A PLEA FOR
THOROUGHGOING ESCHATOLOGY

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After reviewing the nineteenth century's quest for the historical Jesus, Albert Schweitzer believed that the honest scholar faced two alternatives: thoroughgoing skepticism or thoroughgoing eschatology. The historical Jesus of future criticism, he wrote, "will be a Jesus, who was Messiah, and lived as such, either on the ground of a literary fiction of the earliest Evangelist, or on the ground of a purely eschatological Messianic conception."1 Schweitzer, like his own Jesus, was not a very good prophet. The twentieth century has indeed had its Wredeian skeptics, as well as many who have, happily or not, embraced thoroughgoing eschatology. But others have resisted Schweitzer's dichotomy.

There continue to be conservative critics who accept the historicity of the canonical Gospels and yet do not acknowledge the humiliating discovery that Jesus proclaimed the divinely wrought near end of the world.2 Some of them wield the tools of the historical-critical method to subtract only a few trifles from the Synoptic tradition, whereas others more courageously lop off a few pieces here or there. But they all end up with a friend and supporter, not an apocalyptic Jesus who is to their theology a stranger and an enigma.3

2 Herein I use "end" to indicate not a literal termination (cf. Ps 102:25-26) but a transformation to an idyllic state in which God's will is done on earth as in heaven—in other words, an end to things as they are now. This state may be thought of either as a sort of millennial kingdom (cf. Rev 20:4; 4 Ezra 7:27-31) or like the supramundane rabbinic "world to come." In either case its inauguration would be marked by extraordinary events—such as the ingathering of the twelve tribes and the establishment of a new or glorified temple—and changes in nature. Cf. Jubilees 23; 4 Ezra 7:25-27; 2 Baruch 73; Papias in Irenaeus, Adv. haer. 5.33.3-4. My own guess is that for Jesus, as for the authors of 1 Enoch 6-36, 37-71; Sibylline Oracles 3; and Psalms of Solomon 17, the eschatological promises were to find their realization not in a completely new world but in a transformed world, an old world made new, in which the boundaries between heaven and earth would begin to disappear, in which evil would be defeated, and (perhaps) in which men and women would be "like angels in heaven" (Mark 12:25).—As for the word "near," it indicates that Jesus expected his hearers to see the "end" of which he spoke. Further specification is unwarranted.
Something similar is true of more radical critics, who sort through the early sources to discover which sayings and events should be related to the historical Jesus and which should not be. Often they too tell a tale far different from Schweitser's. One thinks for instance of the contributions of Marcus Borg, Burton Mack, and John Dominic Crossan. Their Jesus, like the portrait painted by Robert Funk's Jesus Seminar, is no proclaimer of a near end but rather—although the two things are not conflicting—an aphoristic sage.

A few have even suggested that this new Jesus, who often shows an unsuspected cousinship with the Cynics, is fast becoming the object of some sort of consensus. This essay, however, shall urge that Schweitzer, despite his failure to see the future, was right about one thing: either the prophet from Nazareth was a man whose imagination dwelled in a world akin to the imaginative worlds of the old Jewish apocalypses or perhaps about him we know next to nothing.

I. Four Arguments

1. Walter Schmithals wrote:

The primary and fundamental utterance of the community that looked back upon Jesus' activity was "He is risen," and this confession shows with sufficient clarity that the expectation of the resurrection of the dead as a now imminent eschatological act must have been an essential object of hope of the disciples who followed Jesus during his time on earth.

The logic compels. It would require Herculean doubt to disbelieve that several pre-Easter followers of Jesus, soon after his crucifixion, declared, "God raised Jesus from the dead." Upon this fact the canonical Gospels, traditions in Acts, and the letters of Paul all concur. If we do not know this, we do not know anything.

__imagine that "apocalyptic language" just "invests ordinary events with their total significance," so that the "bizarre idea" that Jesus expected "the world to come to an end . . . should now be given a pauper's funeral."


What follows? To proclaim a man’s vindication by τήν ἀνάστασιν τήν ἐκ νεκρῶν (Acts 4:2) was to proclaim the occurrence of an eschatological event to claim that in one individual God had “already accomplished the resurrection process expected at the end of time.”

But why associate a man’s post-mortem vindication with language traditionally reserved for the consummation, language implying the onset of the end? Why not rather announce the heavenly vindication of Jesus’ spirit, or declare his future resurrection from the dead, or interpret Jesus as an angel who (as in docetic circles) only appeared to die before he returned to heaven, or use terms associated with the assumptions of earlier Jewish heroes such as Enoch and Moses and Elijah?


There is no evidence that Christians ever understood Jesus’ resurrection to be a return to earthly life (contrast Mark 6:14–16; John 11:38–44). His resurrection was not a resuscitation performed by a mighty miracle worker (cf. 1 Kgs 17:17–24; Heb 11:35); it was instead always conceived as entrance into heavenly glory.


Cf. the formulation in Jub. 23:31 (where righteous spirits rejoice even as their bones rest in the earth); also 1 Enoch 91:10; 92:3; 103:3–4; T. ABR. A 20:8–14; B 7; T. Job 12:10; 53:7, 11.

