

FIVE

The End of the Times

The New Testament and the *Eschaton*

The Present Reality of the Eschaton

The New Testament message is that Jesus is the final revelation of the divine nature, the last word of God and about God. This means that he is also viewed automatically as the last word about history: in him “the time is fulfilled” (Mark 1:15). “Now once at the end [R.V. margin, “consummation”] of the age hath he been manifested” (Heb 9:26). The supreme disclosure of God’s nature cannot come at any time; it cannot come, as a pagan theophany might, against the backcloth of history which has nothing to do with it and which it leaves unaffected. For the God of the incarnation is the God of history. He can speak finally about himself only as he speaks finally about the world-process. With the completion of Christ’s work, *tetelestai*, “it is finished” (John 19:30): the *telos* of history is finally revealed.

This is otherwise expressed in the New Testament by the paradoxical affirmation that the *eschaton* has arrived.¹ The last times have begun,

1. To *eschaton* (neuter) is not actually a New Testament phrase. Loyalty to the christocentric nature of all New Testament theology would require us to speak always of *ho eschatos*—not the last *thing*, but the last *man*. So in Rev 1:17; 2:8; 22:13, Christ is essentially *ho protos kai ho eschatos*, the first and the last. In 1 Cor 15:45 he is *ho eschatos Adam*, which would perhaps best be rendered, “the eschatological Adam.” [1968: “the eschatological man.”] The Jesus of history is “the Son of Man on earth” (Mark 2:10), the eschatological figure of the apocalypses exercising his functions of forgiveness and judgment [1968 adds: “before the time”] within this present world-order.

the powers of the age to come have broken in upon the present order. In the person and work of Christ the kingly rule of God is already a present reality: “If I, by the finger of God, cast out devils, then is the kingdom of God come upon you” (Luke 11:20). From the days of John the Baptist it has been active among men, exercising its own peculiar

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force (Matt 11:12, taking *biazetai* as a middle with R. Otto).² That beyond which nothing can happen has already happened. Such is the message that runs through the whole of the New Testament—Gospels, Acts, and Epistles.³

2. [1968 omitted this sentence.]

3. It is unnecessary to go over the evidence assembled by Professor C. H. Dodd and others for this proclamation of eschatology “realized” in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. (It is conveniently summarized in Guy, *New Testament Doctrine of the “Last Things.”*) If the case is overstated in Dodd’s *Parables of the Kingdom*, it is only by overstatement that truth penetrates. It may be, as will be argued below, that he is mistaken in some of the things that he denies; but that does nothing to affect the fundamental soundness of his positive assertions. [1968 omits this paragraph.]

It is perhaps worth adding that the gospel of “realized” (or, as I would prefer to put it, “inaugurated”) eschatology is attested by many passages in the New Testament which to the modern ear have no eschatological ring at all. For instance, the very gift of the Spirit as a corporate possession of the body—available not merely, as under the old covenant, to outstanding individuals, prophets, and kings, but to every member of the people of God down to slaves and scullions—was itself seen as sure evidence that “the last days” had come (Acts 2:17–18). The fantastic wish that “all the Lord’s people were prophets, that the Lord would put his spirit upon them” (Num 11:29) had in these latter days become a reality. All that the New Testament has to say of life in the *koinonia*, or common ownership, of Holy Spirit, is direct assertion that the new age of the kingdom is already inaugurated [1968: “has already begun”] in this world. When St. Paul is speaking of “the fruits of the Spirit” he is talking about eschatology. If evidence such as this be taken into account, the passages relating to a future coming can be seen to occupy a comparatively minor place in the eschatological message of the early church. It may be noted, for instance, when estimating the relative emphasis laid on the two elements, that St. Paul, like Jesus, never derives any *moral principle* from the belief in the second advent: the whole quality of the Christian life is based directly upon the fact that Christians *have already been* translated into a new order of existence: “If then ye were raised together with Christ, seek the things that are above . . . For ye died and your life is hid with Christ in God” (Col 3:1–3); “Ye are not in the flesh, but in the spirit, if so be that the Spirit of God dwelleth in you . . . So then, brethren, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live after the flesh” (Rom 8:9, 12). The future hope is used simply to underline the urgency (e.g., Rom. 13:11–12), never to formulate the principle. It is permitted on occasion to modify the details of application (1 Cor 7:29), but even in this respect St. Paul found it necessary to correct those who were allowing their conduct to be distorted by undue emphasis upon an immediate *parousia* (1 Thess 4:11).

