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1980s Honko became increasingly engaged with the systematization of scholarship on the world's epic traditions. These interests led him, in the 1990s, to new theoretical questions about textualisation and organic variation, about the making of folklore texts in performance and strategies for data collecting, about the "thick corpus" of data as a *sine qua non* for serious research and about the short and long epic formats. Honko rejected the dichotomy of literary and purely oral epics and introduced the concept of tradition-oriented epics, which includes such works as the Finnish national epic, Kalevala, by Elias Lönnrot and the Estonian Kalevipoeg by Friedrich R. Kreutzwald. In re-examining the various corpora in the overall textualisation process of the Kalevala he also created the notion of mental text – a pre-textual frame, a pre-narrative existing in the singer's mind. In order to test his findings empirically Lauri Honko embarked upon field-research into the epic tradition among the Tulu people of Southern India. He published a two-volume edition of the Siri Epic with a thorough introduction in 1998 (FFC nos. 264, 265, 266). Extensive empirical research convinced him of the urgent need for a special institute dedicated to the comparative study of the world's epic tradition. Determined as he was, he gathered resources and established the Kalevala Institute at the University of Turku. Being the editor of Folklore Fellows Communications since 1969, he made the Kalevala Institute the centre of research and academic publishing for studies of the epic traditions of the world. Today the institute has won fame in many countries, just as other works by Honko have survived their author. Honko's final magnum opus, published posthumously, was a twin epic by Anne Vabarna, a Setu woman from South-Eastern Estonia, whose performance of "The Maiden's Death Song" and "The Great Wedding" was recorded by the Finnish ethnomusicologist, A.O. Väisänen in 1923. (Lauri Honko in collaboration with Anneli Honko and Paul Hagu. FFC 281. 2003). Thus Lauri Honko returned to the Baltic-Finnish realm of culture to which he belonged as mentor and authority in all issues of folkloristics and comparative religion. His works, however, belong to scholars present and future all over the world.

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## Last Things First: "Eschatology" as the first chapter in an overall account of early Christian ideas

In 1897, New Testament scholar William Wrede (1859–1906) sketched the programme of a "History of Early Christian Religion and Theology" as an alternative to "New Testament Theology". Wrede worked with the group of scholars known as the *Religionsgeschichtliche Schule*, which tried to place the religion of Israel and emerging Christianity firmly within a religio-historical context - at first apparently independently of (but parallel to) the nascent discipline of comparative religion. Wrede complained that too close a relationship to dogmatics had prevented the discipline of "New Testament Theology" from becoming truly historical (Wrede 1973, 69) and claimed that it was *not* the task of the exegete (or any theologian) to serve the practical needs of the Church. Consequently, the biblical canon (which is a result of church decisions) must have no significance in a critical synthesis of the scholarly findings; "no New Testament writing was born with the predicate 'canonical' attached." All early evidence, canonical or non-canonical, must be taken into account. A "New Testament Theology" understood in this way would in no respect differ from a history of (early Christian) religion.

Unfortunately, this brilliant scholar died young. As the theological climate changed dramatically in the aftermath of World War one, leading to the rise of Barthian neo-orthodoxy and the decline of liberal Protestantism, it took nearly a century until the first efforts were undertaken to carry out Wrede's programme.<sup>1</sup> These attempts still leave much to be desired; there is certainly room for further experiments.

A word of clarification is needed here. Of course critical historical work

<sup>1</sup>Berger 1995 and Theissen 1999 refer explicitly to Wrede's programme. Rowland 1987 and Teeple 1992 do not, but in many ways their books already move along similar lines. See my comments on these (and some other recent) works in Räisänen 2000, 108–109, 134–147. Recently Zeller (2002) has given a succinct account of the birth and consolidation of Christianity (down to the middle of the second century) in the first volume on Christianity in the series *Die Religionen der Menschheit*, in effect largely realising what Wrede had in mind.

on the New Testament and its environment was being done throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century; there is nothing novel in that. The point is that the scholarly landscape has tended to change dramatically when one moves from articles and monographs to *syntheses* of the discipline, or to programmatic statements on what the discipline is all about. In these works the climate has been overtly theological.<sup>2</sup>

A synthesis can be constructed in many different ways. In what follows I sketch *one* possible model. I take it for granted that other ways of planning and organising such an account are possible and legitimate; in fact, readers would be best served if several *different* syntheses, written from diverging viewpoints and structured differently, were available.

For some time I have been working towards a synthesis of early Christian<sup>3</sup> ideas or, in a more modest formulation, of cognitive elements in early Christianity (the programme is presented in Räisänen 2000). In this, the scope of my project is narrower than that of Wrede; I find the history of early Christian *religion* in its totality too vast a task at the moment. There is enough challenge in trying to paint a total picture of early Christian ideas.<sup>4</sup> I present the plan to scholars of comparative religion in the hope that the guild may find it relevant and could contribute to its improvement.

The main principles of the project are as follows:

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<sup>2</sup> In 1990, I described the situation thus: "Special studies on the New Testament and early Christianity are quite often conducted in a detached, descriptive, history-of-religions or literary-critical atmosphere. Value-laden theological categories such as 'revelation' or 'inspiration' are seldom used at this level... All this changes abruptly when one turns from monographs to New Testament theologies... We hear a good deal of God revealing himself definitively in Christ and speaking to us through the New Testament texts. Some diversity in the texts is admitted (often reluctantly), but the authors are at pains to show that behind the diversity there nevertheless lies a theological unity. They also make an effort to make the texts speak to modern men and women in their present situation..." Räisänen 2000, 2. For a discussion of the history of the discipline see *ibid.*: 11–147.

<sup>3</sup> Strictly speaking the term is an anachronism as regards the first "Christian" century. It would be inconvenient to avoid it systematically, but the reader should take it *cum grano salis*: it is a question of the religious movement, originally a group within Judaism, from which the Christian religion was to develop.

<sup>4</sup> Concentration on the cognitive side does *not* imply that ideas (let alone "theology") should be regarded as the most important aspect in (any) religion. I only assume that ideas are important enough to merit independent consideration (though not in isolation from their social context!).

- the work has no ecclesiastical or specifically Christian concern, but is addressed to a wider readership;
- it is *religionswissenschaftlich* in orientation ;
- it is not limited to the New Testament canon, but deals on equal terms with all material down to the middle of the second century and casts a glance on even later developments, where possible;
- it makes no distinction between "orthodoxy" and "heresy" (except as historical notions);
- the work is not focused on "doctrines", but on the formation of religious ideas in close interaction with the social experience of individuals and communities;
- the account should contain some hints at the reception and influence of the various ideas and convictions, thus helping to build a bridge to the present;
- the account concentrates on major lines and main problems, opting for a topical organization; thereby full justice would be done to the diversity of early Christianity.

A few comments on the last point are in order. "New Testament Theologies" are often organized according to writings: Paul, the Synoptics, the Johannine writings etc. Comparisons between the different writings thereby tend to be accidental and Paul is likely to receive exaggerated attention, as the New Testament contains so many writings from his pen.

It is also possible to organize an overall account in chronological or tradition-historical terms (e.g. Zeller 2002), but here the fragmentary nature of the early sources causes problems; one is forced to resort to more or less hypothetical reconstructions (witness Berger 1995). Personally, I have found a *thematic* or topical structure attractive (cf. also Theissen 1999). Modern readers interested in a summarising account of the discipline will perhaps profit more from a sketch of the great lines and main issues than from an exposition of the profiles of individual authors. But any choice has its advantages and disadvantages.

Where should a thematic account begin? Obviously, it would not be wise to start an account of *early* Christian ideas with an exposition of the Trinity. The decision, favoured by existentialist theology, to choose anthropology as the starting point, also seems to lead to undue modernising. Monotheism, as the common basis for Judaism and nascent Christianity, would be a possibility, and

so would christology; and self-evidently, Jesus has a central place in Christianity.

Without denying the legitimacy of other options, I am inclined to start with "eschatology". The quotation marks indicate that the term is not used in the sense it carries in traditional compendia of dogmatics. In such works, "eschatology", the doctrine of the 'last things', would have been explained in the last chapter, as a kind of appendix. In an account of early Christian religion, by contrast, "the end" arguably belongs to the *first* chapter. A vivid expectation of a great and decisive *turn of history*, brought about by God, was basic to the genesis of the new religious movement from which Christianity was to develop. This expectation had its roots in Jewish hopes. In critical situations, when Israelite identity was under threat (whether from without or from within), the memories of bygone days when Yahweh had helped his people "with his mighty hand and his outstretched arm" were actualized, and his promises to intervene again one day became the source of great hopes.

"Eschatology" has to do with a teleological view of history. Such a view is far from self-evident. Wilfred Cantwell Smith records the remark of an Indian friend, "Being a Hindu, I am not a victim of the notion that history is going anywhere" (Smith 1993, 246 n. 15).<sup>5</sup> No doubt this Hindu hit on a crucial difference between the two traditions. The classic Christian (and Jewish) view used to be that history *is* moving, or rather is moved by God, towards a goal. This vision has had an effect even on secular views of history in the West. "It could be argued that the Bible, with its tale of human history stretching from a long-ago beginning to a final culmination in glory yet to come and its presentation of the historical process as the primary arena of the activity of God, has been the single most important source of the West's historicizing orientation." (Smith 1993, 9f.)<sup>6</sup>

Early christology can be understood as part of eschatology (rather than vice versa): expectation of a redeemer figure was often connected with the expectation of the turn, and the understanding of Jesus as the Messiah has to do with this. A comprehensive account of eschatology, which also encompasses its transformation into something else, could easily grow almost to an overall presentation of early Christianity. This is an important reason for starting an

<sup>5</sup> To be sure, Hindu eschatology does assume a catastrophic end of history, but this is incomprehensibly far in the future; history consists of immensely long cycles of time (in which an end is followed by a rebirth of the world) lasting millions of years.

<sup>6</sup> Not that teleological views of history are lacking in the "East" either. Buddhism knows the important figure of Maitreya, the future Buddha whose coming will establish universal peace and concord.

overall account with the expectation of the great turn.

Yet eschatology does *not* have a central position in extant New Testament theologies; it is more or less explained away. It is difficult to avoid suspecting apologetical motives here, when history as the arena of God's action has become a problem for modernity. Even Gerd Theissen's *religionswissenschaftlich* synthesis blends all early Christian expectations together into expressions of *one* "basic motif", the motif of renewal (1999, 277). But if the Book of Revelation and the gospel of Thomas are taken to represent one and the same point of view, we are moving on a very abstract level. Christopher Rowland's account (1987) is a laudable exception. Here, eschatology does have a key position: the competition between an earthly expectation and a transcendent hope plays a central role. In the spirit of liberation theology, Rowland's sympathy is strongly on the side of the earthly expectation. A somewhat less partisan approach might emphasise that *both* alternatives had their advantages and disadvantages. But I share with Rowland the view that the question of "where" is even more fundamental in early Christian "eschatology" than that of "when", on which most discussions (including Zeller 2002) are focused.