11 Cf. LXX Job 42:17a, according to which the blessed Job will be raised from the dead.


One very good answer is that several influential individuals came to their post-Easter experiences with certain categories and expectations antecedently fixed, that they already envisaged the general resurrection to be imminent. This would explain why Jesus' vindication was interpreted not as an isolated event but as the onset of the consummation. As anyone familiar with the sociology of messianic movements knows, every effort is usually made to clothe the unfolding of events with material already to hand. Schweitzer saw the truth: "the psychologist will say that the 'resurrection experiences,' however they may be conceived, are only intelligible as based upon the expectation of the resurrection, and this again as based on references of Jesus to the resurrection."

2. Whereas only a very few scholars have, to my knowledge, urged that primitive Christian congregations were not characterized by an eschatological fervor, one could probably cite a hundred to the contrary. Let Bultmann suffice: "the earliest Church regarded itself as the Congregation of the end of days." It is also, for good reason, a commonplace that John the Baptist's public speech featured frequent allusion to the eschatological judgment, conceived as imminent. According to Matthew 3 and Luke 3, he warned people "to flee from the wrath to come," asserted that "even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees," prophesied a baptism "with fire," solemnly affirmed that the winnowing fan of judgment was about to clear the threshing floor, and spoke of him "who is coming after me." The direction of all this is near to

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14 It is no objection that discovery of an empty tomb (assuming for the sake of discussion its historicity), combined with visions of a glorified Jesus, must have generated resurrection language Christians could have proclaimed that Jesus' spirit had been vindicated even though his body had been stolen or misplaced in a pile for criminals. "Resurrection" was an "interpretation" (Willi Marxsen), or a "deduction" (Ulrich Wilckens), not an objective or inevitable description of historical circumstances.

15 Schweitzer, Quest, 345. The three objections of Vögtle (Wie kam es zum Osterglauben? 110–12) — that the earliest kerygmatic formulas refer only to Jesus' isolated resurrection and not to the general course of salvation history; that whereas Jewish sources emphasize that the general resurrection will take place on "the earth," "the earth" plays no role in the traditions about Jesus' resurrection; and that the premature resurrection of one individual is foreign to Jewish tradition — do not persuade. The first objection overlooks a common and very natural reading of Rom 1:3–4 (see n. 7), whereas the other two neglect the impact circumstances—in this case Jesus' bodily absence from "the earth" and the fact that he alone had appeared in visions to others—can have upon religious beliefs. History alters ideology. One might as well imagine that early Christians could not have proclaimed Jesus to be the Messiah because his crucifixion contradicted all Jewish expectation.

16 Note S. J. Patterson, "Q: The Lost Gospel," BibRev 9/5 (1993) 38: "Christianity may not have begun as an apocalyptic sect after all."

unambiguous. For Jesus himself was baptized by John. Further, we should not doubt that Jesus had very positive things to say about his baptizer. Obviously then there must have been significant ideological continuity between the two men. So to reconstruct a Jesus who did not anticipate a near end entails an unexpected discontinuity not only between him and certain early Christians but also between him and John the Baptist, that is, a discontinuity with the movement out of which he came as well as with the movements that came out of him. Is presumption not against this?

Crossan resists the inference from Jesus’ relationship to John by citing Gos. Thom. 46 = Luke 7:28 = Matt 11:11: “which one of you comes to be a child will be acquainted with the kingdom and will become superior to John,” or “the least in the kingdom of God is greater than he.” The complex supposedly shows us that if—as Crossan admits—Jesus once shared and “even defended” John’s “apocalyptic” vision, he must later have “changed his mind.” It suffices to respond that Crossan’s interpretation of Gos. Thom. 46 par. is—as a perusal of recent commentaries reveals—very far from obvious. So one can hardly be chided for preferring the plain and unqualified endorsement of John’s message ascribed to Jesus in Luke 7:26 = Matt 11:9: “What did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet.”

Borg for his part resists the inference about Jesus drawn from the expectation of the early churches by crediting that expectation “to a deduction based upon the Easter event itself. . . . To some within the church, the fact that a resurrection had occurred was an indicator that the general resurrection must be near; Christ was the ‘first fruits’ of those to be raised from the dead.” This seemingly sensible suggestion, however, leaves the big question unanswered: Why did anyone ever proclaim a resurrection in the first place? “The fact that a resurrection had occurred” is an infelicitous formulation. How can one here speak of a “fact”? The declaration of Jesus’ resurrection was not the due recording of clear observation but rather a creative act of interpretation. So what

18 Cf. Crossan, Jesus, 235: “John’s message was an announcement of imminent apocalyptic intervention by God.”
20 It is telling that, in presenting for our consideration a Cynic-like Jesus, F. G. Downing feels moved to deny the historicity of Jesus’ baptism by John (Jesus and the Threat of Freedom [London: SCM, 1987] 154). On the other hand, it is also true that, according to Matt 11:16–19 par. and a few other sayings, Jesus did consciously differ from John on some matters.
21 Cf. Koester, “Jesus the Victim,” 14: “were the eschatological schemata of his early followers subsequently assigned to a Jesus whose original ministry and message did not contain any eschatological elements? That seems very unlikely. Within a year or two of Jesus’ death, Paul persecuted the followers of Jesus because of their eschatological proclamation. That leaves precious little time in which the followers of a noneschatological Jesus could have developed an entirely new eschatological perspective without a precedent in the preaching and actions of Jesus.”
22 Crossan, Jesus, 237.
made that particular interpretation the favored one among certain people? Borg himself observes that "resurrection' (as distinct from resuscitation) in Judaism was an event expected at the end of time." Given this and the observations already made, does not the post-Easter, eschatological interpretation of Jesus' vindication (and death) evidence a closely related pre-Easter eschatological expectation?