Though his contrast between St. Paul and the rest of the early church has clearly been shown to be false, Schweitzer's metaphor still makes the point with arresting force: "While other believers held that the finger of the world-clock was touching on the beginning of the coming hour and were waiting for the stroke which should announce this, Paul told them that it had already passed beyond the point, and that they had failed to hear the striking of the hour, which in fact struck at the resurrection of Jesus."⁴

That beyond which nothing can happen had already happened. This goes to explain the prevailing certainty among the New Testament writers that time must shortly come to an end. The decisive move had been played. The opposition *must* resign: it had no *right* to continue. Though, as we have seen, there is no necessity that finality of purpose should automatically be marked by temporal cessation, such is the inevitable form of expression by which this finality is asserted. The idea of the second advent stands in the New Testament for the conviction that if the events of the incarnation have the eschatological character asserted of them, then history *must* come to a close. And by the process already discussed, "the proposition 'A is involved in B' (by the logic of the moral and spiritual order) becomes 'A will follow immediately upon B.'"⁵

The "Not Yet" of the Eschaton

But the idea of the second advent represents also the inescapable conviction that the end of God's purpose, however clearly embodied in the incarnation, has *not yet* come in the most final sense possible. And that [is evidenced], not merely in the outward fact that the temporal process continues, but in the more fundamental fact that God and his will are quite obviously not "all in all." In order to understand the finality of the events of the incarnation, in order to see them as *eschatological* at all, it is necessary to view them as the first half of a single process that will be completed in the future. It is necessary, to borrow a metaphor used by both Barth and Heim, to assume the thunder in order to interpret the lightning. It is the certainty of the sequel which seals the events of the incarnation as eschatological.

4. Schweitzer, *The Mysticism of Paul the Apostle*, 99.

5. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom*, 71 [Fontana ed., 55].

It is important to see this motive for the formulation and retention of the belief in a second advent. It explains, for instance, why a residue⁶ of “futurist eschatology” remains⁷ even in those strands of the New Testament, such as the Fourth Gospel, where the whole stress is laid upon the fact of living already in the new age and the last judgment. In St. John, “the last day” as a future occurrence never entirely disappears (John 6:39–40, 44, 54; 12:48), and it is strongly present in the Johannine epistles. This fact is not to be understood simply as a concession to a cruder traditional belief otherwise “quite refined away”⁸ It is perfectly true that the weight of emphasis has shifted. The gospel of the new world is made to rest firmly⁹ upon the eschatological character of the *first* advent. [The themes of the Synoptic Gospels of] the coming of the kingdom of God in power, the exaltation of the Son

The gospel of the new world is made to rest firmly upon the eschatological character of the first advent. It is precisely to insist on the ultimate, eschatological character of these “first” events—and not to detract from it—that the limiting concept of the “last day” is retained.

of Man to his throne of glory, and his return in judgment and great might, are tied securely to the historical events of Good Friday, Easter Day, and Whitsunday. The so-called “second” coming (not in fact a New Testament phrase) is viewed as the return of the risen Christ in the power of the Spirit.¹⁰ But it is precisely to insist on the ultimate, eschatological character of these “first” events—and not to detract from it—that the limiting concept of the “last day” is retained.

6. [1968: “an element”]

7. [1968: “persists”]

8. Dodd, *The Apostolic Preaching*, 155.

9. [1968: “The offer of eternal life, now, in Jesus Christ is, to be sure, made to rest firmly . . .”]

10. Cf. the deliberate reinterpretation in the last discourses of the eschatological ideas like the “little while” and the “coming” in “that day” to “convict the world.” These discourses occupy the same place prior to the passion narrative as the apocalyptic discourses do in the Synoptics. In the Johannine writings “the day of the Son of Man” becomes “the hour . . . that the Son of Man should be glorified” (John 12:23), and the “signs of the end”; the “marks” of the new age within the church—“the Spirit and the water and the blood” (1 John 5:6–8; cf. John 7:38–39; 19:34). [1968 adds: “See the fuller treatment of Johannine eschatology in *Jesus and His Coming*, ch. 8.]

