



Saint Paul, Eschatology and Our Present Situation

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Święty Paweł, eschatologia i nasza obecna sytuacja

STRESZCZENIE

Paweł dzielił wspólne żydowskie oczekiwania co do końca czasów, podobnie jak sam Jezus. W ciągu dwóch stuleci przed Jezusem i Pawłem w Izraelu oczekiwania eschatologiczne nabrały nowej siły. Wierzący czekali na (nową) radykalną interwencję Boga w historię ludzkości, aby spełniły się przewidywania starożytnych proroków. Wiara w zdolność Boga do wskrzeszania umarłych stawała się coraz bardziej widoczna. Dlaczego? Ponieważ sprawiedliwość Boga jest kluczowym elementem Jego tożsamości. Aby pozostać Bogiem Izraela, Bóg musiał być sprawiedliwym Sędzią, żeby móc wynagrodzić męczenników. Nawet jeśli ostateczny moment przyjścia musiał pozostać nieznanym, wierzone, że dzień wielkiego rozliczenia nadejdzie. Od XIX wieku Kościół wstydił się apokaliptycznego dyskursu, gdyż wydawał się on mitologiczny, przestarzały i zasadniczo bezużyteczny. Celem artykułu jest ukazanie, że obecny globalny kryzys ekologiczny zmienił sytuację. Musimy na nowo odkryć wartość maksymy węgierskiego jezuita Gábora Hevenesiego: „Pokładaj ufność w Bogu, jakby cały bieg rzeczy zależał całkowicie od Ciebie, a nie od Boga; ale jednocześnie rób wszystko, co w Twojej mocy, jakby nic nie miało być zrobione przez Ciebie, a wszystko przez samego Boga”. Zawarta w tej formule idea to ani pietystyczna rezygnacja z działania, ani woluntarystyczny aktywizm.

Słowa kluczowe: św. Paweł, eschatologia, pietystyczna rezygnacja, woluntarystyczny aktywizm

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Paul shared common Jewish end of time expectations. Exactly like Jesus. He expected a *trumpet* to make the ultimate sound of the end (cf. 1 Corinthians 15:52). As Jesus saw that *angels* would play a role in this moment: “For the Son of Man is going to come in his Father’s glory with his angels, and then he will reward each person according to what they have done” (cf. Matthew 16:27). I would like to present briefly the key elements of Paul’s eschatology while at the same time trying to put into words how our present ecological situation challenges us, in a unique new way, that our predecessors could not fathom.

1. Jewish Eschatology

There have been endless discussions about the difference between *eschatology* and *apocalypticism*. It is clear that both are closely related¹. The moment of the ‘end’ will necessarily be a moment of ‘revelation’, a revelation of God’s Judgment on the wicked, of manifestation of his will and aspirations. In the two centuries before Jesus, the question had become more and more prominent in Jewish thought. We know this more clearly now since we have the Qumran documents and since we are becoming more acquainted with books like the Book of Enoch. The theme of the revelation of the judgment of God is very present. Why this focus? Israel was now strongly monotheistic and was submitted to pagan powers and even after the Maccabean revolt and the birth of the Hasmonean state there was a deep and growing disaffection with the present order of things. A short way of putting things is to say that the theological weight created by the prophets of the Exile and just after the Exile, became more and more important: “I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth; do you not perceive it?” (Isaiah 43:19). The God who was acting in behalf of Israel in the past was said to be preparing to act decisively in the near future. The famous sentence of Revelation – “I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, who is and who was *and who is to come*, the Almighty” (Revelation 1:8) has its roots in this logic. The normal way of putting things would have been “the Lord God who is and who was and who will be” in the line opened at Exodus 3:14: “I will be what I will be” (*ehye asher ehye*). The line that Zachariah expressed powerfully: “See, a day is *coming* for the Lord [...] the Lord my God will *come* and all the holy ones with him. [...] And the Lord will become king over all the earth; on that day the Lord will be one and his name one” (Zechariah 14:1.5b.9). This day is the day that John the Baptist was waiting for and expecting and it is also the day that Jesus was praying for. Paul was having, I believe, the same expectation. And he expected the same day of the Lord. This Lord being now the Messiah Jesus and not only and above all the Lord God of Israel. He is the one who will *come* again.

