

# THE ESCHATOLOGY OF THE APOSTLE PAUL

A Senior Honors Thesis

by

JASON E. KNOTT

Submitted to the Office of Honors Programs  
& Academic Scholarships  
Texas A&M University  
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Group: History and Cultural Studies

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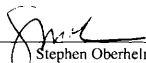
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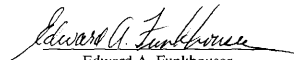
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## ABSTRACT

The Eschatology of the Apostle Paul. (April 2001)

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*Eschatology* in Christian theology means doctrines about the return of Christ to Earth and matters related to that return, such as the resurrection of the dead, the final judgment, the beginning of the eternal Kingdom of God, and those events and phenomena one can expect to precede or accompany the return. These issues were of paramount importance to the earliest Christians, the apostle Paul included. Eschatology was not then, as in later Christian theology, simply an appendix to Christianity much in the way that John's Revelation seems to be a sort of strange appendix to the New Testament. Even the importance of such issues as the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus depended upon the way in which they fit into and altered the eschatological scheme. Because Jesus had died and had been raised again, he was Lord of the world and was even then beginning to prepare to bring in the Kingdom of God. Christians were not to wait for the day when they would die and go to heaven, but for the day when Jesus would come *from* heaven to bring the Kingdom to Earth (1 Thessalonians 1:9-10). Eschatology was an essential key to their whole way of thinking.

Historically Paul's eschatology has been the focus of scant attention. This is because the more elaborate apocalyptic stories found in texts such as Daniel, the Synoptic Gospels (Mark 13 with parallels), and especially John's Revelation seem to swallow up and render superfluous anything Paul has to say about the issue. Whether Paul might have had in mind something different or even contradictory to these other sources is often a possibility considered unthinkable if not heretical. The purpose of this research has been to allow Paul to speak for himself on the issue, letting the chips fall where they may in regard to his agreement or disagreement with other New Testament authors.

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## INTRODUCTION

### **The Importance of Paul**

The apostle Paul was a traveling preacher, church organizer, and theologian whose activities spanned from the 30's to the 60's of the first century of the Common Era. He established Christian communities throughout the areas of Asia Minor and Greece.<sup>1</sup> Paul is considered by many Church historians to be the greatest Christian missionary of all time. If nothing else, he has been the most influential.

Paul's most lasting influence has been through his letters, which he wrote to his own and other churches to encourage, instruct, and sometimes rebuke them about matters of faith. These letters were saved, copied, and collected, and eventually became a large part of the accepted canon of the Christian New Testament. The importance of these letters for understanding the Christian faith as practiced in the early church is unsurpassed, especially considering that they are probably the earliest extant Christian writings,<sup>2</sup> the letter of James alone being the possible exception.

### **The Importance of Eschatology**

Throughout the history of Christianity, eschatology, the belief in an ultimate end of the present world order to be brought about by the return of Jesus to Earth, has been

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<sup>1</sup> This thesis follows the style and format of *Transactions of the American Philological Association*.

<sup>1</sup> For a balanced approach to constructing Paul's life and work from all relevant sources, see Murphy-O'Connor.

<sup>2</sup> Barrett 5.

an issue of varying importance in the minds of the faithful, but has usually been taken for granted.<sup>3</sup> As in the case of various sects of Christians throughout history, the centrality of the idea of Jesus' return in the minds of the earliest Christians was accompanied and strengthened by the belief in the imminence of this event. As I will show later in this thesis, Jesus' return was a basic component of Paul's theology and permeated his thinking in almost every possible way.<sup>4</sup>

### **Methodology**

How to study Paul's eschatology? The best evidence we have of Paul's thought on this subject—in fact the *only* direct evidence—is what he says in his letters. Of course, considerations such as historical context are also very important. One cannot claim to have a proper understanding of Paul without understanding his orientation within the early church, Pharisaic Judaism, and in the first-century Greco-Roman world, any more than one could understand the presidency of Ronald Reagan without knowing about the Cold War. It is my conviction, however, that Paul's letters themselves alone count as conclusive evidence of Paul's thoughts on eschatology. For example, whether Paul's eschatology agreed in every detail with that set forth in John's Revelation is a question to be asked *after* both have been studied on their own terms.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> See preface to Vos.

<sup>4</sup> Schweitzer 52-54.

<sup>5</sup> This stance does not constitute faithlessness to the authority of the texts in question. See Vos 226. For the reliability of Acts for Paul's life and thought, see Barrett 5 and Murphy-O'Connor, passim.

This brings us to the issue of the authenticity of Paul's letters. Thirteen of the books of the New Testament have been ascribed to Paul. Thanks to the results of modern scholarship, however, the authenticity of roughly half of these letters has been challenged. Seven letters remain undisputed: Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Philippians, Galatians, 1 Thessalonians, and Philemon. Scholars are more or less evenly divided on the issue of the authenticity of 2 Thessalonians and Colossians. Relatively few still maintain the Pauline authorship of Ephesians and the "Pastoral Epistles" (1 and 2 Timothy and Titus). Scholars dispute the authenticity of these various letters for reasons such as style of writing, use of key terms, and theological differences. What concerns us here, however, is how the so-called "authorship controversy" relates to Paul's eschatology.

