

## *Eschatology*

**F.F. Bruce**

[p.99]

In addition to the normal progress of biblical study, one or two events of recent years have directed special attention to the eschatological teaching of the New Testament. Two events in particular may be mentioned, the one occurring in the practical life of the Church, the other of a more purely academic nature. These are the World Assembly of Churches at Evanston, Ill., in the summer of 1954, and the discovery and study of the Dead Sea Scrolls from Qumran. The Evanston Assembly was the occasion of a number of careful studies of the Christian hope; the Qumran texts have introduced us to an aspect of eschatological expectation in Israel at the beginning of the Christian era which invites both comparison and contrast with what we find in the New Testament.

The literature which has appeared of late on New Testament eschatology is bewildering in its variety, and the ordinary Christian may well ask what he is to believe. 'What do we ask for when we pray: "Thy kingdom come"? What do we mean when we say in the Creed: "...from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead"? And what are we to understand when we are told at the Holy Communion that "as often as we eat this bread, and drink the cup, we proclaim the Lord's death *till he come*"?'

We cannot leave the Old Testament out of sight when we review recent literature on this subject; for the eschatological teaching of the New Testament is rooted in that of the Old. We must think, for example, of Sigmund Mowinckel's great book, *He That Cometh*, now accessible to English readers in the excellent translation by G. W. Anderson (Blackwell, 1956). Mowinckel holds that at the annual New Year festival in Jerusalem the kingship of Yahweh was celebrated and the promises made by Yahweh to the house of David were recalled, but the contrast between the ideal embodied in these promises and the actual fortunes of the royal house became so painfully evident as time went on that the ideal was projected into the future and associated with the figure of that coming prince of the house of David who came to be known as the Messiah *sagas* phrase, with whose advent the expected Day of Yahweh would be inaugurated. Mowinckel has certainly identified one factor in the eschatology of the Old Testament, though not the only factor.

Mention should also be made of the Fernley-Hartley Lecture for 1952, S. P. Frost's *Old Testament Apocalyptic* (Epworth Press, 1952), which investigates the origin and development of the most distinctive literary form in which the eschatological hope expressed itself. Here it is insisted that apocalyptic is not the eschatologizing of mythology (in which case it would have little to say to us) but the mythologizing of eschatology, the casting of the eschatological hope into forms drawn from mythology. In the latter case, the process of demythologizing could leave us with something of real substance and value.

Apocalyptic is so foreign a mode of expression to most of us today that it is difficult to realize that the apocalyptists were, for the most part, saying in their way what other biblical writers said in other ways. For example, no two books Gospel are more diverse in literary form than the Johannine Gospel and Apocalypse; but when we get behind the form to the substance, we discover that both works are concerned to present One whose name is called 'The Word of God' saying to His followers: 'In the world you have tribulation; but

[p.100]

be of good cheer, I have overcome the world' (John 16<sub>33</sub>; cf. Rev. 5<sub>5</sub>, 19<sub>13</sub>).

The perfect tense 'I have overcome' suggests the change in eschatological outlook that takes place when we pass from the Old Testament to the New. In the Old Testament, eschatology is forward-looking; its dominant notes are those of hope and promise. While these notes are not absent from the New Testament, the dominant note is that of fulfilment: in the ministry of Jesus the long-expected 'kingdom of God' is present, and through His death Resurrection, and Exaltation it comes with power. But if that is so is there anything further to be looked for?

What is the *eschaton*, the 'last thing', which is the object of eschatological hope? If it came with the ministry and triumph of Jesus, then it cannot be the absolute end of time, for time has gone on since then. Perhaps we should say that the New Testament reveals the 'last thing' to be really the 'Last One', the *Eschatos* (cf. 'the First and the Last' as a title of Jesus in Rev. 1<sub>17</sub>, 2<sub>8</sub>, 22<sub>13</sub>). That is to say, Jesus Himself is the fulfillment of his people's hope, and the 'Amen' to all the promises of God.