What follows is a sketch of "eschatology" as the first chapter in the kind of overall account I have in mind. The chapter could be entitled *God, History and Beyond*. It deals with the expected future activity on this earth by the god of Israel, including the transformation of this expectation to a hope of fulfilment in a transcendent realm and the coexistence, competition and combinations of these two different visions. "Individual eschatology" - what is expected to happen to a person in and after death - would be dealt with in the following chapter.

### The Jewish matrix<sup>7</sup>

The common ancient Near Eastern belief that each people is aided in its fortunes by its gods<sup>8</sup> is shared by the authors of the historical and prophetic books of the Hebrew Bible. The 'Exodus', the deliverance from Egyptian bondage, came to be portrayed as the classic divine act. Albeit historically at best a very minor incident, it became the celebrated archetype of battles won

<sup>7</sup> Cf. e.g. Smend 1982; Gowan 1987; Nickelsburg 1992; Collins 1992.

<sup>8</sup> The view, characteristic of much previous scholarship, that this is a unique vision which distinguishes the religion of Israel from the religions of its neighbours, is disproved by such evidence as the Mesa stele and the Esarhaddon treaties.

through divine intervention, along with the sensational (if imaginary) conquest of Canaan. Yahweh was envisaged as providing help in local battles in the time of the 'judges' and the early monarchy. The idealized memories of such incidents, combined with the royal propaganda of court theologians who equated Yahweh's cause with that of the state (e.g. Psalm 2), fostered the faith that this god would protect his people. Tales about the warrior god, painted with colours adapted from combat myths celebrating the victory of a god over primeval monsters of chaos, were combined with Canaanite traditions about Zion, the primeval dwelling-place of the deity. The result was the conviction that Jerusalem was inviolable.

From time to time, there appeared prophets of doom who tried to shatter this trust. They predicted the destruction of Israel which, they held, had forsaken Yahweh. Yahweh was using the troops of Assyria and Babylon as his instruments of punishment. These prophets postulated, as traditional wisdom had done, a causal connection between morality and welfare, though on a universal level.

The catastrophe became true. Jerusalem was sacked and its leading citizens exiled. "For those who had believed that Yahweh would protect his own people it must have been a time of serious loss of faith after the holocaust." (Carroll 1979, 150) A radically new situation now called for new kinds of spiritual leadership. The prophecies of doom yielded to promises of a new turn. Israel had atoned for her sins. The faith that Yahweh would redeem his people asserted itself once more. "Second Isaiah", the unknown prophet of Isa 40-55, sensed in the expansion of Persia the prelude to a new age. The exiles would return to their land, the tribes of Israel would be regathered. Yahweh would enact a new Exodus, parallel to his victory over the monsters of chaos, that would conjure up the idea of a new creation. A material and spiritual renewal awaited both Israel and the nations, to whom Israel would be a light so that they too would turn to Yahweh. And all this was happening, now! Second Isaiah took 'the radical step of identifying God's decisive act with a historical event', the rise of Cyrus, king of Persia (Nickelsburg 1992, 581).

The exiles did get permission to return, but hopes of peace and prosperity were bitterly disappointed. Juda remained a vassal to foreign powers; the dynasty of David was extinguished; living conditions were poor. The only hopes that *were* realized were the survival of a community centred on Jerusalem, with a rebuilt - but modest - temple as its focus. The historical experience clashed with expectations. But the optimistic oracles were not forgotten. They were edited into collections, reinterpreted and reapplied.

Not that this expectation of divine deliverance in the future was ever shared by all. It was *one* important Israelite way of perceiving reality, surely most germane to those who were not in charge of political or religious institutions.

For a long time, the would-be turn remained this-worldly. On this earth, at the centre of which stood Jerusalem with its gloriously renewed temple, a new order would be established. Israel would be vindicated. The dispersed tribes would return. Piety and purity would flourish in individual lives and in the cult. About the destiny of other nations various views are found: some predict world peace, others expect the destruction of the Gentiles. Some oracles envisage cosmic upheavals: the skies are wrapped together, the stars fall down from the firmament. Originally, this may have been metaphoric speech depicting the judgment of enemies. Later, the expectation of cosmic signs became an established belief and the images were often understood literally. Sometimes even the creation of a heaven and earth is envisaged. Here a novel dualistic vision emerges, emphasizing the contrast and the gap between old and new. The new beginning is conceived to be so spectacular that it really belongs beyond the world as humans have known it. Still, even the new creation bears characteristics of earthly life, though in transformed conditions. The centre of Third Isaiah's (Isa 56-66) new earth is still Jerusalem, and while people will reach an extremely old age, they will still die. But it is an earthly Paradise (Isa 65.17ff).

Most of the expectation, even in the Persian period seems to have been due to an intra-Israelite development. In the turmoils of the Greco-Roman era it received international colouring from the apocalyptic world of ideas then generally in vogue.<sup>9</sup> As the Egyptians and Babylonians had lost their kings, too, 'the Hellenistic age was marked by widespread nostalgia for the past and alienation from the present' (Collins 1992, 28). Now as before, old hopes were sustained, but they were reinterpreted in new situations, among which the crisis under the Syrian monarch, Antiochus Epiphanes, with the defilement of the temple (mid-2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE), stood out.

The classic view, expressed in the prophetic books, had been that either salvation or destruction could ensue, depending on whether the people mended

<sup>9</sup> It seems unviable to isolate "apocalyptic eschatology" as a distinct category. In a presentation focused on the formation of religious ideas it is neither possible nor necessary to penetrate into the literary problems of apocalypticism (which are many). "Apocalypses" are not only eschatological works, while eschatological views similar to those found in apocalypses are found elsewhere. The questions of the bearers and social settings of the apocalypses are largely open.

their ways. Apocalyptic revelations, from 1 Enoch and Daniel on, seem to imply instead that Yahweh had an immutable plan for the course of events. This may be seen as a reaffirmation of the old conviction that Yahweh would eventually save his people; what is new is the notion that the stages on the road to salvation were predetermined and could, with heavenly aid, be discovered by the sage.<sup>10</sup> This determinism is largely a side effect of the *ex eventu* technique. But in the end the determinism is mitigated (or contradicted) by the rivalling notion, more at home in the prophetic books, that the course of events could be affected e.g. by the prayers of the righteous, by conversion to the Torah or by the deaths of the martyrs.

Largely due to external (Persian) influences, dualistic notions gained in intensity. Sharp distinctions could be drawn between this age and a coming new aeon (temporal dualism); between the wicked and the righteous even in Israel (social dualism); and between this earth and a transcendent heavenly sphere (cosmic dualism). Much of this is palpable in the book of Daniel, composed during the time of Antiochus. After the present time of tribulation, perceived as the worst catastrophe ever, God would prepare deliverance for his people (Dan 12). In a cosmic battle, in which angels fought infernal beasts, he would break the hostile kingdom into pieces and establish his own reign. "And the kingdom and the dominion and the greatness of the kingdoms under the whole heaven shall be given to the people of the saints of the Most High; their kingdom shall be an everlasting kingdom, and all dominions shall serve and obey them." (Dan 7.27) A great judgment (depicted in more detail in 1 Enoch) would take place. "And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt." (Dan 12.2)

Indeed, the Maccabean crisis helped notions of post-mortem retribution and life after death to gain ground in Judaism. Dan 12.2 is the first (and last) unambiguous reference to resurrection in the Hebrew Bible. Life after death seems 'a kind of appendix to the eschatology of the Old Testament. It doesn't quite fit and the logic of most Old Testament thought doesn't require it, but there are historical reasons here that transcend logic.' (Gowan 1987, 91) The idea is clearly Zoroastrian in origin.<sup>11</sup> As is often the case in religious history,

<sup>10</sup> Yet, contrary to a persistent scholarly claim, exact time-tables are rare in apocalyptic, the book of Daniel being the exception here rather than the rule.

<sup>11</sup> This is convincingly argued by Hultgård 2000. While only late sources are available for the bulk of apocalyptic Persian material, Greek authors such as Plutarch (who used earlier sources) show that this world-view existed in Persia in the Achaemenid period. Contacts between Jews and Persians were frequent and friendly in those times.

encounter with a foreign tradition facilitated a coming to terms with a dilemma in one's own; it 'produced the necessary stimulus for the full development of ideas that were slowly under way in Judaism'. (Hultgård 2000, 80) The idea of resurrection is a radical resolution to the problem of innocent suffering. In a situation where those faithful to Yahweh were persecuted and killed, only a solution that defied death was, it seemed, capable of saving Yahweh's righteousness and sustaining the people's hope. The martyrs would be vindicated and the oppressors punished; the faithful would be resurrected to eternal life.

In the book of Daniel the righteous martyrs are a special case. 'Many, not all, will rise; presumably the very good and very bad.' (Collins 1992, 90) It would seem that, in this author's vision, the life of resurrection was to be lived in a theocracy on this earth (thus e.g. Nickelsburg 1992, 585), and undoubtedly that is where a *bodily* resuscitation conceptually (and, in its Iranian setting, originally) belongs. Such a view is clear in the Animal Apocalypse (1 Enoch 90) and in the (later) similitudes of Enoch (1 Enoch 51.5, 45.5–6, 63). Yet the wording of Daniel 12.2–3 is also 'open to the idea of transformation into heavenly existence, glory and light' (Cavallin 1974, 27). The Testament of Moses, likewise having the Maccabean crisis in view, later envisages such a blissful future for the whole people: 'after cosmic upheaval and the destruction of Israel's gentile enemies Israel will be lifted up from earth to the heavenly immortal realm of the stars'.<sup>12</sup> The Enochian Book of Watchers, on the other hand, reacts to the cultural and religious crisis in more individualist terms: Enoch is shown the souls of the dead which are kept (the souls of the righteous being clearly distinguished from those of the wicked) to await a final judgment which will be executed on every individual (1 Enoch 22). This expectation of a general judgment soon becomes the dominant view. Even the Book of Watchers assumes, however, that the judgment will be followed by a paradisaic life on earth.