Let me note here that the issue of pseudepigrapha in the canon of the New Testament is touchy. We must remember though that pseudepigraphy was quite common in antiquity.<sup>6</sup> In fact, one is hard-pressed to find an ancient author who did not have imitators of this kind. Little prevented someone from putting any name he chose on his work in order to attract attention to it or to give it prestige or authority. There were many texts written under the pseudonyms of Plato, Caesar, and Seneca, to name but a few. Pseudepigraphy continued throughout antiquity and into the medieval period; there were even pseudo-Shakespeare plays that were published as if authentic. Though most of these forgeries have been universally recognized as such for centuries, religious concerns kept the texts of the New Testament immune from an equal sort of scrutiny.

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<sup>6</sup> For more discussion of pseudepigraphy in general, see Ehrman 320-23.



But one cannot pretend that the issue of authenticity of canonical works is simply an academic question: doctrines of scriptural authority presuppose authenticity. In fact, the gradual acceptance by the Church of some works as canonical was in part an acceptance of them as having an apostolic origin. Some important theological issues also depend upon authenticity. For instance, the letter to the Colossians contains some of the most developed Christology in the New Testament.<sup>7</sup> Even so, one should not overestimate the importance of the authenticity of any particular letter. Even scholars who attempt to construct a “Pauline theology” using some or all of the disputed letters in addition to the undisputed letters rarely base any idea *solely* on passages in the disputed letters.<sup>8</sup> Basing one’s belief in a doctrine based on any one passage would be precarious in any case. As such, the authorship question, while interesting, has less import when Paul is view as an historical person with ideas that can be appropriated to new contexts than when one sees Paul’s writings as sources for proof-texts.

I shall base my investigation of Paul’s eschatology on the basis of his seven undisputed letters. Once I have formed a coherent picture of Paul’s eschatology based on those letters, I shall compare the eschatological statements in the disputed letters to that picture of Paul’s eschatology and see how they fit in. This method seems somewhat circular at first glance, but that is illusory. The beginning point is the *positive* affirmation of the authenticity of the undisputed letters, while the disputed letters are left to one side. Here there is no prejudgment about the authenticity of the disputed letters;

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<sup>7</sup> See Dunn 275-77.

<sup>8</sup> See Wright 8 and Fee, *passim*.

we may (or may not) then conclude that the eschatology of the disputed letters fits that of the undisputed letters. Thus, there is no circularity of argument. Various scholars for the better part of a century or more have used a similar method of focusing on the seven undisputed letters.<sup>9</sup>

The letter whose authenticity is most often challenged based on eschatology is 2 Thessalonians. Here, for the first and only time in the corpus of letters ascribed to Paul (whether disputed or genuine), we meet the mysterious “Man of Lawlessness” (2:1-12). Some scholars have also found in this letter a more negative view of future events than in the undisputed letters. I reject this letter’s authorship for the same reasons. Other scholars, such as G. Vos and Jerome Murphy-O’Connor, disagree.<sup>10</sup> I will address this more fully in a later section.<sup>11</sup>

There are two more points I would like to make about methodology. The first has already been suggested above, that is, that Paul is best understood as an independent thinker. Paul did not just take what had been passed on to him—be it from his rabbinical upbringing and education, from the teachings already existing in the Church before his conversion, or from his revelation of and from the risen Christ—but rather worked with that raw material to build his own unique theological system. As Albert Schweitzer says at the beginning of the final chapter of his book, *The Mysticism of Paul the Apostle*,

<sup>9</sup> See, e.g., Sanders 431-32, Schweitzer 41-43, Barrett 3-5, Beker passim.

<sup>10</sup> But see how Murphy-O’Connor neutralizes the importance of the eschatological teachings in a way other than denying authenticity (129). His arguments for authenticity do not address what is to me the main issue, namely, eschatology (110-11).

<sup>11</sup> See below. AUTHORSHIP QUESTIONS.

“Paul vindicated for all time the rights of thought in Christianity.”<sup>12</sup> A second point is that Paul built his whole theology, including his eschatology, first and foremost around the death and resurrection of Christ.<sup>13</sup> Everything else was secondary. To him, the “true” interpretation of any theological point, church doctrine, ethical and moral issue, Hebrew text, and the like was the one that fit the facts about Jesus’ passion and resurrection. This makes sense considering the fact that he claimed to have experienced a personal encounter with the resurrected Jesus—an experience that inevitably increased his sense of the importance and reality of the resurrection. Jesus rising from the grave alone was not open to “interpretation.”

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<sup>12</sup> Schweitzer 376.

<sup>13</sup> Sanders 442-47.

