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Hope Deferred? Against the Dogma of Delay

Die immer noch anzutreffende Auffassung, Jesus und seine Jünger hätten ein baldiges „Ende der Welt“ erwartet, basiert auf einer falschen Interpretation der relevanten antiken Texte, zu der Johannes Weiß und Albert Schweitzer vor dem Hintergrund von Vorstellungen zum „Ende der Welt“ gefunden haben, die gegen Ende des 19. Jahrhunderts verbreitet waren. Der kulturelle Kontext von Rudolf Bultmann in den 1930er Jahren und Ernst Käsemann und anderen in den 1940er Jahren boten Anlass zum weiteren Ausbau dieser Fehldeutungen. Die in apokalyptischen Texten verwendete „kosmologische“ Sprache wird dabei in unzulässiger Weise wörtlich verstanden. Die entsprechenden Symbole und Metaphern bezeichnen aber primär soziale und politische Ereignisse, welche zugleich in ihrer theologischen Bedeutung herausgestellt werden. Dem Jerusalemer Tempel, verstanden als Begegnungsort von Himmel und Erde, kommt dabei eine Schlüsselrolle zu. In den synoptischen Evangelien werden die Aussagen zur Erhöhung des „Menschensohnes“ innerhalb „einer Generation“ auf Jesu Tod, Auferstehung und Erhöhung bezogen, womit das eschatologische „schon jetzt“ akzentuiert wird, ohne dass das „noch nicht“ seiner Wiederkunft aus dem Blick gerät.

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1 Introduction

The idea of “the delay of the parousia” has been a powerful yet problematic notion in biblical study and systematic theology over the last century. Powerful: it is central to the theses of Albert Schweitzer and Rudolf Bultmann, and through their influence it has continued to exercise constraint, not to say control, on many readings of the New Testament and many related theological projects.¹ Problematic: some scholars attuned to

¹ Keith Ward, in his recent book *Christ and the Cosmos: A Reformulation of Trinitarian Doctrine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), xii, 10, simply repeats the twentieth-century tradition: for the early Christians “the world was due to end at any moment,” so that we, who know they were wrong, may need to think differently. A recent publication that takes the received dogma for granted and tries to work around it is C.M.

the Jewish world of the Second Temple period have repeatedly argued that the notion as popularly conceived is based on a serious misreading of the relevant texts. Jews of this period (they have argued) were not expecting the world to end.² Matters are made worse by multiple confusions associated with the words “eschatology” and “apocalyptic” in current writing; and also by accusations of special pleading, this way or that.³ The matter deserves fresh treatment at monograph length. The present article attempts to flag up some important issues for further consideration while presenting in outline a case against what might be called “the Dogma of Delay.”⁴

The dogma in question is sometimes presented quite baldly: Jesus and his followers expected the world to end very soon, and it didn’t happen. This then generates two related problems, one ancient and one modern. (1) The second generation of Christians, confronted by failed hopes, transformed the early “eschatological” faith into something else. (2) In the modern period, anyone who wants to retrieve the message of Jesus or the faith of his first followers must face the question: since they were wrong about the end of the world, what sense can we make of all the other things they believed, not least their sharp-edged ethics? How can we, whose worldview is so different, claim any continuity with the early Christians, or with the apparently strange figure of Jesus himself?⁵

Each stage of this, on closer inspection, is more complex than it appears at first sight. Starting with Johannes Weiss and Albert Schweitzer, who

Hays et al., *When the Son of Man Didn’t Come: A Constructive Proposal on the Delay of the Parousia* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2016).

- 2 See, e.g., C.F.D. Moule, *The Birth of the New Testament*, 3rd ed. (London: Black, 1982), 139f., 143f.; M. Hengel, *Between Jesus and Paul: Studies in the Earliest History of Christianity* (London: SCM, 1983), 184 n. 55, describing the “delay of the parousia” as “a tired cliché”; E.P. Sanders, *Judaism: Practice and Belief, 63 BCE–66 CE* (London: SCM, 1992), e.g., 298, 303, 456f.; at p. 368 he says, as though the point were obvious, that “like other Jews the Essenes did not think that the world would end”; J.J. Collins, as summarized in N.T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (London: SPCK; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 333f. (hereafter *NTPG*); see the fuller discussions *ibid.*, 280–299, 459–464; *id.*, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (London: SPCK; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 339–367 (hereafter *JVG*); and *id.*, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God* (London: SPCK; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013), 163–175 (hereafter *PFG*).
- 3 For the background, see esp. N.T. Wright, *Paul and His Recent Interpreters* (London: SPCK, 2015), 135–186 (hereafter *PRI*); see also the famous essay by K. Koch, *The Rediscovery of Apocalyptic* (London: SCM, 1972).
- 4 I am grateful for the help of Max Botner, Julian Wright and Robert Morgan in thinking through the issues here explored; needless to say, they are in no way responsible for my conclusions.
- 5 A point stressed in the 1970s by D.E. Nineham; see, e.g., his *Explorations in Theology* (London: SCM, 1977).

share responsibility for introducing this end-of-the-world idea into western scholarship, the expectation and disappointment went in at least three distinct stages.⁶ First, there was the expectation of Jesus himself, for the “coming of the Son of Man” within his own Galilean ministry. When that didn’t happen, he went to Jerusalem to force God’s hand, throwing himself on the wheel of history to make it turn the other way. That, too, was a failure, but Jesus’s first followers, inventing his “resurrection,” quickly reaffirmed an imminent expectation now reshaped around Jesus himself . . . and that, too, was disappointed. What could one do with that? Weiss declared his personal preference for a Ritschlian notion of the kingdom of God: the personal religion and ethic taught and modelled by Jesus in his non-eschatological sayings.⁷ Schweitzer, insisting that Jesus was a full-time eschatologist, not a part-time one as Weiss proposed, constructed Jesus as a heroic if distant figure to be followed and emulated.⁸ But these differences didn’t mask the basic affirmation: Jesus announced that the world was about to end, and it didn’t.

Theories about the post-disappointment life and thought of the early church have likewise taken different forms. Schweitzer saw Paul as a middle term, working out a Jewish eschatology in such a way as to leave the door open for a post-Pauline Hellenized church and theology. Bultmann, here as elsewhere following Ferdinand Christian Baur, saw a decline into ecclesial and sacramental life, a “normative” Christian existence from which the original eschatological urgency had been removed. The writing of the Gospels, even Mark, was itself a failure of nerve: instead of looking forward to the coming parousia, the church was starting to look back. Ernst Käsemann developed this: the deutero-Paulines, the Pastorals and other early writings show evidence of a community conforming itself to the world around. For Käsemann and Hans Conzelmann, and for many in their wake on both sides of the Atlantic, the low point of all this is Luke, who transformed the explosive early expectation into *history*. The church thus became a *Heilsanstalt*, an Institute for Dispensing Salvation. Here, as with Bultmann, there is a straightforward reversion to Baur’s category of

6 Earlier precursors include the eighteenth-century Deists John Toland and Matthew Tindal: see W.G. Kümmel, *The New Testament: The History of the Investigation of Its Problems* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1972), 54–55. A. Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, “complete edition” (London: SCM, 2000), 14–26, saw Reimarus as a precursor, though his Jesus was a disappointed revolutionary, not an end-of-the-world speculator; see discussion below.

7 See J. Weiss, *Jesus’ Proclamation of the Kingdom of God* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971), 134–136.

8 Schweitzer, *Quest* (see n. 6), 478–487.

Frühkatholizismus, coupled with a standard sociological point about second-generation movements abandoning early enthusiasm, developing structures, and settling down into comfortable, conformist and basically bourgeois social life.⁹

There is already an oddity here. If the early church expected the end of the world, they were wrong, so why shouldn't the second generation have done things differently? What were they supposed to do? Go on announcing something by now clearly false? Revise the date, like so many much-mocked end-of-the-world preachers in modern times? Why *was* there a "second generation," anyway, if the message of the first generation was that things were coming to a quick end? In any case, as anyone in a second-generation movement knows, you cannot keep things going for ever on early enthusiasm. To all this Bultmann and his followers gave their demythologized and existentialist answer: the "expectation" was really all about "living by faith in the present moment," and that is what should have been maintained. To this in turn a further question must be addressed: if most of the first generation had known that Jesus's "end-of-the-world language" was really about "living by faith in the present," why was there then a disappointment? Who misunderstood whom and at what stage? These internal tensions have not stopped the theory becoming scholarly dogma, held in place by repetitions less pious, but no less vain, as those denounced by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount.

When it comes to the retrieval of all this in today's exegesis and theology, there is again a divergence. The assumption that Jesus and his followers expected the imminent end of the world has led to a wide variety of re-interpretations, too wide in fact for easy cataloguing. For some, the only way forward is with some variety of post-Bultmannian reinterpretation: the "end" is really all about the "apocalyptic" nature of early Christianity, at least in its most authentic form – never mind that what some have recently meant by "apocalyptic" is very different from what either Schweitzer or Käsemann meant, focusing now on the "apocalyptic" significance of the cross rather than the parousia.¹⁰ For others, the effect of the failed imminent expectation results simply in a loosening of ties to the detail of early

⁹ See the summary of Bultmann at this point by A. Standhartinger, "Bultmann's *Theology of the New Testament* in Context," in *Beyond Bultmann*, ed. B.W. Longenecker and M.C. Parsons (Waco, Tex.: Baylor University Press, 2014), 233–255, here 250. A key text for all this is M. Werner, *The Formation of Christian Dogma: An Historical Study of Its Problems* (London: Black, 1957).

¹⁰ See *PRI* (see n. 3), 135–216.

Christian teaching and even to Jesus himself.¹¹ The strict ethic, for example, was clearly designed as a short-term measure; now that we know the end would not come for at least two millennia, we have to think differently. Beyond that again (strictly speaking this is a different point even though Bultmann muddled them all up together), we cannot in any case think of divinely engineered cosmic catastrophes now that modern science has taught us otherwise. “The end of the world” is likely to come through the cooling of the sun, not through a miraculous divine intervention.

Resistance has, of course, been offered to the whole picture. Taking the relevant sayings of Jesus and passages of Paul one by one, scholars from various backgrounds have argued that the whole theory as developed by Weiss and Schweitzer and their successors is simply mistaken: the relevant sayings never did refer to an imminent cosmic catastrophe. Bultmann’s entire construct was then based on a mistake. In particular, the massive study of Second Temple Jewish sources over the last fifty years has made it less and less likely that the Jews who wrote the so-called “apocalyptic” texts, and Jesus and the early Christians insofar as they spoke or wrote in a similar way, were actually thinking of a cosmic catastrophe. A major event through which the world would become a different place, yes; the collapse or destruction of the world of space, time and matter, no. At this point the ways diverge. Perhaps Jesus did say the relevant sayings but didn’t mean what Schweitzer and others supposed – either because he *did* mean “the end of the world” but that “within a generation” didn’t mean what it seems to mean, or because he was referring instead to his own vindication and the fall of Jerusalem. Or perhaps the sayings did mean what Schweitzer thought they meant, but Jesus didn’t say them. The latter was the line taken by the so-called “Jesus Seminar” which was reacting to modern American end-of-the-world fundamentalism, and, like the earlier German scholars chronicled by Klaus Koch, was doing its agonized best to rescue Jesus from such “apocalyptic.”¹²

Of course – to glance back again at the theory of Weiss and his followers – there were obvious reasons why the alternative reading was not available. They show little signs of having made any detailed or historically grounded study of the Jewish writings of the period, or of the biblical texts on which those writings were drawing. They had not noticed that, in

11 D.E. Nineham, “Foreword to the Complete Edition,” in Schweitzer, *Quest* (see n. 6), xiii–xxxii; see esp. p. xxxii, suggesting that future versions of Christianity might be “less centred on the figure of Jesus.” An earlier version of this essay appears in Nineham, *Explorations in Theology* (see n. 5), ch. 8.

12 On these options, particularly the last, see *JVG* (see n. 2), ch. 2.

Josephus and elsewhere, such texts were not predicting “the end of the world.”¹³ They lived at a time when the only sense one could make of “apocalyptic” language was to treat it as dark, dualistic, offering a different worldview to that of the (positive, world-affirming) prophetic tradition.¹⁴ In that context (and still, to some extent, today), things were polarized: either “progress” or irruption (the social and political overtones are obvious). Either the gentle Ritschlian piety, or the “end-of-the-world.” This either/or was not simply a matter of theological discussion. It reflected the much wider social puzzles of nineteenth-century Europe, as chronicled for instance by Lucian Hölscher in his recent book *Weltgericht oder Revolution*.¹⁵ The choice posed between a steady “progress” and a sudden irruptive transformation was not, in the first instance, about *Heilsgeschichte* and “apocalyptic.” It was about Hegel and Marx – and many other thinkers and the movements that tried to live out their dreams. It was a larger social and cultural question, of which the church’s and the exegetes’ questions were reflections.¹⁶

In any case, Weiss and the others belonged to a *sceptical* tradition which had for many years not taken seriously the bodily resurrection of Jesus, so they could not imagine that the early Christian resurrection-language referred to something which Jesus’s first followers saw as an actual space-time event. They belonged to a *Protestant* tradition that had projected its critique of mediaeval Catholicism on to the first-century Jewish world, thereafter regarding Jewish ideas as part of the problem to which Paul’s gospel was the solution.¹⁷ They lived within an *Enlightenment* world where “the church” and its mission were perceived as retrograde, blinkered,

¹³ See n. 2 above.