The Maccabean rising was successful. Yet the paradise did not materialize, nor did the martyrs awake. The national heroes began to pursue mundane power politics. A century later, Rome arrived in Palestine and the land was once more under the thumb of foreign overlords. In these circumstances the predictions of a great reversal stayed alive. Calculations were revised; disappointments were overcome and cognitive dissonance reduced by ever new contemporizations. Rich diversity in expectations was the rule. Still, with due caution some main

<sup>12</sup> Nickelsburg 1992, 584–585, commenting on a passage in the *Testament of Moses* (10.9–10).

features, which must have been shared by a large number of people, can be singled out for the time of Jesus (cf. Sanders 1992, 289ff). A central hope (visible in the gospels) was still that of *collective national restoration*: God would maintain his loyalty to Israel, or to the faithful among the people. The restoration would entail the deliverance of Israel from its foes; a general resurrection (though this was controversial); judgment and destruction of the wicked; the re-establishment of the twelve tribes; the subjugation or conversion of the Gentiles; possibly a renewed temple; purity and righteousness in worship and morals. In the diaspora, the notion of a dramatic reversal was replaced in the thoughts of some (e.g. Philo) by the 'demythologized' notion that the superiority of the Jewish religion would gradually win through universally, although the collective-national eschatology (found e.g. in OrSib 3) was dominant even there.

The present was often assessed in pessimistic terms, so much so that a cosmic adversary - a fallen angel, variously called Mastema, Belial, or Satan - was thought to rule the earth with the aid of a host of demons. The perceived political and moral chaos could also be interpreted as divine punishment for the sins of the people. In many scenarios, the coming turn was to be preceded by tribulations, sometimes called 'woes', the depiction of which was coloured by horror experiences from the Maccabean time (the 'desolating sacrilege' had become a stock figure of speech). A variety of eschatological mediator figures existed, too, yet the expectation of a messiah was *not* the rule.

Different visions - earthly and transcendent - of the restoration lived side by side. Common to them is the conviction that there will be a point in history after which life will no longer continue its (hitherto) 'normal' course on earth. There will be a dramatic reversal of fortunes, a new start for some and a catastrophe for others. The reversal is conceived in collective terms. It can be envisaged as a fulfilment of utopian hopes on this earth, a restructuring of the political and social order. The collective fulfilment can also take place on a *new* earth - a vision which is not very different from the previous one, even if there is less emphasis on historical continuity. Or again, the fulfilment may take place in a transcendent heavenly realm, but it will still be a communal life, lived in some continuity with previous social life on earth.

It is of lesser importance, just how soon the reversal was expected to take place - in any case, it was anticipated in the life-time of the generation in question. For the Qumran community the crucial events had already begun; the consummation was anticipated in its worship in which angels participated.

In 4 Ezra (end of 1<sup>st</sup> century CE) different expectations are eventually

arranged to a sequence of events: first tribulations and battles; then a peaceful kingdom on earth; finally a cosmic reversal, the resurrection, the judgment and a transcendent kingdom. This attempt at systematization is, however, an exception.

The expectation of the great turn has its roots in experiences of political frustration or alienation (which need *not*, however, mean intolerable oppression), interpreted in the light of the traditions of God acting in history. "Eschatological hopes arise both to compensate for the powerlessness of Israel among the nations and to console groups that were alienated from the power structures within Jewish society." (Collins 2000, 134.) But once they have established themselves as part of a widespread world view, they are capable of stirring the emotions and actions of people even apart of situations of 'deprivation' (real or perceived). There is, of course, a moral side to the problem as well: the lack of justice in the world and, often enough, the perceived moral chaos in one's own community. The belief that justice will eventually be realized is based on the covenant relationship thought to exist between Yahweh and the people. The expectation thus also contained the answer to the problem of theodicy: right now few signs of God's loyalty could be seen, but the future would show that he *was* faithful to his promises.

Different roads to the great turn were conceived. Some people were guided by a militant view, others (probably the majority) by a more quietistic conviction. Many were ready to die rather than transgress the law. This conviction, which relied on a direct intervention of God, independently of the doings of humans, was able to lean on Isaiah and the bulk of apocalyptic literature. Intermediate expectations also existed: God would play the crucial part, but the faithful too would bear arms. And of course there were those who, due to their social position and well-being (notably the priesthood in Jerusalem), were more or less content with the status quo and did not wish for upheavals.

No doubt there were substantial socio-economic factors that led to unrest, and finally to rebellion, in Roman Palestine. But the religious tradition itself contributed a great deal to that end. The memories of independence and the promises of a glorious future were themselves a reason for the disdain felt by many towards Roman rule.

However, the expectation of a dramatic-collective reversal was never a central concern for all pious Jews. Individual hopes take more individualistic and personal forms. In the apocalyptic literature we still find hope for a glorious kingdom, but the hope of the individual even in many apocalyptic texts is for

eternal glory with the angels.' (Collins 2000, 147; see esp. 1 Enoch 104). In a more Platonic vein, some authors in the Diaspora express a view of immortality that is largely disconnected from the historical orientation of the mainstream hopes and more attuned to the Greco-Roman conceptual world. In 4 Maccabees, 'immortality is conferred at the moment of death, which is the eschaton for individuals. There is no need for a future consummation.' (Nickelsburg 1992, 590) Likewise, the Testament of Abraham contains 'a consistent teaching of the immortality of each soul, implying immediate judgment after death'. (Cavallin 1974, 97). Philo gives a spiritualized account of the Jewish tradition, regarding 'death as the moment of change, the soul's liberation from the prison of the body' (ibid., 139). Still, the individual after-life is often simply juxtaposed with the thought of collective restoration. Even in the writings of Philo, who perhaps goes furthest in a spiritualizing direction, there are traces of a national-utopian scenario. In terms of function, the different hopes boil down to the same effect: ultimately justice will prevail. The meaning of life is not lost in the midst of adversities.

One might be able to distinguish between two *ideal types* of future hope: a *collective earthly* expectation on one hand, and an *individual transcendent* expectation on the other. The former would involve an eternal kingdom of peace and prosperity on this earth, into which the righteous dead would rise to share it with the righteous of the last generation. For the latter, by contrast, events on this earth would be of little or no interest; the righteous would receive their reward, eternal spiritual life in a transcendent heaven, immediately after death. The former is in essence a *Mesopotamian-Zoroastrian*, the latter an *Orphic-Platonic* type. It is very hard, however, to find representatives of either type in a *pure* form in the extant Jewish texts. The symbolic worlds reflected in the sources are a more colourful mixture than a simple logic of ideal types would dictate. Much of this diversity reappears in the thought world of nascent Christianity.

### Jesus and his early followers: God's kingdom on earth?

Jesus announced the coming of the "kingdom of God". Though direct proof is not abundant, "kingdom of God" can hardly have been a rare term in his environment. Apart from terminology, the *notion* of God's visible end-time reign was all-important. The gospel of Mark self-evidently assumes that there were pious Jews 'waiting for the kingdom of God' (Mark 15.43). Jesus did not have to

explain the term, though he did describe the nature of the *basileia* in parabolic language.

The notion of God's reign was familiar, but its meaning for Jesus is open to many interpretations. Notoriously, all reconstructions of Jesus' message are to be treated with caution. Nevertheless the claim can be ventured that he *proclaimed a dramatic turn which would concern all humans in the near future*.<sup>13</sup> First, there is the ideological continuity from John the Baptist to Paul (and beyond). Jesus was baptized by John, who probably announced an imminent turn; Paul still wrote that the turn was so close that few Christians would die; in his writings at least vestiges of an earthly fulfilment are found. His hope had its roots in that of the early Christian community which lived in vivid expectation of Jesus' return, praying *maranata!* (Our Lord, come!) It was thought that the fulfilment of God's promises had begun. The Easter visions of Jesus's followers were interpreted in accordance with the eschatological thought world. God had, it was believed, raised Jesus, and this must have been an end-time event, for it anticipated Jesus' return to hold judgement.<sup>14</sup> In the next generation(s) after Paul, the synoptic gospels came into circulation - replete with references to a more or less imminent reversal. If only a couple of such sayings were established as authentic words of Jesus, the issue would be settled. But even if (with rather extreme scepticism) one ascribes all of them to Christian prophets or teachers, one still has to explain why *they* interpreted Jesus's message in such a manner.

A plausible reconstruction must find a place for Jesus in this line of development. A figure whose message is focused simply on living in this world just does not fit.

Postponement sayings' such as Mark 9.1 (*some* of Jesus' hearers will live to see the reversal) and Mark 13.30 (this generation will not pass away, though no one knows the hour) defer the turn further to the future, but it will still come during 'this generation'. They may not be authentic, but then there must all the more be a reason for their existence. Obviously one had to cope with the delay

<sup>13</sup> This claim is controversial today. The 'Jesus quest' is split: an eschatological and a non-eschatological ('sapiential') figure are in competition. The former proclaims God's kingdom as the imminent great turn of history. The latter only teaches 'subversive wisdom', criticizing the values of this world with aphorisms and parables, urging people to live under God's rule in the here and now. Despite the eloquence with which the latter picture is presented, notably by Crossan (1991) and the "Jesus seminar" (Funk & Hoover 1993), general considerations support a dramatic-eschatological interpretation (presented in different versions e.g. by Sanders 1985 and Allison 1998).

<sup>14</sup> It is debated whether the notion of Jesus as the "first fruits" of the resurrected dead (1 Cor 15.20) belongs to this early stage or whether it is younger (of Pauline origin?). Jesus may have been seen as a special case, since he had a special task as the eschatological judge.



of what had been hoped. A different solution to a similar problem finds expression in certain non-eschatological materials e.g. in the gospel of Thomas. Sayings that circumscribe what the kingdom is *not* (Thomas 3, 113) are best understood as pieces of secondary de-eschatologization.<sup>15</sup> In this case, too, one is reacting to something. The author of this gospel knows of the eschatological understanding of the kingdom and disparages it.

The eschatological interpretation receives support from the fact that Jesus died on a Roman cross. Jesus was arrested by Jewish authorities and executed by the Romans as 'the king of the Jews'. It is hard to see how preaching love, or pragmatic wisdom, could have brought such a death upon him.<sup>16</sup> It is much easier to understand that Jesus was condemned to death, if he spoke of God's kingdom as an imminent reversal of things. The talk of the kingdom must have evoked in the minds of many hearers associations with the end of Roman rule - not least in the emotion-laden atmosphere of Passover-time Jerusalem. Indeed it may have been over-eager pilgrim crowds that brought a rebel's death on Jesus, the authorities being nervous about possible Roman intervention and the Romans willing to set yet another warning example.