## THE ESCHATOLOGICAL STORY

### Background and Scope

The term *eschatology* denotes beliefs about events in the story of salvation that are yet to come. This term presupposes a sharp disjunction between this future hope and other doctrines of the Christian faith. But no such disjunction existed in Paul's thought. Paul saw the future coming of Christ and the establishment of God's Kingdom as the final climactic act in a much longer play. When Jesus comes again, Paul thought, God's purposes for creation will finally be realized, and the dominion of hostile spiritual powers will be broken.<sup>1</sup> Eschatology not only affected every aspect of Paul's theology,<sup>2</sup> it was part of a story that began "In the beginning," and spanned from creation to new creation, from the first Adam to the Last Adam (Romans 5).<sup>3</sup> I will return to this issue again, but it should be kept in mind in the meantime.

Paul did not grab his eschatological beliefs out of thin air. His beliefs probably had their genesis in his rabbinical education and upbringing, his religious/mystical experiences (including the encounter he claimed to have had with the risen Jesus), and teachings that were handed down to him from the early Christians.<sup>4</sup> It would behoove one wishing to understand Paul's eschatology, therefore, to understand the Jewish eschatological beliefs on which Paul's beliefs doubtlessly drew for inspiration and

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<sup>1</sup> See Romans 8:19-22.

<sup>2</sup> See section INTERACTIONS for examples.

<sup>3</sup> For a discussion of Paul's "Adam Christology," see Dunn 199-204.

<sup>4</sup> See 1 Corinthians 15:3; this is despite his protest in Galatians 1:12. See Dunn 177-79.

direction. But one must be cautious not to assume that Second-Temple Period Jewish eschatology was monolithic. As in other areas of faith and practice, contemporary Jews had a variety of eschatological beliefs. Schweitzer makes the mistake of assuming that all "Scribal" eschatology was the same, and comes to some unwarranted conclusions such as his "two resurrection" theory,<sup>5</sup> a subject to which I will return.

A few basic things may be said about Jewish eschatology. First, eschatology was their unique solution to the problem of evil. The god Yahweh was the one benevolent Creator of the world; the world he created was good (Genesis 1:25), and yet somehow things had gone wrong. Although Jews agreed that God would eventually put things right, how he would do so was a matter of disagreement. As time progressed, Jews developed some basic concepts such as "the Kingdom of God," a final resurrection, and an ultimate reward and punishment of people. Jesus' resurrection and the pouring-out of the Spirit necessitated a creative new reworking of these ideas among the early Jewish Christians, but Paul continued to work within these traditions.

After having his experience of the risen Jesus, Paul no doubt had a lot of thinking to do before he could make sense of these developments within his understanding of eschatology. In some ways the mold of existing Jewish eschatology was broken. For example, the idea of one person experiencing the resurrection alone, before the end of history (the "End of Days" in rabbinical thought), was unheard-of before some uneducated fishermen from Galilee began proclaiming that it had actually happened.

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<sup>5</sup> Schweitzer 94-95. For a critique of this, see W. D. Davies' *Paul and Rabbinic Judaism* (London 1958) 288-98. I owe this reference to Sanders 434.

The prevalent view before this was that the resurrection was something that would happen to all of God's elect at once. But Paul believed he had seen the risen Jesus, and for him seeing was believing; what was left was to make sense of this. I will also return to this subject later.<sup>6</sup>

The most important point concerning the effect of these new realities on Paul's eschatology is that Paul now knew that the story of salvation was nearing the climactic end. As he knew from his education, "resurrection" and "Spirit" were eschatological realities and were connected with the kingdom of God. Jesus' resurrection may have been a surprise, but its general import was unmistakable: God was finally bringing history to a close and was fulfilling His purpose for creation.<sup>7</sup>

Because Jesus' resurrection did not fit into any of the established eschatological stories, however, it is doubtful whether Paul or anyone else would have known at first exactly what to make of it. But Paul reached a definite conclusion that Jesus was Lord. His belief in Jesus' lordship seems to have been intimately connected to the resurrection.<sup>8</sup> Why this should be so is a mystery. Judaism has no tradition of a person being resurrected alone *at all*, much less a tradition that whoever is resurrected should take the title "Lord" (a title reserved for God alone in the Hebrew Scriptures). Where did the idea, that because Jesus is resurrected he is Lord, come from? Because the author of the gospel of Matthew expresses the same idea (28:18-20), seemingly without dependence on Paul, the conclusion that this idea predates Paul is hard to dismiss.

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<sup>6</sup> See below. INTERACTIONS.

<sup>7</sup> Dunn 240.

<sup>8</sup> Dunn 244-52.

## **The Story's Content**

In this subsection I shall give an outline of the climax of the story of salvation as Paul saw it. In the next subsection I shall give a brief explanation and defense of the points that I think necessary, along with some as-yet unresolved problems.

The climax, which begins with the death and resurrection of Jesus, inaugurates Jesus' lordship over the hostile spiritual powers that enslave the world, and initiates the life of the world to come, manifested on earth by the presence of the Holy Spirit in and among believers. In part in heaven, and in part on earth, Jesus is at work destroying these hostile powers or "enemies"(1 Corinthians 25-26). In the meantime, those "in Christ" must be patient, "working out [their] salvation" and "putting to death the deeds of the body by the Spirit"(Philippians 2:12, Romans 8:13). Because enemies remain, Christians will suffer persecution in various forms and must bear it patiently, because by doing so they share in the sufferings of Christ (1 Thessalonians 3:4, 2 Corinthians 1:5, Philippians 3:10, Colossians 1:24). Christians are to meet together in worship, including partaking in the Lord's Supper, which is seen primarily as a proclamation of Jesus' death and an anticipation of his return (1 Corinthians 11:26).