2. Eschatology and resurrection

Eschatology was a Jewish thing. Of course, some elements can be found in other Middle Eastern religions. But the biblical matrix, the prophetic stance was peculiar. In those who were hoping for something different

¹ Cf. John J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination: An introduction to Jewish apocalyptic literature* (Michigan/ Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, 2016³ [1984]).

and protesting the present order of things, the words of the prophets were more and more important. In particular Isaiah, the third Isaiah. In a way we can say that the Christian movement is an *Isaianism*, an Isaianic movement. And, in that galaxy of beliefs, the belief in God's capacity to resurrect the dead came more and more prominent. Why? Because God's justice was a key element of God's identity. In order to stay the God of Israel, God had to be a just judge and in particular be able to give rewards to the righteous. And what to do in the case of the martyrs? This is where the mother of the seven brothers is an important spokesperson for those eschatological expectations. In the same way as God created the whole world from nothing, he will be able to recreate the righteous for eternal life. The destiny of the wicked was always less important. For they were returning to the 'void' they have showed during their life. In the faith of the ardent believers of Israel, those who were not happy with the functioning of the Temple system, unhappy about the 'corruption as usual business', the faith in the resurrection became more and more central as Jesus own words and faith show abundantly. There is a fascinating debate, an old one, about the question of the origin of the notion of the resurrection: was it an element 'foreign' to Israel who came in Israel late and due to a foreign 'influence' or was it something more rooted in Israel texts and beliefs? I tend, more and more, to join those who favor an 'indigenous' origin. But I won't enter in that debate.

My point is rather that with Christianity – and Paul is a brilliant example – resurrection became the absolute focus of the faith, the heart or the nuclear reactor of the Christian faith. God became *The One-who-resurrected Jesus from the dead* or as Robert Jenson says: "God is whoever raised Jesus from the dead, having before raised Israel from Egypt"². With Christianity, resurrection becomes the key element of faith and therefore eschatology is the center of theology since resurrection is, per se, an eschatological notion. Paul illustrates that point in countless ways. As he says: "But if it is preached that Christ has been raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith. More than that, we are then found to be false witnesses about God, for we have testified about God that he raised Christ from the dead. But he did not raise him if in fact the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised either" (1 Corinthians 15:12-16). This last verse is explicit. Luke will make that point repeatedly in the Acts. To proclaim the resurrection is to announce Christ, even if his name is not even mentioned. Acts 16 is a wonderful example. Paul speaks in front of the Sanhedrin and says: "I stand on trial because of

² Cf. Robert Jenson, *Systematic Theology I* (Oxford University Press, 1997), 63.

the hope of the resurrection of the dead.” (Acts 16:6). And it is written just after: “The following night the Lord stood near Paul and said, “Take courage! As you have testified *about me* in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome.””. But Paul had said nothing about Jesus and even nothing about his being a Christian! The strategy of Luke is clear. He wants to say to faithful non-Christian Jews at the end of the first century: ‘we have much more in common than you think! We both believe in the Resurrection. We both believe that God is a righteous Judge. That he is the God of the living being the God of life. In Jesus being resurrected, this is what we affirm: God is just and defends the innocents: it is also what you believe’. The preface for the Second eucharistic prayer says: “he stretched out his hands as he endured his Passion, so as to break the bonds of death and *manifest the resurrection*”. As if Jesus’ resurrection had as main point the goal of proving the belief in the resurrection!