As Albert Schweitzer, with his 'consistent eschatology', was the most significant name in eschatology a generation ago, so in our day C. H. Dodd, with his 'realized eschatology', is probably the most significant name. In his *Parables of the Kingdom* (1935), he interprets the Parables of Jesus in terms of the challenge to decision with which men are confronted by the presence of the kingdom in His ministry. In *The Apostolic Preaching and Its Developments* 1936 'the kingdom of God is conceived as coming in the events of the life death, and Resurrection of Jesus, and to proclaim these facts, in their proper setting, is to preach the Gospel of the Kingdom of God' (pp.46f.)—without reference to another coming in the future. These events constitute an eschatological process, 'a decisive manifestation of the mighty acts of God for the salvation of man'; and the relapse into Jewish eschatology which led to a concentration on an *eschaton* yet to come had the effect of relegating to a secondary place just those elements of the gospel which are most distinctive of Christianity. In a later work, however, *The Coming of Christ* (1951). Dr Dodd appears to allow a future consummation associated with the Person of Christ: what came to earth with the advent of Christ 'was final and decisive for the whole meaning and Purpose of human existence, and we shall meet it again when history has been wound up.... At the last frontier-post we shall encounter God in Christ...' (p.58).

Parallel to Dr Dodd's interpretation is that given by Joachim Jeremias in *The Parables of Jesus* (Eng. tr., 1954; indeed he acknowledges his indebtedness to Dr Dodd. The parables, according to Dr Jeremias, express an eschatology 'that is in process of realization'; they proclaim that 'the hour of fulfilment is come' and compel the hearers to come to a decision about the person and mission of Jesus (p.159).

The work of T. F. Glasson stands in the Dodd succession. In *The Second Advent* (1945) he argued that towards the middle of the first century various circumstances induced a spirit of great excitement and expectancy in the early Church which led to the belief that a culminating intervention from heaven must soon take place; this was to take the form of a manifestation of Christ in glory, the details of which were filled in from Old Testament descriptions of theophanies and of the Day of Yahweh. In his *Appearing and His Kingdom*

[p.101]

(1952) he reproduced this thesis in a form suitable for more general readers, together with a survey of Christian eschatological expectation throughout the centuries. Like William Temple earlier, he affirms that 'the Church must accustom itself to the idea of a vast future on the earth'. But he adds: 'If any one wishes to add with Maldwyn Hughes that "history will be consummated by some supreme manifestation of the Presence and Power of Christ" ...I shall certainly not quarrel with him' (*His Appearing and His Kingdom*, p.191). This is to the same effect as our quotation from Dr Dodd's *The Coming of Christ*.

But perhaps the most stimulating thinker in this succession is J. A. T. Robinson. In 1950 he produced a book entitled *In the End, God...*, in which he interpreted the doctrine of Christ's *parousia*, not as a literal event of the future, but as a symbolical or mythological presentation of 'what must happen, and is happening already, whenever the Christ comes in love and comes in power, wherever are to be traced the signs of His presence, wherever to be seen the marks of His cross. Judgment Day is a dramatized, idealized picture of every day' (p.69). More recently, in *Jesus and His Coming* (1957), he applies himself to the crucial question: Did Jesus Himself ever use language which suggested that He would return to earth from heaven? A critical examination of the data leads Dr Robinson to conclude that He did not. His sayings on the subject really express the two themes of vindication and visitation. For example, His reply to the high Priest's question (Mark 14<sub>61f</sub>)—where Dr Robinson (no doubt rightly) takes the phrase "from now on" added in Matthew 26<sub>64</sub> and Luke 22<sub>69</sub> to be a genuine part of the reply—declares, in language derived from Daniel 7<sub>13</sub> and Psalm 110<sub>1</sub>, that the Son of man, though condemned by earthly judges, will be vindicated in the presence of God. Other sayings (e.g. Luke 12<sub>40</sub>; Matt. 10<sub>23</sub>; Luke 18<sub>8</sub>) apply the expression 'the coming of the Son of man' to a visitation in judgement which will be set in motion by His rejection; it will take place 'from now on' as surely as His vindication. Instead of a realized eschatology, Dr Robinson speaks of an 'inaugurated' eschatology—an eschatology inaugurated by the death and Resurrection of Jesus. For His death and Resurrection did not exhaust the messianic act; on the contrary, they 'would but release and initiate that reign of God in which henceforth the Father's redeeming work could be brought to the fulfilment which hitherto it was denied' (p.81). As for the ministry of Jesus before His death and Resurrection, Dr Robinson applies to it some such term as 'Proleptic eschatology' (p.101), because in His words and deeds the signs of the messianic age were to be seen by anticipation.