¹⁴ See my *PRI* (see n. 3), 137–144; and again Koch, *Rediscovery* (see n. 3), 38, pointing out that, when German commentary series or reference works needed to discuss Daniel, “foreign scholars had to come to the rescue.”

¹⁵ L. Hölscher, *Weltgericht oder Revolution: Protestantische und sozialistische Zukunftsvorstellung im deutschen Kaiserreich* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1989).

¹⁶ See L. Hölscher, “Mysteries of Historical Order: Ruptures, Simultaneity and the Relationship of the Past, the Present and the Future,” in *Breaking Up Time: Negotiating the Borders between Present, Past and Future*, ed. C. Lorenz and B. Bevernage (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013), 134–151. New Testament scholars often write as if the theories and “results” of their predecessors were reached in a scholarly bubble, isolated from wider culture. Essays like that of Hölscher show otherwise. Thus the contrast between Pannenberg’s developmental eschatology and Moltmann’s more “apocalyptic” view (Koch, *Rediscovery* [see n. 3], 108) is not simply, as Koch suggests, an example of bad historical research taking revenge in systematics, but a reflection of a wider, and older, problem of European thought in general. This wider context deserves fuller exploration.

¹⁷ This is the main thrust of E.P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (London: SCM, 1977).

stultifying: how could this movement, even in its early days, be the new reality in which one could see the fulfilment of Jesus's grandiose promises?

The debate has not been helped by the tone adopted by Bultmann and some of his advocates, accusing their critics of "apologetic" motives. Bultmann of all people knew that there is no such thing as exegesis without presuppositions.¹⁸ The pretence to a lofty neutrality is threadbare. More particularly, the end-of-the-world proposals and the various corollaries they have generated have themselves had considerable apologetic value. For some (as in the seventeenth-century precursor Matthew Tindal) this was an apology for Deism, or even for agnosticism. For Schweitzer and some of those who latched on to his ideas, it was an apology for a radical rejection of the smug ecclesial piety of nineteenth-century Europe and a way of hearing a new word in an alarming and threatening social context.¹⁹ For Bultmann, it served the cause of a neo-Kantian and existentialist retrieval of Lutheran piety. For many in our own day, it has functioned as an apology for various kinds of liberal revisionism.

What matters, of course, is *history*: what did Jesus actually announce, what did his first followers claim, and what did they mean by it? The ostensible foundation for the position of Weiss, Schweitzer, Bultmann and their followers was a *historical* proposal. However difficult it might be to determine whether Jesus said this saying or that, here at least we were (so it was claimed) on solid ground. Schweitzer's dramatic proposal was argued *historically*: this was the only way to make full sense of the data. Bultmann too advanced a *historical* proposal about early Christianity, composed of many parts such as his theory about pre-Christian Gnosticism, his sug-

18 Bultmann's position is summarized by J. Frey: "If Jesus and Paul expected the imminent end, they were disappointed in this expectation, and all attempts to dispense with this disappointment must be abandoned as intellectually dishonest and incredible apologetics" ("Johannine Christology and Ecclesiology," in Longenecker and Parsons, *Beyond Bultmann* [see n. 9], 101–132, here 106).

19 See again Hölscher (see nn. 15, 16). On the enthusiastic reception of Schweitzer by some English scholars, including F.C. Burkitt, who saw his reading as an appropriate word to a tottering European civilization, see M.D. Chapman, *The Coming Crisis: The Impact of Eschatology on Theology in Edwardian England* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2001), 81–86; and see, e.g., F.C. Burkitt, "The Eschatological Idea in the Gospel," in *Essays on Some Biblical Questions of the Day by Members of the University of Cambridge*, ed. H.B. Swete (London: Macmillan, 1909), 193–214, insisting that the message of Jesus was relevant precisely because it was geared to "the expectations of sudden and complete catastrophe" rather than of "gradual and progressive evolutionary change" (208); so too Burkitt's "Preface" in the first English edition of *The Quest* (London: Black, 1910), xvii–xix. Compare also W. Lowrie's "Translator's Introduction" to Schweitzer's *The Mystery of the Kingdom of God* (London: Black, 1925), 17–58, anticipating Bultmann in some respects.

gestion of an early form of John's Gospel and a later ecclesial redactor, and so on. Käsemann swapped Bultmann's theory about gnostic origins for his own theory of apocalyptic origins, but still the point was to make historical sense of the early Christian movement. Today's heirs of Bultmann have done some of this quite differently, but the case still rests on what, within this view, is regarded as unassailable historical evidence. This is the level at which the whole proposal must be challenged.

2 A Different Kind of Eschatology?

The basic historical point I wish to make is that Weiss, Schweitzer and their successors were right to highlight "eschatology" as being central to Jesus's message (and to the beliefs and preaching of his first followers), but wrong to understand this "eschatology" in terms of "the end of the world" or "cosmic catastrophe." There are many details, but the two main points are quite simple. First, all the participants in this long-running drama were themselves anything but neutral historians; they all had strong reasons for wanting an "end-of-the-world" theory. Second, they were all, in their different ways no doubt, assuming worldviews quite different from the Second Temple Jewish ones. They therefore misunderstood (1) what the Jews of the period were hoping for, (2) the language in which those hopes were expressed, and (3) the meaning of Jesus's retrieval of that language and reframing of those hopes.

First, then, the reasons why the end-of-the-world theorists were so eager to embrace this position. They were all, in one way or another, reacting against the comfortable piety of nineteenth-century Europe, which as far as they could see had too easily identified the agendas of the Enlightenment, with its sense of moral, cultural and societal "progress," with "the kingdom of God." Europe, so many supposed, was at last putting Jesus's programme into action. The storms of revolution, both in the 1780s and then again in 1848, had been weathered, and the way was clear for the immanent process of improvement to continue indefinitely. But for Schweitzer, and for many others of the time, this was hollow. What Nietzsche had said about his own day, Schweitzer said about Jesus: it was time to go "beyond good and evil," beyond the comfortable pieties and moralisms of the period.²⁰ Something far more radical was needed. There are signs of a stirring in the culture of

²⁰ On Schweitzer and Nietzsche see Chapman, *The Coming Crisis* (see n. 19), 74–76, 129–131.

Germany and France at the time: the secular world was also ready for “end-of-the-world” ideas. This helps to explain what might otherwise be very puzzling: why a new theory, advanced in two small books by two young scholars, so quickly became the received orthodoxy, so that to challenge it was to be dubbed intellectually dishonest or guilty of seeking “an easy way out.”²¹

All this was amplified a thousand times by the events of the early twentieth century, in which many perceived an “end of the world” in what was in fact (as we shall see) a more authentic first-century sense: the collapse of previously fixed landmarks in the social, cultural and political realms. And, speaking of landmarks, a new one was erected right after the First World War: Karl Barth’s famous Romans commentary, which, though it actually had rather little to do with Paul and his great letter, spoke volumes about the abject failure of the nineteenth-century liberalism whose greatest products, Adolf von Harnack and Wilhelm Herrmann (Barth’s teachers), had cheerfully signed on the line in support of the Kaiser’s war programme. Nothing good had come of the human, self-congratulatory dreams of “progress.” What was required was a fresh word from God. Thus was born Dialectical Theology. And it was out of that movement, initially in agreement with Barth though gradually parting company, that Rudolf Bultmann came to the fore.

Bultmann, like Barth, was reacting against the supposedly Christian culture that had allowed terrible things to happen. Through the 1920s and 1930s he faced, of course, yet more challenges, and is often hailed, along with Barth, as a strong member of the Confessing Church, speaking out in confusing times against the growing tide of wickedness. In the midst of all that, Bultmann’s constant theme was that the eschatological perspective of Paul, as articulated in 1 Cor 7, enabled one to live “as if not” – in other words, as if the present world were irrelevant.²² Bultmann’s Lutheranism, with its “two kingdoms” theology, reinforced this: the two kingdoms were quite different. What mattered was not the horizontal “progress” of the world, with all its ambiguities and inhumanities. What counted was the vertical address of the Word, and the daily decision to live by faith.

So far as I know, Bultmann did not even discuss the “end-of-the-world” theory. He took it for granted. It fitted his situation – or rather, he could

21 For the charge of finding “an easy way out” see, e. g., D.W. Congdon, *Rudolf Bultmann: A Companion to His Theology* (Eugene, Or.: Cascade Books, 2015), 10f.

22 On the importance of 1 Cor 7 for Bultmann’s preaching and theology in the 1930s see Standhartinger, “Bultmann’s *Theology of the New Testament in Context*” (see n. 9), esp. 237f., 253f.

make it fit. The famous programme of demythologization, so confusing to Anglo-Saxon readers approaching the New Testament with different questions and cultural assumptions, was aimed principally not so much at getting rid of the New Testament's "supernatural" worldview to make the gospel palatable for a "modern" world that had given up such things – though that was part of it too – but at translating the "mythological" language of first-century Jewish "apocalyptic" into what it had "really meant" for Jesus himself. This had already been seen by John (Bultmann's John, anyway). Underneath this again was the well-known extension of Luther's "faith not works": if we base our faith on "history" we will turn it into a "work."²³

Here there are further depths to be plumbed. Bultmann, as a thorough and careful reader of the New Testament, worked under the imperative to produce a historical account of early Christianity, and to that extent might be thought to have infringed his own anti-history prohibition. His response would be, presumably, that his historical investigations into early Christianity were not aimed at producing a historical platform for faith. This was why he supposed that Paul had committed a *faux pas* in emphasizing the witnessed historicity of Jesus's bodily resurrection in 1 Cor 15. Bultmann was doing something different: aiming to provide a historical account of how the early Christians had expressed their (non-historical) faith.

I have argued elsewhere that the period of the Second World War had more than a little to do with the development of the next phase of the story.²⁴ The cultural critic Walter Benjamin, in his last work, expressed his profound disillusionment with "history": nothing good can come of it. Hopes had been raised in the 1930s that a new moment of history might be on the way, but with the pact between Hitler and Stalin in 1940 all seemed lost. The mood of radical disappointment, of disillusion with any sense of positive historical progress, was palpable by the end of the war. Barth, lecturing in Bonn not long after hostilities had ceased, spoke of students who had forgotten how to smile.²⁵ It was precisely in this period that Bultmann himself, theoreticians such as Martin Werner, and pupils of

²³ I do not know whether it ever occurred to Bultmann to run his famous distinction between "work" and "deed" – the former ruled out by the gospel, the latter what the believer does in Spirit-inspired response to the gospel – over the question of history; whether, in other words, his *Historie/Geschichte* distinction might correspond to the work/deed distinction.

²⁴ See *PFG* (see n. 2), 1476–1484.

²⁵ See again Koch, *Rediscovery* (see n. 3), 67f. ("nearly all discerning Christians had finally lost faith in a divinely willed progress in history after the outbreak of the Second World War"), 70; and see K. Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline* (London: SCM, 1966), 7.

Bultmann's such as Conzelmann and Käsemann, followed by other devotees such as the American Norman Perrin, were emphasizing that after the parousia had failed to arrive on schedule the church suffered a grievous disappointment, and began to change in character quite drastically.²⁶ An early sign of that change (according to this theory) was the writing of the first Gospel, turning early faith-traditions into Jesus-stories and thereby (for a Bultmannian) falsifying them, particularly when the other evangelists, especially Luke, seemed to think that this would produce a "history" on which faith could then be based.²⁷ For others, it was a matter of the church settling down into a bourgeois existence (was this, too, a projection of mid-century frustrations?). For others – and all these categories could of course overlap – it was a matter of sacramental and ethical life taking over from "apocalyptic" expectation and non-historical faith. Thus, if the notion of the imminent end of the world had served the various aims and agendas of Schweitzer and Bultmann, the notion of a *disappointed* end-of-the-world hope served very well the various aims and agendas of Käsemann and others in the 1950s and 1960s, neatly retrieving Baur's theory about the church's decline into *Frühkatholizismus* and combining it with a social protest against a once-again-comfortable church life, all supposedly based on "apocalyptic." Like all theories about "the fall of the church," this then became another variation on the much older Protestant proposal: the first generation got it right, and things have been going wrong ever since.

None of this is meant to imply that the proposal to understand Jesus as in some sense an "apocalyptic prophet" was wide of the mark. The question is, in what sense?²⁸ If the choice is between Schweitzer and William Wrede, I have always chosen Schweitzer. If the choice is between Bultmann and the "German Christians," with their ideas about historical progress, we must choose Bultmann. If the choice is between Käsemann's proposal that "apocalyptic is the mother of early Christianity" and some non-apocalyptic, steady-state view of Jesus and his followers as teaching merely a new social ethic – a chastened Ritschlianism, as it were, however radical – we must choose Käsemann. But at every point in this hundred-year tradition

²⁶ See N. Perrin, *The Promise of Bultmann* (New York: Lipincott, 1969).

²⁷ R. Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, 2 vols. (London: SCM, 1951–55), 2.127; see Standhartinger, "Bultmann's *Theology of the New Testament* in Context" (see n. 9), 250. On Gospel writing as a failure of nerve see the remark of R.H. Lightfoot reported by Nineham in *Explorations in Theology* (see n. 5), 110.