One means of eliminating the enemies of Christ is to make them his servants. That is, by the proclamation of the gospel and the work of the Holy Spirit, more and more people will become believers of the gospel, until "the fullness of the Gentiles" (to use Paul's term) will be saved, followed by "all of Israel"(Romans 11:25-26). This presumably means "all of the gentiles who will be saved" and "all of the Jews who will be saved." At this point Jesus will come back, and the "last enemy," death, will be

destroyed (1 Corinthians 15:26). All Christians will be raised from the dead (or “changed” if they are still alive—1 Corinthians 15:51-52), to die no more (1 Corinthians 15:42-44). Then the resurrected Christians will sit with Christ in judgment over the world and the angels (1 Corinthians 6:2-3). Finally, Jesus will hand over the kingdom to God (1 Corinthians 15:24).

### **Explanations, Defense, and Problems**

The Kingdom of God and the Kingdom of Christ were synonymous for Paul, and both were already a present reality, only needing to be *consummated* at the return of Christ at some point.<sup>9</sup> All of the enemies of Christ and of his people will be destroyed before his return (Greek: *parousia*, or “presence”) excepting only death, which is destroyed at the time of the *parousia* by the resurrection of believers.<sup>10</sup> Since I assume that the “judging” of the world and of angels by the saints, which Paul mentions in 1 Corinthians 6, will happen after the *parousia*, those humans and angels who will be judged cannot be considered “enemies” in the sense meant by Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:26. The real “enemies” are the hostile spiritual powers such as Death, Sin, and Satan. Moreover, there is no reason to assume that these ensuing judgments will all result in condemnation. In fact, the concept of “judgment” seems to imply that there is at least a possibility of acquittal.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Vos 259-60.

<sup>10</sup> Vos 245-46.

<sup>11</sup> But see 1 Corinthians 10:6.



For Paul, persecution was a present reality, not a prophecy. He did not look forward to a time of a “Great Tribulation,” but saw an increase in the Church’s fortunes as time went on. This will be an important point to remember when I discuss the authorship controversy in a later section.

Jesus’ return was something that Paul expected to happen within his lifetime and the lifetime of most of his converts. Scholars have debated the precise meaning of 1 Thessalonians 4:17, usually translated to read something like “Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air”(NRSV). Some scholars translate this as a conditional, reading “We, if we be alive—if we be left—...” This may be a better translation, but the main point to recognize concerning the expectation of the *parousia* in 1 Thessalonians is that Paul’s converts were *distressed* that some in their number had died. This would not have happened had Paul not led his converts to believe that they would be alive at Christ’s return. Certainly such a clear thinker as Paul would have taken into account the possibility of Christians dying before the end. But, such a possibility must have seemed to him the exception, rather than the rule, for him not to have mentioned it to the Thessalonians (or even to Timothy!).<sup>12</sup> In fact, Paul reminds the Thessalonians that at their conversion they learned “to await the coming from heaven of [God’s] son” (1:10). One who is dead cannot await anything, as common sense would tell anyone, nor can they be kept blameless (3:13), and therein lies the Thessalonians’ distress over their departed fellow-believers.

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<sup>12</sup> Ehrman 269.

In Philippians 1:21-26, Paul considers the possibility that he himself will die before the return of Christ (after the *parousia*, this would be impossible). He does not shrink from his duty for fear of that possibility. In the end, however, his conclusion is that he “knows” that he will remain for the sake of his converts (vs. 25).

Some scholars give undue stress to the fact that Paul believed the *parousia* was imminent. They usually quote 1 Thessalonians 5:2, where Paul says, “you yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night.” This verse is usually adduced as an argument against the authenticity of 2 Thessalonians, in which the author states that certain things had to happen before the end.<sup>13</sup> Though I agree that 2 Thessalonians is spurious, this argument makes too much of Paul’s belief in the imminency of the *parousia*. He did believe certain things had to happen first, even if they were different than those mentioned in 2 Thessalonians. And it is arguable that he only meant to say that the return was “like a thief in the night” to unbelievers, since he says immediately after that that “you are not in darkness that the day should overtake you like a thief” (vs. 4). Whether the negative *ouk este* (“you are not”) is more closely connected to the *fact* of the overtaking or surprising or to the *manner* of the overtaking (as a thief) is probably impossible to determine grammatically. Paul might have meant that if one is not in darkness the day would not surprise him at all, or if one is not in darkness the surprise will be pleasant rather than unpleasant. I assume the

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<sup>13</sup> Schweitzer 42, Beker 73.

former is the case because it fits better Paul's emphasis elsewhere on the delay of the *parousia*.