The criterion of dissimilarity might supply a third means of resisting my inference: we cannot safely attribute to Jesus eschatological enthusiasm if his followers were eschatological enthusiasts. But this is unsound reasoning. The criterion of dissimilarity—about which more later—easily overextends itself, and, if useful at all, can only establish what Jesus might have said, not what he did not say. To reduce things to absurdity: Who would argue that Jesus may have been an atheist because John the Baptist and early Christians believed in God?

3. The Synoptics contain explicit statements regarding the temporal proximity of the eschatological kingdom of God:

Mark 9:1: "Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God come with power."

Mark 13:30: "Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away before all these things take place."

Matt 10:23: "When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next; for truly, I say to you, you will not have gone through all the towns of Israel, before the Son of man comes."

The Synoptics also contain parables admonishing people to watch for the coming of the Lord or of the Son of man, pronouncements of eschatological woes on contemporaries, and miscellaneous traditions that alike announce or presuppose that the final fulfillment of God's saving work is nigh.

Three observations. First, even if not a single one of the sayings just referred to is dominical, or even if every one can be construed so as not to imply a near end, that scarcely suggests what Jesus himself did or did not teach. That some Christians believed one thing is not (to repeat) any reason

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24 Ibid., 96.
25 It might be urged that whereas the early church expected the return of Jesus, that expectation was foreign to Jesus himself, so the continuity is broken. But this is hardly decisive: one only expects from the post-Easter period a christological reformation of earlier beliefs.
26 In one thing at least I concur with B. S. Crawford, "Near Expectation in the Sayings of Jesus," JBL 101 (1982) 227: "There can be no question as to the meaning of these texts. Each is a straightforward announcement of the imminently impending eschatological consummation."
to surmise that Jesus believed something else. Was Jesus such a poor teacher? On the other hand, if only one of the sayings cited was uttered by Jesus, then Schweitzer was probably in truth’s vicinity.

Second, it is possible that the Jesus tradition was so amorphous or devoid of character that it could not resist the wholesale importation of foreign ideas into it. But it is also possible — and, many would add, likely — that Christians felt free to compose eschatological sayings and add them to the tradition because they thought them in accord with Jesus’ message.30

Third, where are the logia, canonical or not, which explicitly contradict belief in a near end? Mark 9:1, understood as Dodd understood it,31 or Luke 17:20–21, read as Perrin read it,32 or Gos. Thom. 46, construed as Crossan construes it, would count as such. But Dodd’s interpretation — so much influenced by the Fourth Gospel33—has been roundly rejected; Perrin’s explication is just one of several, and not the most persuasive;34 and concerning Gos. Thom. 46 par. there is nothing but exegetical disagreement. So we are left with this: if Jesus plainly rejected belief in an impending judgment, the tradition failed to register the fact plainly.

This means that we are not confronted by two conflicting sets of sayings, one offering a near expectation, one denying such, between which sets we are compelled to choose. On the contrary, those who reject the eschatological Jesus must replace him with a figure fashioned from exegetical inferences, not straightforward utterances.

4. There are many texts, from various proveniences, which associate the death and resurrection of Jesus with what are on the surface eschatological events. According to Matt 27:51–53, when Jesus died there was strange darkness (cf. Amos 8:9–10), a strong earthquake (cf. Zech 14:5), and a resurrection of the dead (cf. Ezekiel 37; Zech 14:4–5). According to John’s Gospel, Jesus’ death was “the judgment of the world” (12:31) and brought down the reign of Satan (12:31; 16:11). According to Paul, Jesus was “the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep” (1 Cor 15:23)—the meaning of which has been rightly drawn out by James D. G. Dunn:

[The metaphor of the firstfruits] denotes the beginning of the harvest, more or less the first swing of the sickle. No interval is envisaged between the first fruits and the rest of the harvest. With the first fruits dedicated the

30 Relevant here is J. D. G. Dunn, “Prophetic T-Sayings and the Jesus Tradition: The Importance of Testing Prophetic Utterances within Early Christianity,” NTS 24 (1978) 175–98. Dunn argues that the problem of false prophecy may have discouraged early Christians from admitting to the Jesus tradition items which did not cohere with what was already in that tradition.
33 According to reliable oral tradition, Dodd once confessed that it was the Fourth Gospel which first suggested to him “realized eschatology.”
harvest proceeds. The application of this metaphor to the resurrection of Jesus and the gift of the Spirit expresses the belief that with these events the eschatological harvest has begun; the resurrection of the dead has started. . . .

Given its attestation in Paul, the Synoptics, and John, the habit of associating the end of Jesus with eschatological themes must go back to very early times. What explains it? Again the most natural answer is that, while he was yet with them, followers of the historical Jesus—as Luke 19:11 clearly tells us—"supposed that the kingdom of God was to appear immediately." That is to say, in accord with a well-known scenario; they foresaw suffering before vindication, tribulation followed by resurrection. So when Jesus was, in the event, crucified and then seen alive again, his followers, instead of abandoning their eschatological hopes, did what we would expect them to do: they sought to correlate expectations with circumstances, to color historical experiences with the dyes of eschatology. This is why they believed that in Jesus' end the end of the world had begun to unfold.