But at an early date in the Church's history the perspective was changed. The vindication was allowed to follow immediately upon Christ's death and resurrection, but the Son of man's coming in visitation was thought of as deferred.

When Jesus spoke to the high priest about the coming of the Son of man with the clouds of heaven, did He imply a coming to earth? It has generally been accepted that He did, but nowadays several authorities have pointed out that in Daniel 7<sub>13</sub>, which lies behind these words of His, 'one like a son of man' comes to the Ancient of Days (which is true), and they add the corollary that He comes not to earth but to heaven (which is questionable). Where are the thrones of Daniel 7<sub>9</sub> placed; where does the judgement take place?

[p.102]

If we interpret Mark 14<sub>62</sub> in the light of Mark 13<sub>21</sub>, the Son of man is evidently pictured as coming in clouds to gather His elect from earth. But there are many scholars who would not accept the discourse of Mark 13 in its present form as the unaltered teaching of Jesus, and

verses 24 to 27 in particular are widely regarded as secondary, the product of that changed perspective in the early Church which also finds expression, e.g. in 2 Thessalonians 1<sup>8-10</sup>.

At this point, however, we must mention the important contributions G. R. Beasley-Murray—*Jesus and the Future* (1954) and *A Commentary on Mark Thirteen* (1957)—in which a well-argued case is presented for the integrity and authenticity of the discourse of Mark 13. He suggests the possibility that the discourse was spoken on one occasion but was reproduced in a fragmentary condition, so that when a Christian teacher wrote it up for the benefit of the churches it was inevitably recorded in a disjointed state (*Jesus and the Future*, p.212; cf. *A Commentary on Mark Thirteen*, p.11n.). He acknowledges that verses 24 to 27 portray the Day of the Lord in language almost wholly drawn from the prophets. 'When God steps forth for salvation the universe pales before him' (*Commentary*, p.87), and against this background of a darkened heaven the Son of man comes with clouds—to earth. He notes that the contrary interpretation of Mark 14<sup>62</sup> 'is becoming almost a new orthodoxy in Britain' (ib., p.91), but is convinced that it cannot stand. To our question, 'Where are the thrones of Daniel 7<sup>9</sup> placed; where does the judgement take place?' he answers: On earth; for he can find no other meaning in Daniel 7<sup>22</sup>) 'the Ancient of Days came', than that He came to earth where 'the saints of the Most High' (the counterpart of 'one like a son of man' in verse 13) receive dominion from Him. On this showing Mark 13<sup>26</sup> need not be looked upon as a secondary recasting of Mark 14<sup>62</sup>; in both places Jesus does point forward to a coming of the Son of man to earth. Mark 14<sup>62</sup>, in fact is the one sure Gospel text which J. E. Fison regards as unambiguously proving that Jesus did speak of His second coming (*The Christian Hope*, 1954, p.194).