No doubt the coming of the kingdom as proclaimed by Jesus (according to the eschatological interpretation) would have brought with it the end of Roman rule. But it does *not* seem that Rome was the main target of Jesus' preaching. He announced a reversal in which the last would be the first. This message is directed to humble people who are plagued by hunger and illness rather than to foreign troops (which were not even present in Galilee). Jesus envisages no black-and-white contrast between Israel and Rome. Israel itself will be divided; only the poor and penitent who accept Jesus's message shall inherit the kingdom. He continues the tradition of social dualism, well established in Jewish apocalypticism, which distinguished between the righteous and the wicked. The divisions in the families of his followers (Luke 12.51-53) and the break between himself and his own family may have suggested the "messianic woes", "the painful eschatological necessity as a present experience" (Allison 1998, 146).

<sup>15</sup> I would include Luke 17.21 (the kingdom does *not* come by observing signs, but is "in your midst" or "within you" [*entos hymon*]) among such sayings. The expression "not by observing signs" recalls the list of portents in Mark 13 par.

<sup>16</sup> The not uncommon idea that Jewish leaders would have wished to kill someone for the reason that he spoke of God's love, or mixed with people of ill reputation, is nothing short of absurd.

Prominent features in the Jesus tradition that point in the direction of an imminent reversal and may well go back to Jesus himself are the notions of *judgment* and *resurrection*. Jesus seems to have pronounced judgment over Galilean towns which did not accept his message. One's relation to Jesus would decide one's fate at the judgment. The imminence of judgment is such a permeating feature in the tradition that it is impossible to exclude it from the message of Jesus.

The references to (a general) resurrection are more disputed. Matt 8.11-12 (par) implies the resurrection of Israel's patriarchs, Luke 11.31-32 (par) that of well-known ancient pagans (and thus of all humanity); Mark 12.18-27 (par) discusses the ('angelic') life of resurrection in a controversy with the Sadducees. The authenticity of these texts is far from certain. More weight can be put on the general point that leading followers of Jesus interpreted their Easter experiences with the aid of resurrection language: God had *raised* Jesus *from the dead*. Other ways of interpreting the visions would have been available. The choice of this particular idiom suggests that the resurrection of the dead had intrigued the thoughts of Jesus' followers already before his death. The cognitive dissonance caused by Jesus' fate was then overcome with the aid of the explanation, propelled by the Easter visions, that Jesus had in fact been raised. He was a special case, though: he had been raised before the others and translated to heaven to await the carrying-out of his special task.

I have left the *Son of Man* sayings out of discussion here. Of course, if only a single saying which refers to the coming of the Son of Man (e.g. Mark 14.62, Luke 12.8-9 par) could be established as authentic, that would settle the issue. Yet the questions of authenticity and meaning of these sayings are too controversial for them to be of much help here. Suffice it to say that in any eschatological picture of Jesus's message Jesus is seen as having reserved a role for himself in the process. At its most modest, the role is that of an eschatological prophet who proclaims the kingdom. Jesus may also be seen as a Messiah of sorts, God's 'viceroy' ruling over a restored Israel.

Proponents of a non-eschatological Jesus deny the authenticity of the sayings referring to an eschatological turn. They rely greatly on the gospel of Thomas which, however, presupposes (and opposes) an eschatological interpretation of the kingdom. Another source favoured by these scholars is the hypothetically reconstructed earliest layer of the "sayings gospel" Q (which in itself is a reconstruction). One may question the wisdom of building so much on a hypothesis based on a rather small amount of material; it might be more

prudent to view the text of Q as a whole. It is also far from clear that one can play off sapiential and eschatological concerns against each other. Concern with the affairs of the created present world, and even admiration of the works of creation on one hand, and expectation of a new world on the other, contradictory as they may seem to us, need not be mutually exclusive in apocalyptic thought.

One saying that looms large in non-eschatological interpretations is Luke 11.20 par (Q): "If I cast out demons by the finger of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you." The authenticity of the saying can be doubted, since it is inseparable from its literary context in Q.<sup>17</sup> But even if one regards it as authentic, it is still open to doubt whether it can support the idea that Jesus did not expect a future kingdom. The context (Luke 11.15ff par) shows that, far from having disappeared, the kingdom of Satan still stands; at best, then, a decisive battle for God's kingdom is in the process of being fought.

It is not immediately clear how the parables of the mustard seed, or of the leaven, or the parable of the seed growing secretly, fit with the expectation of a sudden cataclysm. But these parables can be fitted into the eschatological interpretation, if the modern notion of gradual development and (slow) organic growth are discarded and the parables are taken as *contrasting* stories emphasizing the difference between small signs in the present and a wonderful outcome in the future. They could be meant as antidotes against the scepticism of hearers who maintain that a few exorcisms by Jesus have not brought the kingdom any nearer. The use of the image of 'leaven' may, in addition, imply an element of threat, as 'leaven' generally stood in Jewish (and early Christian) tradition for something evil that was about to spread. This would tie in with the connotations of even violent power found in the parables of the conquering of the strong man (Mark 3.23–26) or the thief breaking in (Luke 12.39–40 par), or in the enigmatic saying about the kingdom which will force its way through with violence (Matt 11.12 par). The kingdom will not only stand in contrast to the present state of things: it will amount to a violent change - brought about by God, not men - of the present order.

If one accepts an eschatological overall view, one is still faced with the problem of conflicting elements: some signs point in the direction of an *earthly* expectation, while others suggest fulfilment in the *beyond*.

<sup>17</sup> It has been designed with a view to Luke 11.19 (Q), which in itself is a secondary saying. See Räisänen 2001, 15–37.

(a) During his last meal Jesus says that he will not drink wine until he drinks it 'new' in the kingdom of God (Mark 14.25). Irenaeus for one was of the opinion that one does not drink wine in heaven (*Adv. haer.* 5.33.1). The singling out of *twelve* followers as a specific group alludes to the restoration of the tribes of Israel. The regathering of the circle of the twelve after Easter (cf. Acts 1.15–26) was only meaningful if the tribes were expected to be fully represented at the breakthrough of God's reign, conceived as a kingdom for a purified Israel (cf. Acts 1.6). This hope accounts for the position that *Jerusalem* came to have for Christian Jews, and for their reservations toward Gentile mission. The settling in Jerusalem of the leading (Galilean) members of the movement, and their persistence in staying there until the disaster of the Roman war, is a sign that something special was expected to happen there. This connection with a place suggests that the expectation, inspired by Jesus, was of a concrete kind; the kingdom would come on earth.

People arrive at the banquet of the Kingdom "from east and west" (Matt 8.11 par), an expression not well suited to a journey to heaven. The prayer "your kingdom come" also suggests an event on earth. (How would the kingdom 'come' to heaven, where it had always been present?) The kingdom will bring *material* benefits to the needy, for it belongs to the poor and to those who weep. "Blessed are you, the poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who hunger now, for you will be *fed*. Blessed are you who now weep, for you will laugh." (Luke 6.20–23 par) Jesus's healings were understood (by him and his followers) to be a foretaste of the kingdom - a concrete corporeal sign. Through his exorcisms Jesus was struggling for the kingdom by fighting Satan and his demons, thus 'binding' and defeating the 'strong man' (Mark 3.22–26; cf. Luke 11.15–18 par). In good apocalyptic fashion the battle has already been decided, God has won the victory over Satan in heaven (Lk 10.18), but the battle is still to be waged on earth. Yet Jesus is not fighting enemy armies, but Beelzebul's demons in the lives of some Galilean individuals. The old combat myth has been moved to a microcosmic level. Interpreting exorcisms as end-time events seems to be Jesus's original invention, unprecedented in his environment.

Jesus predicted that the temple would be destroyed (Mark 13.2, 14.58) and replaced with a new one (implying that sacrifices would not cease?). Whatever his attitude to the Jerusalem temple and its priesthood - a difficult issue which hinges on the interpretation of his rather opaque 'temple act' - the expectation of a new, God-built sanctuary would seem to assume (improved)

earthly conditions. Why pay special attention to the fate of the temple, if one expects the whole earth to perish anyway?

The expectation of an earthly kingdom would not imply that it was built by humans; Jesus did not preach a social gospel. His conceptual world was probably close to that of the book of Daniel: the kingdom was the work of God alone. Indeed the radical sayings found in the Jesus tradition about breaking human relations, even hating one's kin, are best explained by the expectation of an imminent turn which demands radical action. One has to prepare for the coming of the kingdom by totally dedicating oneself to living according to God's will, even at the cost of one's life (Mark 8.34 par). Two decades later, Paul still counsels his converts not to marry (if possible), as the end of the present order of things is so near (1 Cor 7).

(b) However, there are also elements that seem to point to the expectation of a *transcendent* fulfilment. According to Luke 17.26–37 par, the coming turn is a cataclysmic event, comparable to the flood in Noah's days, which will put an end to the present order and bring God's judgment on the impenitent. In this connection some people will be "taken," while others are "left" (to perish, Luke 17.34-35 par). It is easier to think here of people being gathered up to heaven than of events on the earth. The same is true of sayings referring to (the conditions of) "entering life" (Mark 9:43–48; 10.17-25). Here it is not the kingdom that comes, but individuals who "enter" it; "kingdom" (9. 47) is paralleled with "life" (9 43, 45) and the semantic opposite of both is "hell." The embarrassing harshness of the conditions may be taken as a sign of authenticity.

Soon enough the expectations develop in different directions in any case. The earthly expectation has left traces in Paul and the Synoptic gospels (though these authors themselves seem to share a more transcendent notion); palpably terrestrial conceptions are later found in Revelation and in a large stream of millenarian interpretations. But quite early the earthly expectation has to compete with spiritualising transcendent visions - some radical, some more modest - that do *not* look forward to a great future for the world. Some writings combine a vision of transcendent salvation with the expectation of a series of 'last things' on earth; but as these can take place even in a distant future, they are on their way to an "appendix" to world history. This time, too, it is a question of ideal types; in practice it is impossible to draw clear lines of demarcation.

## Millenarian expectation

The concrete expectation of the early community lives on and is developed in what might be called a millenarian type of eschatology. One hopes for a gloriously transformed material existence *on earth*. What is new is that the *eschaton* is expected to take place in *two* stages. One might have thought this to mean that a first stage, during which the reign of Christ or God is established on the earth, would be followed by the final consummation in the beyond (as in 4 Ezra and 2 Baruch). Yet quite often *both* stages are conceived as taking place on earth, or they fuse without a clear boundary line. Apparently the treasure of eschatological tradition is becoming too rich to allow much rational control.