The arguments just introduced construct a mighty fortress with four strong walls. They are the stronger because there is not one indubitably authentic and crystal clear saying that betrays what the Germans call a Fernerwartung. That certain followers of Jesus proclaimed his resurrection soon after the crucifixion, that Jesus praised the Baptist and was in turn praised by people who proclaimed a near end, that portions of the Jesus tradition came to presuppose eschatological imminence, and that Jesus' passion and vindication were associated with eschatological motifs—these indisputable facts illumine each other because they all have the very same explanation: Jesus and those around him held hopes close to those attributed to him by Johannes Weiss and Albert Schweitzer.

In coming to this conclusion one need not, let it be emphasized, pass judgment on the authenticity of a single logion. Even if every saying about the Son of man and the kingdom of God is attributed to Christians, the force of the argument is not lessened in the least.

37 Thus, as Schweitzer urged, the passion predictions may not be utterly ex eventu; cf. C. K. Barrett, Jesus and the Gospel Tradition (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1968) 35–67.
38 See further Allison, End. There other explanations of so-called "realized eschatology" are reviewed and rejected.
39 According to Borg, "the primary foundation of the eschatological Jesus is the 'coming Son of man' sayings" ("Temperate Case," 86). This may be a fair generalization about Bultmann and his school, but it does not address my case. Nor does the complaint of Crawford ("Near Expectation," 226) apply: "Over the years those who have found a near expectation in the preaching of Jesus have generally based their case either in whole or in part on" Mark 9:1; 13:30; or Matt 10:23.
II. Three Objections

1. According to Borg, apart from the coming Son of man sayings “there is very little in the gospels which would lead us to think that Jesus expected the end of the world soon.”\(^{40}\) so “with the disappearance of the coming Son of man sayings as authentic words of Jesus, the primary exegetical reason for thinking that Jesus expected the imminent end of the world disappears.”\(^{41}\) Ever since Schweitzer, “both ‘imminence’ and ‘end of the world’ have remained connected to the kingdom,” because he “made the coming of the Son of man sayings central to understanding the mission of Jesus.”\(^{42}\) But “the notion that the kingdom of God is the imminent eschatological kingdom is without foundation in the kingdom texts. The element of imminence has to be imported from the coming Son of man sayings.”\(^{43}\) Is this true?

(a) It is reasonable—although of course not necessary—to give temporal content, that is, imminence, to a number of kingdom sayings: Mark 1:15 (“the kingdom of heaven is at hand”); 9:1 (“there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God come with power”); 14:25 (“I shall not drink again of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God”); Luke 10:9 = Matt 10:7 (“the kingdom of heaven is at hand”; cf. Luke 9:2).

(b) “Kingdom (of God)” is (as Borg acknowledges) firmly linked with eschatological imagery in the parables of judgment as well as in other texts (e.g., Mark 14:25; Matt 8:11–12 = Luke 13:28–29).

(c) In ancient Jewish literature “kingdom (of God)” is associated both with imminence and with eschatology proper. T. Moses 10:1;\(^{44}\) Sib. Or. 3:46–48, 767;\(^{45}\) 4Q246;\(^{46}\) 4Q521;\(^{47}\) 1QSb 4:25–26;\(^{48}\) and the Kaddish prayer\(^{49}\) all supply

\(^{40}\) Borg, “Temperate Case,” 87.

\(^{41}\) Ibid., 89.

\(^{42}\) Ibid., 90.

\(^{43}\) Ibid., 91.

\(^{44}\) “And then his [God’s] kingdom shall appear throughout his creation, and then Satan shall be no more, and sorrow shall depart with him.” The context encourages one to hope that this kingdom will come soon.

\(^{45}\) Sib. Or. 3:46–48: “But, when Rome shall rule over Egypt . . . then the mightiest kingdom of the immortal king over men shall appear,” 767: “And then indeed he will raise up his kingdom for all ages.”

\(^{46}\) “His kingdom will be an everlasting kingdom and all his ways in truth. He will judge the earth in truth and all will make peace. The sword will cease from the earth and all provinces will worship him.” For the eschatological interpretation of this text, see J. J. Collins, “The Son of God Text from Qumran,” in From Jesus to John (ed. M. C. De Boer; JSNTSup 84; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993) 65–82.


\(^{48}\) “May you attend upon the service in the Temple of the kingdom and decree destiny in company with the Angels of the Presence.”

\(^{49}\) “May he establish his kingdom in your lifetime and in your days, and in the lifetime of the whole house of Israel, speedily and at a near time.”
Moreover, it seems clear enough that many first-century Jews were indeed "looking for the consolation of Israel," and that this consolation was often conceived of as an eschatological transformation of the world.

(d) Luke 19:11 ("He proceeded to tell a parable, because he was near to Jerusalem, and because they [the disciples] supposed that the kingdom of God was to appear immediately") shows us that at least one contributor to the tradition thought that, before Easter, Jesus' followers expected the kingdom to appear soon — something that did not happen (cf. Luke 24:13–35; Acts 1:6–8). The author of Luke-Acts also knew that Jesus was thought of by some as having been akin to Theudas and Judas the Galilean (Acts 5:35–39); this strongly suggests that "the idea was current in Luke's own day that Jesus had indeed mistakenly expected some form of Jewish restoration in his own lifetime . . . as Judas the Galilean, Theudas, and the Egyptian had done."