The Purpose of the “Not Yet” Language

The function of this imagery is to indicate in unmistakable idiom the *finality* of the processes of life and death, salvation and judgment, already set in motion by the events of the incarnation. The world-judgment is already in action. Outwardly it does not look like it. It appears, as it appeared to a writer of the second century, that “all things continue as they were from the beginning of the creation” (2 Pet 3:4). So, into the main picture the New Testament writers introduce an inset—a glimpse of “that day” when the Lord would be all in all, and his will should have free course and be glorified. This inset was not put there simply by way of antithesis to the main scene, as though to suggest that the present situation was merely penultimate and would be superseded one day by another, final state. It was there, as it were, as the key to the proper understanding of the present. It is the great *clarification* (*apocalypsis*) of the truths that now are, so that every eye may see. “The Parousia removes the hiddenness of the reality of Easter for history.”¹¹

The limiting idea of the “last day” serves in the Fourth Gospel a purpose somewhat analogous to that of the transfiguration in the Synoptics. The transfiguration narrative is not intended to throw into doubt the divinity of the humiliated Christ by contrast with an ultimate, exalted state. On the contrary, it is a turning back of the corner of the veil to reveal the essential, the eschatological, glory which now is, and which constitutes the real truth about the present humiliation. Both this and the “last day” are ideal pictures to authenticate, rather than detract from, the finality of the immediate situation.

“Now” and “Not Yet”

But, again, though this finality is stressed in various ways and in various degrees by the whole witness of the New Testament, it is also never forgotten that the present situation is one in which the rule of God has not yet completely superseded the powers which control this age. Their death-warrant is signed, they are in the process of annihilation (1 Cor

11. Althaus, *Die letzten Dinge*, 4e Aufl., 244. [1968 then adds: “At the Resurrection the winning move was played. Thenceforward the issue of the game could not be in doubt. The picture of the end-time is a representation of the checkmate which must follow because in fact it is already contained in the decisive move.”]

2:6), but their force is still active. The eclipse of the old order is yet only partial, but the sun has begun to move across its disc. Christians, as those who belong to the new and yet who still inhabit the old, live, as it were, in the area of intersection: they are those upon whom the “ends of the ages” have overlapped (the probable force of *katenteken* in 1 Cor 10:11).

Consequently, the Christian era and the Christian life are viewed in the New Testament as set between two poles, between the fact that the end has come and the fact that the end is yet to be. Every great New Testament phrase reflects this double reference: the kingdom of God, eternal life, salvation, justification, sanctification, perfection, even glorification, are all spoken of as being at one and the same time present possessions based on past fact and objects of full attainment only in the future. Sunday is at once a remembrance of the first Lord’s day and a foretaste of the last: it symbolizes the eschatological time between the resurrection and the *parousia*. The Eucharist, the pattern-action of the whole Christian life, also takes place between these two poles.¹² It proclaims the Lord’s death as an act of re-presentation and it celebrates in anticipation the banquet of the Messiah “till he comes.” It is “as true a subsistence of those things past which we believe, as it is of those things yet to come which we hope for.”¹³ The celebrating community, as “the Lord’s remembrancer,” sets forth the real presence (*parousia*) both of the first and the second coming. As an *anamnesis* of Calvary and the resurrection, it is a “repeating”¹⁴ in the body of the dying and rising of Christ; as an anticipation of the messianic banquet, it is:

The song of them that triumph,
The shout of them that feast.¹⁵

12. [1968 adds: “between the Last Supper and the Great Supper.”]

13. Adapted from the Preface by Dr Daniel Brevint to John and Charles Wesley’s *A Selection of Hymns on the Lord’s Supper*, 8.

14. [1968: “re-presentation.”]

15. Schweitzer, *The Mysticism of Paul the Apostle*, 252, points out how the Eucharist is described proleptically by the word *agalliasis*, “rejoicing” or, better, “shouting” (Acts 2.46), which is the regular word for the jubilation at the coming of the kingdom (cf. 1 Pet 4:13; Jude 24). It is used in Rev 19:7 of the wedding banquet of the Messiah: “Let us be glad and rejoice (*agalliomen*) and give honor to him, for the marriage of the Lamb is come.”

