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## INTRODUCTION

It is a most intriguing fact that the delay of Jesus' parousia did not represent much more of a crisis for the first Christians than actually was the case. Though doubtless the earliest community was confronted by a serious problem in the non-fulfilment of their expectation of an imminent end, nevertheless it cannot be denied that the community survived the delay of the parousia without a substantial break. The question as to how the first Christians came to terms with the delay of the end of the world and the parousia without bitter disappointment and without sacrificing their eschatological hope still requires careful historical and theological consideration.<sup>1</sup>

Ever since the 'rediscovery' in the late nineteenth century of the significance of eschatology for Jesus and the early Christian movement, the problem of the delay of the parousia has intrigued scholars. If the eschatological expectations of the early church were disappointed, the magnitude of the disappointment and the form in which it was expressed do not seem to fit with *our own* expectations. Although there are indications within the New Testament canon that Christian communities did grapple with a disappointment in expectation, nowhere are there echoes of the sort of crisis that we of the late second millennium would have expected. It seems that our models for understanding the changes in early Christian eschatological expectation have not yet been adequate to the task of accounting for what is in fact reflected in the documents themselves.

I do not set out to give a comprehensive analysis in this study of the various nineteenth- and twentieth-century models which seek to

<sup>1</sup> Bornkamm, 'Verzögerung', 116 (translation mine).

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account for the developments in early Christian eschatological expectation, nor yet to propose a more adequate model and then test its validity. Rather, after taking account of the range of possible interpretations and evaluating several recent contributions (chapter 1), I undertake a series of exegetical studies of material from the Gospels of Mark and Matthew, and from the Didache. I accept as a basis the two-source hypothesis. On this basis, the material selected for chapters 3, 5 and 6 is examined as a 'progression': Mark 13 was used and reshaped in Matthew's eschatological discourse, and Didache 16 in turn (I conclude) knew and reshaped the Matthean discourse. Such a 'progression', or reworking, of a particular set of traditions enables us to trace the way in which the communities reflected upon their eschatological situation. The way in which these various communities received and reinterpreted these traditions gives us some insight into the ways in which eschatological expectation varied and fluctuated.

If one comes to these traditions expecting them to reflect a particular development, such as a progressive waning in the expectation of an imminent End, one may be surprised. What I find in the course of this study is, in fact, more a fluctuation than a linear development: Matthew shows a more imminent expectation of the End than does Mark. Rather than seeking to account for this by concluding that the two-source hypothesis ought to be superseded by the Griesbach or another source hypothesis, I suggest that this calls into question the strong linearity of our models. Although in theory one might expect that the passing of time led to the waning of hopes for an imminent End, in reality the historical contexts of the various communities seem to have led to a greater variation in *Naherwartung* than our theories would suggest.

In addition to the studies tracing the reception and reinterpretation of the eschatological material of Mark 13, I have found it useful to examine two related areas. The first is the eschatological development in the Matthean community as reflected in a special Matthean tradition, Matt. 25:1–13. Because the findings of this study give some insight into the processes of early eschatological reflection well prior to the events of 70 CE, this is included as the first exegetical chapter, chapter 2. The order of the chapters is thus in some sense chronological. The second related area forms the basis of chapter 4, namely the historical implications of my study of Mark 13. My approach is characterized by the endeavour to deal with eschatological development not primarily as a 'history of

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ideas', but as grounded in historical particularities, the most far-reaching of which were the implications of the Jewish War and the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE. Thus chapter 4 pursues the historical circumstances of the Markan material.

Within the scope of this study, it has not been possible to examine all the passages in the two Gospels which bear upon their respective eschatologies. It has been necessary to draw selectively from a range of materials in order to demonstrate that the developments in eschatology in the first century of Christianity cannot be adequately explained by a blanket theory, but must be seen as expressions of the historical particularities of the communities in question.

The intriguing questions of Jesus' own eschatological expectations and the ways in which the early churches upheld or diverged from them would warrant studies in their own right.<sup>2</sup> These questions have been deemed to be beyond the scope of the present monograph.

A variety of methodologies is represented in the following chapters, ranging from source and form criticism, redaction and narrative criticism to questions of historical criticism. The methodologies have, of course, been chosen according to the nature of the questions at hand, and I am confident that the reader will find the range neither baffling nor inconsistent. At a time when historical and literary studies of the New Testament have become polarized, I hope that this study can make a small contribution towards their integration.

<sup>2</sup> A recent contribution in this area is Witherington's *Jesus, Paul and the End of the World*.