(e) The sayings about the kingdom of God cannot be isolated from other sayings ascribed to Jesus; and these proclaim a crisis that can be given eschatological sense, take up scriptural texts that some ancient Jews read as properly eschatological and refer to the defeat of Satan—something traditionally associated with the last things. Moreover, the sayings fail, despite their moral focus, to offer "concrete planning for achieving any sort of change," which circumstance strongly implies that if Jesus "hoped for change at all, he must have relied upon God," that is, "looked for a divine miracle that would be decisive." In line with this, many sayings refer to the last judgment and other

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50 Note also the eschatological uses of "kingdom" in the Aramaic fragments of 4Q554 ("The New Jerusalem").


52 J. A. Trumbower, "The Historical Jesus and the Speech of Gamaliel (Acts 5:35–39)," *NTS* 39 (1993) 507. Trumbower observes: "in looking for a heuristic category for Jesus, we should take seriously the fact that Luke apologetically rejected a categorization of Jesus with these two politico-religious, probably eschatologically focused individuals [Judas and Theudas], and not with Honi the Circle Drawer or with cynic philosophers" (p. 509).


54 Two examples: (1) the beatitudes as spoken by Jesus probably adverted to Isa 61:1ff. (see W. D. Davies and D. C. Allison, Jr., *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to Saint Matthew* [2 vols.; ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988, 1991] 1. 436–39), and Isa 61:1ff. was frequently given eschatological sense (see J. A. Sanders, "From Isaiah 61 to Luke 4," in *Christianity, Judaism, and Other Graeco-Roman Cults* (ed. J. Neusner; 2 vols.; SJLA 12; Leiden: Brill, 1975) 1. 75–106. (2) Luke 12:51–53 = Matt 10:34–36 depends on Mic 7:6, which was widely drawn on to depict the discord of the latter days (as in *m. Sota* 9:15; cf. also *Jub.* 23:16, 19; *1 Enoch* 56:7; 4 Ezra 5:9; 6:24; 2 Bar. 70:3, 7, etc.).


57 Sanders, "Jesus," 11.
eschatological expectations—a fact more rhetorically powerful if the speaker and audience thought of the end as near rather than far. Again one need not defend the authenticity of particular sayings, but only observe that their presence in the tradition tends to move one's thoughts in a certain direction.

(f) It is too much to say that "language about a 'coming Son of man' who would function as advocate or judge at the last judgment is not intelligible in the pre-Easter setting of the ministry." Unintelligible? Many assuredly now assign all the coming Son of man sayings to the post-Easter period; but that is just one critical option, however popular for the moment. Adela Yarbro Collins has in fact recently maintained, with arguments that cannot be derided as uninformed, that Jesus did speak of the coming Son of man. Without either endorsing or rejecting her conclusions here, they can be cited to show that reference to "the disappearance of the coming of the Son of man sayings as authentic words of Jesus" is probably premature. Surely there is here insufficient justification to speak confidently of a permanent result of criticism.

To return to Borg, then: there is much in the canonical Gospels which prods us to think that Jesus expected the end to be soon; and the alleged disappearance of the Son of man sayings does not overthrow this generalization.

2. Recent study of Q has reconstructed hypothetical stages through which the primitive document passed. Moreover, several contributors to the discussion have decided that the earliest, or at least an early, version of Q contained no future Son of man sayings, and that the eschatological pathos present in the Q known to Matthew and Luke was a secondary development. If accepted,

59 Cf. B. F. Meyer, The Aims of Jesus (London: SCM, 1979) 316 n. 40, on the motif of suddenness in the Jesus tradition: "It does seem almost absurd to conceive of an urgent eschatological appeal based on the motif, not of imminent, but simply of sudden, judgment—leaving open the question whether this or some other generation will be surprised by the actual suddenness of its coming."
60 Borg, "Temperate Case,” 96.
62 Meyer, Aims, 245: "On the level of historical-critical interpretation it is hardly possible to excise 'imminence' from Jesus' proclamation." He goes on rightly to speak of "the implicit time limit which pervades the whole [teaching of Jesus]."
this result would be consistent with the theory that it was the Christian tradition alone, without any help from Jesus, that was responsible for the eschatological character of so much in the Gospels. And the noneschatological Gospel of Thomas, if regarded as a primitive, first-century document (so Crossan and several others), could be thought confirmatory.64

For the sake of argument I shall grant (although I do not really believe) that the first Q was indeed bereft of eschatological feeling.65 What follows? Very little. One can readily imagine that the initial compiler of Q had interests different from the compiler of some later edition of Q. But why those first interests, as opposed to later interests, would alone favor the preservation of authentic logia is unclear.66 If we were envisaging a documentary history that spanned generations or centuries, then an earlier contributor would certainly be in a privileged position. Q, however, was opened and closed within, at most,

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64 But Koester rightly observes that “even the Gospel of Thomas presupposes, and criticizes, a tradition of the eschatological sayings of Jesus” (“Jesus the Victim,” 7 n. 17).