On the eschatological nature of the sacraments in general, see, Schweitzer, *The Mysticism of Paul the Apostle*, ch. 11; Dodd, *History and the Gospel*, 163–65; Niebuhr,

Eschatology as Myth

So far in this chapter we have been considering the witness of the New Testament to the meaning of the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. All the writers speak of it as something which is by its very nature once and for all, unrepeatable, *final*. Yet its very finality in a world that goes on—in a world which is not yet the kingdom of God—requires to be asserted by the limiting concept of a last day and a second advent. If now we are to define further exactly what is meant by this “limiting concept”—or, more bluntly, just what we are to believe about the *parousia*¹⁶—we must go back a little and set this New Testament message in the context of what was said in chapter 2 about the nature of revelation and myth.

The basic revelation attested in the New Testament consisted in being confronted, in the person of Jesus and the fellowship of the Spirit, with the *present* reality of the living God. But in Christ the apostolic church discovered itself laid hold of by someone who filled not only the present but all eternity, who was “the first and the last, the alpha and the omega.” The central truth of the gospel that God has “delivered us out of the power of darkness, and translated us into the kingdom of the Son of his love” (Col 1:13) leads St. Paul on directly to his greatest assertion of its eternal, cosmic implications for the nature of Christ (Col 1:15–20). And what St. Paul found, so in their different manners did St. John and the others. On the one hand, this Christ authenticates himself not merely as one who became a revelation of the Father at a certain moment of time but as the very Word and Meaning of God from the beginning of the ages. The church is forced to the affirmation that in him all things were created and that without him was not anything made that was made. And this pre-existence is realized to hold not only of his person, but also of his work: the Lamb is seen, as it were, to have been slain before even the foundation of the world.¹⁷ And, on the other

Faith and History, 273–75; Cullmann, *Christ et le Temps*, 109, 120. The locus classicus in the New Testament is 1 Cor 10:1–11. As the sacraments in the wilderness—the manna and the water—stood between the mighty act of redemption and the promised land of milk and honey, so the sacraments of the Christian church stand between the resurrection and the *parousia*. [1968 omitted this paragraph.]

16. [1968 omits this parenthesis.]

17. [1968 omits this sentence.]

hand, the church recognizes this act and revelation¹⁸ as of such a quality that nothing can supersede it. It is final, it is eschatological: it discloses equally that which *must* be hereafter.¹⁹

The data of these judgments are given in the present encounter with Christ [first] in the flesh and [then] in the Spirit: their *form*, as the consequences are drawn out for the ultimate beginning and end of God's purpose, is myth. The revelation provides no historical information about the beginning and end of things: it is of the present and of a person.²⁰ But the myth is not free speculation. It is a picture designed to bring out the true depths of the present awareness;²¹ and if it distorts or falsifies the data it has no place in a scientific theology.²²

In this book we are concerned only with the implication of the revelation in Christ for the *last* things. Here the fundamental witness

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of the apostolic church was, as we have seen, that this act of God inaugurated a situation which was, on the one hand, final, and, on the other, required yet to be finalized. A myth²³ of the end that was to do justice to this revelation must include these two elements. This was achieved by the introduction, into the current Jewish expectation, of the idea of the *return* of the Christ.²⁴ It was not a new Christ—

there could be nothing new after the final revelation of the incarnation; on the other hand, the return stood for the completion of that which was already final.

And yet the purpose of the eschatological myth is not simply or primarily to draw out implications of what *will be*. It is first of all a descrip-

18. [1968: "revelatory act."]

19. [1968 adds: "Christ is not only the alpha but the *omega*."]

20. [1968 removes the words, "it is of the present and of a person."]

21. [1968: "the true depths, the full implication, of the present relationship."]

22. [1968 removes the words, "and if it distorts or falsifies the data it has no place in a scientific theology."]

23. [1968: "picture."]

24. This is not, of course, intended to describe the *method* by which the myths, or rather myths, were formulated, as though by committee! Elements entered the common stock of Christian apocalyptic thought from many quarters, and were by no means all mutually compatible. The vexed question (recently raised again by Dr T. F. Glasson's book, *The Second Advent*), of what derived ultimately from Jesus himself, is here deliberately left open. [1968 omitted this footnote.]

tion of what *is*, an inset depicting the truth of the *present* situation—a situation albeit whose depths cannot be plumbed wholly in terms of the present. Perhaps this paradox can most easily be understood by drawing out the parallel with the Genesis myths of the first things.²⁵ For the principles of interpretation in this case have gained a currency and a recognition not yet accorded to the myths of eschatology.