²⁸ See, e.g., D.C. Allison, *The Historical Christ and the Theological Jesus* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2009), 90–101, a brief summary of a position Allison has argued at more length elsewhere, e.g., *Constructing Jesus: Memory, Imagination, and History* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2010), esp. ch. 2.

the appeal has been to history, not in the sense of an immanent progressive movement but in the sense of *what the first-century texts were actually talking about*. And at that point we must protest. The proclamation of Jesus was indeed about *something that was happening and that would happen*, as a result of which the world would be a different place. If that is what is meant by “eschatology” it is undoubtedly correct. It was often expressed in language already used by scriptural prophecy, not least Daniel. If this is what is meant by “apocalyptic,” that too is undoubtedly correct. Jesus was not simply a great moral or social teacher. Nor was he offering either a new spirituality or a new way to get to heaven. He was talking about something that was happening, and that would happen, once and for all “on earth as in heaven.” But what was it? This brings us to the main theme of this paper. What must we say, at this distance, about the key texts, both Jewish and early Christian?

3 First-Century Apocalyptic Eschatology

Among the fascinating unanswered questions about Weiss and Schweitzer, we might ask: what were they using as the basis for their theory? It has been common to assume that they were simply reading Jewish “apocalyptic” texts and drawing conclusions, in an almost positivist fashion, without reference to their own times and indeed claiming that their findings were utterly alien to modern thought. As we have just seen, however, the end-of-the-world theory was an idea whose time, in some people’s eyes at least, had come. There were reasons within the culture why the idea was attractive, and only a small amount of apparent evidence, hastily alluded to, was necessary for the idea to catch on. As Schweitzer himself said, the ideas in question were “in the air.”²⁹ It is commonly said that Weiss and Schweitzer were relying on fresh readings of recently discovered or edited ancient Jewish texts. But these play no actual role in Schweitzer’s argument. It is not even clear from the principal writings what texts they had actually studied. It is *assumed* that books such as 1 Enoch and 4 Ezra, looking back to the biblical book of Daniel, expressed the hope for God’s kingdom to appear through a cosmic catastrophe in which divine intervention would do away with the present world of space, time and matter and replace it with some kind of utterly “heavenly” state. It is *assumed* that this kind of expectation makes sense within an ancient Jewish metaphysical imagination in which

²⁹ Schweitzer, *Mystery* (see n. 19), 3, cf. 25 (translator’s preface).

such things were thinkable. No attempt was made to justify this reading of the relevant texts. They appear to be talking about the end of the world; that is enough. No attempt was made to find out, as scholars have been trying to find out for the last sixty years, how the relevant language worked, which older biblical themes it was echoing and to what effect, what the Jewish apocalyptic texts were actually talking about and why they used the language and imagery they did. No: the end of the world was what the new theory demanded, the texts seemed to provide it, so no further enquiry was necessary. There is no evidence that either Bultmann or his pupils did fresh work on the original context and meaning of the relevant Jewish texts. When others have done that work, they have come up with very different results.

They have come up, in particular, with *political* interpretations. That is to say, most contemporary students of Jewish “apocalyptic” literature understand the idiom to constitute a vivid way of expressing social and political disquiet with the way the world is being run, and the hope and expectation that Israel’s God will act dramatically to bring about a rescue for his people and a new kind of world in which justice will dwell at last.³⁰ There is, to be sure, a duality between “the present age” and “the age to come.” But this should not be taken to imply a metaphysical or cosmological dualism in which the present creation is regarded as evil and to be abolished, leaving only a “supernatural” world in its place.³¹ The later Rabbis firmly believed in the distinction between the present age and the age to come, but they were not cosmological dualists. They believed in the goodness of the creation and that the One God would rescue, restore and renew it.

The entire field of Jewish apocalyptic writings might be surveyed at this point, but we can cut through a mass of detail and say three things in particular, of which the last subdivides.³²

30 E.g., A.E. Portier-Young, *Apocalypse against Empire: Theologies of Resistance in Early Judaism* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2011).

31 On types of “dualism” and “duality” see the discussion by R.J. Bauckham, “Dualism and Soteriology in Johannine Theology,” in Longenecker and Parsons, *Beyond Bultmann* (see n. 9), 133–153, citing esp. J.G. Gammie, “Spatial and Ethical Dualism in Jewish Wisdom and Apocalyptic Literature,” *JBL* 93 (1974), 356–385; and Wright, *NTPG* (see n. 2), 280–299.

32 See *NTPG* (see n. 2), 280–338; *PFG* (see n. 2), 121–196; N.T. Wright, “The Challenge of Dialogue” in *God and the Faithfulness of Paul*, ed. M. Bird, C. Heilig, and J.T. Hewitt, WUNT 2/413 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2016), 711–768, esp. 743–754; G.B. Caird, *The Language and Imagery of the Bible* (London: Duckworth, 1980; repr., Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1997), 243–271.

First, the “apocalyptic” material in the Bible and in Second Temple literature has as its *referent* the world of ancient Jewish history, set in the turbulent and dangerous political climate of the last three centuries before the Common Era and the first century or so after the time of Jesus. Just as much of Daniel is commonly dated around the time of the Maccabean crisis, with the four metals of the statue in chapter 2 and the four “beasts” from the sea in chapter 7 being identified as four great world-empires, so the “eagle and lion” in chapter 12 of 4 Ezra are reliably identified as a Roman emperor on the one hand and Israel’s Messiah on the other. And – this is the main point for our purposes – when the denouement appears in Dan 2 and 7, and when the Lion overcomes the Eagle in 4 Ezra, there is no reason whatever to suppose that this will involve the end of the present world of space, time and matter. That would not be relevant. It would be to change the subject. Nor would anyone in the ancient or the modern world suggest that for Dan 2 and 7 to be fulfilled one would need to see a many-metalled statue whose feet are smashed by a stone which then becomes a mountain, and a succession of actual sea-monsters climaxing with one possessing a battery of horns. For the “dogma of delay,” however, everything else can happily be symbolic, but for some reason “the son of man coming on the clouds” must be literal. And it must include, for Weiss, Schweitzer and their successors, “the end of the world.” But the ancient hope of Israel – which is what all these “apocalyptic” texts are about – was not for the end of the world, but for the *transformation* of the world; in particular, for the transformation of the actual social and political realities so that justice would be done, wickedness would be routed, and Israel would be free in her own land. Destroying the world, and the land with it, would not be to the point. To this extent, Hermann Samuel Reimarus was quite right: Jesus’s language about the kingdom was referring to actual events which were to take place. Other people who spoke in that way were plotting, or at least hoping for, an actual political revolution. Yes: they were looking, not for a steady development of an immanent historical process, but for a new kind of event through which the One God would establish his rule on earth as in heaven. But no, they did not imagine that this would mean abolishing “earth” and replacing it with a new kind of “heavenly” existence instead. When Josephus discusses the views of the main parties and sects in his own day, he never thinks to tell us about people expecting the end of the world. He lists Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes and the “fourth philosophy,” but never mentions any group holding an “end-of-the-world” viewpoint, which would have been significantly different from any of the above. When he expounds Daniel, it is not difficult to read between his lines

(he was anxious, after all, about giving the Romans the impression that the Jews were hoping for revolution) and see that the eager expectation fuelled by that vital book was the hope of a major, and imminent, *political* transformation. Ancient apocalyptic, and particularly Daniel, was read in terms of the transformation of the world, not its abolition.³³

The reason the writers in question do not imagine the end of the world, second, is that they were starting from the biblical text, not from Deist or Epicurean rationalism – for which any kind of “kingdom of God” could only mean the complete abolition of the present world. Weiss and his followers were attempting to read Jewish apocalyptic texts within a wooden, uncomprehending nineteenth-century literalism; within their worldview, the idea of heaven invading earth was part of an ancient Jewish metaphysical worldview to which no modern thinker could subscribe. For Weiss this meant that one would have to leave all that to one side and return to Albrecht Ritschl; for Weiss’s most famous pupil Bultmann, it meant that one would have to demythologize. The “political” interpretation, near at hand because of Reimarus but not wanted because of the perceived dangers of revolution in the late nineteenth century, was replaced by a “cosmic” one. Reimarus had in fact been closer to the truth than he knew (or than Weiss, Schweitzer or Bultmann realized), even while he refused to see the all-important modification which Jesus was steadily introducing into his kingdom-teaching. Jesus’s parables of the kingdom (which Weiss, tellingly, regarded as inauthentic) were saying “Yes” to the kingdom-hope while constantly redefining what that kingdom-hope looked like.³⁴ The second point, then, comes down to this: the fact that “apocalyptic” literature uses the *language* of cosmic catastrophe to refer to actual political events has been massively misread. When Isaiah spoke of sun and moon being darkened, and of stars falling from heaven, he was referring to the fall of Babylon and investing that event with its cosmic significance.³⁵ When Jeremiah warned that the world would go back to its chaotic pre-creation state, he was referring to the fall of Jerusalem.³⁶ First-century Jews knew all this. Nobody who read 1 Enoch supposed that it could only be fulfilled by

33 See *PFG* (see n. 2), 116f., 170f., and elsewhere. On Josephus’s reading of Daniel (including his apparently tactical omission of Dan 7 at *A.J.* 10.263f.) see *NTPG* (see n. 2), 314; *PFG* (see n. 2), 1316f.

34 Cf. Weiss, *Jesus’ Proclamation* (see n. 7), 61–62.

35 See Isa 13:10; 24:23; cf. Ezek 32:7f.; Joel 2:10, 30f.; 3:15; Amos 8:9.

36 Cf. Caird, *Language and Imagery* (see n. 32), 259 (discussed in *PFG* [see n. 2], 168–170): Jeremiah, having prophesied the return to chaos, worried for a long time that he might be a false prophet – not because the world had not ended, but because Jerusalem had not fallen.

an actual white bull. Nobody reading 4 Ezra 12 imagined an actual lion attacking an actual (if unconventionally feathered) eagle. Their habitual idiom for expressing major and turbulent socio-political events, under, of course, the strange but providential guidance of the One God, lent itself to misunderstanding in a post-Enlightenment world which had long since ceased to have any real engagement with early Jewish thought, and for which any divine action in the world would be an “intervention from outside” with “catastrophic” results. When Weiss and others declared that the ancient metaphysic was not available to the modern world, what they should have said was that the ancient literary convention was opaque to them.

This was cognate, third, with their failure to understand the significance of the Temple – which after all stood at the center of the ancient Jewish worldview. The Temple matters in this story for two reasons. First, it was the effective symbol of just that overlap and interlocking of heaven and earth which the post-Deist worldview ruled out a priori. The original creation was a single reality with two aspects. The Temple, and the Tabernacle which preceded it, were the places where, and the means by which, heaven and earth could and did come together again, dangerously and mysteriously. Sometimes this was expressed simply by supposing that heaven and earth met in the Temple. Sometimes the earthly Temple was seen as the true copy of the heavenly original. Sometimes the earthly Temple was seen as a *microcosmos*, a small working model of the whole heaven-and-earth reality, designed to function as a symbol and foretaste of the creator’s plan for the whole creation.³⁷ These options are not mutually exclusive. In the world of symbol, and of symbolic imagination, such views can easily co-exist and interpret one another. All this supplies a Temple-shaped worldview in which the language of heaven and earth makes very different sense from any sense it might make in post-Enlightenment Protestant Europe. There is no sign that Weiss, Schweitzer, or Bultmann – or for that matter Werner, Conzelmann, Käsemann or Norman Perrin – ever tried to understand the Temple-shaped metaphysics within which apocalyptic language, with its ready commerce of heaven and earth, was fully at home.

In particular, therefore (the second point about the Temple), neither Weiss, Schweitzer nor Bultmann even glimpsed the *cosmic* significance which the fall of the Temple itself would possess for a first-century Jew.

³⁷ See, e.g., J. Klawans, *Purity, Sacrifice, and the Temple: Symbolism and Supersessionism in the Study of Ancient Judaism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 111–144.

Since the Synoptic discourse upon which a good deal of end-of-the-world discussion rests (Mark 13 and parallels) announces itself explicitly as being about the fall of the Temple, and since this discourse goes closely with the entire sequence of events from Jesus's "triumphal entry" and his Temple-action through to his arrest, trial and death, this naturally means that the writers who leaned heavily on this chapter to set up their ideas about the imminent end of the world were (to put it mildly) starting on the wrong foot. The question of the Temple is thus *both* the key to the ancient Jewish worldview (heaven and earth coming together) *and* one central feature of what Jesus and his first followers were talking about. But none of this seems to have impinged for a moment on the thoughts of those who formulated what has since become a ruling dogma in biblical and theological studies. All this has resulted, I submit, in major and demonstrable misreadings of the New Testament evidence itself. To this I now turn.

4 Jesus and His First Followers

Weiss, Schweitzer and Bultmann, and their followers to this day, have tended to lump together a string of disparate early Christian themes and ideas, as though they all basically referred to the same thing, and as though that same thing were, unambiguously, "the end of the world." Chief among these is "the kingdom of God," as in Mark 9:1: "Some people standing here won't experience death before they see God's kingdom come in power." Closely allied with this are sayings about "the coming of the Son of Man," as in Jesus's answer to Caiaphas, which in Mark reads "You will see 'the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven.'" This is unsurprisingly (though I believe confusingly) linked with the "parousia" in Paul and elsewhere. Various sayings about "the end," such as 1 Cor 15:24 ("then comes the end") or Matt 28:20 ("I am with you, every single day, to the very end of the age") can come in here, with the note that at least in Paul's earlier writings he clearly expected "the end," including the general resurrection, within his own lifetime (1 Thess 4:15; 1 Cor 15:51–52), though after the terrible time Paul had in Ephesus (2 Cor 1:8–10) he recognizes that he may well die before the day comes, and is figuring out how to think about the consequences (2 Cor 5:1–5; Phil 1:20–26). We should also bring in here the early Christian language about "the day of the Lord" (1 Cor 1:8; 2 Cor 1:14; Phil 1:6, 10; 1 Thess 5:2), which seems to be an adaptation of the biblical "day of YHWH."

