THE OTHERWORLD AND THE NEW AGE IN THE LETTERS OF PAUL

Adela Yarbro Collins

Troels Engberg-Pedersen and other scholars at the University of Copenhagen have argued that Paul is best understood in the context of Stoic philosophy. My colleague at Yale, Dale Martin, has argued that Paul’s letters also ought to be interpreted in the context of popular beliefs and conceptions and of apocalypticism. Although some of Paul’s statements are similar to Stoic doctrines, I agree with Dale Martin’s view, especially with regard to the otherworld and the new age. I will begin my discussion with Paul’s earliest letter, 1 Thessalonians.

Near the end of the first unit of the long thanksgiving in this letter, Paul celebrates the fact that believers in Macedonia and Achaia report how the Thessalonians have turned from idols to serve the living and true God “and to await his son from the heavens whom he raised from the dead, Jesus, the one who rescues us from the wrath that is coming” (1 Thess 1:9–10). We learn from this statement that Paul envisaged a plurality of heavens. This inference is supported by Paul’s talk about

---

1 Only the undisputed letters of Paul will be discussed in this paper: Romans, 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians and 1 Thessalonians. Although Philemon is also authentic, it contains nothing relevant to the topic.
2 See now Troels Engberg-Pedersen, Cosmology and Self in the Apostle Paul: The Material Spirit (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), see also idem, Paul and the Stoics (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000); see also idem and H. Tonier, eds., Philosophy at the Roots of Christianity (Copenhagen: Biblical Studies Section, The Faculty of Theology, University of Copenhagen, 2006); the latter contains papers from a Conference held in Copenhagen from August 31 through September 3, 2006.
4 According to H. Conzelmann, the “points of agreement do not go beyond the terms and ideas of popular philosophy with which it was possible for any and everyone to be acquainted,” in his 1 Corinthians: A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), 10.
5 A.J. Malherbe defines the thanksgiving as 1 Thess 1:2–3:13 and the first unit of it as 1:2–10; The Letters to the Thessalonians (AncB 32B; New York: Doubleday, 2000) viii; but see the slightly different definition on 103.
“the third heaven” and “Paradise” in 2 Cor 12:2–4. We also learn about “the wrath that is coming” and that Jesus will rescue those who believe in him from the consequences of that wrath. The formulation “the wrath that is coming” suggests that this wrath is not merely a matter of the punishment of sinners in this life by illness and other misfortunes. It also implies that it is not simply a matter of an individual judgment immediately after death followed by an afterlife designed to deprive or punish sinners. It suggests rather a public, cosmic event, the definitive divine Visitation of the last days in which the righteous will be blessed and the wicked punished.6

It is noteworthy that 1 Thess is addressed to Gentiles and that it contains no evidence of Jews in the community. The nature of the audience explains why Paul emphasized wrath in his discussion of the final divine intervention. Paul shared the widespread Jewish view that Gentiles as such are sinners. This perspective is clearly expressed in his indictment of Gentiles in Rom 1:18–327 and in his statement in Gal 2:15, “We are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners.” In Rom 1, the major Gentile sin is defined as idolatry. Similarly, the third book of the Sibylline Oracles, a Jewish work disguised as prophetic speech of the Sibyl, condemns Gentiles for their idolatry and says that they will seek someone to rescue them when the great wrath of God comes upon them.8

We also learn from 1 Thess that Paul considered himself to be involved on the side of God and Christ in a struggle against Satan. This is evident from his remark in 2:17–18 that he wanted to come to see them again face to face, more than once, but Satan thwarted each attempt. He alludes to the activity of Satan again in 3:5 when he

---

6 The thanksgiving extends from 1:2 to 3:13; the first unit, 1:2–10, concerns the conversion of the Thessalonians; Malherbe, Thessalonians viii. Cf. Paul’s description of the “day of wrath” (ἡμέρα ὀργῆς) in Rom 2:5–11.