Here a somewhat remote witness deserves attention. If concrete earthly expectation was a central feature of the thought world of (Jesus and) the early Jerusalem community, one would expect it to live on in the hopes of those who are the most likely heirs of the early community, i.e. the Jewish Christian circles proper (often called Ebionites). Yet Jewish Christian witnesses to such a conviction have been lacking. Recently, however, attention has been called to a reconstructed Jewish Christian source in the Pseudo-Clementine *Recognitions* 1.27–71 (Jones 2001). In this source, the land (of Israel) is of particular importance. The present (ca. 200 CE) occupation of (some of) the land of Judea by (Gentile and ) Jewish Christians is in continuity with the promise to Abraham of return of the land. This present occupation "would issue into an earthly kingdom of heaven, in which the believers would be filled with food and drink." This terrestrial kingdom would be followed by the resurrection of the dead.<sup>18</sup> Thus, the early expectation has developed to entail two successive stages of fulfilment.

The first surviving document to present a two-stage-fulfilment scenario, however, is the Book of Revelation which illustrates the anomalies faced by anyone inclined to systematise the end events. For in Revelation (chs. 21–22) even the final consummation is located on *earth*, albeit on a re-created earth. Before this final stage is reached, however, a number of things will have happened. An intense period of plagues and tribulations, the escalation of evil, will introduce the final battle between Christ and his enemies who will, of course, be slain - a Christianized version of the age-old myth of the combat with the monster (which is directly reflected in Rev 12). Then there will be a resurrection

<sup>18</sup> Jones specifically quotes 1.55.4 and 1.61.2 (2001, 544–545). In the former passage, "the kingdom of heaven" and the "resurrection of the dead" appear as successive stages in the future. In the latter, Jesus is said to have "called the poor blessed and promises earthly rewards" so that they "would inherit the earth and would be filled with food and drink."

to life. Satan will be bound and the faithful - or, more likely, the martyrs - may, after the 'first resurrection', reign with Christ for a thousand years in Jerusalem.

There is a strong exhortatory emphasis in Rev 20.4: if the cost for confessing Christ is high, then so is the reward. This is the point of the whole book; the author tries to persuade the addressees to remain steadfast in their faith among the coming tribulations. The account of the reign, however, remains quite abstract.

When the predetermined time is finished, Satan is let loose to deceive the nations and mount a last attack. A new period of tribulation will ensue, eventually followed by the final bliss (now enjoyed by *all* the faithful of all generations) after a new creation. The new Jerusalem comes down (21.2,10); eternal life will be life on a new earth. The twelve tribes have been reassembled in the resurrection (21.12). Even 'the kings of the earth shall bring their glory' (21.24,26) to this new Jerusalem; the leaves of the tree of life there are 'for the healing of the nations' (22.2). Such a pilgrimage ill fits the fate of the nations described a little earlier, but precisely therefore it is important. It serves to underline that mundane history has *not* quite dropped out of view. The vision of the consummation in Revelation preserves a certain continuity with the vicissitudes of history, which have now been healed. God can be claimed to be in control on earth.

The Book of Revelation is flooded with ominous "signs" of the end. Such portents go most naturally with terrestrial expectation. The "woes" are birth-pangs of the new things that will happen on earth. The notion that a series of historical events (such as the escalation of a war) and natural disasters (earthquakes, famines) will lead up to the final culmination came alive in many circles during the horrors of the Roman war (66–73 CE); it is reflected in Mark 13 par and in the Q apocalypse (Luke 17 par). Behind the Markian apocalypse stands a group of Christians who had interpreted the war events as the beginning of the eschaton and had apparently been disappointed as the turn did not take place. Mark encourages his readers, postponing the turn somewhat (see below). The observation of eschatological signs can thus serve opposite ends. While some people infer from the signs that the turn must now be very close (the prophets criticised in Mark 13; in Revelation this view becomes all-important), others try to master the situation by underlining that since the most decisive signs are not to be seen, the turn cannot yet be at hand. Therefore, one has to remain calm (Mark, 2. Thess). The author of 2. Thess, in particular, relies on a clear-cut "time-table" in the spirit of eschatological determinism: the end

cannot be at hand (which is what some people claim), for the mysterious "son of lawlessness" (an Anti-Christ figure reminiscent of the Beast of Revelation) must appear first, put himself in God's place and seduce people;<sup>19</sup> this, however, cannot happen until "that which restrains" (whatever that means) has been removed. As nothing like this is in sight, there is no reason to abandon daily routines.

In subsequent tradition, depictions of the millennium abound, especially in Asia (Papias, Melito). For Justin Martyr, belief in the millennium is a criterion of orthodoxy, though he admits that not all 'pious and pure Christians' think in this way (Dial. 80,4). In this millenarian tradition, the vague hints of Revelation yield to graphic descriptions of a most concrete kind. The resurrection will introduce a new bodily life on earth. A re-built (or descended) Jerusalem is often thought of as the stage. Enormous material blessings are made possible through the incredible abundance of nature. According to Irenaeus, there will be a time

when the righteous shall bear rule upon their rising from the dead; when also the creation, having been renovated and set free, shall bring forth an abundance of all kinds of food (simply) from the dew of heaven, and from the fertility of earth ... the Lord used to teach, saying: The days will come in which vines shall grow each having 10 000 branches, and in each branch 10 000 twigs, and in each twig 10 000 shoots, and in each shoot 10 000 clusters, and on every cluster 10 000 grapes, and every grape when pressed will give 25 measures of wine. And when any one of the saints shall lay hold of a cluster, another shall cry out: I am a better cluster, take me; bless the Lord through me.' 'All the animals, feeding only on the produce of the earth, shall in those days live in peaceful harmony together, and be in perfect subjection to man. (*Adv. haer.* 5.33.3)

The millennium is painted with colours supplied by Old Testament prophecies, in particular Isa 65. There will be an abundance of crops, splendid food and drink; some even think of special sexual pleasure and numerous descendants.

<sup>19</sup> The battle of God or Christ against this eschatological antagonist became a very popular topic in the sequel. Vivid descriptions are found in second century apocrypha.

Earthly expectation is often, especially in the beginning, connected with experiences of oppression and persecution. This is palpable in the book of Daniel, of course. In Revelation, in Justin and still in Irenaeus, the hope is also connected with the idea of recompense. Irenaeus - the bishop of a persecuted community during widespread social unrest - claims that it is *God's justice which requires a material kingdom*: it is necessary that those who were killed for their faith awake to life and reign in the very same world where they suffered wrong (5.32.1).

Something of the original connection with a crisis situation is thus preserved in millenarian eschatology. Yet this way of thinking can also conversely contribute to the interpretation of a situation as an unbearable crisis, as happened in connection with the Roman war (and in the events leading up to it) in Palestine. Recent research (e.g. Thompson 1990) favours the view that the book of Revelation was *not* written during a severe persecution; rather, the symbolic world of the seer has a strong influence on how he experiences the world around himself.

Another important point is the positive emphasis on God's creation. Irenaeus truly appreciates material blessings. He makes use of millenarian visions especially in his battle against the Gnostics, and Lactantius later dwells on the analogy between the days of creation in the beginning and at the millennium. The earthly expectation emphasises that creation, which has been spoilt through sin, now receives a new chance. Irenaeus finds yet an additional reason for the millennium: it is, he claims, needed as pedagogical preparation for the final bliss (e.g. *Adv. haer.* 5.32.1).

In most scenarios the earthly millennium will be followed by a final fulfilment in a different transcendent sphere. Tertullian for one is positive that the 'kingdom of heaven' is quite different from the millennium; in it, humans will be transformed into the 'substance of angels' (*Adv. Marc.* 3.24). The final stage can, however, also be located on a transformed earth, or the two reigns can fuse without any clear boundary (as seems to be the case with Justin). The focus of the millennialists could be "so closely fixed on the first resurrection that the second often received no attention." (af Hällström 1984–89) While in Revelation the millennium is mentioned briefly and the final consummation depicted in vivid detail, it is now the other way round.

One might expect that the atmosphere for a millenarian hope would be imminent expectation, but this is not always the case. Sometimes the millennium is, on the contrary, deferred to a remote future. This happens when it is included in a speculation about world periods. Hippolytus (*Dan.* 4.23), for example,

reckons with a cosmic week, each of the seven days covering one thousand years. The millennium will, of course, begin in the year 6000. As Christ is counted to have come onto earth (for the first time) in 5500, one obviously still has to wait for a few centuries (*Irenaeus, Adv. Haer.* 5.28.3). Irenaeus, commenting on scriptural passages, gives the impression that it will take quite some time before all the event prophesied have taken place. The millennium is on its way to becoming a doctrinal *topos*; one of its basic functions is now to guarantee the dependability of (the promises of) Scripture. It will come true, since so many passages in Scripture point to it, and its appearance will solve many scriptural problems (promises not yet fulfilled).

Indeed concrete expectation faded in the fourth century. When the position of the church had radically changed, there was no social order for a vision hinting at a change of ruler in this world.

## Towards the end of the world and a kingdom in heaven

### Paul

As the great reversal was delayed, the notion of Jesus as a heavenly ruler on his throne facilitated the transfer of the kingdom of God to heaven in many circles. The process of spiritualisation and the concomitant individualisation is already visible in Paul's letters which, however, also display vestiges of the expectation of an earthly kingdom. These letters provide glimpses of a community life in which present experience receives an enhanced positive significance (as it had, for example, in Qumran too). Present experience anticipates and points to future consummation.

Paul still looks forward to shattering events in the near future (1 Thess 4, 1 Cor 15). Christ will return to judge the world, the faithful will be saved, the unrighteous destroyed. Romans 8.18–21 adds that the whole of creation will be affected. The final outcome is that 'all things are subjected to God' who will be 'all in all' (1 Cor 15.28).

Does Paul still expect that a transformed earth will be the stage for the final consummation? The hints he gives to this effect are, at best, vague (see Räisänen 2002). In his earliest letter, 1 Thessalonians, Paul consoles the recipients who have experienced cases of death among them. Apparently the turn was believed to be so close that everybody would participate in it. Paul affirms that

the deceased are at no disadvantage compared to the living:

For the Lord himself ... will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air,<sup>20</sup> and so we will be with the Lord forever. (1 Thess 4:16–17)

Does Paul think that those 'caught up' will accompany Jesus to the earth? This would be in accordance with earlier expectation, and the word *apantesis* ('meeting') has connotations of escorting that might support such an interpretation. Yet for Paul the only really important thing is that the believers will now *always* be *in the presence of Christ*; everything else fades.