Already we note a distinction which has to be made between events referred to as future *from the perspective of Jesus's public career* and events seen as future *from within the perspective of post-Easter Christian life*. Of course, the former were “written up” within the post-Easter world. But, as with many other aspects of the Gospels' portrayals of Jesus, they seem to be doing their best to imagine themselves within a world which would have made sense in Jesus's own time.³⁸ And we also note that some of the features listed above (kingdom of God, “coming of the Son of Man,” and so on) are tagged with a definite time-constraint, such as the coming of the kingdom with power in the lifetime of some bystanders (Mark 9:1), and the “coming of the Son of Man” within a generation (Mark 13:30 and elsewhere). That cannot be gainsaid. But attempts to find such definite short-term timelines elsewhere often involve special pleading, as has been shown in relation to *ὁ καιρὸς συνεσταλμένος ἐστίν* in 1 Cor 7:29, which NRSV translates as “the appointed time has grown short” but which, in the light of 1 Cor 7:26 which refers to “the present difficult time” (and which some have argued refers to the famine which struck the eastern Mediterranean world at that time), I have translated as “the present situation won't last long.”³⁹ Bultmann clearly wanted 1 Cor 7 to refer to the imminent end of the world, because the idea of living “as if not” was such a major theme of his teaching in his own difficult situation in the 1930s; but this should not become the very short tail that wags the very large dog of New Testament theology. Similar things could be said about the generalized declaration in Rom 13:11 (“our salvation is nearer now than it was when we first came to faith”). The *only* point in the whole New Testament at which we find explicit mention of a puzzling “delay” is the notorious 2 Pet 3:4–10, but that too – a warning about what “deceivers” may say – ought not to be taken as an indication of what the early church as a whole believed.⁴⁰

This leaves us with two main questions to examine. First, are there any texts at all in the early Christian writings which speak of an actual cosmic catastrophe such as Weiss, Schweitzer and Bultmann assumed (I say “assumed” because I have seen no actual argument for this interpretation in

³⁸ On this point see, e. g., *NTPG* (see n. 2), 421 f.

³⁹ On the widespread famine see, e. g., B.W. Winter *After Paul Left Corinth: The Influence of Secular Ethics and Social Change* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2001), 216–225.

⁴⁰ For discussion see, e. g., R.J. Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter* (Waco, Tex.: Word, 1983), 283–322; B.W. Witherington, *Letters and Homilies for Hellenized Christians*, vol. 2: *A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on 1–2 Peter* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2007), 363–391.

their writings)? Second, how did the first Christians themselves understand the sayings which *did* have a specific time-limit, such as Mark 9:1 or 13:30?

First, the passage in 2 Pet 3 is again regularly cited. Some have seen it as a Christian version of a Stoic eschatology which expected a cosmic conflagration; but in Stoicism the fire which eventually consumes the world is the inner divine life, finally and gladly drawing the entire world into its flame, whereas for 2 Peter it seems that the fire executes judgment. In any case, the passage is unique among early Christian writings and could not be used as an index of what Jesus and his first followers believed. More to the point, Rom 8:18–25 does indeed envisage a major transformation of the present creation, with language modelled on Exodus to indicate that what God did for Israel in liberating his people from Pharaoh’s Egypt, and what God did for Jesus in raising him from the dead, God the creator will do for the whole creation in the end, setting it free from its “slavery to decay” (8:21). This is closely linked to the final resurrection from the dead, and clearly Paul is envisaging an actual event (not something that could be demythologized into an existential experience, which is presumably why Bultmann regarded this passage as extraneous to Paul’s proper thought) in which the cosmos will be transformed.⁴¹ This must be correlated closely with the other full-dress exposition of final eschatology in 1 Cor 15 to which we shall return presently. As with the parallel between 1 Thess 4 and the end of 1 Cor 15 it looks as though Paul is quite capable of describing what he sees as essentially the same event in different ways, drawing on biblical imagery to invest the actual future event with its theological meaning.

Romans 8 does not, however, describe a cosmic *catastrophe*. The present creation will not be destroyed. It will, Paul says, be set free from the severe limitation imposed by φθορά, “decay.” It will be more truly itself when, in the end, God will be “all in all” (1 Cor 15:28). All this is guaranteed, in Rom 8, by two things: the death and resurrection of the Messiah, and the power of the Spirit. Something *has happened* as a result of which something else *will happen* in the future. There is all the difference – all the difference in the world, one might say! – between a cosmic catastrophe, in which the present world will cease to exist and a new purely “heavenly” reality will take its place (which seems to be what was envisaged by Weiss, Schweitzer and Bultmann as the meaning of “the kingdom of God,” and as the result of “the coming of the son of man”), and a cosmic Exodus in which the whole creation will be liberated from its present slavery to decay. This in turn picks up the earlier promises: God told Abraham that his seed would inherit

⁴¹ On the whole question see the discussion in *PPG* (see n. 2), 1402f.

the world (4:13), and the Messiah's inheritance now fulfils that (8:17). Why could Weiss and the others not grasp all this? Because they were reading such early Jewish texts as they had available in the light of their own worldview. Had they tuned in to the biblical or Second Temple worldview in which heaven and earth were made for one another they might have realized that the ultimate "end" envisaged by Paul and the other early Christians was very different from the cosmic destruction they imagined. And, significantly, *Paul says nothing in Rom 8 or elsewhere about the predicted cosmic transformation necessarily coming to pass within a generation*. No doubt it is coming. But, like the thief in the night, it could come at *any* time.

The point about the this-worldly referent of "apocalyptic" language in Paul can be seen clearly enough in a text which obviously belongs within early Christian "apocalyptic" or "eschatology," and yet which completely disproves any suggestion that this future hope was all about the destruction of the space-time order. In 2 Thess 2 we do not see with complete clarity what "the day of the Lord" actually means, but we see very clearly what it does *not* mean:

Please don't be suddenly blown off course in your thinking, or be unsettled, either through spiritual influence, or through a word, or through a letter supposedly from us, telling you that the day of the Lord has already arrived. (2 Thess 2:2)

Obviously, if "the day of the Lord" meant "the collapse of the space-time universe," this entire sentence would be nonsense. One would not expect to be informed of such an occurrence in a letter. All that follows in the chapter – the prediction of "the lawless one" who will be destroyed by Jesus "with the breath of his mouth" (2:8, alluding to Isa 11:4) and will be destroyed by "the unveiling of his presence" (parousia) – comes under this rubric. These will be *transformative events within the ongoing space-time world*, not the destruction of that world and its replacement with a "purely supernatural" world. All that Paul says about the parousia must be seen in this light.

So, second, what did the earliest Christians believe about Jesus's promises of an imminent kingdom? The short answer is that they believed that something *had already happened* which could be seen as a fulfilment of those promises. But to investigate this we must take a deep breath and frame our question to the documents rather sharply.

We must, in short, face the obvious question: how did the earliest Christians understand "the coming of the kingdom" and, alongside that and apparently blended with it, "the coming of the Son of Man"? We could sharpen up this question by asking: supposing we had confronted Paul, or a

member of one of his churches, with Mark 9:1 and its parallels, or with the question of Mark 13:30 concerning “this generation” not disappearing “until all this has happened”; what would they have said? And supposing, having thus interrogated Paul and other early writers, we asked *the writers of the Gospels themselves* to comment on these interpretations, and to give us in their own words a further explanation of what they meant by these well-known sayings of an “imminent” kingdom, what might they say?

One of the best-known answers to these questions is that the early Christians developed a “now-and-not-yet” approach: something *had happened* as a result of which the expected kingdom was, in one sense, a present reality, and something *was yet to happen* through which that already-inaugurated kingdom would reach its ultimate goal. This has been taken for granted by many scholars and popular preachers for much of the last half-century. This has, however, been attacked recently as being a modern invention generated by “apologetic” motives, by the desire in particular to get off the hook of the notion that Jesus and his first followers expected the end of the world and were obviously mistaken.⁴² The case must be made again. This is not difficult, since the arguments are strong. But since they are often forgotten we need to set them out step by step.

5 Early Tradition outside the Gospels

Setting aside the Gospels themselves for the moment, there are various passages commonly thought of as incorporating or reflecting very early Christian tradition. Three such passages in Paul come to mind, and in each case we will see that these traditions insist on a “present” powerful kingdom alongside the clear promise of a still-future fulfilment. This, it seems, is how the very early Christians would have answered the question about Mark 9:1 and similar promises.

We must first say a word about Paul’s eschatology in general, since it is within Paul’s letters, themselves written within thirty years of Jesus’s death, that these fragments are now found. It is well known that we can observe a shift in Paul’s eschatology, but this shift is not always well described. To put it crudely: in 1 Corinthians and 1 Thessalonians Paul expects that he will

⁴² See again Congdon, *Rudolf Bultmann* (see n. 21), 10: the combination of present and future eschatology into an “already but not yet” scheme is a “simplistic dismissal of the problem,” invented in the mid-twentieth century, offering “an easy way out” which has become “immensely attractive for obvious reasons” so that “all problems immediately disappear.”

still be alive when Jesus returns, but in Philippians he faces the possibility that he may die ahead of that time (though holding on to the possibility that he may not) and in 2 Corinthians he appears to have concluded that he probably will die before the time. As I have argued elsewhere, this is not because he has changed his mind about the “end” (whatever he means by that) being expected “at any time.” He still believes that in Romans. Nor is it because he has swapped a Jewish or “apocalyptic” vision of the “end” for a Hellenistic or Platonic one, as has sometimes been said in relation to 2 Cor 5:1–10. It is simply that his experiences in Ephesus (described allusively in 2 Cor 1:8–10) have brought him face to face with his own mortality in a new way. The shift has to do with his perspective, not his belief.⁴³

Turning, then, to the key early fragments, we come first to the supposedly “formulaic” introductory saying in Rom 1:3–5. Here Paul speaks of Jesus as being marked out as “Son of God in power” through the resurrection, and thereby attaining to a position of world sovereignty, echoing as he does so Ps 2:7:

[...] the good news about his son, who was descended from David’s seed in terms of flesh, and who was marked out powerfully as God’s son in terms of the spirit of holiness by the resurrection of the dead: Jesus, the king, our Lord! Through him we have received grace and apostleship to bring about believing obedience among all the nations for the sake of his name [...].⁴⁴

“Marked out powerfully as God’s son” here translates τοῦ ὀρισθέντος υἱοῦ θεοῦ ἐν δυνάμει, literally “marked out as God’s son *in power*,” and the following verse indicates that this “power” refers not simply to the power which effected his resurrection but the power with which the “son” is now invested, as in the enthronement scene in Ps 2:8 (“ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession”). The “power” in question is now manifested in Paul’s commissioning to summon the nations to a new allegiance, “believing obedience” or “faithful allegiance.” The addition of “for the sake of his name” looks across to another bit of early tradition, Phil 2:10, on which see below. Thus, though the word “kingdom” is not explicitly mentioned, the way in which this extract, whether original to Paul or (as is usually thought) quoting a pre-Pauline formula, claims the biblical language of kingship for Jesus and declares that this kingship is “with power” and “for the sake of his name,”

⁴³ On all this see the discussions of the relevant passages in N.T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (London: SPCK; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), pt. II, and *PFQ* (see n. 2).

⁴⁴ Translations from the New Testament are taken from my *The New Testament for Everyone* (London: SPCK, 2011), in the US, *The Kingdom New Testament* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2011).

already indicates an answer to the question of Mark 9:1: yes, the kingdom *has already* come with power, when Jesus was raised from the dead and began to commission his emissaries to summon the nations to allegiance.⁴⁵ There is still in Romans, of course, a strongly future element, as in chapters 2, 8 and 13, and also a clear present obligation, which is to *implement* the “already” through apostolic work and thereby to *anticipate* the eventual future.

