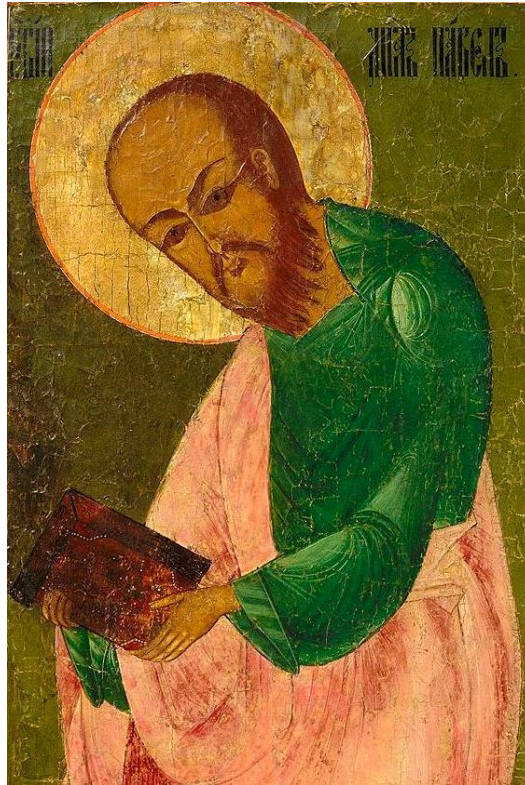


Curtis Mobly

Paul's Ambiguous Eschatology:
The Messianic Coming, Resurrection, and Evil



In *Life After Death: A History of the Afterlife in the Religions of the West*, Alan F. Segal writes that, “The apostle Paul is our first Christian writer. His writings present us with the first reflections on the faith that the man Jesus was Christ and that, through Him, all who have faith will be resurrected.”¹ The extent to which Paul can be assigned the label “Christian” is questionable, however, because Paul wrote long before Christianity finally became distinct from Judaism. This article examines Paul’s eschatology – that is, his view of end times – with Paul’s Jewishness as a primary interpretive key. Any serious study of Paul’s eschatological beliefs

¹ Alan F. Segal, *Life After Death: A History of the Afterlife in Western Religion* (New York, NY: Doubleday Religion, 2004), 399.

properly begins with the development of Jewish eschatology because Paul's eschatological writings draw heavily from – and engage in – that tradition. After discussing the development of pre-Pauline Jewish eschatology, I will examine Paul's own eschatological views, especially highlighting the ambiguous nature of Paul's thought on issues concerning the messianic coming, the resurrection, and the fate of evil people and powers. Paul's extant letters reveal that his views on these subjects developed over time.

Today, many people hold to the worldview of the journalist Lewis H. Lapham:

If it's true that the universe consists of atoms and void and nothing else, then everything that exists—the sun and the moon, mother and the flag, Beethoven's string quartets and da Vinci's decomposing flesh, is made of the elementary particles of nature in fervent and constant motion, colliding and combining retribution or reward, nothing other than a vast turmoil of creation and destruction. Plants and animals become the stuff of human beings, the stuff of human beings food for fish. Men die not because they are sick but because they are alive.²

This is a modern take on a very old philosophical view of the universe. It is the view that was held by Epicurus, a famous philosopher of ancient Greece.³ It is a nihilistic view, and many would argue a realistic view – one that offers no hope for the human situation. At the beginning of their history, the ancient Israelites held a view that differed minimally from this Epicurean conception of the universe. However, through gradual development, they reached a different view. To be sure, the Israelites never completely rejected the afterlife. Their earliest notion was of an abode where all the dead resided. This abode was called Sheol. Sheol was the destination of both the good and the bad. Aron Pinker suggests that this was a “rather austere and simple” view of the hereafter compared to other Near Eastern cultures, and that the notion of Sheol

² Lewis H. Lapham, “Momento Mori,” *Lapham's Quarterly*, accessed August 15, 2016, <http://www.laphamsquarterly.org/death/memento-mori>

³ “Epicurus,” last modified 2014. <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/epicurus/>.

“[was] a departure from the norm in its abruptness and approximation of human extinction.”⁴

This earliest conception of the afterlife offered no hope to the ancient Israelites as they faced a harsh environment with equally harsh enemies.

As the ancient Israelites struggled through many hardships, it became clear that this conception of the afterlife could not hold. The central claim of the Hebrew Bible is that YHWH is a god of justice. How could a god of justice allow the evil to prosper as the righteous suffered? This is the central dilemma that gave rise to a Jewish eschatology centered on the hope of a future resurrection. In light of their concerns for god to restore justice on earth, the ancient Israelites were not interested in philosophical speculation about the fate of the individual or of the world; they were interested in vindicating god’s divine character in relation to his people, Israel.⁵ John Dominic Crossan notes that the Jewish apocalypse “was justice and righteousness established forever.” It meant “not the destruction of space and time, earth and world, but of evil and violence, injustice and unrighteousness.”⁶

The evolutionary nature of Jewish eschatological thought did not end with the last canonical book of the Hebrew Bible. In fact, literature from Second Temple Judaism (sometimes confessionally referred to as the “intertestamental” period) provides essential historical and literary resources for understanding the eschatological views of the New Testament.⁷ This is the world in which the apostle Paul was immersed. Paul’s Jewishness, specifically his Pharisaic school of Judaism, vividly influenced his views concerning the “last things.”⁸ In *An Introduction*

⁴ Aron Pinker, “Sheol,” *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 23 (1995): 168.

