

## **JOHANNINE THEOLOGY**

The question of Johannine eschatology addresses the existence of both realized and futurist/apocalyptic eschatology in the Fourth Gospel and the relationship between them.

### **A. Futurist Eschatology**

Fourth Gospel presupposes the continuation of the church's mission: missionary activity (4.35-38; 15.26-27; 20.21); conflict with the world (15.18ff); work of the Spirit in and through the church (16.5ff; 17.20); gathering out of the nations (10.16; 11.52).

This evidence is taken to imply that eschatology is not fully realized in the coming of Christ and that his mission continues through the mission of the Christian community. This presupposes that things are in some sense incomplete. However, it could be argued from the same evidence that the function of the church is to declare what God has done in Christ and this might be understood as compatible with a realized eschatology.

future resurrection 5.28-29; 11.24.

resurrection on the last day 6.39-40,44,54; 11.24.

judgment on the last day 12.48.

the return of Jesus 14.3; 21.22-23.

### **B. Realized Eschatology**

eternal life 3.36; 5.24. cf Mk. 10v30

present judgment 3.18,19,36; 12.31.

present condemnation 3.18,24

present reward 3.24.??

sonship 1.12 (cf. Lk. 6.35; 20.36)

the definitive coming 1.14

### **C. Relationship**

In comparison with the Synoptics the Fourth Gospel presents eschatology in a way which places a greater emphasis on the realized element. However, it would be a mistake to say that futurist eschatology has little significance for John. Both aspects are present but he handles the relationship between them in a distinctive way. Barrett insists that John has not abandoned the pattern of NT eschatology but has presented it in such a way as to bring out forcefully the message that in Christ the new age has already dawned. Schnackenburg also notes this Christological influence on John's eschatology: "The blessings of salvation are already present as the essence of salvation already attained in faith in Christ who is 'the eschatological present'", 1.159-160.

4.23 sums up Johannine and NT eschatology - 'an hour is coming and now is'

5.24-30 present and future resurrection, life and judgment

6.54 'has eternal life and I will raise him up'

11.24-25 present life and future resurrection

14.3,18,23 Easter/present coming and final coming

### **D. The Origins of John's Emphasis**

The nature of early Christian eschatology is disputed.

**A Schweitzer:** the Kingdom of God was soon to come. Jesus expected and preached an early eschatological intervention. The failure of this to materialize led the early church to project Christ's coming into the distant future.

**C.H.Dodd:** Jesus preached a realized eschatology but his followers could not accept this and applied apocalyptic categories with which they were familiar to the person of Jesus. Those elements in Jesus' teaching which reflect realized eschatology are closest to Jesus' own thinking. (Dodd did modify his views to take account of futurist eschatology in later years, but his basic position remained essentially unchanged).

**M.E Boismard:** Apocalyptic eschatology represents Jesus' own teaching. Realized eschatology represents a later development.

**Bultmann:** John represents an existential understanding of the Christian faith. What is important is the immediate encounter with the risen Jesus that brings life. Apocalyptic elements are later additions to the gospel by the Ecclesiastical Redactor in order to align it with the teaching of the early church.

**R.E. Brown:** Jesus' own preaching reflects eschatological tension (e.g. Mk 1.15; Lk 3.9,17). The NT writers used these different strands in their own writings depending on the circumstances. In the early period of the church's history there was confusion about eschatology (Acts 1.7). The issue was addressed in a number of NT writings (e.g. 1&2 Thess; 1Cor 15; 2Pet3). The destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70 provoked a crisis since it was believed that such an event would be the precursor to the coming of the Son of Man (Lk 21.20,27). The death of the apostles also caused confusion (Jn 21.22). These two elements (delay of parousia/death of apostles) lead to a greater emphasis on realized eschatology. This situation is reflected in John. The apocalyptic element may have been added at a later stage but not as a correction of John by the church but as a completion of John reflecting the preaching of Jesus and preserving Johannine material (e.g. John 5).

**R. Schnackenburg:** While recognizing that some of these elements may have played a part he insists that the key factor shaping John's eschatology is John's Christology. (See Smalley below).

### **Comment**

John's emphasis on realized eschatology reflects his emphasis on the decisiveness of Jesus' coming. How people will fare at the end is determined by their response to Jesus now. They do not need to wait for the final day to know God's decision. At the same time that there will be a final day is still part of John's expectation.

For **Carson** (p.97), all NT works reflect the same tension mentioned above. The Kingdom of God has come and we must wait for it to come; The Holy Spirit is given as the down payment and guarantee of the new heaven and the new earth. For John, the emphasis is that we can possess eternal life even now. He tilts his emphasis to the present enjoyment of eschatological blessings, but this is never at the expense of any future hope. We should not see this tension as an aberration or a piece of unassimilated tradition clumsily added by an incompetent redactor.