Even if Paul is not the original author of the supposed confessional fragment of vv. 3 and 4, he has clearly made it his own, and has allowed it to shape both the overall theme of Romans and some of its crucial central summaries. The notion of God’s already-launched kingdom appears explicitly in Rom 5:12–21, setting the tone for the whole of chapters 6, 7 and 8. The “reign” of death is contrasted in Rom 5:19 with the “reign” of “those who receive the abundance of grace”; and then, in v. 21, with the reign of grace which has been inaugurated through Jesus. For Paul in this passage, and throughout the following chapters, these are clearly *present* realities with *future* consequences. The claim that Jesus is already enthroned as the true Davidic king and hence the world’s true Lord is then announced triumphantly at the climax of the letter’s theology in chapter 15:

The Messiah became a servant of the circumcised people in order to demonstrate the truthfulness of God – that is, to confirm the promises to the patriarchs, and to bring the nations to praise God for his mercy [...]. “There shall be the root of Jesse, the one who rises up to rule the nations; the nations shall hope in him.” (Rom 15:8–9, 12, quoting Isa 11:10)

For Paul, then, Jesus is *already* enthroned as the world’s true Lord, in explicit fulfilment of the biblical kingdom-vision as in the Psalms and Isaiah (the two major sources of kingdom-language), and this is the ground of the *still-future* hope. Paul’s mission is eschatologically driven, by which I mean that he does what he does because the long-awaited eschaton had already arrived in the person and work – and especially the death and resurrection – of Jesus, inaugurating a new era of world history in which, by the Spirit, the apostolic proclamation was the appointed means by which the world would come to hail Jesus as its rightful Lord. More specifically (though for Paul all the events concerning Jesus belonged together and were mutually interpretative) the resurrection of Jesus from the dead was the clear sign that his kingly rule had been established in power, defeating

⁴⁵ Bultmann would have agreed at this point since for him the Transfiguration narrative which follows (Mark 9:2–8) was a misplaced “resurrection” story designed to “fulfil” this prediction.

death itself (hence Rom 5:14, 17, and 21). Because of the Spirit's work, the resurrection of Jesus could be seen as the model for the final, and of course still awaited, resurrection of all the Messiah's people (8:9–11). *The belief in a now-and-not-yet inaugurated kingdom, through the exaltation of the human being Jesus, Israel's Messiah, is not, then, an apologetic invention of the twentieth century.* Nor was it only introduced after a generation had gone by and been puzzled by the non-arrival of the supposed "end." It was part of the very early apostolic gospel itself. We note in particular that at the heart of this kingdom-picture Paul has placed the Messiah alongside Adam: it is through the truly human one that the divine purpose has been fulfilled, and the "glory" which Ps 8 spoke of as proper to this truly human one will now be shared with his people.⁴⁶

Mention of Paul's alignment of the Messiah with Adam – and with his "reign" precisely in that capacity – points across to the chapter where Paul actually tells us that he is quoting an early and universally accepted Christian tradition. In 1 Cor 15, drawing together many threads from the rest of the letter, he begins with a reminder of the original "gospel" message:

The Messiah died for our sins in accordance with the Bible; he was buried; he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Bible; he was seen [...]. (1 Cor 15:3–5)

These events were never "bare events": the fact that the Messiah's death and resurrection were understood to be in accordance with the scriptures invested them with specific meaning; with specific *messianic* meaning; therefore, with specific *kingdom*-meaning.

This is abundantly clear in 1 Cor 15:20–28, which single-handedly ought to put to flight any suggestion that a now-and-not-yet kingdom-teaching is a modern apologetic device:

But in fact the Messiah has been raised from the dead, as the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep. For since it was through a human that death arrived, it's through a human that the resurrection from the dead has arrived. All die in Adam, you see, and all will be made alive in the Messiah. Each, however, in proper order. The Messiah rises as the first fruits; then those who belong to the Messiah will rise at the time of his royal arrival (ἐν τῇ παρουσίᾳ αὐτοῦ). Then comes the end, the goal (εἶτα τὸ τέλος), when he hands over the kingly rule (ὅταν παραδιδῶ τὴν βασιλείαν) to God the father, when he has destroyed all rule and all authority and power. He has to go on ruling (δεῖ γὰρ αὐτὸν βασιλεύειν) until "he has put all his enemies under his feet." Death is the last enemy to be destroyed, because "he has put all things in order under his feet." But when it says that everything is put in order under him, it's obvious that this doesn't include the one who put everything in order under him. No: when everything is put in order under him, then the son himself will be

⁴⁶ Rom 8:18–30; I owe this point (and the reference below to Dan 12:1 at Phil 4:3) to Dr Haley Goranson.

placed in proper order under the one who placed everything in order under him, so that God may be all in all.

The first and most obvious thing to say here is that Paul clearly believed, on the basis of the primitive “gospel” he has quoted, that *the Messiah was already reigning*. The passage admits of no other reading. Paul distinguishes this present messianic reign from the clearly future time when God will be “all in all.” This generates a set of puzzles for exegetes on two levels: first, the distinction between the Messiah’s “kingdom” and the eventual state when the Messiah has handed over the kingdom to God the father; second, the nature of the “subordination” of the son to the father in v. 28. Neither of these need concern us here, since the point for our purposes is clear: the Messiah is already reigning.

This reign, second, is “according to the scriptures” in a very particular sense. Paul is obviously working with Gen 1, 2 and 3 throughout the whole chapter; the reference to Adam is not incidental, but is foundational for everything he says. The Messiah is the new model of humanity, a new *and generative* model through whom other “new humans” will be brought to life out of the presently mortal ones who belong to him (1 Cor 15:48–49). In particular, the Messiah’s *present reign* is to be seen as the fulfilment of two vital and interlocking Psalms: 110 and 8. As in the Synoptic Gospels, and also interestingly the letter to the Hebrews, these two Psalms are used to speak of the way in which the coming King (Ps 110) is also the truly human one (Ps 8).⁴⁷ In both cases the Psalm envisages “enemies” who are to be subdued by the royal/human figure, and the statement of this in Ps 8 seems to have been, in Paul’s mind, the main theme of the paragraph. Psalm 8:7b in the Septuagint reads: πάντα ὑπέταξας ὑποκάτω τῶν ποδῶν αὐτοῦ, and though Paul has adjusted the language slightly to fit his own sentence, reducing ὑποκάτω to ὑπό in the process and therefore changing the case of “feet” to accusative (πάντα γὰρ ὑπέταξεν ὑπὸ τοὺς πόδας αὐτοῦ, 1 Cor 15:27) he obviously has this verse in mind and makes its main verb thematic in what follows:

When it says that everything is put in order (ὑποτέτακται) under him, it’s obvious that this doesn’t include the one who put everything in order (τοῦ ὑποτάξαντος) under him. No: when everything is put in order (ὑποταγῆ) under him, then the son himself will be

⁴⁷ On the “royal” interpretation of the “son of man” in Ps 8 see my article “Son of Man – Lord of the Temple? Gospel Echoes of Psalm 8 and the Ongoing Christological Challenge,” in *The Earliest Perceptions of Jesus in Context: Essays in Honour of John Nolland on His 70th Birthday*, ed. A.W. White, D. Wenham, and C.A. Evans (London: Bloomsbury, forthcoming). In Heb 2:5–9, of course, the Psalm is seen as *partially* fulfilled in Jesus. In references here to Ps 8 I am using the verse-numbering of the Septuagint.

placed in proper order (ὑποταγήσεται) under the one who placed everything in order (ὑποτάξαντι) under him [...]. (1 Cor 15:27b–28a)

It is hard to think of another Pauline passage where a single scriptural term is repeated so often and so emphatically. And the point is not simply that Paul is using Ps 8 for all its worth, linking it with the obviously messianic Ps 110. The point is that Ps 8:7b, here expounded, evokes not only Gen 1 and 2 (the chapters which dominate Paul’s whole argument), but also Dan 7. In Gen 1 and 2, the image-bearing humans are put in authority over the plants and animals. That too is important for Paul. In Dan 7, exactly as in Ps 8, we find the train of thought in which “the one like a son of man,” who in Ps 8:7b has been made lower than the angels, now “crowned with glory and honor.” The passage as a whole, focused in the line Paul quotes and expounds almost ad nauseam, has to do with *the exaltation of the “one like a son of man” to a position of world dominion*. And with that, even without an explicit quotation from Dan 7, we are right in the middle of Synoptic territory. If we ask the author of 1 Cor 15 whether the scripturally promised kingdom has come with power, *and if we ask him whether “the son of man” has been exalted to worldwide authority*, the answer is Yes. This has already happened. Jesus has been raised from the dead and exalted as the world’s Lord.

All this would be a correct analysis of the passage, I submit, even if (as I say) there were no reference to Dan 7 in the passage. But we may detect such a reference none the less. In 1 Cor 15:24–25 Paul explains that the present reign of the Messiah is designed to continue (δεῖ γὰρ αὐτὸν βασιλεύειν) until he has disempowered “all rule and all authority and power” (πᾶσαν ἀρχὴν καὶ πᾶσαν

Though this is not a direct quotation of either of the extant ancient Greek versions of Dan 7:27, that verse is the only other place known to me where a substantially similar set of ideas occurs. This is the final interpretation of Daniel’s vision of “one like a son of man” coming to the Ancient of Days and being given royal authority.⁴⁹ The court has handed down its verdict (7:26), which is that the present rule and authority will be abolished “for ever” (ἕως τέλους).⁵⁰ The result is that

48 I say “disempowered” rather than the normal translation of “abolished” with a nod to Col 1:18–20 where the “powers” are eventually “reconciled”; but this question does not affect our present discussion.

49 There are slight variations here between the Septuagint and Theodotion but the sense is the same.

50 Dan 7:26 LXX has the ἀρχὴ being destroyed; in Theodotion it is the ἐξουσία; this is continued into Dan 7:27.

The kingdom (βασιλεία) and dominion (ἐξουσία/ἀρχή) and the greatness of the kingdoms under the whole heaven shall be given to the people of the holy ones of the Most High; their kingdom shall be an everlasting kingdom, and all dominions shall serve and obey them. (Dan 7:27)

The kingdom enables the “one like a son of man,” interpreted as “the people of the saints of the Most High,” to have all authorities and powers subject to him. In the Septuagint this “subjection” uses the same verb (ὑποτάσσω) as in Ps 8:7, which Paul then uses five times in 1 Cor 15:27 and 28. It looks strongly as if, when expounding Ps 8 in relation to his new-Genesis vision of the Messiah’s rule, he has Dan 7 in mind as well.

This raises the question, of course, why, if he was referring to Dan 7, he was not more explicit about it. I suspect that Paul, in company with Luke,⁵¹ realized that his largely non-Jewish congregations might well not be able to decode the rich symbolic language of Daniel. But the meaning is clear. The kingdom *has* been inaugurated in power. The “son of man” – as in Ps 8, certainly; as in Dan 7, arguably – *has* been exalted to a place of world sovereignty. There is an equally strong future hope: “if it’s only for this present life that we have put our hope in the Messiah, we are the most pitiable members of the human race” (1 Cor 15:19). The future still matters. Paul is still suffering (15:30–32). But Paul is not waiting for the exaltation of the “Son of Man,” or the establishment of his worldwide sovereignty, as still-future events. They have already happened. And they are the direct entail of the earliest known Christian tradition: “the Messiah [...] was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures.”

This notion of the *present* powerful kingdom is not simply an extra bit of “apocalyptic” speculation tacked on to a letter which in other respects is still oriented only to the future. In chapter 4 Paul speaks about the future day of judgment but sees that anticipated in the power of his own work:

I will come to you quickly, if the Lord wants it that way; and then I’ll find out not what these puffed-up people are saying but how powerful they are. The kingdom of God, you see, isn’t about talk – it’s about power. (1 Cor 4:19–20)

He clearly believes that *the powerful kingdom of God is already in operation*. Faced with Mark 9:1, the Paul of 1 Corinthians would say, “Yes, that has happened. God’s kingdom has come with power. That is why I do what I do.”⁵²

The explicit and fully worked out eschatology of 1 Cor 15, then, is already latent in some quite incidental remarks earlier in the letter. As far as

⁵¹ See Luke’s “decoding” at 21:20 of the Danielic reference in Matt 24:15/Mark 13:14.

⁵² Similar points could be made in relation to 1 Cor 6:2–3.

Paul is concerned, the Messiah is *already* ruling; his kingdom is *present*; he is *already* exalted as the “Son of Man” of Ps 8 and, by extension and echo, Dan 7. And this highlights an important point without which other misunderstandings can easily creep in. For Paul, this distinction between something which has *already* happened and something that is *yet* to happen is quite new. It has been occasioned by the unexpected resurrection of Israel’s Messiah in the midst of ongoing history. That is why he can call on similar scriptural texts when looking to the future, as for instance in 1 Thess 3:13 or 2 Thess 1:3–10. The present exaltation (“already”) and the future parousia (“not yet”) are mutually supportive and explanatory. The echoes they set up, not least of passages such as Zech 14:5 which speaks of YHWH himself “coming with all his saints,” are to be expected; they do not indicate that for Paul or other early Christians such language could *only* refer to the still-future event.⁵³

Similar themes, and similar scriptural echoes, are plentiful in Philipians. Here we find the best known example of what many regard as pre-Pauline fragments, the poem of Phil 2:6–11. The links here with Rom 5 and 1 Cor 15 are well known. Though some still dispute whether any reference to Adam is intended, it seems to me clear that Paul is drawing on the same stock of themes as those other passages where the Adam-link is explicit. There are few verbal links with Ps 8, but the sequence of thought is the same.⁵⁴ The human figure is made a little lower than God (or the angels), and then crowned with glory and honor, with all things put underfoot. The emphasis in the poem then falls on the *name*:

And so God has greatly exalted him,
 And to him in his favor has given
 The name which is over all names:
 That now at the name of Jesus
 Every knee within heaven shall bow –
 On earth, too, and under the earth;
 And every tongue shall confess
 That Jesus, Messiah, is Lord,
 To the glory of God, the father.
 (Phil 2:9–11)

⁵³ Against the elegant exposition of S. Motyer, *Come, Lord Jesus! A Biblical Theology of the Second Coming of Christ* (London: Apollos, 2016), 100–105. The point deserves fuller discussion.

⁵⁴ I am assuming that Paul at least is taking Ps 8:6 (8:5 Eng. versions) as a sequence (first, humiliation; subsequently, exaltation) rather than a static paradox (simultaneous humiliation and exaltation), though as it stands – and perhaps in Johannine interpretation – the latter is a possible reading. I am grateful to Prof. Walter Moberly for pointing this out to me.

