VI. THE EXPECTATION OF JESUS’ PAROUSIA

Similar to the expectation of the eschatological resurrection, the expectation of Jesus’ coming in glory has its origin in Jewish eschatology. Tracing the origins of the latter, however, is more difficult than an examination of the former. The main difficulty is that in the Jewish literature prior to Christianity the Jewish tradition underlying the concept of Jesus’ second coming is not well attested. As in the previous section, the initial stage of the research will retrieve the earliest traceable form of the Christian expectation of Jesus’ coming at the end of time (section a). Then, the Jewish tradition underlying that form of the hope of Jesus’ parousia will be identified (section b). Finally, an attempt will be made to answer the question why the expectation of Jesus’ parousia arose (section c).

a. The earliest traceable form of the expectation of Jesus’ parousia

(1) In his letters Paul refers to the future coming of Jesus in about 21 passages. These passages can be categorized in three groups: (a) those in which Paul states in some fashion that Jesus will come at the end of time: 1 Thess. 1:10; 2:19; 3:13; 4:16-17; 5:1-4, 23; 1 Cor. 1:7; 4:5; 11:26; 15:23; 16:22; Phil. 3:20; (b) those in which Paul uses the phrase ‘day of our Lord Jesus Christ’ (or a synonymous expression):1 1 Cor. 3:12-15; 5:5; 2 Cor. 1:14; Phil. 1:6, 10; 2:16; and (c) those in which Paul mentions Jesus’ activity on the last day so that his coming is implied: 1 Thess. 1:3; 2 Cor. 5:10; Rom. 5:9. Two passages are inconclusive: Phil. 4:1, 5.2 Only in three passages—1 Cor. 15:23-28, 1 Thess.

1 The phrase ‘day of our Lord Jesus Christ’ and its variations refer indirectly to Jesus’ coming at the end of time. The phrase ‘day of our Lord Jesus Christ’ is the Christian adaptation of the Old Testament notion of ‘the day of the Lord’, which is the day on which God will intervene once and for all; G. von Rad, G. Delling, ‘ἡμέρα’, ThWNT, vol. II (1935), pp. 945-956.

2 In Phil. 4:1 Paul calls the Philippians his ‘crown’ (στέφανος) which is most likely a metaphor for the favourable judgement Paul hopes to receive on the last day; see Phil. 2:16 (cf. 1 Thess. 2:19; 2 Cor. 1:14) and, in the immediate context, the mention of Jesus’ parousia in 3:20-21. In Phil. 4:5 Paul states that ‘the Lord is near’ which can either refer to the imminence of his coming (cf. 1 Cor. 16:22; Rom. 13:12; J. Gnilka, Philippbrief, p. 169) or to his spiritual proximity in the congregation of believers (cf. Ps. 144:18[LXX]; E. Lohmeyer, Philipper, p. 169).
4:16-17, and Phil. 3:20-21—does Paul speak about Jesus’ second coming somewhat more extensively. These passages reflect the following concept of that coming.\(^1\)

Jesus’ coming itself is described as a descent from ‘heaven’ (1 Thess. 1:10; Phil 3:20) with a ‘cry of command’, an ‘archangel’s call’, and a ‘sound of God’s trumpet’ (1 Thess. 4:16). At his coming Jesus will be accompanied by angels (1 Thess. 4:16) and by ‘all the saints’ (1 Thess. 3:13). These saints are not angels, but most likely those righteous ones who, as a special reward, were taken up into God’s presence either just before or directly after their death.\(^2\) Paul does not mention any further characteristics of Jesus’ coming in the future.

Paul does, however, elaborate on the actions which Jesus will perform at his coming. In 1 Thess. 1:10 Paul writes that Jesus will rescue his followers from the ‘wrath that is coming.’ The coming wrath (\(\delta\rho\gamma\eta\ \ \varepsilon\rho\chi\omicron\mu\omicron\nu\eta\)) is part of God’s final judgement.\(^3\) Christians will be saved from this wrath by Jesus, he is their saviour. The verb \(\rho\upsilon\epsilon\omicron\sigma\omicron\tau\omicron\alpha\iota\nu\), ‘to save’, is a synonym of \(\sigma\phi\zeta\epsilon\nu\) which is found, for instance, in Rom. 5:9. There, too, it is said that on the last day Jesus will save (\(\sigma\phi\zeta\epsilon\nu\)) the believers from the wrath (\(\delta\rho\gamma\eta\)) of God. In Phil. 3:20-21 Paul calls Jesus the Christians’ saviour (\(\sigma\omega\tau\iota\rho\)) who will come from heaven and ‘transform the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself.’ The mention of Jesus as the one who will ef-

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1 The most important Pauline passages on Jesus’ parousia (1 Cor. 15:23-28; 1 Thess. 4:13-18; Phil. 3:20-21) have already been examined in previous chapters.

2 Whether these ‘saints’ (\(\delta\gamma\omicron\omicron\)) are angels or human righteous ones is a debated issue (T. Holtz, Thessalonicher, pp. 146-147). There are sufficient grounds, however, to argue that human righteous ones are meant; namely, those special righteous ones who have been taken up to heaven in previous times as a special reward (martyrs, Elijah, Enoch, e.a.). Firstly, in Paul (ol) \(\delta\gamma\omicron\omicron\) almost always refers to humans, i.e., Christians (B. Rigaux, Thessaloniciens, pp. 491-492). Secondly, a useful parallel occurs in 4 Ezra where it is said that God’s eschatological agent will come with ‘those who are with him’ (7:28; 13:52). These include those ‘who have not tasted death’ (6:26) as well as those special righteous ones who were ‘taken up’ after their death to live with God’s eschatological agent, as, for instance, it is promised to Ezra himself (14:9; cf. 8:51, 62); M.E. Stone, Fourth Ezra. A Commentary of the Book of Fourth Ezra (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), p. 215, cf. p. 172. Just like the author of 4 Ezra, Paul proves to be familiar with the tradition according to which special righteous ones are taken up to heaven soon after their deaths. This is clear from Paul’s view on his own death and resurrection in Phil. 1:23; 3:9-10, as well as from his view on Jesus’ heavenly resurrection. For further discussion of this tradition, see chapter IX, pp. 139-157.

3 The idea, of course, is adopted from Jewish eschatology; see L. Matterm, Das Verständnis des Gerichtes bei Paulus (ATHANT 47; Zürich/Stuttgart: Zwingli, 1966), p. 59; B. Rigaux, Thessaloniciens, pp. 196-197.