3. Eschatology and justice

To say that Resurrection is the heart of faith and the key eschatological belief is also to say that the attribute of justice and the attribute of love work closely together on that respect. It is common to say that love or agape is the key Christian concept and that the ‘Christian God’ is a God of love. But it would be perhaps more pertinent to say that he is above all a god of justice. He vindicates Jesus with his resurrection and will vindicate his faithful, the poor, the oppressed, the little ones by giving justice. “And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off?” (Luce 18:7). What follows is interesting: “I tell you, he will see that they get *justice, and quickly*. However, when the *Son of Man comes*, will he find faith on the earth?”. So justice is the aim. It will come ‘quickly’, a key element of all eschatology: the faithful are hoping a quick justice and the coming of the Son of Man. The Son of Man is a key eschatological figure that we know from the book of Enoch and he is and will be above all a judge³.

4. Eschatology and timing

The “quickly” is important. There have been infinite debates to know if Paul (or Jesus for that matter) believed in a quick coming of the end. It is, I believe, in the nature of eschatological faith, – and of the faith in the justice of God – to hope and believe that he will *quickly* do justice. But this, in itself,

³ See Collin Blake Bullard, *Jesus and the Thoughts of Many Hearts* (London: Bloomsbury – T&T Clark, 2015).

does not guarantee a timing so to speak. With the “quick” also goes the “delay”, the notion that is so mysteriously developed in Second Thessalonians. “Concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered to him, we ask you, brothers and sisters, not to become easily unsettled or alarmed by the teaching allegedly from us – whether by a prophecy or by word of mouth or by letter – asserting that the day of the Lord has already come. Don’t let anyone deceive you in any way, for that day will not come until the rebellion occurs and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the man doomed to destruction” (2 Thessalonians 2:1-3). And “Don’t you remember that when I was with you I used to tell you these things? And now you know what is holding him back, so that he may be revealed at the proper time. For the secret power of lawlessness is already at work; but the one who now holds it back will continue to do so till he is taken out of the way. And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will overthrow with the breath of his mouth and destroy by the splendor of his coming. The coming of the lawless one will be in accordance with how Satan works” (2 Thessalonians 5-9a). So, the believers have to exercise *upomone*, patience, and persevere in good deeds as well as in faith. The more ardent the faith, the quicker the Christian will believe that the end ‘is near’.

As the author of Revelation says: “Do not seal up the words of the prophecy of this scroll, *because the time is near*. [Let the one who does wrong continue to do wrong; let the vile person continue to be vile; let the one who does right continue to do right; and let the holy person continue to be holy]. “Look, I am coming soon! My reward is with me, and I will give to each person according to what they have done. [...] The Spirit and the bride say, “Come!” And let the one who hears say, “Come!” Let the one who is thirsty come; and let the one who wishes take the free gift of the water of life. [...] He who testifies to these things says, “Yes, I am coming soon.” Amen. Come, Lord Jesus” (Revelation 22:10.17.20). Paul would have said the same.

5. Eschatology and enlightenment

The eschatological discourses are a key element of Jesus last words. The ‘little apocalypse’ of Mark 13 has been entirely taken, albeit rewritten, by Luke (Luke 21) and Matthew (Matthew 24). Even if they kept the main focus, there is a clear tendency to dampen eschatological expectations. In that speech as well as before. The classical example is the way Luke changes Mark’s verse 8:34 “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me” by adding “each day” with “Whoever

wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross *daily* and follow me” (Luke 9:23).

I think it’s fair enough to acknowledge that, from the Enlightenment onwards, it was a highly ethical Jesus who took over from the eschatological Jesus. What’s more, since the end of the 19th century – beginning of the 20th century, the Church has taken on board, albeit in its own way, the progressive, optimistic discourse that saw humanity developing steadily towards the better. A number of expressions from the Second Vatican Council point in this direction. Eschatological discourse seemed mythological, outdated and basically useless. And the same was true of Jesus’ words along these lines. And Paul was often also deprived of this eschatological angle in favor of a Paul who was very much a university professor of fundamental theology. His dimension as a charismatic pastor focused on the end times was easily overlooked. The Church was accused on all sides of being hostile to progress and true humanity, of spreading an overly pessimistic vision of human nature and its capabilities. She defended herself, without abandoning her fundamental software, which gives a large place to human fallibility and original sin, but nevertheless, in her great documents, she was part of the cultural and philosophical current that ran through the whole of the West, and through it, the rest of the world, in the 20th century. She wanted to be enlightened. In its Catholic tradition, at least, she has given a strong place to reason, trust in the international institutions, and in the ability of economic players to work together for the common good.

