The Transformation of Paul’s Apocalyptic Ideas in the First Two Centuries

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I am happy to dedicate this essay to Christopher Rowland, a pioneer in the history of reception of biblical texts, colleague, and friend.

Paul’s Apocalyptic Ideas

Paul’s apocalyptic expectations are reflected in his earliest letter, 1 Thessalonians. He and his audience expect the coming of Jesus from heaven, God’s son, whom he raised from the dead (1:10, 3:13). The outcome of this advent will be the rescue of them all “from the wrath that is coming” (1:10). Rather than encountering wrath, they expect to participate in the kingdom and glory of God (2:12). Turning from idols to serve the living and true God (1:9), accepting the proclamation of the gospel (1:5–6), leading a life worthy of God (2:12, 4:3b–7), faith (3:2–5), love (3:6, 12; 4:9–10), and holiness (3:13; 4:3a, 7; 5:23) are the prerequisites for escape from “wrath” and sharing in the kingdom and glory of God. This escape is equivalent to “being saved” (2:16; cf. 5:9) and to being found “blameless” before God at the coming of the Lord Jesus (3:13; cf. 5:23). The latter formulation seems to imply an eschatological judgment.

In the hortatory part of the letter, Paul elaborates on the coming of the Lord (4:13–18). In relation to what he taught the Thessalonians when he was present with them, a new element is the idea that “God will bring with Jesus, through him, those who have fallen asleep” (4:14), that is, the believers who have died. When the Lord descends from heaven, the first thing that will happen is the resurrection of the dead “in Christ” (4:16). Then the believers still alive at the time “will be caught up in clouds together with [those who have just been raised] to meet the Lord in the air; and thus we will always be with the Lord” (4:17). Strictly speaking, Paul does not say explicitly where the believers will be with the Lord forever. The description, however, of the living believers being snatched upward to meet the Lord in clouds and in the air suggests that they will be together in the heavenly world. The passage is, however, ambiguous, and open to other interpretations. Finally, Paul reminds his audience that, “the day of the Lord comes like a thief in the night” (5:2). The “day of the Lord” here is presumably the day on which the Lord comes. This remark seems to
exclude the idea that signs and wonders will precede the coming of the Lord, by which the audience will know that it is near.

The same basic scenario is reflected in 1 Corinthians 15. Steadfast faith in the gospel proclaimed to the audience is necessary to be “saved,” presumably at the coming of the Lord (15:2–3). Faith in the good news that God raised Jesus from the dead is an essential element here as well (15:14–18). Similarly, the resurrection of the dead is “through” Jesus Christ (15:21–22). The believers who have died will rise at the coming of Christ (15:23). A new element in relation to 1 Thessalonians is that Christ rules (as Messiah) until “the end,” when he will hand the kingdom over to God (15:24–25). The final state is a time when God will be “all in all” (15:28). This is a pregnant phrase, which Paul does not interpret except to affirm that every thing and every personal being, including Christ, will be subordinate to God at that time (15:25–28). Teaching about a general resurrection is not explicit. It may be implied in the statement that the last enemy to be abolished is death. This hypothesis is supported by the remark that all human beings will be made alive in Christ (15:22).

Paul pays particular attention to the question what kind of body the dead will have when they rise (15:35–57). He emphasizes the discontinuity between the earthly body and the resurrected body (15:36–44). He contrasts the earthly body with the spiritual body, which is apparently a kind of heavenly body (cf. 15:44 with 15:40). He also affirms that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God (15:50). This whole discussion seems to imply that those who rise in Christ at his coming will be with him in the heavenly world. This conclusion is supported by another new element in 1 Corinthians 15 in comparison with 1 Thessalonians, namely, the idea that those alive at the coming of Christ will be “changed” (15:51–52). The reason seems to be the widespread idea that earthly bodies do not belong in heaven. Thus what is perishable must become imperishable (15:53–54). The change is necessary so that those still alive may ascend with Christ into heaven and be with him forever. Once again, however, this conclusion is not stated explicitly, so Paul’s teaching can be interpreted in other ways.

The reading of 1 Corinthians 15 offered here seems also to be implied in Philippians. Paul has not yet received or acquired the resurrection from the dead (3:11–12). He associates this prize with “the upward call of God through Christ Jesus” (3:14). Paul also contrasts the earthly-mindedness of his rivals with the

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1 For an argument that Paul modified his teaching about resurrection in response to popular philosophical objections on the part of some of the Corinthians, see Adela Yarbro Collins, “The Otherworld and the New Age in the Letters of Paul” in T. Nicklas et al., eds., Other Worlds and Their Relation to This World: Early Jewish and Ancient Christian Traditions (JSJSup 143; Leiden: Brill, 2010) 189–207.