65 But again Koester deserves quoting: “The myth of Wisdom is in itself eschatological. The Wisdom of Solomon speaks of a future or transcendental vindication of the rejected righteous people” (“Jesus the Victim,” 7 n. 16). I note that the original or pre-eschatological Q, even as reconstructed by Burton Mack, contained much that can be given an eschatological interpretation. There are sayings in Q-1 that have often been understood to (i) foretell eschatological reversal (Q 6:20b–22; 14:11), (ii) warn of eschatological judgment (Q 6:37a, 38b, 47–49; 12:2), (iii) depict the present as a time of crisis (Q 10:2), and (iv) proclaim the nearness of God’s eschatological kingdom (Q 10:9, 11; cf. 11:2). According to C. M. Tuckett, some of these sayings are “dominated by the eschatological dimension” (“A Cynic Q?” Bib 70 [1989] 369–70).

66 It is also unclear why so many read Q as though it were a systematic theology or worldview. To argue that, because a particular belief did not appear in Q, that particular belief did not appear in the Q community or, if known, was unimportant to its members, is to crawl out not on a limb but on a twig. Q is not an exhaustive presentation of anything. But the argument from silence is seemingly now very popular and is a methodological principle of Mack’s The Lost Gospel: The Book of Q and Christian Origins (New York: Harper & Row, 1993). For example, Mack confidently asserts that “the people of Q . . . were not Christians. They did not think of Jesus as a messiah or the Christ. They did not take his teachings as an indictment of Judaism. They did not regard his death as a divine, tragic, or saving event. And they did not imagine that he had been raised from the dead to rule over a transformed world” (p. 4). At the very best these assertions are possibilities, not established facts. I could just as well contend, without fear of direct refutation, that the author of Pseudo-Phocylides, because he failed to mention Abraham or Isaiah, cared nothing for them, or that Pseudo-Philo thought all history after David theologically inconsequential because the Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum ends with the death of Saul, or that those Dead Sea Scrolls which fail to name the Teacher of Righteousness were composed by sectarians who disputed his prominence, or that the person or group responsible for gathering the infancy traditions behind Matthew 1–2 was uninterested in the adult Jesus, or that, because we have from Arrian only Epictetus’s Diatribai and Encheridion, Arrian was absorbed only by Epictetus’s teachings, not Epictetus’s life (although according to Simplicius Arrian also wrote Epictetus’s biography).
a forty-year period. One might accordingly even proffer that the enlarged version of Q, by virtue of additional, authentic material, resulted in a fuller and less-distorted impression of the historical Jesus.67

Nearly everyone who has said anything about the historical Jesus has used material from Mark, even though Mark appeared later than Q. Scholars have also drawn upon material unique to Matthew and Luke, even though those two Gospels followed after Q and Mark. So it does not seem that the initial state of Q should determine how we settle the issue of Jesus and eschatology. In what other area do we equate the primitive form of Q with the boundaries within which we must find the historical Jesus?

3. Contemporary work on the Jesus tradition has plausibly urged that Jesus was a teacher of subversive wisdom, an aphorist, a creator of sapiential sayings. Moreover, because apocalyptic and wisdom have often been thought of as reflecting different ways of viewing the world (cf. Sirach), it is natural to intuit that if Jesus saw things through the wisdom tradition, he did not also see them through the apocalyptic tradition.68

One can doubt, however, that Jesus the eschatological prophet could not have uttered provocative one-liners and lived partly out of the wisdom tradition. Even if von Rad failed to convince the scholarly world that wisdom supplied "the real matrix from which apocalyptic literature originates,"69 there remain significant connections between wisdom literature and the apocalypses.70 Further, an imminent expectation or strong eschatological interest is combined with wisdom materials in Daniel, the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs, the Synoptics, Paul, James, and the Didache. So why not also Jesus?

67 Cf. Kloppenborg, Formation, 244–45: "To say that the wisdom components were formative for Q and that the prophetic judgment oracles and apophthegms describing Jesus' conflict with 'this generation' are secondary is not to imply anything about the ultimate tradition-historical provenance of any of the sayings. It is indeed possible—indeed probable—that some of the materials from the secondary compositional phase are dominical or at least very old, and that some of the formative elements are, from the standpoint of authenticity or tradition history, relatively young. Tradition history is not convertible with literary history, . . . ."

68 This argument is made by Borg in Jesus in Contemporary Scholarship (chapter 4)—although he emphasizes that the difficulty is the combination of a certain type of "wisdom" with a certain type of "apocalyptic." One is reminded of the older protest against Schweitzer: he had to explain away Jesus' ethic as an Interimsethik. But the tradition (accurately or not) sometimes links religio-ethical concerns to eschatology (e.g., Mark 1:14–15; Matt 5:21–26, 27–32; 7:1–2 = Luke 6:37–38; Matt 10:32–33 = Luke 12:8); and Schweitzer affirmed not that the content of Jesus' ethical teaching derived from eschatology, only that the nearness of the end (i) made his imperatives more urgent and (ii) sometimes generated harsh teachings on renunciation. See the clear-headed discussion of R. H. Hiers, Jesus and the Future (Atlanta: John Knox, 1981) 50–61.


Such would be no more surprising than the discovery that the Qumran sectarians concerned themselves both with detailed community rules as well as with detailed eschatological visions. Do not both the subversive and often unconventional wisdom of the Jesus tradition and near eschatological expectation in any case function similarly, namely, to undo the status quo?