Myth and the First Things

Consider, for instance, the myth of the fall. The prime motive and intention of the writer is to account for the present, and perennial, condition of man, who in stature and behavior is at once so like a god and so like a devil. And whereas another race or another age might have set out its conclusions in a philosophical system or a scientific treatise, the Hebraic mind tended naturally to express truth in the more concrete form of what today would be recognized as the novel or the strip-cartoon. So the author of Gen 3 makes his sketch. His real interest is not in people who lived thousands of years ago, but in the humanity of his and every age. The abiding greatness of his cartoon, as of any such work of imaginative artistry, lies not in the fact that in it a man can see his ancestors as they were, but that in it he can and must see himself as he is. There, in the domestic life of Everyman, each man is discovered to himself as his own Adam.

The purpose of the eschatological myth is not simply or primarily to draw out implications of what will be. It is first of all a description of what is, an inset depicting the truth of the present situation.

25. There is a striking parallel between the content of the myths of the beginning and end, which provides confirmation of the fact that in form they were both regarded as belonging to the same genre. The events of the end are depicted as coming to *reverse* the events of the beginning. Without going into any elaborate detail—and confining attention to the incidents of Gen 1–3—one can observe such points as these: The fall narrative ends with the curse upon nature, the promise of toil and sorrow for man and of birth-pangs for woman, and the expulsion of Adam and Eve from Eden. The last times begin with terrible signs of disruption in the natural order, the woes and travails of the messianic age, and the casting of the devil—“the old serpent”—out of heaven. The paradise of Eden is replaced by the millennium, when, this time the second Adam dwells with his bride—the church—in a renovated earth; till, finally, all things are handed back to the Creator from whom they took their origin. The recurring symbol of the tree of life in Genesis and Revelation is an indication of how this parallelism could be worked out almost indefinitely. It is also extended in the New Testament to cover such later myths as those of Babel and Noah.

Why then does the author place his characters in the first generation rather than in his own? Because he knows the dark mystery of that which he is trying to delineate. Sin is something that may not be understood in terms of one generation alone. Each person and every age knows that he or it is not wholly responsible. All men find themselves born into a historical order where sin²⁶ is there before them, dragging them down. Go back into history as far as one may, one can find no generation and no civilization of which this is not true. There seems to be no time when sin was not there anticipating individual choice and decision. It is *not enough* to say that every man is his own Adam, because in this matter no one starts from scratch. The Adam in us is bound up with the historical nexus into which each person is born; and so apparently has it always been. Consequently, in order to account for the condition of *present* humanity, the author of Genesis makes his story tell of the first man and the first woman. It is essential that *in the myth* Adam and Eve shall be historical characters (and not, for instance, legendary heroes or demi-gods who have no place in the historical entail), and of historical characters the first. But it is a total misconception to imagine that the truth of the myth is in any way bound up with their being *actual* figures of history, or that it matters a scrap that as anthropology the whole thing is fantastic.²⁷

Myth and the Last Things

Now the same principles govern consideration of the eschatological myths. The point of reference from which they start is the present. All the elements in the myth are first and foremost descriptions of *present* realities within the life of the new age. The second coming has happened in the return of Christ in the Spirit; the resurrection of the body has occurred in the putting on of the new man in the body of Christ; the millennium has been inaugurated in the reign of Christ in his church on earth; the Antichrist is a present reality wherever final refusal meets the gospel preaching; the messianic banquet is celebrated whenever the wine is drunk new in the kingdom of God; Satan falls from heaven as each man decides for the gospel, and in the finished work of Christ the

26. [1968: "in which evil."]

27. [1968: "fanciful."]

prince of this world has been judged; the last assize is being wrought out in every moment of choice and decision; Christ is all in all, since all things *have been* reconciled in him.²⁸

But in each case these realities cannot, any more than the realities of the kingdom of sin, be understood simply in terms of the present generation. They *are* present realities, but they run out into the ultimate future as the old order runs back into the primeval past. Just as, to explain the present, Adam must be depicted in the myth as the first man, so the new man from heaven is still “he that shall come”; the resurrection of the body will not occur till the final day; for the reign of Christ on earth men must continue to watch and pray; the Antichrist is a figure belonging to the last hour; the messianic banquet awaits the consummation of the kingdom, and for Satan’s overthrow the cry still goes up, “How long?”; the last judgment cannot be declared till all consequences are known, and we see not yet all things subjected to Christ. The myth, if it is to be true, must, therefore, present all these elements not simply as present but also as future.