We can confidently say that what Paul expected before the *parousia* was the spread of the gospel throughout the world. Eventually "the fullness of the Gentiles" and "all of Israel" would be converted (Romans 11:25-26). We will probably never recover the exact sense of what Paul means by this phrase. Paul could have meant all the Gentiles and Jews who were living at the time of the *parousia* would be converted, but this assumes that Paul thought the *parousia* would (or at least *could*) be delayed for some generations, and we have no evidence that he ever believed this. Such an assumption also ignores the fact that the Judgment upon those living is often said to happen when Jesus comes again (e.g. 1 Thessalonians 5:3), which would not happen if all those living at that time were Christians. The best way to interpret Romans 11:25-26 is that Paul believed that a certain number of Gentiles and a certain number of Jews were going to be saved, and when the fullness of that number were to occur, Jesus would come back. Since judgment is something that will happen to Jews and Gentiles alike (Romans 2:9), I assume that "fullness of" and "all of" in Romans 11:25-26 are two ways of saying the same thing.

The question of how the Gentiles and Jews will be converted is a matter of some controversy. Since Paul believed that the *parousia* would happen in his lifetime, and since he believed that he had been entrusted with "the gospel for the uncircumcised, just as Peter had been entrusted with the gospel for the circumcised"(Galatians 2:7), it makes sense that Paul believed his own ministry was the focal point for the conversion of both

of these groups. Paul says that his ministry (at least in part) was to provoke Israel to jealousy, and therefore to save some of them (Romans 11:14); this statement is made in the context of the acceptance of Israel being “life from the dead [for the world]” (vs. 15). The most natural referent for this statement is the resurrection. Thus, even though Paul was willing to grant Peter (his sometime opponent) status as “apostle to the circumcised,” he believed the decisive factor in converting the Jews was when they saw what the gospel was doing for Gentiles via his own apostleship. Fredriksen (205) says that the Jews would be converted by the second coming of Christ, but this is hard to fit into Paul’s other statements. Not only would such a conversion not be by “jealousy,” but it would mean that no Jews would be judged at the second coming, which Paul specifically claims earlier in the same letter (2:9).

The question arises whether Paul had any room for a “rapture” of the sort popularized by, for example, the *Left Behind* series of novels. Although much debate has raged, especially among conservative scholars, about the timing of the rapture, by far the most popular notion is that some day, out of the blue, all “true” Christians (those in their graves and those still alive) will simply disappear; this will be the first event in the final eschatological drama. Paul’s first letter to the Thessalonians is quoted as supporting this belief: “For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel’s call and with the sound of God’s trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord forever” (4:16-17). The “cry of command,” the “archangel’s call,” and “God’s

trumpet” are all events that show that the coming of Christ will occur with much fanfare, not manifested only in the mysterious disappearance of millions of people. An especially critical point to observe is the fact that this coming of Jesus and raising of believers is not *the beginning* of the eschatological climax, but *the end* (1 Corinthians 15:23-26). There is simply no room in this scheme for the type of stories so popular among some Christians today and so popularized in the *Left Behind* series. If Paul believed in an escalation of hostilities between God’s people and an evil world leader or power (an “Antichrist”), he would need to put these events before any resurrection of believers and their being “caught up.” I do not think he did believe in a reign of an evil world power or an “Antichrist,” but at least those who put the “rapture” (if it can even be called that) after it are being more true to Paul than most. Ehrman (267) believes this catching up of believers into the clouds will be how believers will escape God’s wrath (see 1 Thessalonians 1:10, 5:9). This is not that far from what some conservative scholars think, at least so far as the “rapture” itself is concerned.<sup>14</sup>

A final problem is the question of who Paul thought would be resurrected. According to Acts 24:15, Paul himself says that all men will be resurrected. But in the Pauline letters, resurrection was a positive experience, a reward for holiness even, and never spoken of as happening to anyone but Christ and those “in” him. Even conservative scholars like Vos must recognize the precariousness of relying on one source, which is at best second-hand, over against what Paul actually said.<sup>15</sup> This does

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<sup>14</sup> Van Kampen, *passim*.

<sup>15</sup> 223-24.

not mean that after death unbelievers are free from judgment. That Paul believed in some kind of conscious existence beyond the grave and before the resurrection (at least for Christians) is evident from Philippians 1:21-23.<sup>16</sup> It is not difficult to imagine that he believed in the same thing for unbelievers.

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<sup>16</sup> "Sleep" was just an expression for death in the ancient world, and its use by Paul does not indicate what the mode of existence was that he expected for the Christian after death and before the resurrection. See Vos 142-46.

## INTERACTIONS

Scholars have often debated the question of the so-called “center” of Paul’s theology. This debate sometimes assumes that Paul’s thought was like a wagon wheel, with one central idea radiating out to all the other, less important ideas. This makes some sense: in any system of thought, some ideas will be more important and will determine other beliefs. The problem, however, is that this debate assumes that Paul must have had one idea that was more central than any other and that determined all other ideas. That so little agreement has been reached among scholars on what that central idea actually is suggests that this may be a futile search. But rather than throwing the baby out with the bathwater, I prefer to recognize the validity of this debate insofar as it recognizes that some ideas are more important than others. The solution lies in thinking in terms of *relative* centrality of a belief over against another belief, while not insisting upon any one *absolute* center. I shall not attempt to answer the question of what belief among those in Paul’s theology held the most central place, nor even determine if there was any one such belief. But this question can best be answered after a better understanding of the interaction between Paul’s various beliefs has been attained. And that is what I intend to do in this section with regard to eschatology.