1 Cor 15:20–28 has led some interpreters to think that Paul expects a transitional messianic kingdom on earth. However, a different reading is plausible.<sup>21</sup> The subjugation of enemies is already in the process of being realised and will be completed in the parousia. The mention of Christ's reign (v. 25) must refer to his *heavenly* rule in the *present*, and indeed the statement 'he must reign' is too colourless to be an allusion to an earthly kingdom. However, it could well be the *vestige* of a concrete expectation, grown pale in Paul's own mind. In 1 Cor 7:31 Paul founds his exhortation to the unmarried on the conviction that 'the form of this world is passing away', without giving a hint that, say, a new form of life was to be introduced on a transformed earth.<sup>22</sup> Unlike the Synoptic tradition, Paul never states that the kingdom 'comes'. At the end of 1 Cor. 15 Paul claims that the bodies of the resurrected, and of those

<sup>20</sup> Paul's notion is strikingly similar to that found in Mark 13:26f par where the elect are gathered from the earth by angels at the moment of the parousia.

<sup>21</sup> Paul is drawing a contrast between Christ and Adam: death came to the world through the first man, but 'as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ' (v. 22). For Christ is the 'first fruits' of resurrection, and at his coming 'those who belong to Christ' will also be resurrected (23). Then Christ hands over the kingdom to God, having destroyed every inimical power (24). This is elaborated in verses 25–26: 'For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death.' Should v. 25 refer to an earthly reign, death would be destroyed only *after* this reign, meaning that even those made alive in the parousia could die once more. It is much more natural to equate the destruction of death with the resurrection of the Christ-believers at the parousia (v. 23), and this is confirmed by v. 54: 'death has been swallowed up in victory' precisely 'when this perishable body puts on perishability', i.e. in the resurrection (of the believers).

<sup>22</sup> The only statement by Paul that *could* be conceived as an allusion to an actual event on earth after the parousia is the sentence that the saints will participate in the judgment, pronouncing a verdict even on (fallen) angels (1 Cor 6:2f). This reminds one of the notion of the Twelve as judges over Israel. But even in this case there is no hint at life (and even less of a reign) on earth after the judgment.

alive at the Lord's coming, will be transformed into a 'spiritual' form. The 'kingdom of God' is now equated with 'imperishability' (v. 50). No interest in any events on earth is detectable.

Eventually Paul can even juxtapose to participation in the parousia a different road to salvation. In 2 Cor 5:1–10 he speaks as if one could reach the state of being 'with the Lord' immediately at death, when the 'earthly tent we live in is destroyed' and we may put on our heavenly dwelling' (verses 1–2). The parousia is mentioned in this context, but only the first half of the passage (verses 1–5) alludes to it, whereas verses 6–10 have the individual's death in view. But even verses 1–5 reveal no interest in any *events* expected to take place on the earth. Paul's gaze is fixed on the invisible heavenly world (cf. 4:18). He has a desire to leave his earthly body, to exchange it for a heavenly dwelling or garment (verses 1–2), for he knows that "while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord" (v. 6) and he "would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord" (v. 8). On his or her death, the individual Christian will appear before the judgment seat of Christ (v. 10); a private act seems envisaged. Having stood the test, (s)he will have reached the state of being 'away from the body and at home with the Lord' (v. 8). Paul here seems to be on his way toward an individualized transcendent hope.<sup>23</sup>

This reading is confirmed by Phil 1:20–26 where Paul ponders whether he would prefer to die rather than continue his labours in the world. 'My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better; but to remain in the flesh is more necessary for you' (vv. 23–24). 'Dying is gain' (v. 21), because it is a direct route to being 'with the Lord'. The parousia fades from sight, though it reappears in Phil. 3:20f.: the 'commonwealth' of the Christians is 'in heaven', from where Christ will come 'to transform the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of his glory'. But if the home of the Christians is in heaven, it is natural to think that *that* is where the transformed believers will go after the parousia.

Paul never ceased to expect the parousia (cf. still Rom 13:11–14), but its significance diminished. It is important, since it brings the faithful to 'be with the Lord'; yet this goal can be reached simply through death as well.

To be sure, Rom. 8:18–22 confuses the picture. Here the old expectation of a transformed earth makes itself felt. The creation is 'groaning' in its 'bondage to decay', but it will 'obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God'. A

<sup>23</sup> Some interpreters read into the text the notion of an interim state for souls, but v. 8 hardly gives the impression that the being-with-the-Lord could be a temporary phase.

cosmic change leading to Paradisiac harmony within the creation seems to be in view. Paul is probably taking up traditions of the wolf and the sheep sharing the pasture and the lion converting into a vegetarian (Isa 65 etc.), but he uses abstract language; his point in the passage seems to be to encourage the 'groaning' believers who will soon be 'revealed' in glory.

If Paul's eschatological passages were simply added up, one would have to conclude that the kingdom must be on earth; this would be the only way to accommodate Rom. 8.18–22. Phil. 1 and 2 Cor. 5 would then have to be adjusted, e.g. by positing an intermediate state for the naked selves before their return to earth in the resurrection. As such a harmonization is implausible, the view is preferable that in Rom. 8 Paul is exploiting a piece of traditional eschatology that no longer belongs to the core of his own convictions. Paul's future hopes do *not* add up to a consistent picture in any case. The constant features - the certainty of judgment and the hope of eternally being with the Lord - can be placed into different frameworks. But if there is a trend, it is toward heaven.

Now one may properly ask: *what is the point of the resurrection*, if nothing of importance happens on the earth (apart from the parousia itself)? From the beginning, faith in resurrection in Israel had been tied to an *earthly* expectation. It was the ultimate solution to the problems of oppression and unjust suffering. For Paul, however, the parousia really seems to be the *end* of history rather than a decisive turn in it. His notion of a resurrection and parousia does reflect (and conceptually presupposes) the inherited view that the new life will be lived on (a transformed) earth, but Paul does *not* seem to share (or give weight to) this presupposition any more. He does *not* seem overly concerned with problems of oppression or unjust regime in this world. A middle class cosmopolitan of sorts, Paul apparently did not experience the Roman rule as something from which he specifically needed to be redeemed. No social unrest is desirable (Rom 13!).

Paul is still strongly oriented toward the future, but he combines his imminent expectation with a tendency toward spiritualising and individualising. But he walks a tightrope: going in a spiritual direction himself, he simultaneously wants to tone down certain even more radical spiritualising tendencies in his congregations (see below).

One thing is missing altogether from Paul's agenda: the observation of signs of the end (2 Thess. cannot be from his hand). 'The day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night'; Christians have to be prepared to meet the Lord at any time (1 Thess 5.1–11).

## Developments after Paul

In the Synoptic gospels we find a peculiar combination: a cataclysmic end of the world and its history, preceded by an utterly dramatic series of eschatological events on the earth, is expected, but the fulfilment is apparently located in a *transcendent heaven*. In Mark's materials, the "kingdom" sometimes seems (as in Paul) to be anticipated in the present life of Jesus' followers. It is like the leaven in the dough (4.30–32); a perceptive scribe is "not far from the kingdom of God" (12.34). Other passages suggest transcendent fulfilment (with an individualistic flavour) in the future. In 9.43–48 the kingdom is synonymous with "life," and *geenna* (hell) is its semantic opposition. In 10.17ff the kingdom is equated with "eternal life," the "coming aeon," having one's treasure in heaven and with being "saved." Statements about humans "entering" the kingdom (9.43ff, 10.15) probably envisage the kingdom in the beyond. As we saw above, the tension between this notion and the expectation of an earthly kingdom may well go back to an ambivalence in Jesus's own conviction.

The author of the gospel finds himself in a precarious situation. The horrors of the Roman war had evoked a fervid expectation of the parousia. Some had interpreted the (actual or anticipated) destruction of the temple as the signal that the last events had begun. In chapter 13 Mark makes a delicate effort to achieve a balance between an imminent and a somewhat tempered expectation. From traditional materials he creates a great apocalyptic speech. As an answer to the question "what will be the sign that all these things are to be accomplished?", Mark's Jesus "provides a virtual apocalyptic timetable." (Kloppenborg 1987, 165). Those who connect the destruction of the temple directly with the fulfilment are false prophets (verses 1–6, 21–23). Wars and tribulations 'must take place', yet they are 'but the beginning of the birthpangs'. (7–8) The readers should not be alarmed. No one, not even Jesus in heaven, knows the exact time of the end (32), but in more general terms it can be known: 'this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place' (30).<sup>24</sup> The present is a time of suffering, but also a time for witnessing (9–13). Soon the Son of Man will come in his glory, and the elect will be gathered by angels from all over the earth, presumably to heaven, as in 1 Thess. 4 (Mark 13.24–27). The cosmic disasters involved indicate that this world will perish; "heaven and

<sup>24</sup> The saying according to which some (not many) of Jesus' original hearers will still be alive when the kingdom comes in glory (9.1) is thoroughly diluted through the Markian composition: it is immediately followed by Jesus's transfiguration which may thus be seen as its fulfilment.

earth will pass away" (v. 31). We hear nothing of a new earth and a new heaven. Apparently the consummation is conceived as angelic life in the beyond (cf. 12.25).

In the Sayings Source known as "Q"<sup>25</sup> the kingdom has presentist features in the Pauline vein: it is an effective power within the Jesus movement (Lk 11.20), involving a threat for its opponents. On the other hand, the expectation of an imminent end is strongly present. Strikingly, the parousia passages of Q disparage all observation of signs of the end. The Son of Man will come when people are amidst their everyday affairs, suspecting nothing; in this, Q contrasts markedly with Mark. As in Mark, bitter experiences from the war period seem to loom in the background (Myllykoski 1996) but disappointments have made the Q people cautious concerning signs: none will be given. Whereas Mark "expressly notes the positive side of the events" (the angels will gather the elect), "Q represents the parousia as a disaster which overwhelms the world." (Kloppenborg 1987, 165f.) The rapture saying Lk 17.34–35 par seems to imply that those who are saved will enjoy the fulfilment in heaven, not on earth.

*Matthew* reckons on a prolonged period of waiting, setting forth several parables that deal with the delay of the parousia (Matt 24.32–25.46). But when the last day finally does arrive (still during 'this generation'), it will be of paramount significance. In some sense, the kingdom is present in the life of the congregation, but the parousia will make a real difference. A final judgment will take place and will bring great surprises. There is presently a provisional 'kingdom' on earth, called in 13.41 the kingdom of the Son of Man. Yet at the consummation this kingdom needs to be purified from foreign elements: 'all causes of sin and all evildoers' will be thrown 'into the furnace of fire'. The righteous, by contrast, 'will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father' (13.42–43). Undoubtedly they will find themselves in the heavenly realm. Indeed the kingdom has been prepared for them at the creation (25.34). It is not said that it will 'come' or 'descend' (as in Rev. 21), so the righteous must probably be moved beyond this earth. One should think of this kingdom in transcendent terms: it will be in heaven.