### **Eschatology in the Fourth Gospel (Summary of S.S. Smalley, *Evangelist and Interpreter*, p.235f.)**

Eschatology in the strict sense means a description of what is to happen to the world and especially to man at the end of all things (at the eschaton). Traditionally this involves the study of death, judgment, hell and heaven. As the term has come to be used more recently in theology however, 'eschatology' refers generally to the history of salvation at *any* point in time, even if inevitably salvation is related to the end of the world eventually. In this sense, eschatology can be considered from the point of view both of Christ and the Christian; and there is a connection, of course, between the two. Christ makes eternal life available in time as well as in eternity, and the believer is able by faith to share in it at any moment.

The broader understanding of eschatology is particularly relevant to the study of John since the Fourth Evangelist has little to say about the 'last things' as such, and is much more concerned about the vital inter-relation between time and eternity,

### **Present Eschatology**

John is deeply interested in the effect of history being invaded by what is supra-historical. He perceives that since the Word became flesh, history carries and can convey the life of God in Christ. The divine revelation is decisive, and apparently complete. In one sense, therefore, it is possible to claim that for John the climax of all salvation history and all history, indeed has been reached. Certainly the Johannine stress is on the past and present, rather than on the future; and 'what will happen' seems for John to be the continuation of 'what has happened', rather than its consummation.

It is this element in John's theology that has sometimes caused his eschatology to be more 'realised' than that of the synoptic writers. From the point of view of the believer, for example, there is a familiar emphasis in the Fourth Gospel on the present tense of both salvation and judgment, 'He who believes in him (the Son of God) is not condemned; he who does not believe is condemned already'. Equally, the strong (future) apocalypticism of the first three Gospels (e.g. in the eschatological discourse) disappears in John and the Jesus of the Fourth Gospel says very little about his coming parousia in vindicated glory at the end (Mk. 13v26; 14v62).

Furthermore, John 'telescopes' all the important moments that are included in the salvation event. By contrast, Luke lays out in an ordered, chronological line, the birth, baptism, transfiguration, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus. John, however, in harmony with his characteristic view of history, draws this line together until those moments overlap: The death and exaltation of Jesus shade into one act of glorification (John 7v39; 13v31). Pentecost merges with the death of Jesus on the one hand and his ascension on the other (John 20v22), and the gift of the Spirit becomes an immediate parousia of Jesus (John 14v16-18; 16v16; cf. 14v3).

What accounts for these features in John's eschatology? That question is sometimes answered in terms of the so-called delay in the parousia. The imminent expectation of the end receded as time went on, it is argued and this was one reason for John's concentration on a theology of the presence of Christ in the church and in the believer now. But quite apart from the likelihood that this was not a serious problem for the early churches, it is much more probable that John's particular eschatology was determined and shaped by his christology.

The pattern of descent and ascent is an important part of John's christological perspective. The fourth evangelist is not alone in the NT of course, when he speaks of a redeemer who descends to earth and ascends to heaven. This idea is already present in Judaism, and it reappears in other parts of the NT-for example-in Paul. But John develops this theological concept further by dwelling on the dimension of Christ's pre-existence. In the Fourth Gospel Jesus not only 'descends' to earth and 'ascends' to heaven; he is also represented as ascending 'where he was before' (John 6v62; cf. 1v1-3). In other words, the ascension is 'built in' to every part of John's theological line. The earthly life and life-giving ministry of Jesus presuppose, in John's view both his divine origin (before the incarnation) and his exalted destiny (after the resurrection) and with all three-the origin, life and destiny of Christ-John is deeply concerned.

This is the reason for the theological 'overlapping' in the Fourth Gospel of which we have taken note. For John, the act of revelation in Christ shades inevitably into his glorification. There is no mention in this gospel of the transfiguration as a separate event because the glory, the transfigured nature of Jesus is to be seen at all times. Likewise the cross and indeed every part of the self-giving ministry of Jesus constantly imply his exaltation as well as pointing towards it.

Thus we find that John's eschatology is directly related to his christology and once more to the two balanced poles-the divine and the human-within that christology. The Jesus who in one sense is always exalted, and therefore not 'of the world', also, and in reality is sent 'into the world'. He has come from the Father and is going to the Father (John 13v3; 16v28); but on earth his humanity is nevertheless genuinely manifested and visible. His salvation and judgment are mediated in time as well as eternity (John 3v16-21; 5v25-29).

It is quite possible that John's preoccupation with the 'present' aspects of salvation reflects the thought of Jesus himself. This is the contention of C.H. Dodd who believes that Jesus proclaimed - without apocalyptic trimmings the complete and historic presence of the kingdom of God in his own person and ministry. Dodd supports his argument by analyzing the synoptic parables of the kingdom, each of which he maintains is best understood when it is interpreted in terms of 'realized' eschatology. Not all would subscribe to such a monochrome view of the message of Jesus; and indeed Dodd modified it later himself. But there is no reason to doubt that this was one element in the eschatological perspective of Jesus. According to all the evangelists, Jesus announces the arrival in himself of a decisive moment in God's salvific activity. The kingdom of God is at hand; the signs of the new age are apparent; the scriptures have been fulfilled; the glory of God has been fully revealed. John has no parables of the kingdom as such; but with the other gospel writers, he knows that in one sense at least the harvest hour has already come.

