visit Spain, because of some conflicts between Jews and Gentiles over the Law, and in light of his upcoming trip to Jerusalem. In some sense, Paul is worried about the trip to Jerusalem because of the ongoing conflicts over the issue of the Law. These conflicts no doubt mirror those going on among the believers in Rome. Thus, in the context of Romans, Paul's gospel is very much at stake.<sup>24</sup>

---

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 131-2.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 138.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 143.



Romans 5 can easily be divided into two parts, verses 1-11 and verses 12-21. The first section is the third of a series of nodes in the beginning of Romans that state the fundamental theme of the argument, that is, human beings are not justified by works of the Law.<sup>25</sup> This passage as a whole marks the transition between apocalyptic interpretations of the Christ-event. In the previous chapters, Paul has been concerned with the apocalyptic interpretation of the Christ-event as per the forensic school. The forensic focus in the early chapters probably stem from Paul's conversation partners that conceive of the change of the age as being conducted in a courtroom with God passing judgment on how well one has lived up to the requirements of the Law.<sup>26</sup> However, in this chapter, Paul begins to introduce cosmological categories to the discussion. Paul's beef with the forensic school of Jewish apocalyptic eschatology is twofold. On the one hand, he is intent of showing that final justification comes not through the Law, but through Christ apart from the Law.<sup>27</sup> On the other hand, he feels that merely a forensic interpretation is inadequate. For Paul, Christ's death cannot be seen in only forensic terms because the meaning of faith is determined by the cosmologically apocalyptic disclosure of God's righteousness, sin, and death. Christ's death marks God's triumphant liberating invasion into the world.<sup>28</sup> This invasion is intent on rectifying a situation that humans are simply unable to rectify through any works of the Law.

It is in verses 12-21 that the apocalyptic imagery kicks in to high gear. This section is summed up well by de Boer when he says, "Christ's justifying work, unlike Adam's trespass, is God's own work. This work, furthermore, aggressively nullifies and destroys the world

---

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 144.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 153.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 155.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 156.

determined by Adam's trespass."<sup>29</sup> God and his cosmological power of grace counter the cosmological rulers of the old age, i.e., sin and death. This understanding strongly qualifies a forensic understanding of salvation. Christ is shown in opposition to Adam and the Law as a remedy for the bondage that humanity lives under. This shows that human culpability is placed squarely within the context of a cosmological battle between death and Christ – sin and grace – and the battleground is humanity.<sup>30</sup>

Paul makes a point to show the hegemony of the cosmological reality of sin through reference to the trespasses of Adam and his descendants (verse 19). The Law came alongside a cosmological situation outside of human control to make things worse. Even though the Law is holy and good, sin used it as its base of operations to a lethal effect. For this reason, the Law cannot bring deliverance from the cosmological power of sin and death. The Law's true forensic purpose is to confirm the condemnation of Adamic humanity. This is in stark contradiction to the forensic understanding of Jewish apocalyptic eschatology.<sup>31</sup> This assessment grows directly out of Paul's Christological vantage point. Christ's death reveals that the observance of the Law cannot be the remedy for sin and the bridge over the chasm of death that separates humanity from God precisely because Christ lived a life in perfect obedience to the Law and was still subject to death. It was through the power of God that Christ was raised from the dead, breaking the power of sin and death, and establishing the promise of that same resurrection for believers. This free gift of deliverance in Christ entails a forensic-eschatological status. Yet it also presumes the divine power that reveals God's righteousness by triumphing over the reign of sin and death.<sup>32</sup>

---

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 158.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 164.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, 167.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, 169.

In Romans, Paul seems to point away from a linear futurity of eternal life to the paradoxical experience of eternal life now. This dialectical pattern arises from two sources in Paul's thought. First, he is convinced that Christ's death justifies believers now and not simply at the end. Second, Paul understands the Christ-event as God's cosmological-apocalyptic invasion of this age for the purpose of liberating humanity from sin and death.<sup>33</sup> He does not see two successive temporal epochs but two warring orbs of power that are conceived of cosmologically. Viewed from this cosmological standpoint, grace cannot be seen as God's sales pitch to those held captive by sin. It must be seen as his initiative to liberate them.<sup>34</sup> It is only because salvation is God's gift that believers can affirm the present reality of eternal life in the face of the seemingly continuing reign of sin and death.<sup>35</sup> God's redemptive power delivers human beings from the sphere of death by keeping them conformed to Christ's once-for-all death. The present reality of eternal life is based upon the eschatological promise of the parousia. Yet the fulfillment of this promise is present in Christ's death and resurrection.<sup>36</sup>

When approached with attention to the background of Jewish apocalyptic eschatology, Paul's argument in Romans, especially in this passage, begins to make sense. Further, it demonstrates that an individual forensic concept of justification is an inadequate way to characterize Paul's concept. His thought includes much larger and, indeed, cosmic motifs that serve to take the attention off of individual status and on to the initiative of God.

---

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, 173.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 174.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid, 176.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, 177.

## Conclusion - Paul's Apocalyptic Eschatology and the Church:

Paul's apocalyptic framework is profoundly instrumental in his interaction with the Christ-event. In recent times, however, Rudolf Bultmann, and those in his camp, has undertaken the "demythologization" of the biblical witness. It is their opinion that the modern, scientific worldview of the west should be considered correct. Thus, they wish to remove what they see to be the husk of the biblical message in order to get down to the kerygmatic core of the gospel. In their opinion, Paul's apocalyptic eschatology is part of that husk and they work to remove it. Yet, it has been profoundly observed that "[w]ithout the Devil and his dominion the biblical story becomes flattened out and one-dimensional, leaving us with 'I'm O.K. – You're O.K. – and other gooey stuff like that.'"<sup>37</sup> Modern humanity as a whole has discarded, seemingly out of hand, anything that doesn't fit with their, to use a post-modern term to describe modernism, 'imagination' of the world. The Church today must pay particular attention to the insights of J. Christiaan Beker in this area.