*Luke* vigorously emphasises the present, the time of the church. He plays down the imminent expectation found in his sources. One day the parousia will take place, but only long after the destruction of the temple,<sup>26</sup> and one is

<sup>25</sup> Reconstructed from the material common to Matthew and Luke, but mostly missing in Mark.

<sup>26</sup> "The end will not follow soon" (Lk 21.9). Cf Lk 17.20: the kingdom of God will not come "with things that can be observed" (this is the answer to the question of *when* the kingdom will come).

left wondering how much difference it will really make. The 'last' things are not denied, but they give the impression of an 'appendix'. For the individual seems to attain his or her future state right after death, as is the case with Lazarus in the *exemplum* (Luke 16.19–31), or with the robber on the cross (23.43). On the very day of his death, the robber will be 'with' Jesus in Paradise - just as the aging Paul hoped to be 'with the Lord' immediately after death. The parousia and resurrection on one hand, and the private road to Jesus's kingdom on the other, stand side by side in an unresolved tension which reminds one of a similar tension in many Jewish texts. Apparently the 'private road' option comes to the fore almost by itself, as soon as the death of an *individual* is considered.

On the other hand, Luke is one of the few early Christian authors to take up explicitly the question of "the kingdom for Israel" (Acts 1.6) which we assumed to be a central part of earliest expectations. He lets the question surface several times, starting with the prophecy of Zechariah that God is about to fulfil 'the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham, to grant us that we, being *rescued from the hands of our enemies*, might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all our days' (Luke 1.75). But gradually it must dawn on the reader that there will be no such kingdom, for the promises about the redemption of Israel have been fulfilled in the resurrection of Christ. Time and again, statements which at first seem to suggest a special hope of redemption for the Jewish people tacitly fuse with, or yield to, a more individualised and spiritualised view of salvation. Luke, however, never admits this in so many words (Räisänen 2001, 61–81). He lets the national-political promises blend with a spiritual fulfilment: e.g. redemption as Israel's liberation from foreign oppressors (Luke 1.68–75) is tacitly identified with forgiveness of sins (1.77).

### Spiritualising reinterpretations of the fulfilment

Many Gentiles, in particular, who were drawn toward the early Jesus movement may not have longed for the re-creation of the world, much less for the restoration of Israel. More likely what was hoped for was a meaning for life, liberation from anxiety and personal happiness. The dissolution of the safe structures of the ancient *polis* and of national identity in the Empire produced feelings of uprootedness: one no longer felt at home in the world (Walter 1985, 339f.). Many a believer was not primarily attracted to concrete visions of the



future, but could more easily conceive the meaning of Jesus in 'vertical' categories: he had overcome death and made it possible for *heavenly realities to be experienced on earth*. The religious experience itself, the anticipation of the final consummation in the joyful, sometimes ecstatic gatherings of the elect, paved the way for more radical spiritualisation of the hope. When outward fulfilment was delayed, compensation could be found in present communion with the indwelling Christ. The future came increasingly to be contemplated from the individual's point of view. As believers died, belief in the individual post-mortem life of the self (hinted at by Paul) was emphasised at the cost of the hope for bodily resurrection. A terrestrial kingdom was no longer envisaged by these Christians.

But a spiritualised eschatology pre-dates the problem of delay. Its earliest representatives in our sources are members of Paul's congregation in Corinth. Some of those who "say that there is no resurrection" are criticised in 1 Cor. 15. Since they belonged to the congregation, they can hardly have denied all post-mortem hope. The sense of fulfilment presently experienced by the believers would, they may have held, continue in another form of existence after death. It may have been the same people who felt that they were already "filled", "rich" and "kings" (1 Cor. 4.8). This is apparently a spiritualised interpretation of the blessings of the kingdom promised by Jesus to the hungry and the poor, cross-fertilised by the Stoic notion of the wise man as "king."

A spiritual interpretation of the great turn may have been represented by Hymenaeus and Philetus, who are mentioned as Paul's contemporaries in 2 Tim. 2.17f and blamed for scandalously claiming that 'the resurrection has already happened'. It is likely that they, too, merely downplayed the significance of death and reckoned with a spiritual post-mortem life without bodily resurrection. If so, their position was not far from that of such disciples of Paul as the authors of Colossians and Ephesians. Colossians proclaims that Christ has conquered the inimical powers that have barred men's access to the divine realm and thus brought harmony back to the cosmos (Col. 2.15,20). The author goes beyond Paul in claiming that the believers have already been raised with Christ from the dead into life in baptism (Col. 2.12, 3.1; contrast Paul's more reserved formulation in Rom. 6.3-4). The earthly pilgrimage has its goal in the heavenly realm. What is expected from the future is the public revelation of the present secret (3.4). Traditional parousia language is transformed to refer to something that does *not* take place on earth; no interest in the destiny of the earth is visible. Ephesians emphasises that God has raised us up together with

Christ, 'and made us sit with him (on thrones) in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus' (2.5f) - a statement that reinterprets the notion of the reign of the saints with Christ and might well have stemmed from a Hymenaeus or a Philetus. The last word of the epistle summarizes it all: what matters is 'imperishability' (Eph. 6.24).

In 1 Peter the earthly pilgrimage of the 'aliens and exiles' (2.11) in this world is contrasted with their heavenly destination. Such language 'immediately transfers the focus of interest of the believer from his present world to the joys of heaven' (Rowland 1987, 293).<sup>27</sup> In the Epistle to the Hebrews the crucial contrast is not between 'now' and 'later', but between 'down here' and 'above in heaven'. The blessings of this world are a shadow of that which has always existed in heaven. Believers still look forward to future consummation, but heavenly repose (*katapausis*) has throughout eternity been ready to receive them. Salvation has awaited them in heaven since the exaltation of Christ.

A prominent representative of a non-terrestrial type of expectation is the author of the fourth gospel. To be sure, references to a future resurrection of the dead and to the judgment (often regarded as additions) are found in his work as well. But no renewal of the cosmos is envisaged, even in these references. John devotes no attention to the destiny of the world. "The coming of Christ is not intended to change the world; that is merely an arena where the shepherd seeks to gather all his sheep into the fold." (Rowland 1987, 253) The "hour", "when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live", is *now* (5.25). The judgment has already taken place (3.18). Jesus is "resurrection and life"; whoever believes in him already has eternal life and will never die - or lives even if she dies (11.25f). All that is decisive has already taken place when the believer "has passed from death to life" in the present (5.24).

Physical death is unimportant. Still, "eternal life" before death is not identical with eternal life as it will be lived in fullness after death, or after the parousia; it is a foretaste of the latter. The notion of Jesus's return is still there: not only will Jesus go away to "prepare a place" for the believers (14.2); he also says "I will come again and will take you to myself." This is an allusion to the parousia, entailing an echo of the traditional notion of rapture, but wholly stripped of such apocalyptic language as is found in 1 Thess 4. Jesus will take his own to the heavenly dwelling-places. No reader of John 14 could possibly

<sup>27</sup> Rowland also claims that "such an outlook contrasts with the bulk of New Testament eschatology", but this is clearly not the case; large parts of the NT share the hope of a heavenly, rather than earthly, consummation.

think of an earthly kingdom after the parousia, nor is any concern for public vindication visible.

In John, the certainty of future fulfilment in heaven is intended to strengthen the community in its troubles. By contrast, an overwhelmingly joyful atmosphere of present fulfilment dominates in the Odes of Solomon, a collection of liturgical poems from the eastern Syrian church in the first half of the second century. Eternal life has been given to all who trust in Christ (15.9f). "Because the Lord is my salvation, I will not fear... if everything visible should perish, I shall not die, because the Lord is with me and I with him. Hallelujah!" (5.11–15) The sense of present salvation is so dominant that the end of the world, the judgment or even the resurrection, are not mentioned as future realities. The "temporary boundary between present and future has been obliterated within the context of charismatic worship, where the glories of the future eschatological salvation are experienced and actualized." (Aune 1972, 194.)

There are close affinities between the gospel of John and that of Thomas, whose view has partial analogies in Q and in Paul. In Thomas, there is a heightened emphasis on present fulfilment. The disciples ask, "When will the repose of the dead come about, and when will the new world come?" They receive the answer: "What you look forward to has already come, but you do not recognise it." (Thomas 51) A similar question about the kingdom (Thomas 113) is answered by Jesus in words reminiscent of Luke 17.20: "it will not come by waiting for it... Rather, the kingdom of the Father is spread out upon the earth, and men do not see it." Thomas criticises the eschatological tradition, stripping the message of Jesus of all traces of collective, national or earthly hope (Thom 3). The kingdom of God is an invisible reality which permeates everything. Thomas does not speak of its "coming"; enlightened individuals are said to find (27, 49), enter (22, 99) or know it (46). Salvation has become "an individual project of seeking true human existence" (Uro 1990, 18f.) Yet the tension between present and future is not completely eliminated. The world is "a threat which tries to deprive a Thomasine Christian of the salvation already actualised in the present life (51) and of the profit expected in the future consummation (21; 49)." (Marjanen 1998, 129f.) Thomas reveals no interest in the affairs of this world, but hints at the destruction of heaven and earth (11; 111). The material cosmos will perish, but this is of no consequence for one who is "alive".

A radical elimination of terrestrial eschatology is found in those Christian writings that display more pronounced "gnostic" tendencies (Rudolph 1983,

171–204; Peel 1970). The gnostic teacher Menander may have promised his disciples actual immortality: they 'are able to receive resurrection through their baptism into Him; they can no longer die but remain ageless and immortal' (Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* 1.23.5). Elsewhere such claims should be taken in a metaphorical sense (as in John or in Thomas): physical death has lost all significance. It is through his reception of saving knowledge that the Gnostic comes to full realisation of his or her divine nature in the present (cf. Gospel of Truth 22.2–12). The spiritual person has already been transferred to the realm of Light: "We suffered with him, and we arose with him, and we went to heaven with him" (On Resurrection 45.25–28). In the Dialogue of the Saviour (142.16–24) the Lord states, in reply to his disciples' question about where they will go after departing this earth, that they are already standing in that place. In the Gospel of Philip (73.3–5) it is said: "Those who say they will die first and then rise are in error. If they do not first receive the resurrection when they live, when they die they will receive nothing."