The emphasis on the *name* – which is either κύριος itself or the combined κύριος Ἰησοῦς Χριστός of v. 11 – combines with the narrative of humiliation and exaltation to make a powerful link to Ps 8, whose opening and closing lines (Ps 8:2, 10 LXX; 8:1, 9 Eng. versions) read: κύριε ὁ κύριος ἡμῶν ὡς θαυμαστὸν τὸ ὄνομά σου ἐν πάσῃ τῇ γῆ (“O Lord our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth!”). The *name* of κύριος Ἰησοῦς is thus already, one might say, θαυμαστὸν, a name to be marvelled at. One way or another, it is clear that the poem itself, and Paul in his fresh use of it (supposing him to have borrowed it from elsewhere, which I regard as moot), see Jesus as *already* the exalted κύριος of Ps 8. The undoubted future element in v. 11 (every tongue *shall* confess) refers, not to the Lordship itself, which Jesus already possesses, but to its universal acknowledgement.⁵⁵

It looks as though, across these three books, Romans, 1 Corinthians and Philippians, in which early tradition may well be incorporated, and thus dating perhaps to the 40s or, in the case of 1 Cor 15:3–5, even earlier, the early Christians who knew these traditions would join with Paul himself in the 40s and 50s and declare both *that the kingdom had already come with power*, even though the power was paradoxical, made perfect in weakness (2 Cor 12:9), and that *the Son of Man of Ps 8 and Dan 7 had already been exalted*, even though there remained yet a day when he would return to be acclaimed by all. We are here, obviously, at the same point as we were in 1 Cor 15:23–28. Indeed, the same Christological puzzle emerges here as there: the son will be subject to the father, and now, when every tongue confesses Messiah Jesus as Lord, this will be “to the glory of God, the father.” Our purpose here is not to go deeper into the Christological question, but simply to note that in all these passages we have classically Pauline inaugurated eschatology, related specifically to the *present and future kingdom* and also to the *exaltation of the Son of Man* as something which has already taken place and whose implications are being worked out through the apostolic mission against the day when every tongue will confess him as *Kyrios*.

One more Pauline letter takes us as far as this part of our argument needs to go. In Galatians, as has been argued forcibly by J. Louis Martyn and others, Paul insists that the event of Jesus’s death was the “apocalyptic” moment through which the “powers” were defeated and the rescue of God’s people accomplished:

⁵⁵ That same future is re-emphasized in Phil 2:15, alluding to Dan 12:3; cf. too the echoes both of the poem and of Ps 8 in Phil 3:20–21.

Grace to you and peace from God our father and Jesus the Messiah, our Lord, who gave himself for our sins, to rescue us from the present evil age, according to the will of God our father, to whom be glory to the ages of ages. Amen. (Gal 1:3–5)

God forbid that I should boast – except in the cross of our Lord Jesus the Messiah, through whom the world has been crucified to me and I to the world. Circumcision, you see, is nothing; neither is uncircumcision! What matters is new creation. (Gal 6:14–15)

The first of these looks as if it joins up with 1 Cor 15:3 as a statement of the very early Christian summary of the gospel: the Messiah died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures (or, here, in accordance with the divine will, which comes to much the same thing). This depends, of course, on a belief in the Messiah's resurrection, a belief alluded to in 1 Cor 15:2 and explained in 1 Cor 15:17: "if the Messiah wasn't raised, your faith is pointless and you are still in your sins." In other words, the resurrection *reveals* what the cross had *accomplished*: the defeat of death on the third day indicates that in his crucifixion Jesus really had won the victory over the dark powers (including "sin" itself) that had enslaved the world. This supposedly "apocalyptic" interpretation of Galatians insists on what so much twentieth-century scholarship has resisted: the idea that the promises of (at least) an inaugurated kingdom were indeed fulfilled in Jesus's death and resurrection. (Martyn emphasizes Jesus's death rather than resurrection, but then Galatians has very little to say about the latter. The other features of Martyn's view that I regard as problematic I have explored elsewhere; they do not affect the present discussion.⁵⁶) The point for our present purposes is that in this letter, regarded by some (myself included) as the earliest Christian document we possess, but in any case written within thirty years of the crucifixion and well before the end of "this generation" from Jesus's point of view, the whole point of the gospel is that a mighty power-reversal *has already taken place*. Galatians, to be sure, still has a future aspect: "we are waiting eagerly, by the spirit and by faith, for the hope of righteousness" (Gal 5:5). With that goes the warning that those who produce "the works of the flesh" "will not inherit God's kingdom" (5:19, 21).⁵⁷ But the whole premise of the letter is that the powers that have enslaved humankind have already been defeated on the cross. That, after all, is the foundation of the gentile mission: the powers that have kept the gentiles enslaved have been overthrown.⁵⁸ This is obviously closely cognate with the "reign" of the Messiah in Romans and 1 Corinthians, and with his exaltation in Philip-

⁵⁶ See *PRI* (see n. 3), 167–186.

⁵⁷ Cf. 1 Cor 6:9–10; Eph 5:5.

⁵⁸ Cf. John 12:31–32.

pians. It is also, perhaps to the surprise of some, closely cognate with the similar statements in Ephesians and Colossians, though to explore this here would take us too far afield.

No doubt there is much more that could be said about the contribution of the Pauline corpus to the question of how the early church would have understood passages like Mark 9:1. But we have said enough to sketch an overall picture.

Ultimately, theories about a disappointed end-of-the-world expectation arise out of the imposition onto the New Testament of alien categories. This is the more ironic, in that Weiss and Schweitzer insisted that what they were doing was confronting the categories of late nineteenth-century Germany with the alien world of (what was then seen as) “late-Jewish apocalyptic.” But, as we saw earlier, they were mistaken, both on the original meaning of apocalyptic language and on the ways in which such Jewish writing might be “alien” to the modern world. It *was* indeed alien, but not because it envisaged the invasion or “intervention” of a God who was (as in Deism or Epicureanism) normally “outside” the system. It was alien precisely because (1) the metaphysical assumptions of the Jewish heaven-and-earth world envisaged a more subtle interlocking engagement than the Deist framework could imagine; and (2) many first-century Jews really did believe, on the basis of their reading of Daniel, that “the time was fulfilled” for the long-awaited deliverance which would be both heaven-sent and (in our terms) socio-political in impact. They did not see this as one example of the sort of thing that might happen from time to time, as seems to have been imagined by those who wanted to retrieve Schweitzer’s proposals within a Europe that, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, was starting to question the easy assumption of “progress” and was looking for what was later called a “theology of crisis.” Parts of the European world – precisely the parts that were already dissatisfied with the smug religion and theology that would end up in the work of Harnack – were ready for what Weiss and Schweitzer were giving them, even before the First World War shook the world so hard that nothing less than an “apocalyptic” theology would do. They had not understood that the “apocalyptic” texts such as 1 Enoch and 4 Ezra were coded *political* texts, just as Daniel had been. There is the irony: faced with “apocalyptic” political events themselves, they insisted that the original meaning of ancient Jewish “apocalyptic” texts had been that of a “cosmic” catastrophe, the absolute end of the world of space, time and matter. Nor had Weiss and his followers understood that the Jewish “apocalyptic” expectation could not be translated into a lesson for subsequent generations in the sense that one should always be expecting a

disruption of easy immanent “progress.” The Jewish expectation was not for God to act dramatically now and then. It was to be, as Paul says of the death and resurrection of Jesus, ἐφάπαξ, “once for all.”⁵⁹

Weiss and his followers knew Paul’s letters, of course. Weiss sees quite clearly that Mark 9:1 answers closely to Rom 1:4, the starting-point for our present discussion.⁶⁰ But he regards the words “in power” in Mark 9:1 as a “later Paulinizing addition”;⁶¹ and he misreads Rom 1:4 as referring, not to Jesus’s resurrection, but to his “exaltation.”⁶² This is in fact at the heart of the problem. Weiss, Schweitzer and Bultmann, and many others throughout the period, took it for granted that nothing actually happened to the dead body of Jesus. That is why they could not understand the Pauline emphasis on the *now* of the kingdom, on the fulfilment of Ps 8 and by implication Dan 7 as well. And that is why they could not see that the synoptists, too, held a now-and-not-yet eschatology. They themselves interpret their own sharp sayings in ways much closer to what we have seen in Paul than to what we have seen in Weiss, Schweitzer and their followers.

There are inevitably many other texts we might study in this connection. Hebrews 2:6–9 is another example of an early Christian “now and not yet”: Jesus is already “crowned with glory and honor,” but there will be a fuller sovereignty, for the whole redeemed human race, yet to come. But we have said enough to point us back to the Synoptic Gospels themselves, where the heart of the problem clearly lies.

6 The Gospels, the Kingdom and the Son of Man

All this leads us at last to the point where we can ask the question from the other end. If this is what the first Christians would have said in relation to Mark 9:1 and the other relevant passages, what might the Gospel writers themselves have said by way of reply? Would they say “No, you have misunderstood; we are telling you that Jesus really predicted an event which we and you know has not happened yet?” Or would they say, “If you read our whole books instead of pulling out a few sayings here and there, you will see that we agree with Paul, Hebrews, and the early traditions they employ –

⁵⁹ Rom 6:10, etc.

⁶⁰ Weiss, *Jesus’ Proclamation* (see n. 7), 69 n. 22.

⁶¹ Weiss, *Jesus’ Proclamation* (see n. 7), 97 n. 62.

⁶² Weiss, *Jesus’ Proclamation* (see n. 7), 121.

as you would discover if you allowed us to explain further what we think those sayings meant”? I shall now argue for the latter answer.⁶³

The first point is perhaps the most important, though normally missed entirely. All four Gospels frame the story of Jesus in terms of the long-awaited return of Israel’s God. Matthew and Mark introduce the story of John the Baptist by reference to Isa 40, where the herald announces the return of YHWH, a message repeated loud and clear in Isa 52:7–12. Mark adds the reference to Mal 3:1, with similar effect, and with the added echo of Exod 23:20.⁶⁴ The idea of John as the “Elijah” figure who would prepare the way for the coming of Israel’s God himself is emphasized in the discussion of John in Matt 11:2–15, which is where Matthew has Jesus himself quoting Exod 23:30/Mal 3:1. Luke (7:18–28) does the same thing, having just told the story of the raising of the widow’s son, at which the crowds exclaim that “God has visited his people” (7:16), a further echo of Exodus (4:31) which resonates through Luke’s whole account (1:68, 78; 19:44).⁶⁵ For Luke, Jesus’s journey to Jerusalem is to be seen in this way, as the ultimate, though deeply paradoxical, return of Israel’s God. When Jesus sets his face to go to Jerusalem, he “sent messengers ahead of him” (9:52, another clear echo of Exod 23 and Mal 3); when he arrives and his followers think God’s kingdom is going to appear immediately, he tells a story about a king coming back after a long absence and judging both the servant who had failed in his commission and the citizens who had not wanted him to be king in the first place (Luke 19:11–27). He backs this up, and strengthens this interpretation, with the dire “apocalyptic” warnings about the destruction of the city and the Temple “because you didn’t know the moment when God was visiting you” (19:44).⁶⁶ John has his own way of saying the same thing, but it is the same thing: “the Word became flesh, and lived (ἐσκήνωσεν) among us” (John 1:14). Jesus is the true Temple, the place where and the means by which Israel’s God has returned at last to dwell in the midst of his people, revealing his glory in the shocking paradox of the cross.

All this is of obvious importance for our theme. As far as the Gospel writers were concerned, the event long predicted by prophets and “apocalyptists” (not that they would have distinguished these two the way

63 This discussion could be made more complex by reflecting on the meaning Matthew and Luke intended for the relevant sayings if, as most still think, those Gospels were written after AD 70.

64 See the discussion in R.B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Gospels* (Waco, Tex.: Baylor University Press, 2015), 22, 374f. nn. 17, 22.

65 For the idea, cf., e.g., Sir 2:14; Wis 3:7; and, wider, Isa 10:3 and 1 Pet 2:12.

66 On all this, see *JVG* (see n. 2), 348–360.

scholarship has done) had already happened: YHWH had returned to his people. Since the liberal Protestant context within which Weiss and Schweitzer worked had little or no sense of an incarnational Christology in the Synoptics at least, and since for the British writers who appropriated their work the doctrine of the incarnation, though important, was not thought of in terms of the return of YHWH, this entire theme simply failed to impinge. But it throws all other questions of hope, of “coming,” of events through which the kingdom of God was to be established, into a quite different light.⁶⁷ The “return of God” had taken the form of *a human story* in which, inevitably, there was movement, a sense of now and not yet, of something accomplished and something still to be realized.

The second main point goes closely with this first one. For all four Gospels, this story of Israel’s God coming back at last had taken the form of *the messianic career and death of Jesus of Nazareth*. So far as we can tell, they had had no thought that a coming “Messiah” (should such a figure turn up) would be the personal embodiment of Israel’s God. The way they told the story of Jesus, however, was as the story of a potential messianic claimant *in whose actions and ultimate fate they discerned, in retrospect, the presence of Israel’s God*. But the messianic narrative matters in itself, not least because when we think of actual would-be messianic movements in the period it becomes obvious that they will have a now-and-not-yet element about them.

As long as we think in nineteenth-century categories, and ask whether a “supernatural” event has occurred through which the “natural” world has been “obliterated,” we are deciding the issues in advance: either such an event has occurred or it has not. (There could be no uncertainty of the kind Paul was envisaging in 2 Thess 2.) But if we take the two most obvious movements, that of Judas Maccabeus roughly two hundred years before Jesus and that of Simon ben Kosiba roughly a hundred years after him, we see how it works. First, the central figure comes forward as the leader of a brave and determined little group. He is already hailed – in ben Kosiba’s case, by the leading Rabbi of the time – as the true king, “the son of the star.” Bar Kokhba, as he thus becomes, mints coins with the year “1”; then “2.” The kingdom of God, in other words, *has already been launched*. But if someone were to suppose that there was therefore no “future” element, he and his followers would have laughed, perhaps bitterly. They have an urgent and dangerous agenda. The Romans are to be defeated at last; the

⁶⁷ See R.J. Bauckham, “The Delay of the Parousia,” *TynBul* 31 (1980), 3–36. The theme goes back through Habakkuk to the Psalms at least.