One issue that was profoundly affected, and in many ways determined, by Paul’s eschatology was his soteriology (beliefs about salvation). In the undisputed letters of Paul, salvation is almost always a future reality. Only once does Paul say that Christians “were saved” (Romans 8:24) and this verse’s emphasis on “hope” of things to come shows that the future was never far from Paul’s mind when discussing salvation. The

disputed letters, by contrast, are replete with talk of salvation in the past tenses (whether aorist or perfect).<sup>1</sup> And as much as salvation was seen as something already nascent in the life of the individual Christian and the Church (e.g., 2 Corinthians 2:15), this was clearly because the future salvation was considered to be so close and so certain, and therefore it exerted a certain quasi-gravitational force, in the mind of Paul, on the present lives of Christians. That is, salvation was primarily a future reality, and it was only because this future reality had foreshadowing in the present that salvation could ever be spoken of as somewhat past or present. The idea that salvation was primarily a present reality, with merely consummation in the future, is post-Paul.

The above observations give a new perspective on an issue in modern theology. It has often been assumed that emphasis on a future salvation somehow leads to a devaluing of present life on Earth. Surprisingly, Paul's thought (and presumably that of many Christians of his time) did not work this way. It was precisely because the future salvation was emphasized so much that it seemed to break into the terrestrial sphere *in the present* in the common life and worship of believers through the Holy Spirit.

I Corinthians has several examples of interactions between Paul's eschatology and his other beliefs. In chapter 7, Paul makes the connection between ethics and eschatology explicit. He says in verses 29-31 that, because of the impending eschatological crisis, people should not become too attached to things like marriages or money. This connection is less direct in other statements, where Paul says that

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<sup>1</sup> Vos 52-53.



practicing ethical behavior should be done in the light of the coming judgment.<sup>2</sup> In chapter 11, verse 26, he says that the Lord's Supper should be celebrated as a proclamation of Jesus' death until the *parousia*.

Perhaps one of the most important ideas in Paul's theology is his concept of being "in Christ." In fact, this is one idea that many scholars have argued is *the* center of Paul's theology. But Schweitzer argues that this idea is actually caused by Paul's eschatology.<sup>3</sup> Even recognizing that Schweitzer made some mistakes here (like the doctrine of "two resurrections," mentioned above), his argument has some validity. As I have said above, a single person being raised from the grave before the end of time was not present in contemporary Judaism. The current Jewish idea was that all the elect of God would be resurrected at once, at the End of Days. But Paul postulated that in fact all Christians *have died and have been resurrected with Christ*. He says as much in 2 Corinthians 5:14: "Because we are convinced that one has died for all; therefore all have died." This idea of dying and rising again with Christ has important applications in the area of Paul's ethics (Romans 6:1-11). But more to the present point, it explains Paul's "mysticism," that is, his idea of being "in Christ." If all Christians have died and have been raised with Christ, then they must possess some sort of mystical connection with him. A word of caution is appropriate at this point: we do not know whether Paul used this reasoning to come to his belief in a mystical connection with Christ, or whether he used it to explain, *ex post facto*, a connection that he experienced with Christ. One

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<sup>2</sup> See Schweitzer 310-12.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* 94-97.

should not foist on Paul the image of the cloistered theologian. His theology was probably forged in the mission field and the experience of common worship, and his mystical experiences, though rarely mentioned, were apparently varied and powerful (see 2 Corinthians 12:9).<sup>4</sup> But at the very least, his statements in 2 Corinthians 5:14 and in Romans 6:1-11 show that this line of reasoning from eschatology to mysticism probably existed in Paul's mind.

As a result of this reasoning combined with the experience of oneness with Christ, Paul used the concept of being "in Christ" to exhort his converts to holiness and unity. He uses this same idea in the first letter to the Corinthians to encourage them not to commit acts of sexual immorality (6:12-20), and not to participate in pagan rituals (10:14-22). This also has consequences in Paul's theology of the Lord's Supper. Because Christians are members of Christ's body individually (12:27), their common meals somehow make them the body (as opposed to scattered parts, 10:17). It is probably impossible to tell if Paul reasoned from eschatology to mysticism and then on to the consequences of mysticism, but it is at least possible. It is reasonable to suppose that the thought process from eschatology to mysticism strengthened and intensified his awareness of a connection with Christ, even if the connection was experienced already.

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<sup>4</sup> This is especially true if the experience in 12:1-4 is something Paul himself experienced. But this is a disputable point.