III. Methodological Problems

The main arguments in this essay are arguments from continuity: because this or that characterized some portion of early Christian discourse, one should posit a related this or that in the pre-Easter period. One wonders whether the eschatological Jesus has not lost much of his immediate appeal because application of the criterion of dissimilarity is now a reflex action. We are instantly cynical of almost all significant continuity between Jesus and the early churches, and we intuit that if early Christians held a particular conviction, then Jesus probably did not. But is this not a very strange intuition? Could one not plausibly intuit just the opposite: that if early Christians held a particular conviction, then that is some reason for asking whether Jesus held it too?

Despite the great differences in appearance, the frog was once a tadpole: the one thing evolved into the other. So too with the pre- and post-Easter communities: notwithstanding the obvious differences, genuine continuity cannot be denied. How can we forget that some of the early Christian leaders were followers of the historical Jesus? They did not die and rise with him. Even if we cannot decide what exactly to assign to Jesus and what to the churches, the Easter gulf is probably a modern mirage. Jesus made early Christianity into what it was just as much as or more than early Christianity made Jesus into what he was not. The primitive communities, although orphans in much recent scholarship, were not like Melchizedek, without father or mother or genealogy.

Perhaps the impulse to wield the sword of dissimilarity comes from our Cartesian brains: we seek certainty. Descartes’ method of obtaining this, of slaying the demon of doubt, goes under the name of foundationalism. Descartes located a foundation stone (the cogito) and then set upon it allegedly indubitable item of knowledge after allegedly indubitable item of knowledge.

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71 I shall ignore another objection to my thesis, namely, that a literal reading of eschatological language fails to understand its metaphorical functions. See esp. G. B. Caird, The Language and Imagery of the Bible (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1980) 243–71. Discussion of this subject would occupy too much space, and I have answered Caird elsewhere. See End of the Ages, 84–90. I observe, however, that Caird’s hermeneutical program even eliminates a near expectation from Daniel and Mark 13. I can no more accept this result than I can suppose that Montanism and Sabbteanism were devoid of eschatological enthusiasm.

72 To be fair, I recognize that the criterion of dissimilarity plays a lesser role in the work of Borg and Crossan than in that of others.
He built his house upon the rock, so that when the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat upon that house, it would not fall, because it had been founded on the rock.

NT scholars have adopted an analogous method for reconstructing Jesus. The criterion of dissimilarity has supplied the foundation stones, that is, the items of supposedly indubitable knowledge. Then the criterion of consistency has allowed the building to be raised, finished, and decorated.

But foundationalism no longer rules philosophy, and its failure in NT studies is patent from our inability to quit disagreeing with each other. This need not mean that we must become Feyerabendian cynics. Surely we can offer decent reasons for preferring one paradigm over another (wherefore these arguments). Still, there is just no certainty, and no one method for success; and it is untrue that no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, the criterion of dissimilarity. We have been captive to its false promise of objectivity. Historians are artists. Our task requires intuition, analogy, metaphor, and imagination—things that cannot be reduced to a method.73

Even if foundationalism were defensible, the criterion of dissimilarity could not be our cogito. Not only does it fail to give us what was characteristic as opposed to what was supposedly unique, but its application presupposes that we know far more about both first-century Christianity and first-century Judaism than we do.74 Further, the criterion of coherence is perhaps equally problematic. Religion is not always the breeding ground of acute logic; and eschatology, as Rudolf Otto reminded us, is essentially irrational.75 The splendor of vision can obscure the clarity of thought. R. H. Charles’s dissection of Revelation and of several Jewish apocalypses into various and contradictory compositional stages was based on his supposed ability to divine discrepancies, but Charles was all too often utterly wrong. For our modern ways of thinking are not the ancient ways. One can only imagine how the Pauline epistles would fare were they thought to be the outcome of an oral tradition, for many inconsistencies have been alleged to inhabit them.76 Is the common conviction that Jesus must have been consistent perhaps a relic from traditional christological dogma? Even Kant has been accused of contradicting himself. Why suppose that Jesus was immune from the appearance of such?

The answer may be that we have nothing else. But we do have sociological continuity, which enables us to argue backwards, from later communities to

76 See esp. H. Räisänen, Paul and the Law (WUNT 29; Tubingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1983).
early communities, from effect to cause. One must admit that a religion may indeed utterly abandon its founder. The distance between Buddha (or early Buddhism) and Pure Land Buddhism is immense. Still, the relatively short chronological span between Jesus and the early traditions about him should enable us to draw some reasonable inferences.

Whatever be thought of contemporary methods and plain historical probability, one thing is manifest: the criterion of dissimilarity has unfairly eliminated eschatological elements from the Jesus tradition. Apparent examples appear in the work of Norman Perrin; and because of his manifest influence upon so many contemporary writers on Jesus, they merit examination.