Before we leave Mark 13, we may mention the unusual treatment given to this chapter in the late R. H. Lightfoot's *The Gospel Message of St Mark* (1950), pp.48ff. ('The Connexion of Chapter Thirteen with the Passion Narrative'). Here it is argued that the discourse of Mark 13 is a forecast, in apocalyptic language, of events which (in the first instance at any rate) were fulfilled by our Lord's passion. In this case, Lightfoot remarks, Mark 13<sup>30</sup> 'becomes much less difficult than is usually supposed: "Verily I say unto you, this generation shall not pass away, until all these things be accomplished." A first fulfilment at any rate was not far off, which was itself regarded as a sign, a seal of assurance and a sacrament of the ultimate fulfilment' (p.54),

Among significant publications in this field by Continental scholars, we may make special reference to those by W. G. Kümmel and Oscar Cullmann, not only because they are accessible in English dress, but also because of their intrinsic importance. The recent appearance of Kümmel's *Promise and Fulfilment* as No. 23 In the S.C.M. Press Studies in Biblical Theology (1957) is heartily to be welcomed. He does more justice than many scholars do to the tension between the idea of the presence of the Kingdom of God in the life and work of Jesus and the idea of its future consummation as a tension which is operative in the thought of Jesus Himself as well as of the New Testament

[p.103]

Church. He also does more justice to the evidence that Jesus envisaged an interval of some duration between His Resurrection and His *parousia*. For example, although Mark 13<sup>10</sup> (and the gospel must first be preached unto all the nations') interrupts the continuity of the context in which it appears, it is an authentic 'detached saying' of Jesus which can only apply to the period happened the *eschaton*. Put the *eschaton* is essentially bound up with what happened

when Christ came; He fulfilled the Kingdom and promised it; His promise of it is confirmed by His fulfilment of it in His life and death, fulfilment of it in His life and death will be vindicated when His promise at last comes true.

Oscar Cullmann, who acknowledges his debt to Kümmel, has dealt with the subject in *Christ and Time* (Eng. tr. 1951) and in his essay on *The Return of Christ*, included in *The Early Church* (Eng. tr., 1956), pp.141ff. He has caught the imagination of many readers by his happy use of the analogy of D-Day and V-Day to illustrate the relation between what Christ has done and His *parousia*. Once the decisive battle of a war has been won, the final outcome is assured, although the lapse of time before that ultimate manifestation and celebration of victory is and of relative unimportance. The *parousia* is not the decisive event for uncertain, Christianity; it is the inevitable sequel of the decisive event, which took place in the death and Resurrection of Christ. The when of its occurrence does not matter nearly so much as the fact that its occurrence is assured.

The brilliant work done by some of our British scholars requires the corrective of these Continental colleagues. We can never go back on the achievements of Dodd and his school. They have taught us something that we needed to learn, even if they have so emphasized it as to leave another factor in the situation out of sight. Put this other factor receives its proper place in the work of Kümmel and Cullmann.

With the death and resurrection of Christ eschatology has indeed been inaugurated. By his triumph the slaughtered Lamb has vindicated His title to be the effective Lord of history; this is the lesson of Revelation 5. But inauguration points on to consummation; if Christ is Lord of history, He is directing it towards its true goal. And this consummation, this goal, must be as truly bound up with His person as the inauguration was. This is why the consummation is described as the 'epiphany of His Parousia'—'the manifestation of His presence' (2 Thess. 2<sub>8</sub>). He has been vindicated by God; but that vindication is yet to be publicly revealed and universally acknowledged. Meanwhile, we who live between the times'—between D-Day and V-Day—may have the present and constant assurance of His presence, His coming, His abiding, as victor and Deliverer. The New Testament writing which dwells in greatest detail on the present vindication and exaltation of Christ admits that as yet we do not see all things put under Him, but teaches us to rest content so long as we see Jesus glorified (Heb. 2<sub>8f</sub>); this is guarantee enough that the Coming One will come (Heb.10<sub>31</sub>). In this hope we pray 'Thy kingdom come; we confess that Christ 'shall come to judge the quick and the dead'; and each time that we eat the bread and drink the cup we 'proclaim the Lord's death till he come'.

---

© 1958 *Methodist Publishing House* (<http://www.mph.org.uk/>). Reproduced by permission.

Prepared for the Web in October 2007 by Robert I. Bradshaw.

<http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/>

---