⁵ John Dominic Crossan, “The Resurrection of Jesus in its Jewish Context,” *Neotestamentica* 37 (2003): 43.

⁶ *Ibid.* 44.

⁷ George W.E. Nickelsburg, *Resurrection, Immortality, and Eternal Life in Intertestamental Judaism and Early Christianity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 211-218.

⁸ E.P. Sanders, *Paul* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1991), 90.

to the *New Testament*, Raymond E. Brown explains the difference between the Pharisees and two other branches of Second Temple Judaism, the Sadducees and the Essenes, by noting that: “the Pharisees approach to the written law of Moses was marked by a theory of a second, oral Law [which was] supposedly also derived from Moses.” He goes on to say that “their [the Pharisees’] interpretations were less severe than those of the Essenes and more innovative than those of the Sadducees who remained conservatively restricted to the written law.”⁹ It is this innovative nature that led the Pharisees to champion belief in the resurrection against the Sadducees who always remained attached to the earlier concept of Sheol.¹⁰

According to Robert F. Segal, Paul’s religious journey started in Pharisaism and journeyed to a sectarian, apocalyptic strand of Judaism. This strand of Judaism “had unique and novel notions about the divinity and messiahship of their founder, Jesus of Nazareth.”¹¹ As such, Paul was not “converted” out of Judaism, and his eschatological thought must be interpreted within the Jewish concepts that were prevalent in his day. Paul builds on these concepts only when he has a mystical experience with the risen Jesus. He then becomes convinced of the messiahship of Jesus, and this conviction is at the heart of Paul’s eschatological thought. Because the Father has raised his Son Jesus from the dead, the promised reign of justice and righteousness on earth will soon be realized. In this final show of god’s power, evil will be overcome. The dead will be raised into a transformed material body, and they will experience the glory of the kingdom.¹² As John Dominic Crossan argues with respect Jewish eschatology, Paul’s

⁹ Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997), 230.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* 230-231.

¹¹ Segal, *Life After Death*, 401.

¹² *Ibid.* 402-403.

eschatological views were about god vindicating his people and not about the immortal life of the individual.¹³

In addition to interpreting Paul's eschatology with his Jewishness in mind, we must also be attentive to the nature of the historical sources he left behind: his letters. Paul existed in history. He wrote no systematic theology. He wrote letters to specific communities to address contingent practical and ethical issues, not abstract ideas. We should expect, therefore, to find in Paul's letters only fragments of theology, and in the end, an incomplete system of thought.¹⁴ For the purpose of historical accuracy, it is important to not read later traditions into the text. Finally, and most importantly for our study, we should expect to see development in Paul's ideas as he struggles to state his convictions about Jesus and His coming in a practical way that addresses the concerns of the intended audiences of his letters.

In his essay *Resurrection and Eschatology in Paul's Letters*, G.M.M Pelsler notes that "[t]he assumption that Paul's eschatology underwent a process of development has met with fierce opposition from many scholars."¹⁵ He writes further, "Though not questioning scholarly integrity, one cannot avoid the suspicion that in the case of many a scholar the endeavour [sic] to harmonize Paul's thought on eschatology, is motivated by a disinclination to accept the possibility of inconsistency or even diversity in Paul's thinking."¹⁶ In most cases, this denial of development is perpetrated by pseudo-scholars who bring their doctrinal convictions to the text. I believe that in order to construct an accurate portrait of Paul's views, we must see past these

¹³ Crossan, "The Resurrection of Jesus," 43.

¹⁴ Bart D. Ehrman, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2012), 311-312.

¹⁵ G.M.M. Pelsler, "Resurrection and Eschatology in Paul's Letters," *Neotestmentica* 20 (1986): 27-36.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* 27-36.

convictions. I will labor to do this by examining Paul's views on the messianic coming, resurrection, and the ultimate fate of evil men and powers.

Paul, like all the early Jewish Jesus-followers, believed in the messianic second-coming. As with the resurrection, the future reign of the messiah is about vindicating god's justice. Although the evil now prosper, god will, in his time, send a liberator to rescue his people. Although this vision of the "Son of Man" was possibly referring to the entire elect community in the book of Daniel, it was later interpreted in individual terms. The hope for an individual ruler is seen especially in the Book of Enoch. The Book of Enoch, which is likely a composite work, is one of the most important works of Second Temple Judaism. The Book of Enoch states both that the messiah will come on earth and that he will come on a "new heaven and a new earth."¹⁷ In A similar way, Paul is not consistent in his views concerning the messianic coming. In 1 Thessalonians, he teaches that Christ will come again on earth possibly before Paul's own death (1 Thess. 4:15-17). Later, in 1 Corinthians, Paul speaks of the coming of Christ in a much less literal way, emphasizing instead the spiritual value of this doctrine (1 Cor. 15: 20-57).¹⁸