## AUTHORSHIP QUESTIONS

In this section it is appropriate to revisit the authorship controversy and to discuss the significance of this controversy as it pertains to my conclusions regarding Paul's eschatology. Discussion of the authenticity of 2 Thessalonians will take up most of the space in this section, because scholars very often challenge the authenticity of this letter on the basis of its eschatology. The letter is also one whose authenticity is quite controversial, indeed critical scholars are equally split on the authenticity of this letter.

As I pointed out earlier (pp. 11-15), Paul's eschatology was "optimistic," especially as it concerned the success of Paul's own missionary efforts. For him, persecution by the unbelieving world is the order of the day, and will be so until the end. But even though things will never be perfect until the *parousia*, they will constantly get better. More and more Gentiles will become Christians, until "the fullness of the Gentiles has come in" (Romans 11:25). This fact will make Israel jealous because it will see that God is favoring the Gentiles more than his chosen nation, and this jealousy will cause a great number of Jews (hyperbolically referred to as "all of Israel" in Romans 11:26) to believe in Jesus. Jesus will return at this point, the dead will be raised, and the living will be "changed."

This "eschatological optimism," which is set forth in Paul's undisputed letters, is in direct contrast to the pessimism of 2 Thessalonians. This is the real crux of the issue of the authenticity of the letter. The pessimism of 2 Thessalonians focuses in part upon the very same issue as the optimism of the authentic letters, and predicts not a gradual increase in believers up to the end, but a drastic decrease in believers just before the end.

The author tells the Thessalonians not to be deceived, because “the day will not come unless the falling away comes first”(2:3). This “day” can be none other than the “Day of the Lord” spoken of so often in Paul’s letters,<sup>1</sup> a day that is synonymous with the return of Jesus. Paul, in Romans 11, taught that Jesus’ return would come after a certain number of conversions. Because we have a direct contradiction between what Paul says and what the author of 2 Thessalonians says, the Pauline authorship of 2 Thessalonians is questionable, to say the least.<sup>2</sup>

Vos, who argues that Paul wrote 2 Thessalonians, believes that Romans 10:20 shows that Paul believed in a “possibility” of a falling away of “considerable groups” and that this idea was too much a “fixed feature” of Jewish eschatology to be put aside (133). This is one of the better defenses of the authenticity of this letter, but Vos’s arguments are not convincing because the “possibility” of “considerable groups” falling away is a far cry from the *certainty* that many *will* fall away, and because Paul had to jettison at least one “fixed factor” of Jewish eschatology, as I mentioned above (p. 8).

Some scholars have given undue stress to the fact that the mysterious “Man of Lawlessness” mentioned in 2 Thessalonians 2:3 does not appear in any other letter ascribed to Paul. This is at best a minor point, and should not be given too much attention lest more important issues be neglected. Paul’s silence elsewhere about the “Man of Lawlessness” does not convincingly prove that he did not believe that there would be such a man. Paul’s letters were occasional productions, written to serve

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<sup>1</sup> See 1 Corinthians 5:5, 2 Corinthians 1:14, 1 Thessalonians 5:2, etc.

<sup>2</sup> As a side note, the issue of optimistic vs. pessimistic eschatology also strengthens the already-strong case against the authenticity of the Pastoral Epistles, or at least the ones addressed to Timothy. 1 Timothy 4:1-3 and 2 Timothy 3:1-7 both predict an increase in evil before the end.

specific purposes at specific times, and so we should not assume *a priori* that the lack of a mention of a particular theological doctrine or tenet is noteworthy in itself.<sup>3</sup> If the Corinthians had not abused the ritual of the Lord's Supper, Paul never would have mentioned it, and doubtlessly there would be scholars arguing that Paul was not aware of the Lord's Supper, or that he did not think it was important. This example should demonstrate how precarious it is to argue from silence.

A final argument against the letter's authenticity is the amount of knowledge the author assumes that the audience has. Paul in 1 Thessalonians must instruct his converts in Thessalonica, seemingly for the first time, about such basic issues of eschatology as the fact that those who have died will enter the Kingdom upon Christ's return (4:13-18). But the author of 2 Thessalonians assumes his audience knows about specific issues such as the "Man of Lawlessness" and the "Restrainer" (2:3,7). It is unlikely that the same person writing to the same people, with only a short time interval in between, would have assumed that his addressees were suddenly so knowledgeable. For this and the other reasons I have outlined above, I do not believe that Paul wrote 2 Thessalonians.<sup>4</sup>

I would note that even scholars who argue that Paul wrote this 2 Thessalonians challenge the significance of the eschatological statements in the letter. Murphy-O'Connor argues that Paul improvised and came up with this eschatological story in order to diminish the expectation of the *parousia* among the Thessalonians, which had been causing problems (129). If this argument is accepted, the importance of the

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<sup>3</sup> Beker 20.

<sup>4</sup> Other arguments could be adduced against the authenticity of 2 Thessalonians, but they have nothing to do with eschatology.

eschatological statements in 2 Thessalonians for constructing Paul's eschatology will depend upon which of Paul's eschatologies one wishes to construct. If one wants to understand Paul's eschatology in its final, developed form—that is, what Paul would have said about it if he was asked just before his death (by tradition, his execution under Nero)—then 2 Thessalonians is no better a source if it is authentic than if it is spurious.