But, further, in order to do justice to the realities of the present revelation, it is necessary *in the myth* to represent these truths not only as future, but as future *events*. As Adam and the fall—to explain our situation—must be conceived within the same historical nexus in which we live, so it is essential that the *parousia*, last judgment, and the rest, if they are to be relevant for asserting the true, eschatological character of this present age, shall be depicted as historical events. Thus every *kairos* and every *krisis* in the present order (for instance, the fall of Jerusalem) can be seen as apocalyptic,²⁹ i.e., as embodying the ultimate judgment on the world, only if the final apocalypse—the *eschaton*—is conceived as in some way continuous with the events that prefigure it. *Within the myth* the last things must be viewed as history. It is left to the form of the imagery employed (the sign-manual of apocalypse³⁰) to make clear

28. The incident at Pentecost of the apostles speaking in the language of each of the assembled races is probably to be understood as symbolizing, as an accomplished fact, the preaching of the gospel to all nations, which was one of the signs of the end (Matt 24:14). At any rate, it is at once interpreted by Peter as evidence that these were “the last days.” This incident is also, of course, to be seen in the context of the reversal of the primal myths referred to above, where it stands for the undoing of Babel.

29. [1968: “eschatological.”]

30. [1968 omits this parenthesis.]

that these ultimate occurrences cannot be conceived as *simply* historical, but must essentially be trans-historical in nature.³¹

It is essential that the parousia, last judgment, and the rest, if they are to be relevant for asserting the true, eschatological character of this present age, shall be depicted as historical events.

But it would be an equal misunderstanding to take the picture of the last things as *historical prediction* as it is to view Adam and Eve as personages of whom birth-certificates might theoretically be produced. In neither case is the truth of the myth in any way bound up with the belief that its events did literally take place or will do so. Nor is their *temporal* primacy or finality the clue to their real import. The incidents are not actual occurrences in the past and future, but are representations to interpret present realities in all their primal and eschatological quality. Yet they can do this only if they depict, not abstract truths, but events, and events which run back into the past and out into the future. The myth is to be judged solely for its accuracy in interpreting³² the data, not as³³ it provides an account of the probable beginning or end of the world acceptable to the astronomer or biologist. In exactly the same way, as we saw, Freud's use of mythological terms such as Eros and Thanatos is scientific in so far as it helps to interpret and illumine the psychological facts; its truth does not depend on whether these figures can be proved to exist by clinical research.

It will perhaps clarify further the status of the myth of the end if we give yet closer attention to the central element in it—the day of the *parousia* or second coming.³⁴ It is well known to students of the New

31. The New Testament never pictures the *parousia*, as modern Liberal and sectarian Christianity has tended to, as another incarnation—Jesus coming again within the sequence and boundaries of history as we know it. (Such an expectation is typically to be seen running through Lloyd C. Douglas' popular novel, *The Robe*.) The return of Christ as judge is always a supernatural event including a radical transformation, if not a complete supersession, of the historical scene. There are, it is true, elements in the myth (the reign of Christ with his saints in a renovated earth and the resurrection of the body) that stress the necessary truth that what supervenes upon history transfigures rather than destroys it.

32. [1968 adds, "and illuminating."]

33. [1968: "on the grounds that."]

34. [1968 adds the following footnote: "See further 'Preaching the Second Coming' in *On Being the Church in the World*, ch. 13."]

Testament that there are two very different, and apparently incompatible, manners in which this is expected to occur. One catena of sayings (represented generally, in the Gospels, by Mark) suggests that things will very definitely “work up” towards the final act of the divine drama. It is bound to be evident to all that matters are reaching a head: “the signs of the end” will become increasingly apparent in the gathering storm. On the other hand, there is another tradition (represented, for instance, in the source common to Matthew and Luke) which speaks of the day of Christ cutting suddenly and unexpectedly across the normal processes of this world. Men and women will be engaged upon their ordinary occupations with no premonition of the end. They will be eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, grinding at the mill and drawing at the well. And then, suddenly, as a lightning flash, the day of the Son of Man will be upon them transecting human society, and some will be left and others taken.