### **Future Eschatology**

However this is not the only aspect of John's eschatology; as we have begun to see, there is another. In addition to an emphasis on the present tense of salvation, there are some passages in John which speak explicitly of what is to happen in the future. The note of consummation, the gathering up of all things in eternity at the end of time, is clearly sounded.

For example the believer can share in the present, the life of God through Christ; and he will also be raised up at the 'last day' (6.47; 6.40b).

Judgment for the unbeliever has already begun here and now; and those who have done evil will also 'come forth' to the resurrection of judgment, (John 3,19; 5.28f). Jesus comes to his own in the world; at the end he will also come and take them to himself, (John 14.18,23; 14.3). The church continues in time its immediate task of worship and service; and the hour is coming when worship in spirit and in truth will be shared by the church in eternity (John 4. 23).

John's eschatology then manifests an intriguing double perspective. Thus Jesus comes now, and he will also come again. Salvation is a possibility for the believer in the present, and also in the future. But John is too sophisticated an interpreter to place these two strands of eschatological present and future, side by side in his Gospel without resolution. A creative tension develops between them - between what 'is now' and what is 'not yet'; and with consummate skill John draws these two poles together until they blend. We can see this from John's distinctive use of the term 'hour'. For Jesus the hour of glorification has not yet arrived; but in one sense it has struck already (John 2.4; 7.39). For the individual, the 'hour' of true worship is here and not yet here (John 4.23); and 'the hour is coming and now is' when those who hear the Son's voice will live (5.25).

In this way the 'future tense' of John's eschatology is historically anchored, and given real content. Because of this, the eschatology of John may be associated with the Johannine understanding of the church. Church and eschatology are both concerned with salvation; and therefore it is possible to view them from the perspective of the past and present, as well as the future.

Moreover, both are rooted not only in the death and resurrection of Jesus but also, once again, in the total fact of his 'descent; and ascent'. One who came from the Father heads up the Christian community on earth, and after creating an entirely new situation by his glorification returned to him.

Jesus now indwells the church as Spirit-Paraclete. The church is therefore able in the present time to project the resurrection life of Jesus in the world, while awaiting the consummation of all things at the end. When that point is reached, the exalted Jesus (whose parousia is anticipated by his glorification) will take his disciples in the church to be with him-for the Christian also 'ascends', even if he does not 'descend' (14.3).

Church and eschatology in John (like church and Spirit) are thus complementary ideas, tied to each other. Their content and meaning have a christological basis and a background in history. Once more we find in John coherence between the historical. and the supra-historical.

### **Conclusion**

John's eschatological perspective, between the present and. future tenses of Christ's coming and the Christian's salvation is not far from that which is attributed to Jesus himself by the synoptic writers. They also suggest that the teaching of Christ contained a double polarity. Admittedly, as we noticed at the outset, their emphasis differs from John's by being emphatically futurist. But as well as referring to the parousia of Jesus, and the eternal life of the believer as future possibilities, the synoptics preserve a tradition which implies that they are present realities, (Mk 1.15; Lk.4.21; Mt.10.40)). And as in John, the present and future poles are on occasions brought very close together, so that in the same discourse Jesus appears to view the consummation as both imminent and distant, (Mk 13.28-31,32-37). Similarly the very phrase 'The kingdom of God is at hand' is perhaps deliberately ambivalent in its meaning, since the time of the Kingdom's arrival may in this case be either present or future.

It is possible, of course, that a redactor's hand has been at work in the synoptics(adding present to future eschat) and in John(adding future to present). But in the light of the complex character of NT eschatology as a whole, which can seldom be pegged down in one direction and is inevitably varied in its perspective, we do not need (for John at least) to resort to such an explanation. Those who do, must still reckon with the fact that the future elements in John's eschatology (including their apocalyptic tinting) probably belong to an early stage in the development of Johannine interpretation, paralleled by the primitive stages in the transmission of the synoptic tradition, rather than to a late period.

While John's eschatology may have increased its 'present' emphasis as the Fourth Gospel came to birth, therefore - particularly in view of the pressures exerted by the evangelist's own theological and christological outlook - there is no real reason to doubt that the basic double polarity of his eschatological perspective is traditional. But while the eschatology of the Gospel is certainly in touch with other parts of the NT, it is also true to say that John handles this aspect of his material in a distinctive and seminally important manner. The theological effect of this is ultimately to bring together the 'times' of salvation, and to show that they are interrelated. The time of Israel, the time of Jesus, the time of the church, and the time of the end overlap in John. All history is there and so is all salvation history,