Temple is to be rebuilt. It didn't happen. The revolt went into a third year, but the coins, instead of a number, carried the words "Freedom of Jerusalem." Anyone who wants to propose that Jesus and his first followers were expecting something to happen which failed to happen and therefore produced grievous disappointment ought to look closely at Bar Kokhba and the aftermath of his failure, and contrast that with the early Christian movement. That this comparison does not seem to have occurred to most end-of-the-world scholars merely shows that they have not been thinking in terms of the actual Jewish history and culture of the period. Reimarus was right to this extent: Jesus's kingdom-announcement was indeed to be understood within the "apocalyptic" *and therefore political* aspirations of the time, though the "and therefore political" was ignored by Weiss, and by Schweitzer even though he made Reimarus his hero. What Reimarus said about Jesus applies exactly to Bar Kokhba. What made Jesus different was his radical redefinition of what the kingdom would actually mean. What made the early church different from any who survived the Bar Kokhba revolt has to do with what the whole early church said had happened next.⁶⁸

This redefinition of "kingdom of God" is, of course, at the heart of the parables, though remarkably they are seldom seen in this light, so that one Gospels scholar was able to say that Jesus does not appear to have tried to modify what "the kingdom" meant in the world of his day.⁶⁹ The kingdom-parables all assume a basic meaning of the kingdom *and then explain that in fact the kingdom is indeed coming, but in a different, subversive fashion.* The hope of Israel is being fulfilled but not in the way people had thought. This comes out explicitly in passages like the Emmaus Road story in Luke 24, but it is arguably there in all the great parables. It is of course possible, as with all Gospels scholarship, to suggest that this is a later interpretation on the part of the evangelists or the traditions with which they were working, but there is a point beyond which such arguments begin to eat their own tails. If our evidence for what Jesus himself said is contained in these books, and if we are saying that these books have systematically and completely readjusted what Jesus meant, then we have no access to the first term in the comparison. Better to press on with the main evidence.

The messianic theme in all the Gospels reaches its height in Jesus's crucifixion. All four Gospels see this event as Jesus's royal enthronement, fully aware of the shocking paradox of such a claim. That is the point of the

⁶⁸ Insofar as some Jews at least took a turn towards Gnosticism after the failure of the revolt, there is a fascinating parallel with Bultmann's own turn in the same direction.

⁶⁹ Nineham, "Foreword" (see n. 11), xxiii-xxv.

titulus, and all that leads to and surrounds it. They explain it in different ways. For Matthew, it is the way by which “the Son of Man” is first humiliated in order then to be glorified (see below). For Mark, it is the paradox at the heart of Jesus’s redefinition of power itself (10:35–45). For Luke, it is the moment when the powers of darkness do their worst and Jesus wins the messianic victory over them (22:53). For John, it is the moment when “the ruler of the world” is cast out so that Jesus, in his being “lifted up,” will draw all people to himself (12:31–32). This is the real victory over the real enemy, as in Matt 10:28 and Luke 12:4–5. The evangelists knew perfectly well that they were living in a “not yet” time. But as far as they were concerned the cross – whose meaning was of course only disclosed in the resurrection and the scriptural reflection that quickly followed – was the “already” which they were celebrating. Weiss, Schweitzer and their followers were right to criticize attempts to “spiritualize” the meaning of Jesus’s message, turning the “eschatological” or “apocalyptic” original meaning into a teaching of piety, morality and social conformism which could easily fit within a nineteenth-century “progress” ideology. What they never realized, despite their admiration of Reimarus, was that Jesus was not depoliticizing the kingdom. He was redefining power and politics themselves.

Within all this, all four Gospels indicate, in different though converging ways, that Jesus was constantly warning that the Temple in Jerusalem was under divine judgment. We shall return to this presently when addressing Mark 13 and its parallels. For the moment we simply notice that the synoptists mention, without comment, the tearing of the Temple veil at the moment of Jesus’s death (Matt 27:51; Mark 15:38; Luke 23:45). Whatever we make of this in its wider context, the writers seem clearly to indicate that at least in a proleptic sense Jesus’s prophecy had begun to come true. Again there is an obvious now-and-not-yet. In the evangelists’ construction of the time of Jesus’s public career, they themselves are saying that, though from that point of view the destruction of the Temple was still in the future, nevertheless at the moment of Jesus’s death something happened in which that destruction was foreshadowed.

This theme might be pursued through Acts, though again there is no space here for a full treatment. We simply note that the strange events of Acts 1 and 2, the Ascension on the one hand and Pentecost on the other, appear to have to do with the joining together in a new way of earth and heaven – with, in other words, the replacement of the Jerusalem Temple, the current heaven-and-earth establishment, with a new kind of link, formed by Jesus on the one hand and by his Spirit-filled people on the other. That is why so many of the crucial and dangerous points in Acts have to do

with temples in general (Athens, Ephesus, and so on) and with the Jerusalem Temple in particular (e. g., Stephen's speech and of Paul's trials). All this comes under the rubric of Acts 1:6–8, which offers one of the classic statements of the New Testament's now-and-not-yet:

So when the apostles came together, they put this question to Jesus. "Master," they said, "is this the time when you are going to restore the kingdom to Israel?" "It's not your business to know about times and dates," he replied. "The father has placed all that under his own direct authority. What will happen, though, is that you will receive power when the holy spirit comes upon you. Then you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judaea and Samaria, and to the very ends of the earth."

Jesus's answer to the question, in other words – exactly as with the Gospel parables – is "yes, but not in the way you imagine." That is why the disciples, faced with persecution, invoke Ps 2, which speaks of their belief that Jesus is *already* enthroned as the true king, having drawn on to himself the wrath of Herod and Pilate, representing the evil powers of the world, and having overcome them (Acts 4:23–31).

For Luke, then, Jesus is already reigning; he has already fulfilled the promises of establishing his kingdom. Having said that he would not drink wine again until the kingdom of God came (22:16), we are not told that he did so after the resurrection, but it is assumed in passages like Acts 10:41 where Peter speaks of the disciples eating and drinking with Jesus after his resurrection from the dead.

What then about Matthew and Mark? It is Matthew, after all, who gives us the fullest of the variations on Mark 9:1. Mark has Jesus say that some standing there would not taste death "before they see God's kingdom come in power." Luke (9:27) shortens this to "until they see God's kingdom." For Matthew, however – and this is one of the classic passages that has given rise to the dogma of "delay" – Jesus says that "some of those standing here will not taste death until they see 'the son of man coming in his kingdom.'" The clue is, of course, in the quotation marks around the last clause: this is obviously a quotation from Dan 7, though in fact it is a composite quotation from Dan 7:13 ("the son of man coming") and 7:14, 18, 22 and 27 (his "kingdom"). How did Matthew, at least, understand this vital clause? Did he think it was to be "taken literally," as a prediction of Jesus flying about in mid-air on a cloud?

Emphatically not. The howls of protest that will arise upon this denial must not get in the way of exegesis – our exegesis of Matthew, and Matthew's exegesis of Daniel. Matthew is quite clear: he frames his entire passion narrative (26:2) with the prediction that "the son of man" is going

to be crucified, and when it is all over he has the risen Jesus declare that *Dan 7 has now been fulfilled*:

Jesus came towards them and addressed them. “All authority in heaven and on earth,” he said, “has been given to me! So you must go and make all the nations into disciples [...]” (Matt 28:18–19)

The echo of Dan 7:14 is unmistakable: Matthew’s ἐδόθη μοι πᾶσα ἐξουσία ἐν οὐρανῷ καὶ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς answers exactly to Daniel’s ἐδόθη αὐτῷ ἐξουσία καὶ πάντα τὰ ἔθνη τῆς γῆς [...] αὐτῷ λατρεύουσα, just as the final words of Matthew’s Jesus, about his being with the disciples until the συντελεία τοῦ αἰῶνος answer to Daniel’s emphasis that the ἐξουσία in question will be αἰώνιος.⁷⁰ Matthew is telling us, in unmistakable terms, that as far as he is concerned “the son of man” *has* now been exalted into his “kingdom.” Of course there is a great deal that must still happen. The eschatology is a long way from being “realized.” But it has been well and truly inaugurated.

This is strongly confirmed by Matthew’s account of Jesus’s hearing before the high priest. Jesus has been accused of saying that he can destroy the Temple and rebuild it in three days. Faced with Jesus’s continuing silence, the high priest puts him on oath that he tell the court if he is “the Messiah, God’s son” (26:63). Jesus’s reply brings together two vital early Christian texts, with the quotation from Ps 110 held between the two parts of the quotation from Dan 7:13:

“You said the words,” replied Jesus. “But let me tell you this: from now on you will see ‘the son of man sitting at the right hand of the Power, and coming on the clouds of heaven.’” (Matt 26:64)

This, of course, precipitates the accusation of blasphemy, and the verdict of death; and events take their course. And here, as later in chapter 28, Matthew has made it clear what he thinks this combination of scriptural promises actually means. The key phrase is “from now on,” ἀπ’ ἄρτι. Caiaphas will not have to wait long. Jesus will be vindicated, will be enthroned as the true priest-king of Ps 110, will be exalted as the “son of man” of Dan 7 – and indeed of Ps 8, since Matthew has carefully woven that “son of man” passage, too, with Ps 110 and with the prediction of the Temple’s destruction.⁷¹

Exactly the same point emerges from the equivalent passage in Luke. After the ἐξουσία τοῦ σκότους has taken him captive (Luke 22:53), Jesus is brought to the council and asked if he is the Messiah:

⁷⁰ Matt 28:20; Dan 7:14; cf. too 7:27.

⁷¹ See Wright, “Son of Man – Lord of the Temple?” (see n. 47).

“If I tell you,” he said to them, “you won’t believe me. And if I ask you a question, you won’t answer me. But from now on the son of man will be seated at the right hand of God’s power.” “So you’re the son of God, are you?” they said. “You say that I am,” he said to them. (Luke 22:67–70)

What matters, as in Matthew, is the opening phrase of the scripturally based claim: “from now on,” ἀπὸ τοῦ νῦν (22:69). For Luke, as for Matthew, and as indeed for John, the exaltation of the son of man is something that happens with Jesus’s crucifixion and resurrection. Both Matthew and Luke explicitly refer to a *new and lasting state of affairs*, not to a single event, not even to a single event which might launch a new state of affairs.

This is strongly confirmed in the opening chapters of Acts. Peter’s Pentecost sermon emphasizes that Ps 110 *is already true* of Jesus:

This is the Jesus we’re talking about! God raised him from the dead, and all of us here are witnesses to the fact! Now he’s been exalted to God’s right hand; and what you see and hear is the result of the fact that he is pouring out the holy spirit, which had been promised, and which he has received from the father. David, after all, did not ascend into the heavens. This is what he says: “The Lord said to my Lord, sit at my right hand, until I place your enemies underneath your feet.” So the whole house of Israel must know this for a fact: God has made him Lord and Messiah – this Jesus, the one you crucified. (Acts 2:32–36)

We might compare also Acts 5:31: God exalted Jesus “to his right hand” as Leader and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. The point is that Ps 110, the most popular early Christian “testimony,” is regularly used to say *both* that Jesus is already installed as Lord *and* that this carries an “until,” in other words a “not yet.”

It will not do to suggest that this strongly inaugurated eschatology is a Lukan invention, perhaps a way of Luke flattening out the important future tenses into an “early catholic” present tense. Luke, like the others, is clear that there is still a vital future dimension without which the whole claim will not make sense: the angels at the ascension say this, and Peter himself indicates it in a later address.⁷² In any case, this way of using the key texts corresponds so exactly to what we saw in 1 Cor 15 that we should see this as representing a very early Christian reading, rather than a revisionist position after a significant time-lag.

What then about Mark himself? Did he think, in writing the passages in Mark 9:1 and 14:62, two of the regularly-cited key texts, that Jesus had been predicting a cosmic catastrophe? The main answer to this is found in Mark 13, but we may already notice Mark’s placing of the discussion of Ps 110 in

⁷² Acts 1:11; 3:21.

Mark 12:35–37. Mark, as we have seen, regards Jesus’s crucifixion as his messianic enthronement; here we have a key reinterpretation of what Messiahship might mean; and it is clear that he, like Paul and Luke, sees Jesus as *already* fulfilling Ps 110. This must mean that when we meet this Psalm in Mark 14:62 we might expect it to refer to the enthronement which is about to take place – and perhaps to the other events by which Jesus’s claim will be made good. This is what we then find in chapter 13.

Mark 13 has of course been central to debates about “Jesus and the Future” for over a century. I have contributed a fair amount to this discussion already and cannot even summarize the full range of the argument to be made.⁷³ Since my earlier contributions the upsurge of interest in Jewish Temple-theology has only strengthened my already strong impression that this so-called “apocalyptic discourse” is primarily about the fall of the Temple; that, since the Temple was the heaven-and-earth place, the *microcosmos*, the physical and effective symbol of the meeting of Israel’s God with his people, one could not regard its imminent destruction as simply an unfortunate political event, or even as merely the failure of national hopes. It was, from the Jewish point of view, *the collapse of the space-time order itself* – not in the sense that the world of space, time and matter would suddenly cease to exist, but that the cosmos, conceived Jewishly as the created order of “heaven and earth,” had lost the linch-pin which held it all together. This way of looking at things goes back of course to Jeremiah, with his prophecy of the world returning to primal chaos – meaning, as with Jesus’s oracles, that the Temple was under divine judgment.