Now, clearly, as predictions of a literal historical occurrence these two views are incompatible. It must happen one way or the other. But, as elements in the myth, both correspond to factors which require to be met. The day of the Lord is equally something which can only happen as the climax of the world-process *and* something which is the truth about the world-process now and at every time. The *parousia* cannot be pictured simply as an event in the future: it takes, as it were, a cross-section of the universe at every age.³⁵ It is “the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ,” the lightning-flash which lays bare to public gaze the naked truth about the world and the situation of every man in it, as at any given moment the individual stands on one side of the line or the other, for Christ or against him. The myth of the *parousia* universalizes and clarifies, as in an inset, what must happen—and is already happening—whenever the Christ comes in love and comes in power; wherever are to be traced the signs of his presence and the marks of his cross. Judgment day is a dramatized, idealized picture of every day. And yet it is not simply every day. The *parousia* and the judgment are not merely

35. There is a sense in which the *telos* of history is complete *whenever* the *finis* may come, just as the Christian can believe the same of an individual life at whatever point death may cut it off. For the end of the world *has been* achieved in the summing up of all things in Christ. “The Christian faith insists that the end as *finis* is not identical with the end as *telos*. The *telos* is the resurrection.” Niebuhr, *Faith and History*, 268. [1968 omits this footnote.]

cross-sections. They must also be represented, as in the other tradition, as realities which consummate as well as transect the historical process. For the process as a whole has a movement and has a meaning: it “works up” to a goal.

If this understanding of the *mythical* character of the eschatological statement is accepted, it will become clear that the Christian has no more knowledge of or interest in the final state of this planet than he has of its first. The illusion that the Bible vouchsafes him such information, if he can but interpret it aright, requires to be buried as deeply as similar illusions about the beginning of the world derived from Genesis.³⁶ It is perfectly true that in a pre-scientific age no distinction between myth and history was made—or required. St. Paul, as presumably Jesus, no doubt thought of the fall and the last judgment as literal events. But that did not prevent the apostle uncovering the real significance of both myths. Such a failure to distinguish does not seriously distort the New Testament message. It is enough that the Christian hope was such that in due course, when and as the necessity arose, it could be dissociated, first, from the expectation of an *immediate* advent, and then from the belief in a literal *parousia*. Of course, the Christian cannot say that the “events” of the end will *not* literally take place, any more than one can assert that an Adam and an Eve did *not* live in a garden in Mesopotamia.

36. In regard to the end of the world three things perhaps need to be said:

(1) The gospel is not in the least concerned with the “how” or “when.” It is as false to interpret the pictures of the apocalyptists as answers to these questions as it is to read Gen 1 as an historical account of the creation in six days, beginning (or, was it ending?) at 9 a.m. on October 23rd, 4004 B.C. The Bible is solely concerned with the “why,” the “wherefore,” and the “whither”—asserting that the world comes from God, exists for God, and goes to God. The other questions are for the natural scientist, if he can.

(2) When the New Testament speaks about the end of the world, it refers not to this earth, nor even to this whole physical universe, but to this age (*aion*), of which in God’s plan there are an indefinite number (cf. Eph 2:7; 3:9, 21 (R.V. margin)). The *aion* is not necessarily the same as anything that the astrophysicist is talking about. It cannot be calculated chronologically: it is one of the dispensations of God’s purpose or the divisions of God’s time understood as *kairos*. [1968 omits the words, “of which in God’s plan there are an indefinite number (cf. Eph 2:7; 3:9, 21 (R.V. margin)).”]

(3) The New Testament interest is not primarily in the end of the world at all, but in the day of the Lord. Because the kingdom of God in its fullness cannot but transcend every limit of space and time, the picture of its coming has necessarily to include the break-up of this world-order, which straitens it till it be accomplished [1968 omits the words, “which straitens it till it be accomplished.”]. But this disruption is viewed as quite secondary.

He can only declare that, as a Christian, he has no interest in these matters. He is concerned, alike in the myths of the beginning and of the end, with the present. But, being a Christian, he knows the present for what it is; that is to say, a point too charged with eternity to be understood except by myths which open a door into heaven and focus upon every moment the terrible relevance of the first things and the last, the elemental and the ultimate.

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