The resurrection was a view just as integral to Paul's thinking as the messianic coming, but, unfortunately, he is also not consistent in his views concerning the resurrection. In the letter widely regarded as Paul's first, 1 Thessalonians, he is vividly apocalyptic. He believes that Jesus will come back during his own lifetime (1 Thess. 4:15). The Lord is expected to descend with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and the trumpet of God (1 Thess. 4:16). The dead in Christ shall rise first, and after that, the believers still living will be caught up in the clouds with

¹⁷ Michael A. Knibb, "Interpreting the Book of Enoch: Reflections On a Recently Published Commentary," *Journal for the Study of Judaism in the Persian, Hellenistic, and Roman Period* (2002): 437.

¹⁸ Michael Grant, *Saint Paul* (London, UK: Phoenix Press, 1976), 51-57, 129-131.

the newly risen to meet the Lord in the air (1 Thess. 4:17). The overall feel of 1 Thessalonians 4 is that death is the exception to the rule; Paul expects that most of them will stay alive until the *Parousia*, an ancient Greek word meaning arrival, of Christ. Also, the resurrection is seen principally as a resurrection back to *this* life.¹⁹



¹⁹ Sanders, *Paul*, 121-122.

In 1 Corinthians 15, the hope of resurrection is no longer about being brought back to this life. Paul wants the believers in Corinth to know that there are heavenly bodies that are distinct from earthly bodies (1 Cor. 15: 40-41). He also notes that “flesh and blood cannot inherit the Kingdom of God” (1 Cor. 15:50). In this passage, Paul does not hold to the view that the present generation will stay alive until the coming of Christ and death is considered normal. Finally, in Philippians 1, Paul appears to wrestle with the notion of his own death prior to the *Parousia*. He wants to “die and be with Christ” (Phil. 1:23).²⁰ Paul now believes that his death will be the occasion of his meeting with Christ and not the *Parousia*.

In the Jewish tradition of eschatology, the emphasis was on god and not the messiah. The messiah is simply a means to an end for accomplishing god’s will. Ultimately, the glory must always be directed at god in Paul’s mind.²¹ As important as the messiah was to Paul’s thought, the messiah was always subservient to the Father. It is fitting, then, that Paul believes that at the end the messiah will give up the Kingdom to god. God will be “all in all” (1 Cor. 15: 25-28). In order to accomplish god’s reign as “all in all,” death must first be overcome. After death is overcome, the messiah is now ready to give up authority to god, so that god may reign.²² And then? Paul goes no further.

Paul largely does not discuss the ultimate fate of evil people and powers, and when he does, he does not provide a clear answer. In Romans 5:18, Paul writes that, “just as one man’s trespass led to condemnation for *all*, so one man’s act of righteousness leads to justification and life for *all*.” Later in the same letter, he writes, “God has imprisoned *all* in disobedience, so that he may be merciful to *all*” (Rom. 11:32). First Corinthians contains no judgment in its

²⁰ Ibid. 122-124.

²¹ Grant, *Saint Paul*, 81-87.

²² Ibid. 81-87.

description of the resurrection (1 Cor. 15). We receive a quite different picture in Philippians 3:18-19, however, when Paul discusses the “enemies of the cross of Christ.” These people’s “end is destruction.” So, which does Paul believe? According to E.P. Sanders, he believes “both, almost certainly.”²³ Paul was writing letters to specific people in specific places and not a philosophical treatise. This leads to many ambiguities in Paul’s letters. Because of these ambiguities, it is important to consider what Paul was ultimately concerned about while writing. Contrary to the views of some today, Paul was ultimately concerned about the fate of his people rather than the fate of the people with whom he disagreed.

In practical terms, Paul was reluctant to use punishment as a way to accomplish his goals. This is seen especially in 1 Corinthians 5 when he has to confront a situation where a man is living with his stepmother. Paul characterizes this action as being “not even found among the pagans” (1 Cor. 5:1). This is a bold claim considering that he considered, along with most Jews at the time, pagans to be sexual perverts. Despite his disgust with the situation, we see that Paul is very reluctant to condemn the man to eternal punishment. He says that the man should be “delivered to Satan for the destruction of the flesh.” However, he ultimately hopes that through this, “his spirit will be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus” (1 Cor. 5:5).²⁴

I believe we should allow Paul to be ambiguous, possibly even contradictory. Paul, after all, was a human being. We accepted when Barack Obama said he “evolved” on an issue, why not the same for Paul? Generally, those who want Paul to be consistent in his message come to the text with a pre-conceived notion of scriptural infallibility. This is problematic, however, because the best scholarship comes from those who are willing to question their pre-conceived

²³ Sanders, *Paul*, 127-136.

²⁴ Sanders, *Paul*, 121.

notions. In seeing the Bible in historical, developmental terms, rather than as ipso-facto infallible, we are able to understand ambiguities in the text much more clearly.

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