“[F]or Paul, the apocalyptic worldview is so interwoven with the truth of the gospel that their separation would tear the gospel apart. This points to an important hermeneutical insight: Whenever apocalyptic categories are demoted or degraded as if they are purely culturally determined or an obsolete survival, Paul's resurrection theology is transmuted into something else, such as the immortality of the soul or our heavenly ascent, or an existential possibility or the renunciation of the created order. The rejection of apocalyptic categories therefore, has important consequences for the truth of the gospel! This holds true even if we consider them irreconcilable with out modern, scientific worldview. Paul's use of “apocalyptic categories,” then, is closely interwoven with important christological, anthropological, and ethical issues.”<sup>38</sup>

To try and divorce Paul's apocalyptic framework from the message of the gospel would be to do violence to that very Gospel and inhibit the ability to understand the theology that comes with it.

---

<sup>37</sup> Carl E. Braaten & Robert W. Jenson, Ed. *The Last Things: Biblical and Theological Perspectives on Eschatology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002) 17.

<sup>38</sup> J. Christiaan Beker, *The Triumph of God: The Essence of Paul's Thought*, 77.

The Church in the West must consider where its cultural frameworks should be cast off, or at least extensively modified, in favor of an apocalyptic understanding. In our discussion of Romans 5, it has already been seen how a modern emphasis can undermine the focus of Paul's theology with specific reference to justification. With reference to the Christian's spiritual life, it is also true that "we have lost the ability to discern the spiritual dimensions of the warfare in which we are engaged. To put it another way, we have largely lost the apocalyptic imagination to understand the language of the Spirit – to fix our 'minds on the things that are above.'"<sup>39</sup> If we are to rightly understand the biblical witness, the Church must not shy away from the admission that perhaps it needs to have its categories rearranged.

However, this is not only a problem that the Church in the West must face in relation to itself, but it also concerns missionary strategy. It is profoundly important to communicate the Gospel to every culture that the Church comes into contact with. However, thought needs to be given to the issue of whether the Church should try to modify the categories of the Gospel to fit the categories of the culture, or whether the categories of believers in that culture should be cast off when they don't fit with the categories of the biblical witness. Beker makes another fine statement when he asserts that "[h]owever applicable the gospel must be to a Gentile in his contingent situation, it does not tolerate a world view that cannot express those elements inherent in the apocalyptic world view and that to Paul seem inherent in the truth of the gospel."<sup>40</sup> The appropriation of prevailing culture of any kind must be undertaken very carefully with much academic rigor and honesty of consideration.

A third area wherein a recovery of Paul's apocalyptic framework must be pursued is in the area of Christian ethics. Beker observes, with reference to 1 Corinthians 15, that "Paul's

---

<sup>39</sup> Braaten and Jenson, 15.

<sup>40</sup> Beker, *Paul the Apostle: The Triumph of God in Life and Thought*, 171.

ethical imperatives, for instance, presuppose the transformation, rather than the futile destiny, of the created order.”<sup>41</sup> Paul’s concepts of transformation, fueled by his apocalyptic understanding of Christ’s death and resurrection, as well as the Christian’s relationship to them, serve to reinforce the notion that the Church should actively engage the world. There is no call to asceticism and withdrawal from society. Rather, the emphasis is on the fundamentally good nature of the created order, which will not be destroyed but rather restored to its rightful shape. This encourages engagement with the world around us as we bear witness, through our own action and activism, to the future, eschatological, and parousia-based hope in the resurrection of the dead and the restoration of the created order.

The framework of Jewish apocalyptic eschatology, in a form modified by the Christ-event, constitutes the framework through which Paul interprets the Gospel. A proper understanding of this framework aids us in our reading of the Pauline corpus and can serve to correct some of the doctrinal (over?)emphases produced by our modern understandings. These insights also serve to remind us that the biblical witness does not subscribe to a modern world-view. Indeed, the categories through which the Church understands itself must be examined in light of the importance of apocalyptic eschatology in the thought of Paul. Furthermore, it must be wondered where undue concessions have been made in the effort to communicate the Gospel to different times, circumstances, and cultures. Finally, Paul’s apocalyptic framework provides insight into the impetus for Christian ethics and engagement with the world. In the end, the Church must revisit this important hermeneutic tool in order to properly understand the Gospel.

---

<sup>41</sup> Ibid, 167.

### Bibliography

Beker, J. Christiaan. *Paul the Apostle: The Triumph of God in Life and Thought* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980).

Beker, J. Christiaan. *The Triumph of God: The Essence of Paul's Thought* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990).

Braaten, Carl E. & Jenson, Robert W. Eds. *The Last Things: Biblical and Theological Perspectives on Eschatology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002)

Bruce, F. F. *Paul: The Apostle of the Heart Set Free* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978)

De Boer, Martinus C. *The Defeat of Death: Apocalyptic Eschatology in 1 Corinthians 15 and Romans 5* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1988)

Marrow, Stanley B. *Paul: His Letters and His Theology* (New York: Paulist Press, 1986)

Martyn, J. Louis. *Theological Issues in the Letters of Paul*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997).

Moltmann, Jurgen. *The Coming of God: Christian Eschatology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996)

Vos, Geerhardus. *The Pauline Eschatology* (Princeton New Jersey: Published by the author, 1930)