6. The great reversal: the Church and Fear

Today, the situation is virtually the opposite. At a time when many thinkers, and with them many human beings, are increasingly despairing about what is happening to the planet, the Church continues to maintain a discourse affirming humanity’s ability to redress the balance and take action. The Church, perceived by many critics as wanting to defend a supernatural located *outside the world*, finds itself increasingly defending the human capacity for action on the intramundane level. She persists in trying to be optimistic while many around it despair.

Everywhere, at least in a large part of the world and particularly in the Western world, we see fear and anxiety about the future paralyzing and distressing young and old alike. Numerous surveys show that a growing proportion of young Westerners (around 25%) no longer want to have children in the world as it is. The endogenous birth rate is collapsing everywhere, with the Muslim world (albeit much less so than twenty years ago) and Black Africa the only ones driving the birth rate. Many experts point out that hu-

manity's main concern by 2050 will be massive ageing. Moreover, no policy aimed at boosting the birth rate has worked (as China and Hungary have shown). But what we're really talking about here is a fundamental ethos. How can we have children in a world that is on the brink of collapse, in a humanity marked by climate refugees and wars over land, water and natural resources? It is perhaps writers like P. D James, with his "The Children of Men", and filmmakers like Paul Schrader, with his film *First Reformed*, who have best captured our present spiritual and cultural situation.

In the early centuries, Christians persisted in giving life to new children and supporting charitable institutions even as they expected the world to be destroyed as announced in the words of Jesus: "Men's hearts failing them for fear, and for looking after those things which are coming on the earth: for the powers of heaven shall be shaken" (Luke 21:26). Is it time to give up hope? Certainly not. But neither can the pursuit of faith and community pay lip service to the reality of today's problems, which today, as in the past, reveal the depths of original sin. Our eschatological texts can be powerful tools against fear. They tell us that everything has been foretold and said. That the Lord never promised a Kingdom *here on earth*. That the hypothesis of humanity's intramundane failure is entirely conceivable and should not come as a surprise. Yet knowing that God is a God of surprises and sudden reversals.

The letter to the Hebrews explains that, faced with the pains of the world, humans will be seized with fear: "so that by his death he might break the power of him who holds the power of death – that is, the devil- and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death" (Hebrews 2:14a-15). The devil's power over the world here below is not said to be broken on the horizon of our human lives. And on the horizon of humanity.

So, what are we saying? We believe and affirm that, right up to the end, life will be worth living – even when massive euthanasia programs will be developed to deal with the immense mass of elderly people – that right up to the end, right up to five minutes before the end of the world, love will have meaning. Whether experienced as husband and wife, parents or consecrated people. Why? Because, like the contemporaries of the martyrs of Israel under the Maccabees, or the Christians subjected to the great persecutions under Decius and Diocletian in the 3rd century, we believe that God remembers his servants, that he is the God of life, and that he will bring to life in himself all those who have loved life, and the lives of others even more than their own. More than ever in their history, Christians will have to be at the service of hope, of life and of love given and received. More than ever, it will be difficult for many to escape from fear, paralysis and despair. More than ever, Christians will have to make a real spiritual effort to escape this very

heavy cultural and social climate and affirm their faith in the solidarity of all human beings, even though every country, every group, will be tempted to turn in on itself, as we see today.

Conclusion

This brings us face to face with the Christian paradox: Christians are not saying that the world will end up with a classless society or paradise on earth or enhanced man living to 120 years. Quite the contrary, in fact! They announce the end of the world as it is. But this does not prevent them from being joyful and hopeful, and from working, in collaboration with others, “in the present world as reasonable, just and religious men” (Titus 2:12). These texts, which could be a source of anxiety, are in fact a source of peace and confidence.