Yet even these gnostic Christians share the notion of a *coming* spiritual fulfilment: what can be, by way of anticipation, experienced already now, will be completely realised when the soul is, in death, released from the prison of the body and ascends to heaven. Nor is salvation for a Gnostic a merely individual event. For when the souls of the enlightened come to the Redeemer, he will 'receive' them into himself. The particles of light will be gathered together back to their good origin. Redemption is "an entrance into what is silent, when there is no need for voice nor for knowing nor for forming a concept nor for illumination, but (where) all things are light which does not need to be illumined" (Tripartite tractate 124.18–25). All who have come forth from the Father will return to him (Gospel of Truth 38.2–3). It is a question of an "eschatology" that transcends the individual, a teleological plan which must have rendered the present meaningful for those who knew about it. Still, it should be noted that in quite a few gnostic Christian texts a kind of spiritual (non-"fleshly") resurrection "body" is hinted at; thus, there also seems reflected "some desire to retain a sense of personal identity in the post-mortem state as opposed to a mystical yearning to be absorbed into the impersonal All" (Peel 1970, 162).

Perhaps unexpectedly, some gnostic texts combine the spiritual "eschatology" of the soul with a cosmic disaster. There is an expectancy, after a series of portents in traditional style, of a cosmic conflagration that will put an end to the material world; thus the tractate *On the origin of the world* (125.33ff). But unlike the "orthodox" combinations, this one is consistent: no parousia is

expected, and no new heaven or new earth will be created. The world will perish, but there will be no new beginning. Everything will be restored to its original good state when the work of the demiurge is annihilated.

Behind the gnostic view one may sense some disappointment with the world, which also finds expression in a sharply dualistic cosmology. There then remains the possibility of seeking the most profound reality within man himself. This internalized vision is the view of intellectuals concerned with *reinterpreting* their religious tradition: the variety of images used to describe the end time (see the list in Peel 1970, 156–158) includes a number that stem from eschatological usage: restoration, harvest, consummation of the aeon, end of days, the hour, rest in consummation - along with more peculiar ones like the completion of the Pleroma, the entry of the spiritual *syzygoi* into the Heavenly Bridal Chamber, or the time of dissolution.

Despite dissimilarities in the notions about creation and man, the difference between spiritualising interpretations of Christian hope by "gnostic" Christians on one hand and by "Catholic" teachers on the other does not seem overly great. Actually some theologians of the mainstream church distinguished between enlightened "Gnostics" (like themselves) and simple believers. According to Clement of Alexandria, death meant for the true Gnostic liberation for the Lord in the heavenly home, and his final goal was the eternal vision of God. He received a foretaste of this already in the present life. Origen even presents a way of demythologising eschatology for those capable of profound thought. A second (allegorical and "truer") parousia is "the coming of Christ in perfected men and women" (Daley 2000, 16). "The kingdom of God is within you" (Luke 17.21) was a favorite verse with Origen. For him, too, the vision of God is the ultimate goal, and he emphasises that the "spiritual body" of the resurrected is something quite different from the present body. Although no-one adopted Origen's internalised interpretation in its radical entirety, his influence on the eastern church was great. For later fathers it was a commonplace that God's kingdom amounted to his reign in human hearts. The kingdom had become an inner reality in the present and a transcendent entity in the future. In the changed situation of the church in the fourth century a revolutionary vision of the future was not desirable anyway.

## Outcome and impact

Sometimes the different types of expectation compete directly with each other. 2 Peter is involved in a heated conflict with a group which criticises the expectation of the parousia on the score that everything is as it has always been. 2 Peter, by contrast, insists on a spectacular end: "the heavens and earth that now exist have been stored up for fire"; the heavens will be kindled and dissolved; "we wait for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells" (3.7,12). The author defends the certainty of this grand finale with miscellaneous arguments: as the deluge once destroyed the earth, so will fire do now; with the Lord a thousand years are like one day; the delay is also an act of patience, giving all people time to repent - despite the recommendation that the Christians are to *hasten* the coming of the Day through holy life.

On the other side of the debate, visible fulfilment is polemically denied in the gospel of Thomas and in writings with "gnosticizing" inclinations. Earthly expectation is also criticised by representatives of a spiritual view such as Origen, who plays down all material expectation and puts forward the idea of *apokatastasis*, the restoration of all, as an impressive version of theodicy.

Obviously, then, the non-occurrence of the parousia did cause problems. Many passages in the gospels (e.g. Mark 9.1 or Matthew's parousia parables emphasizing the importance of being "awake") already testify to this, and so does 1 Clement (23–28). It would be exaggerated to speak of a profound crisis, but undeniably a thoroughgoing (if tacit) process of reinterpretation did take place. While the more radical spiritualisers dropped concrete expectation altogether, even mainstream theologians adapted themselves surprisingly easily to the "time of the church" which provided the present - the existence under Christ's invisible rule - with meaning and let the future grow pale. Toward the end of the second century Christians could already *pray for the delay* of the final fulfilment (Tertullian, *Apol.* 39.2).

Eventually it came to be of great importance that Augustine polemically rejected millenarian expectation and put forward a compromise. The millennium of Revelation was identified with the church in which Christ and the saints reigned - spiritually, by conquering their vices. Augustine's combination of privatised soteriology (the individual finds bliss in a transcendent realm) and a postponed expectation of "last things", including the traditional "signs of the end" in a distant future, came to be established as the "orthodox" doctrine. The last things were to be awaited, since they were foretold in Scripture, but

inevitably they were "tamed" and turned (in a way already anticipated by Luke) into a kind of appendix.

Terrestrial expectation was banned from mainstream theology, and the great churches have been quite reserved towards it. Still, the expectation lived on, surfacing with significant social consequences for instance in medieval movements which culminating with the Anabaptists. Actually, the vision of an ideal end-time kingdom has played a significant role in Western civilisation as a whole. In instigating people to work actively toward that goal, it has inspired various ecclesial and imperial reform programs. In a new disguise, millenarian expectation has even fuelled secular ideologies of progress. "[V]ast numbers of Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment thinkers were influenced by apocalyptic religious traditions"; "through some of these persons, elements of these traditions have been mediated to and reconstituted in important modern political movements such as National Socialism and Communism" (Zimdars-Schwarz & Zimdars-Schwarz 2000, 284).

The expectation of a concrete turn of history has helped people maintain their hope in difficult times. For countless Christians it has invested history with meaning and hope. But it has also been dangerous because of the power of end-time beliefs "to foster self-righteousness among the elect and at times violent opposition to, even persecution of, those identified as belonging to Satans' party. Apocalypticism has been the source of hope and courage for the oppressed, and - not *too* paradoxically - intransigence and savagery on the part of some oppressors." (Collins et al. 2000, x.)

The expectation has proved dangerous, when, from the crusades on, people began to aid God's cause by embarking themselves on what was taken to be the eschatological battle. One thereby came to give up that part of the original hope which stressed that the turn would be wholly God's work. Yet one could appeal to another feature of the biblical theology of history: God would help his people in its wars against its enemies. The ideologies both of both the former Soviet Union (based on Marxist theory, the similarity of which to Judeo-Christian millennialism is striking), and the United States (which has come to conceive of itself as the "Redeemer Nation") can be partly traced back to biblical roots,<sup>28</sup> to the battle of the children of light against the children of darkness in order to realise the supernatural goal of history. Something like this was true even of the *Third Reich*.<sup>29</sup> "Hitler did not reject Christianity entirely, but worshipped the

<sup>28</sup> Or, ultimately, even to the notion of the primordial battle against the chaos monster.

<sup>29</sup> According to Baumgartner (1999, 208ff) much of the Nazi appeal was due to the fact that Hitler and others succeeded "in framing their ideas in millennial rhetoric and apocalyptic symbolism."

avenging God of the apocalyptic books, which are often overlooked as sources for the Nazi cult of the glorification of war." (Baumgartner 1999, 211). Millenarian hope has been a mixed blessing in Western history.

In mainstream Christian theology the emphasis has been laid on spiritualised expectation. Only recently have conceptions been developed in which this-worldly eschatology is again in a key position, especially in various theologies of liberation. This in turn easily leads to the assessment of otherworldly expectation as degeneration. Some try to have it both ways, hoping *both* for a fulfilment in a transcendence where everything is *totaliter aliter*, and also in a new world which resembles the present one to a surprisingly high degree.

But undoubtedly earthly expectation is burdened with tremendous problems. The fact that Jesus was mistaken in his expectation is only the beginning of the troubles. More aggravating is the history of Christendom ever since. In this light it has become difficult to believe in a divine will steering the course of events towards a righteous goal. It is easy to agree with the non-conformist rabbi, Richard Rubenstein, when he refuses to accept an omnipotent God who could have saved the Jews from the Holocaust but chose not to intervene. Theodicy asserts that there are hidden reasons for God's allowance of (even this) evil. For the likes of Rubenstein,<sup>30</sup> no theodicy can rationalise the enormity of unjust suffering or vindicate divine justice in the light of innocent victims; nor is the Holocaust at all unique in this respect.

Even independently of the theodicy problem, modern theologians have increasingly turned away from a teleological theology of history which is seen to be part of an antiquated world view. Not only is this the case with Protestant existentialism, in which "eschatology" simply serves to underline the definitive importance of the decision required of the individual in his or her present life situation; but even an important current of Catholic dogmatics holds that nothing whatsoever should be expected to happen on the earth. The hope of a Christian is oriented to the future and is fulfilled at his or her death (e.g. Kehl 1986). These modern solutions come close to the Hindu view (or the gnostic Christian alternative, for that matter), taking leave of the "historical process" ideology that has been so characteristic of Western thought: history is after all *not* "going anywhere." Yet traditional terrestrial expectation has left a trace in the form of a "real-symbolic" aspect: as social justice within bodily reality was of utmost

<sup>30</sup> A survey among leading American Jewish rabbis and theologians in 1996 revealed that very many influential Jewish thinkers in USA today do not share a traditional faith in a personal god who still guides humanity's and individual humans' destinies.

importance in the tradition of concrete expectation, so are Christians during their earthly life called to struggle for this-worldly justice.

Obviously, both this-worldly and spiritualised interpretations of eschatology can with some justification appeal to *parts* of the early Christian evidence. It is not the task of scholarship to promote or to refute any particular vision; such decisions take place at an existential level. What scholarship *can* do is to show where the roots of different conceptions lie and try to understand them in their own contexts. In this way some justice may be done to the complexity of the phenomena in question, and to the different groups which have held different convictions at different times. Scholarship can also show what kind of consequences various hopes have had in history. *Indirectly*, it may help by providing insights and stimulating the thought of those who are concerned with contemporary applications of religious traditions.

"Eschatology" is rooted in a dialectical hermeneutical process: present experiences are interpreted in the light of traditions; traditions are reinterpreted in the light of new experiences. In times of crisis one leans on memories of a glorious past on which promises of a bright future can be based. Both the negative experience of the non-arrival of the turn, and the positive experiences of the renewal of life here and now, may lead to the spiritualising of hope; new crises can again actualise more concrete expectations.

It is a never-ending story.

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