Perrin himself was aware that, unless one presupposes that Jesus agreed with Jews and Christians about nothing at all, the criterion of dissimilarity can only pronounce in favor of authenticity, not against it: its logic can only validate items, not exclude them. So Perrin wrote:

We should like to point out that we are not . . . arguing in a circle.\(^{77}\) If we had used our criterion of dissimilarity to deny the authenticity of the apocalyptic Son of man sayings, then it could have been urged that we were using a criterion of dissimilarity to define the teaching of Jesus and then making a big thing of the dissimilarity! But, in fact, the apocalyptic Son of man sayings are to be rejected, not only on the basis of the criterion of dissimilarity, but because they do not survive the enquiry into the history of the tradition. So we are entitled to call attention to this radical dissimilar aspect of the teaching of Jesus.\(^ {78}\)

One is unsure that this defense endures cross examination. Perrin (against Bultmann, Tödt, and Colpe) denied the genuineness of Luke 17:23–24 = Matt 24:26–27 because “expression of a Christian hope in commonplace apocalyptic terminology is a characteristic of the evangelical tradition, not of Jesus.”\(^{79}\) But this just presupposes what remains to be shown, that Jesus neither adopted “commonplace apocalyptic terminology” nor shared “a Christian hope.”

Perrin’s treatment of Luke 17:26–27 and Mark 13:30 was similar. He rejected the former because (i) it is “testimony to the developing tradition of the Church”\(^{80}\) and (ii) the other Son of man sayings are Christian creations. But are these two judgments not simply restatements of the criterion of dissimilarity? Why not rather adopt honest agnosticism?

Mark 13:30 was dismissed for this reason:

\(^{77}\) Crawford is correct (“Near Expectation,” 231): the use of the criterion of dissimilarity “entails a certain amount of circular reasoning which runs the risk of becoming viciously circular. Individual sayings are judged authentic or inauthentic according to the degree to which they express a certain originality over against the tendencies of Judaism and the early church. At the same time, the total picture of Jesus emerging from this process is itself a gauge for deciding the authenticity of the individual sayings.”

\(^{78}\) Perrin, Rediscovering, 198–99.

\(^{79}\) Ibid., 196.

\(^{80}\) Ibid., 197.
It is entirely characteristic of apocalyptic in general, and the "these things" clearly refers to the whole sequence of signs, portents and events with which the apocalyptic discourse, Mark 13.5–27, is concerned. Also, it finally answers the question of the disciples which provides the narrative setting for the discourse: 13.3f.

If, however, Mark 13:30 is regarded as originally isolated (so many), again all we are seemingly left with is the criterion of dissimilarity: "it is entirely characteristic of apocalyptic in general."

One could cite other examples of Perrin's strange habit, all too often emulated, of wielding the criterion of dissimilarity as a tool of excision. But the point is made. The criterion of dissimilarity, although it should not take away Schweitzer's Jesus, has unfortunately often done so. It did so for Perrin, and it has done so for others. Yet, regarding certain eschatological issues, surely Jesus may have been at one with many Christians as well as Jews—just as the authors of the various apocalypses, although they produced very different works, agreed on much. So if we can really do no better than hack the tradition to bits with the criterion of dissimilarity, we might be wiser to keep the silence of thoroughgoing skepticism.

IV. Conclusion

Albert Einstein wrote:

In our endeavour to understand reality we are somewhat like a man trying to understand the mechanism of a closed watch. He sees the face and the moving hands, even hears its ticking, but he has no way of opening the case. If he is ingenious he may form some picture of a mechanism which could be responsible for all the things he observes, but he may never be quite sure his picture is the only one which could explain his observations. He will never be able to compare his picture with the real mechanism. . . .

And so it is with the Gospels. We now see their faces; but the history beneath them, the history that made them, is out of sight. This is why there are competing stories, each purporting to tell us how things came to be: we are not looking at something that can be explained in only one way. To go back to Einstein, we cannot, so to speak, open the case, check the facts, and quit telling falsehoods.

Some inferences, however, are more credible than others, which means that some scenarios are more believable than others. And with regard to primitive Christianity, scenarios which do without the inference that Jesus proclaimed imminent eschatological judgment and redemption are less plausible than those that do otherwise.

My verdict is indeed that this conclusion is very close to obvious, and nothing in this essay is very remarkable, for there is nothing very remarkable

81 Ibid., 200.
left to say concerning what Jesus thought about matters eschatological. We are unhappily reduced to performing again and again the historical-critical symphonies composed by Weiss and Schweitzer.

Perhaps this is one reason the eschatological Jesus has been put to death so often—by C. H. Dodd, by T. Francis Glasson, by John A. T. Robinson, by Eta Linnemann, by George B. Caird, by Marcus Borg, by John Dominic Crossan. Scholarship (not to mention the scholarly journal) forsakes the tedium of the familiar. Novelty tempts because ennui threatens.

Another reason, of course, is that the eschatological Jesus is theologically troubling; and if the practice of preferring those explanations farthest removed from traditional Christian belief is a failing of some within our profession, an equal or greater number within the guild are probably guilty of just the opposite practice, so that the theological wish has all too often become the parent of the alleged historical fact. The truth, however, is like God: we can run from it, but it is always there. I myself do not know what to make of the eschatological Jesus. I am, for theological reasons, unedified by the thought that, in a matter so seemingly crucial, a lie has been walking around for two thousand years while the truth has only recently put on its shoes. But there it is.

82 Cf. Koester, referring not to orthodox Christians but to moderns who still wish to have Jesus on their side: “We are again on the way toward a human Jesus who is just like one of us, one who holds values that are very close to our ideological commitments, a Jesus who is a social reformer and who attacks patriarchal orders, a Jesus who, as a real human person, can stand as an example and inspiration for worthy causes” (“Jesus the Victim,” 7).

83 I should like to thank Marcus Borg, John J. Collins, and W. D. Davies for their critical comments on an earlier draft of this essay.