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## 1

**AN IMMINENT END? MODELS FOR  
UNDERSTANDING ESCHATOLOGICAL  
DEVELOPMENT IN THE FIRST CENTURY****1. The problem of the delay of the parousia: a modern  
construct?**

There are indications in the canon of the New Testament and in early extra-canonical sources that the delay of the parousia of Christ presented the early church with an eschatological and theological problem.

In modern scholarship the delay of Christ's return and the presumed disappointment it engendered has been seen as a primary factor, and in some cases as *the* primary factor, in the development of Christian eschatology. The systematic theologian M. Werner stated in his work *The Formation of Christian Dogma* that 'the longer the non-fulfilment of the Parousia of Christ and the final events connected therewith continued, the weaker became the conviction that the End of the world would come in the Apostolic Age and that the Death and Resurrection of Jesus had, correspondingly, a fundamental eschatological significance'.<sup>1</sup> The problem is thus seen not simply as one of eschatology, but of the fundamentals of christology.

It is perhaps not surprising, therefore, that this problem has received much attention from biblical and systematic scholars over the past century. I will begin by giving an overview of ways in which modern scholarship has sought to deal with the challenge of this problem: by embracing it as the exegetical and systematic key to developments in the early church, by rejecting it as such, or by seeking alternative approaches.

The modern development of studies in New Testament eschatology began with J. Weiss' work *Jesus' Proclamation of the Kingdom of God*. In it, he sought to make clear the profoundly eschato-

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logical nature of Jesus' proclamation of the Kingdom of God. Although Weiss' position was foreshadowed to some extent by O. Schmoller and E. Issel and, earlier still, by the work of H. S. Reimarus,<sup>2</sup> it was not until Weiss' polemically stated thesis that the significance of a future eschatological Kingdom of God was borne in upon German scholarship which had until then been characterized by Ritschlian liberal humanism. Weiss set out to show that the generally accepted religious-ethical understanding of the Kingdom of God had stripped away its original eschatological-apocalyptic meaning, and that 'the Kingdom of God is a radically superworldly entity which stands in diametric opposition to this world. This is to say that there *can* be no talk of an *innerworldly* development of the Kingdom of God in the mind of Jesus!'<sup>3</sup> Weiss sought to demonstrate exegetically that the Kingdom Jesus expected was not both future and present, but exclusively future. This presented the German theological establishment, which was already struggling with D. F. Strauss' challenge to the historicity of Jesus,<sup>4</sup> with a fundamental problem: if it was indeed Jesus' expectation that the Kingdom of God was exclusively a future entity which was to be established at the latest within a generation,<sup>5</sup> what can faith make of a Jesus who was so radically mistaken? Yet even in posing the problem, Weiss stepped back from the brink, claiming that we do not share this expectation, but can be joyfully confident that this world is the arena in which God's purposes are worked out.<sup>6</sup>

It was Weiss' work that gave A. Schweitzer the impetus to formulate his controversial ideas about the eschatology of Jesus and his disciples,<sup>7</sup> and to advocate a programme which he called 'konsequente Eschatologie', rendered in English as 'consistent' or 'thoroughgoing eschatology'. He defined this programme in his book *Out of my Life and Thought* as follows:

For the historical understanding of the life of Jesus . . . it is necessary to think out all the consequences of the fact that He did actually live in the eschatological, Messianic thought world of late Judaism, and to try to comprehend His resolutions and actions not by means of considerations

<sup>2</sup> Schmoller, *Die Lehre vom Reiche Gottes*; Issel, *Die Lehre vom Reiche Gottes im Neuen Testament*; Reimarus, *Von dem Zwecke Jesu und seiner Jünger*.

<sup>3</sup> Weiss, *Proclamation*, 114.

<sup>4</sup> See Strauss, *Life*.

<sup>5</sup> Weiss, *Proclamation*, 91.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 135.

<sup>7</sup> Schweitzer, *Messianitäts- und Leidensgeheimnis*, and more comprehensively in *Quest*.

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drawn from ordinary psychology, but solely by motives provided by His eschatological expectations.<sup>8</sup>

Schweitzer took up not only Weiss', but also Strauss' challenge in his thoroughgoing eschatological reading of the Gospels of Mark and Matthew in particular. In his opinion, this reading made the historicity of these Gospels apparent. Schweitzer set out to show that a historical – that is a thoroughgoing or consistent eschatological – reading of Jesus leaves us with a person who is to our time 'a stranger and an enigma'.<sup>9</sup> Yet he, too, stepped back from the brink which such a conclusion might approach by recourse to a reality which does not belong to historical discourse: 'Jesus means something to our world because a mighty spiritual force streams forth from Him and flows though our time also. This fact can neither be shaken nor confirmed by any historical discovery. It is the solid foundation of Christianity.'<sup>10</sup>

Perhaps not surprisingly, others did not share Schweitzer's confidence that this constituted a solid foundation for Christianity. An ahistorical claim may not be sufficient to recover the Jesus of faith when the historical reality seems to point to a Messiah who was mistaken in his expectation. The problem lay not so much with the apocalyptic expectation *per se* – Jesus was after all part of the thought-world of late Jewish apocalyptic. Rather, the problem lay with the non-fulfilment of the parousia expectation; even if Christians of former centuries could make light of such a delay or indeed fail to recognize it for what it was, modern theology demanded that the problem be reckoned with.