As with Jeremiah, it was this event which Jesus predicted would happen within a generation. From the perspective of his public career, of course, all the still-future events will have appeared close to one another; with hindsight we can see his own death, resurrection and exaltation, the fall of the Jerusalem Temple, and the still-future consummation of all things, as separate events in a way which could not be seen when Pontius Pilate was governor and Caiaphas high priest. But the crucial point is that a nexus has been established by Mark between Jesus and the Temple, and more specifically between Jesus’s kingdom-claim and the warnings against the Temple. Ever since Jesus’s Temple-action in Mark 11:1–19, the rest of the story, all through to the end of chapter 12, has been, in one way or another, about what Jesus’s action might have meant; and the same question, as we have seen, comes up in the hearing before Caiaphas. Mark is just as clear as

⁷³ See *JVG* (see n. 2), 320–367.

John, though in quite different ways, that the implicit claim made by Jesus leaves no ultimate room for the Jerusalem Temple. It has done its work as a signpost pointing forwards to the divinely intended eschatological future. Now a haunt of brigands, as Jeremiah had said (Jer 7:11, quoted at Mark 11:17), it had made itself ripe for destruction.

That, then, is the meaning of Mark 13. This might have been obvious from the opening of the chapter, were it not for vv. 24–27 in the middle. The opening declares, in line after line, that Jesus is talking about the fall of the Temple:

As they were going out of the Temple, one of Jesus's disciples said to him, "Teacher! Look at these huge stones, and these huge buildings!" "You see these enormous buildings?" said Jesus. "There will not be one single stone left on top of another. They will all be torn down." Peter, James, John and Andrew approached him privately as he was sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the Temple. "Tell us," they asked. "When will these things happen? What will be the sign that these things are about to be completed?" (Mark 13:1–4)

There is no doubt. This is what Mark thinks the whole chapter is about. So it continues with warnings of intermittent troubles, replete with allusions to prophetic warnings from scripture about previous disasters. Then comes the passage which can only be understood if we grasp two things, the theology of the Temple on the one hand and the nature of Second-Temple Jewish apocalyptic language on the other:

But in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be dark as night and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from heaven and the powers in heaven will shake. Then they will see "the son of man coming on clouds with great power and glory." And then he will dispatch his messengers, and will gather in his chosen ones from the four winds, from the ends of earth to the ends of heaven. (Mark 13:24–27)

This, indeed, is the event which will happen within a generation (13:30), though the precise hour is known to none but the father alone (13:32).⁷⁴ And everything we have seen so far from Paul, from Matthew and from Luke insists that we should read this language in terms of the death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus on the one hand and the fall of the Temple (the heaven-and-earth place) on the other.

The crucial arguments come from the allusions to Isaiah and Daniel. In Isa 13:10 and 34:4 the reference to sun, moon and stars is easily interpreted:

⁷⁴ The attempt by E. Adams, *The Stars Will Fall from Heaven: Cosmic Catastrophe in the New Testament and Its World* (London: T&T Clark, 2007), 165, to suggest that the events before which the generation will not have passed away (Mark 13:30) does not include the events of vv. 24–27, but only those of vv. 5–23, strikes me as desperate, especially in view of "all these things" in v. 30.

the prophet, and any reader who reads the whole passage rather than just selecting one verse, knows that the reference is to the fall of Babylon in chapter 13 and of Edom in chapter 34. Faced with the sudden collapse and ruin of a great city and civilization, what language is appropriate? For the prophets, the language of sun, moon and stars being darkened or shaken. Faced with the imminent destruction of the Jerusalem Temple itself, how can such language not be appropriate? It is of course true that in the first century people sometimes looked for actual signs and portents, interpreting an eclipse on the one hand, or a cow giving birth to a lamb on the other, as signs of terrible events about to happen.⁷⁵ And it is true that the evangelists draw attention to the strange darkness at noon as Jesus was dying (Mark 15:33 and parallels), and that Peter's sermon at Pentecost quotes Joel to the effect of the sun being turned into darkness and the moon into blood (Acts 2:20, quoting Joel 2:31), possibly (though not necessarily) referring to this recent strange event. But the language and imagery in question was in such regular use, and had been in such regular use for a long time, to refer to (what we call) socio-political events and to invest them with (what we might call) their "cosmic" significance, that we must question whether that is the natural first meaning of such phraseology.

In particular, it is time to speak plainly about Dan 7. Again and again, from Weiss and Schweitzer to the present day, one hears Dan 7:13 quoted as though its only possible first-century referent was an event in which a human figure, whether Jesus or somebody else, would be flying around on a cloud as part of an "end of the world" scenario. But this confident assertion fails on several fronts.

First, and most importantly, it fails, as we saw earlier, because no literate first-century Jew would in fact have read it like that. Whatever Dan 7:1–14 may have meant in some earlier literary setting, it is absurd to think that a first-century reader would have taken literally the monsters emerging from the sea, or that anyone interpreting vv. 13 and 14 would have ignored the interpretations given in the passage itself, in vv. 15–27.⁷⁶

The main question remaining is then the author's intended referent in Mark 13:24–27. I have argued that its natural meaning within its context is the destruction of the Temple. Since Jesus has predicted the Temple's destruction, and since in some sense he is himself seen by the evangelists as the true Temple, then its destruction will mean his vindication. That seems

⁷⁵ See my response on these points to Adams in *PFQ* (see n. 2), 167–175.

⁷⁶ On the interpretation of Dan 7 see, e.g., J.E. Goldingay, *Daniel* (Dallas, Tex.: Word, 1989), 137–193; J.J. Collins, *Daniel* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 274–324.

to be part at least of the subtext of the hearing before Caiaphas. But again Mark has presented a construct of *how it all may have appeared from within Jesus's public career*. Mark's Jesus believes on the one hand that he will die and be raised, as the climax of his kingdom-bringing vocation, and that these events will be the reality towards which the vivid imagery of Dan 7 (interpreted with the help of the Psalms) had been pointing. He believes on the other hand that it has been his vocation to pronounce the doom of the Temple, and that when the Temple is destroyed that, too, will constitute his vindication. The two belong together. The fact that, for Mark (supposing him to be writing in the 60s, though this like other Gospel dating is far less certain than normally imagined), Jesus's death and resurrection had taken place thirty years before, while the Temple was still standing, is not a problem.

We may conclude this brief survey of the relevant Gospel material by insisting that if Matthew, Mark and Luke – and I would add John, though that raises other questions we have not been able to address⁷⁷ – were to be confronted with the eschatological interpretation we have seen in Romans, 1 Corinthians, Philippians and Galatians, and especially with the supposed fragments of early confessions some have found there, they would be quite content. They are in agreement. The death and resurrection of Israel's Messiah, and his exaltation as the ruler of the world, is the story they were telling as well. The language of “apocalyptic,” replete with its biblical overtones, was the most obvious and natural vehicle with which to tell it. They were innocent of post-Enlightenment Epicureanism, as indeed of nineteenth-century literalism. They really were first-century Jews, thinking and writing as first-century Jews, and they are to be interpreted as such. And they were saying, with one voice, that when Jesus of Nazareth died and was raised, having in his public career reinterpreted the ancient prophecies of the coming kingdom, this was indeed the one-off event through which the cosmos had turned its single great corner. The world had changed; Israel had changed; history itself had changed.

Here, then, is the irony of those post-Schweitzer attempted reappropriations of “apocalyptic,” whether in the English liberalism of Francis Crawford Burkitt or Burnett Hillman Streeter, or indeed Dennis Nineham, or the German existentialism of Bultmann. As soon as you say that “apocalyptic” actually makes sense to us today, that we can after all retrieve

⁷⁷ See John 12:31: “Now this world's ruler is going to be thrown out!” This is not a paradigm for something that has to happen in each subsequent generation: John's Jesus is claiming that his death will achieve a once-only victory with lasting consequences.

it for ourselves, because we too live in turbulent times, with civilizations shaking around us, you show that you have not grasped the main things that the Gospels, Paul and Hebrews were all saying. Here again we are confronted with the point the Protestant Reformers insisted on, namely the once-for-all nature of the gospel. Jesus was not announcing something we might call “apocalyptic” *as a general principle about the way things happen in the world*, that is, that from time to time there would be a disaster, a revolution, a world-shaking sequence of events. Jesus was announcing, and the Gospels and Paul were insisting that he was announcing and implementing, a one-off, unique event which could not and would not ever be repeated. Other shocking events would occur, but they would not have the significance of this one. One can understand the way in which prescient souls in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw their once-assured world looking considerably less stable than once it had. One can also understand the mood of those who, with memories of 1789 and 1848, were looking for a new revolutionary event that would call time on the failed project of “progress” and the reflection of that in a bland and bourgeois piety calling itself “the kingdom of God.” If such a context, and such a mood, call for a more revolutionary form of Christian discipleship, so be it. But do not tell us that this is what Jesus was talking about. For all the protests about letting Jesus be a first-century Jew, the eager embrace in some quarters of the end-of-the-world Jesus shows that such writers too were modernizing him, albeit making him a modern revolutionary rather than a modern pietist. The real apocalyptic Jesus stands over against all such suggestions. He believed that in his death and resurrection he would complete the work of inaugurating the kingdom of God. His first followers, including those who wrote the epistles and the Gospels, believed that he had done so, and they expressed that belief in first-century Jewish idiom. Even if we want to express that belief in idioms of our own day, it is that belief – that with those events the world really did turn its corner, the creator God really did deal with evil and launch the project of new creation – that must be expressed.

7 Conclusion

It would be possible to expand this argument into the patristic period. The early fathers offer a variety of interpretations of the New Testament’s es-

chatology, but there is virtually no sign of anxiety about “delay.”⁷⁸ But it is high time to conclude the present discussion.

The “dogma of delay” turns out to be many-sided, and each of the sides exhibits serious weaknesses. (1) Jesus and his first followers did not expect the world to end, either during his public career or shortly thereafter. (2) Paul did not expect the world to end, either, though he knew that Jesus might return at any time, whether during his (Paul’s) lifetime or thereafter. (3) There was no crisis of confidence, or grinding of theological gears, when, after a generation, Jerusalem was destroyed and Jesus had not returned. The proposal of all these ideas emerged (a) from the world of late nineteenth-century Germany where the social and cultural mood was shifting rapidly against the previously assumed “fact” of automatic “progress,” and where many were speaking, whether metaphorically or not, of some kind of “end of the world”; (b) from the Germany of the 1930s where Rudolf Bultmann, faced with Nazi tyranny and its own brand of sociocultural *Heilsgeschichte*, lived and preached an anti-historical message of living “as if not”; (c) from the Germany of the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s where theorists like Ernst Bloch and Walter Benjamin, theologians like Martin Werner (in his case in Switzerland), and exegetes like Ernst Käsemann faced crushing disappointment at the failure of all political hopes. It emerged into Anglo-Saxon scholarship with several writers welcoming it as an appropriate word for a tumultuous time; and it has stayed there not least through others who wanted for quite other reasons to say that Christian origins were culturally relative and that the ideas of that first generation – and even perhaps the person of Jesus himself – might not be all that important for Christian faith in the modern world.⁷⁹ All this should alert us to the fact that the “dogma of delay” was born out of a misreading of history, a misreading which was itself historically explicable. The delay of the parousia is, in fact, a modern myth (that is, an invented story about the past designed to explain or legitimate certain features of the present). It has become a modern dogma, held in place by firm, sometimes shrill, reassertion and the angry scorn used by emperors to silence those who point out their nakedness. But the theory underneath the dogma is indeed naked. It is time to reject it outright.

The underlying problem, of course, is that to suggest that something happened in the first century which is to be seen as the climax of world

⁷⁸ See *NTPG* (see n. 2), 462–464; and, for the larger picture, B.E. Daley, *The Hope of the Early Church: A Handbook of Patristic Eschatology* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2010).

⁷⁹ See J. Hick (ed.), *The Myth of God Incarnate* (London: SCM, 1977).

history flies in the face of the normal claim of the western Enlightenment, that the climax of world history took place in Europe in the late eighteenth century. That is the real challenge. Of course, perceptions of the church, whether in pre-revolutionary France or in comfortable bourgeois Germany, left many readers of scripture in despair: if this seemingly ineffectual body was the new world which Jesus came to inaugurate, something had gone badly wrong. That was the widespread disappointment summarized by the Abbé Loisy in his famous remark that “Jesus announced the kingdom, and what came was the church.”⁸⁰ But the church, despite its obvious and manifold failures and atrocities, has nevertheless continued to bear witness, in practical as well as theoretical ways, to the truth that a new and revolutionary day really did dawn when Jesus was crucified and then raised from the dead.⁸¹ That, after all, is why, with a nice final irony, Albert Schweitzer himself ought to remain a hero, even though he was wrong about the end of the world. He had his own severely practical way of “modernizing” Jesus. Like the men by the lakeside, he heard an unexpected call, and left everything to obey.

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⁸⁰ Loisy's work of 1902, *L'Évangile et l'Église*, was published in English as *The Gospel and the Church* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976).

⁸¹ On which see my recent work *The Day the Revolution Began: Reconsidering the Meaning of Jesus' Crucifixion* (London: SPCK; San Francisco: HarperOne, 2016).