It’s a question of rediscovering Hevenesi’s maxim in its dialectical form⁴. Faced with the radical threats hanging over the future of our planet, two temptations can arise and threaten believers. One is to blindly put one’s faith in God, assuming that one day he will solve our problems from on high – what we traditionally call *fideism*. Or, on the contrary, to put our trust in our actions and repeat to ourselves like a mantra: ‘We’ll get there, we’ll get there’, forgetting the original sin that comes to nestle in all our efforts in a kind of latent *Pelagianism*, where we would be repeating: ‘Yes, we have the Holy Spirit, we know the solutions to the problems and we’ll get there’. In the letter from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, which he inspired and requested in 2018 (and strangely little known though important), entitled *Placuit Deo*, Pope Francis described his two sterile attitudes. In front of the huge challenges the humanity is facing, “a merely interior vision of salvation is becoming common, a vision which, marked by a strong personal conviction or feeling of being united to God, does not take into account the need to accept, heal and renew our relationships with others and with the created world”.⁵ A sort of neo-gnosticism. On the other hand, he notes that some are tempted by the opposite: “A new form of Pelagianism is spreading in our days, one in which the individual, understood to be radically autonomous, presumes to save oneself, without recognizing that, at the deepest level of being, he or she derives from God and from others. According to this way of thinking, salvation depends on the strength of the individual or on purely human structures, which are incapable of welcoming the newness of the Spirit

⁴ Cf. Paul Valadier, *La condition chrétienne. Du monde sans en être* (Paris: Seuil, 2003), 43-47, who defends a dialectical reading of the maxim.

⁵ Cf. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Placuit Deo* (Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2018), § 2, accessed 10 January, 2025, https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20180222_placuit-deo_en.html.

of God” (§3). Neither attitude is faithful to the gospel: Jesus calls for both absolute trust in God, knowing that “for men this is impossible” (Mt 19:26), and determined action for good: “It is not by saying to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ that one will enter the kingdom of heaven, but by doing the will of my Father in heaven” (Matthew 7:21).

Nothing in faith guarantees the success of our efforts in the historical order, and God has never said or guaranteed that everything *in history* will turn out well. Putting all one’s faith in God does not mean stopping to try to act, and acting does not mean believing in the success of one’s efforts. More than ever, the famous maxim of the Hungarian Jesuit Gábor Hevenesi (1656-1715) remains crucial: “Put your trust in God as though the whole course of things depended entirely on yourself, and not on God; but at the same time do everything in your power as if nothing were to be done by you and everything by God alone”. Neither pietistic resignation nor voluntarist activism. The ridgeline is narrow, but it’s the only one that will allow us to walk. Right up to the end, life will be worth living because, whatever conditions we find ourselves in, it will be possible to love. And God created us for love and to love.

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SUMMARY

Paul shared common Jewish end of time expectations. Like Jesus. And, in the two centuries before Jesus and Paul, eschatological expectations had taken a new strength. The believers were waiting for a (new) radical intervention of God in human history in order for the prophecies of the prophets of old to be accomplished. The belief in God’s capacity to resurrect the dead came more and more prominent. Why? Because God’s justice is a key element of God’s identity. To stay the God of Israel, God had to be a just Judge and

be able to give rewards to the martyrs. Even if the moment of the end of things has to stay unknown, the day of the great reckoning will come. Since the 19th century however, the Church has been ashamed of the apocalyptic discourse: Eschatological discourse seemed mythological, outdated and basically useless. The present age of global ecological crisis has changed the situation. We have to rediscover the value of the maxim of the Hungarian Jesuit Gábor Hevenes: “Put your trust in God as though the whole course of things depended entirely on yourself, and not on God; but at the same time do everything in your power as if nothing were to be done by you and everything by God alone”. Neither pietistic resignation nor voluntarist activism.

Keywords: Saint Paul, eschatology, pietistic resignation, voluntarist activism