This, then, is the background against which the numerous twentieth-century studies of early Christian eschatology were written. Those theologians who rejected Schweitzer's programme of 'consistent eschatology' argued against the claim, originally made by Weiss, that the Kingdom of God could not be conceived of as both present and future. If Jesus' understanding of the Kingdom was both present and future, the 'mistakenness' of the timing of its future advent is relativized and thus alleviated.

For the theologians who embraced Schweitzer's programme of 'consistent eschatology', the delay (or non-fulfilment) of the par-

<sup>8</sup> Schweitzer, *Life and Thought*, 43.

<sup>9</sup> Schweitzer, *Quest*, 397. The challenge of Schweitzer's position is still with us, as is shown by Witherington, *Jesus*, 20–2.

<sup>10</sup> Schweitzer, *Quest*, 397.

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ousia was understood as the overriding issue, not only for the twentieth century, but necessarily also for the whole of church history, and in particular for the development of the early church. Schweitzer gave the lead by arguing that the real driving force behind the whole history of Christianity has been the need to ‘de-eschatologize’ it in the face of the non-occurrence of the parousia.<sup>11</sup>

Thus the non-occurrence of the parousia had become an important issue for twentieth-century theology, but it was not seen in the first instance as a problem specific to the modern age. In fact, as the preceding quotation shows, it was understood as an interpretative tool for examining theological developments of the first century.

M. Werner applied this to the development of doctrine in the early church, first in his volume entitled *The Formation of Christian Dogma* and later in his more detailed work in two volumes entitled *Der protestantische Weg des Glaubens*. Another notable systematic exponent of ‘consistent eschatology’ was F. Buri, with his work *Die Bedeutung der neutestamentlichen Eschatologie*.

Exegetically, the concept of the centrality of the delay of the parousia in shaping early Christian eschatology was applied by H. Conzelmann to Luke’s Gospel.<sup>12</sup> E. Grässer then studied the synoptic Gospels and Acts from this perspective.<sup>13</sup> However, Grässer did not altogether align himself with Schweitzer’s reconstruction of Jesus’ eschatological development, because he saw it as questionable from a form-critical point of view. Moreover, Grässer was of the opinion that the exponents of ‘consistent eschatology’ have given too much weight to the factor of the delay of the parousia by overlooking other factors which enabled the early church to come to terms with the delay, such as gnostic ideas.<sup>14</sup> Even so, Grässer proceeded to exegete the synoptic Gospels and Acts using the delay of the parousia as the hermeneutical key to distinguish layers of authentic dominical tradition from early Christian formulations and to determine the age of a particular tradition. In doing so, he created a hermeneutical circle which is very similar to that of Schweitzer and Werner, even if somewhat more agnostic as regards Jesus’ own expectation.

Thus it was that much exegetical and systematic study of the

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 358.

<sup>12</sup> Conzelmann, *The Theology of St. Luke*. Conzelmann had taken up the idea as it had been put forward in an article by Vielhauer, ‘Zum “Paulinismus” der Apostelgeschichte’.

<sup>13</sup> Grässer, *Das Problem des Parusieverzögerung*.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 9–10.

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New Testament proceeded on the basis of the theory that the early church was profoundly shaped by the disappointment it experienced in its eschatological expectation. There were, however, scholars who questioned whether the early church had undergone the sort of ‘crisis’ in eschatology which modern scholarship sought to trace. One such scholar was G. Bornkamm, with whose words I opened the introduction. In his view, the New Testament documents do not reflect the bitter disappointment in expectation which one might have expected; the fact that the early church survived the non-occurrence of the parousia without a significant break and without relinquishing its eschatological hope seemed to him a puzzle which had not yet been fully solved. Other scholars, such as E. von Dobschütz and C. H. Dodd, saw the problem of the delay of the parousia as only an apparent one, and argued that Jesus’ own eschatology was focussed upon the present reality of the Kingdom of God rather than upon a future coming. In Dodd’s view, although Jesus used the language of apocalyptic eschatology, this was really meant to describe a higher reality:

It appears that while Jesus employed the traditional symbolism of apocalypse to indicate the “otherworldly” or absolute character of the Kingdom of God, He used parables to enforce and illustrate the idea that the Kingdom of God had come upon men [*sic*] there and then. The inconceivable had happened: history had become the vehicle of the eternal; the absolute was clothed with flesh and blood.<sup>15</sup>

To Dodd, then, the historical Jesus was by no means mistaken; rather, he was using the language of symbolism. This was not, in Dodd’s opinion, fully understood by the early church, which then reinterpreted the ‘apocalyptic’ predictions in terms of its own developing eschatology.<sup>16</sup>

By taking as his hermeneutical key the sayings which speak of the Kingdom of God as present reality, he subordinated the future-orientated sayings to his interpretation of Jesus’ realized eschatology. Accordingly, he resolved the eschatological tension between the ‘already’ and the ‘not yet’ by portraying it as only a seeming tension, a lack of understanding on the part of the early church.

<sup>15</sup> Dodd, *Parables*, 197.<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 102.



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There are a number of criticisms which one might level against such a resolution:

- (i) The early church is understood to have first re-eschatologized Jesus' Kingdom theology, and then later, given the (misguided) assumption of the delay of the parousia, to have proceeded to reverse the process and de-eschatologize it. This postulates two diametrically opposed tendencies in the early church within a remarkably short space of time, which, though not impossible, is problematic.
- (ii) Dodd sought the 'solid foundation of Christianity', to use Schweitzer's phrase, in a Jesus who so transcended his own thought-world that his own understanding of the presence of the Kingdom of God in his own person and ministry was widely misunderstood and reinterpreted.
- (iii) Dodd's theory bears some similarity to R. Bultmann's programme of 'demythologizing', which, by means of existentialist (Heideggerian) categories, sought to reinterpret such myths as the apocalyptic world view in terms of human constructs rather than as a scientific representation of external reality. One suspects that what Bultmann endeavoured to do in systematic theology, Dodd attempted exegetically. However, what for Bultmann was a distinction between ancient and modern thought-worlds seems to be for Dodd a distinction between Jesus and his contemporary society, so that Jesus is 'rescued' from the trappings of apocalyptic and placed within the parameters of modern existentially orientated eschatology.

Thus neither the solution offered by Dodd's 'realized eschatology' nor, at the other end of the spectrum, the construct of the exponents of 'consistent eschatology' is entirely satisfactory. Both have perceived an important aspect of the tradition, but each has resolved the tension between the present and future Kingdom sayings by giving precedence to one group over the other. Moreover, both have formulated their theories on the basis of certain modern assumptions. On the one hand, 'realized eschatology' reconstructs an essentially modern Jesus, whose use of the language of apocalyptic was symbolic only, and for whom the presence of the Kingdom made the passing of time insignificant. 'Consistent eschatology', on the other hand, imputes to the early church the sort of crisis in eschatology and theology which modern scholars

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think it should have had, but which is not reflected in the documents themselves.

I will now turn to the work of three more recent scholars who have found reason to question whether the early church underwent the sort of eschatological crisis proposed by the exponents of consistent eschatology. The first of these studies is by D. E. Aune, 'The Significance of the Delay of the Parousia for Early Christianity', the second is 'The Delay of the Parousia', by R. J. Bauckham, and the third is 'Christ and Time: Swiss or Mediterranean?', by B. J. Malina. After reviewing these studies, I will set out my own approach to the question of the development of eschatology in the early church.

## 2. Three recent contributions to the debate

### 2.1 D. E. Aune.

D. E. Aune's approach in his article 'The Significance of the Delay of the Parousia for Early Christianity' is shaped in part by his earlier comprehensive study *The Cultic Setting of Realized Eschatology in Early Christianity*. The thesis of this monograph was that 'at no time was the experience of salvation placed wholly in the future within the belief system of earliest Christianity',<sup>17</sup> and this has led him to be sceptical of any scholarly attempts (such as A. Schweitzer's) to reconstruct the development of earliest Christianity solely on the basis of the non-occurrence of the expected experience of future salvation, namely the parousia. I will begin by outlining the most significant aspects of the argument of Aune's article, and then draw some directions from it for the present study.

The aim of Aune's article is twofold: first of all, he sets out to question the theory that the delay of the parousia was a causal factor in the theological transformation of early Christianity; secondly, he offers some suggestions as to the structural and functional significance of the parousia hope in the first century of Christianity. He opens with an outline of the widely held model of the 'decline of eschatology' or 'de-eschatolization' in the first century, which postulates that primitive Palestinian Christianity was characterized by early fervent expectation, which fell away in the face of the passage of time and the expansion of Christianity

<sup>17</sup> This summary is quoted in his article 'Significance', 105.