Theologians and lay Christians handle the issue of pseudonymity in the canon of the New Testament variously. In order to “save” the authority of all canonical works in the New Testament, some retreat into agnosticism or anti-intellectualism when confronted with issues of controversial authorship. This is an unfortunate reaction, because in truth the issue of whether to believe what Paul (or any other early Christian) believed is a different issue than the issue of how best to go about discovering Paul's ideas. Paul himself certainly would not have changed his mind about his gospel because someone who claimed to be him wrote a letter that contradicted his beliefs after his death and thereby fooled many Christians. Loyalty to what Paul believed does not necessitate that we base our faith on the authenticity of all canonical letters attributed to Paul.

Other theologians and lay Christians choose to accept the authority of the disputed letters attributed to Paul regardless of whether he actually wrote them. This solution is more popular among Catholics than among Protestants, because Catholics base their belief in the authority of the canon on the fact that it was granted canonization by the Church, even though many Catholic scholars reject their authorship. It seems to me arbitrary to deny the letters are authentic even while upholding their authority on theological issues set forth in them. Moreover, it is often because these letters contradict

Paul's theology that they are considered spurious. In the end, therefore, what we would be left with is contradictory authoritative texts. I also object to a third reaction to the authorship question, which is to save the authority of the letters by postulating that someone close to Paul and familiar with his theology wrote them. Such a person would have no need to hide his identity and purpose, and the contradictions between Paul's theology and that of the disputed letters argue against them having been written by his close associates.

Others go too far in the other extreme, by denying outright that anything in the spurious letters is of worth to modern Christians. This is excessive because if nothing else, the letters offer evidence of how certain ideas developed in early Christianity and how Paul's theology was adapted to new circumstances. They also show us what sorts of problems arose during the decades after Paul's death, which the various authors of the spurious works felt compelled to answer by whatever means necessary. We must remember, as I mentioned above, how common pseudonymity was in the ancient world. It was simply not as scandalous as we moderns tend to think. As such, modern animosity toward those who wrote these works is misplaced, and their legitimate concerns and sincere faith should be taken into account.

Beker, in his book *Heirs of Paul*, presents what is to me the most attractive reaction to the authorship debate. Beker throughout the book states that the best way to use the pseudonymous letters is to hold them up as examples of how Christians in the second half of the first century and early second century tried to appropriate Paul's

theology to their new situations. Then we can see what sort of mistakes to beware of, and what sorts of methods of appropriation are desirable.



## CONCLUSION

Eschatology was an extremely important issue to Paul. It was an idea that was always in the foreground of his thinking, and profoundly affected every other doctrine in his theology. If one takes eschatology out of Paul's theology, the entire structure of that theology falls apart.

Many individuals and groups throughout the history of Christianity have predicted the occurrence of the end of the world, but, of course, they have always turned out to be wrong. Because such attempts are embarrassing many Christians try to minimize the importance of eschatology, saying that we do not know when the *parousia* will happen, and so we might as well go on with our lives and not concern ourselves too much with it. But this is to effectively jettison eschatological beliefs by making them off limits and therefore practically irrelevant, and thereby to effectively abandon something that was of the utmost importance to the earliest Christians, including those who wrote the works the Church still considers canonical. Denying such an integral part of the faith of the early Christians raises sticky issues about what it means to be Christian 20 centuries after the beginning of the Christian religion, when everything seems to have changed around us, and I will not attempt a comprehensive answer to that problem here. But, whatever is our answer to that question, it will involve somehow maintaining the important aspects of the primitive Christian religion to the greatest extent possible while maintaining intellectual honesty. Therefore, even if it becomes impossible to simply adopt, point-by-point, Paul's eschatology, we must take care that it not lose its importance.

An especially tricky issue concerning the appropriation of Paul's eschatology to our time is the issue of timing. Not only did Paul believe that the *parousia* was coming very soon, but virtually every New Testament author to write on the subject believed likewise. If one common denominator may be extracted from all of the eschatological writings in the New Testament, it is that Jesus is coming back and coming very soon. Yet this did not happen, of course. So, how can we hope to glean anything of worth from New Testament eschatology if the one thing we *should* know for sure from what the New Testament says appears, on the face of it, to be false? I believe that this obstacle is not as insurmountable as it at first seems. Recall that Paul believed that the "fullness of the Gentiles" and "all of Israel" would be converted before the end. We do not know how many converts Paul was expecting, but the fact is that Paul had no idea of how big the world in truth is, or how many people there were who needed to hear the gospel before the Judgment could occur. Had he known, I think he would have rethought his belief that he himself or his disciples would be able to evangelize a sufficient number of them so as to reach the "fullness of the Gentiles." Rethinking would have been nothing new for Paul, since he had had to do it after witnessing the risen Jesus, if not at other times (such as after the confrontation with Peter mentioned in Galatians). It is true that Paul believed that Jesus was coming soon, and that he was wrong about this. But the real issue is how important that was to his theology, and how drastic a change it would have been to him if he had been able to know that Jesus might not come back for millennia. I think it would not be too drastic.

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