

Paul and the Apocalyptic Imagination

An Introduction

Ben C. Blackwell, John K. Goodrich, and Jason
Maston

Problematizing Apocalyptic in Pauline Scholarship

Over the course of the last century, the place of apocalyptic has grown increasingly prominent in Pauline studies. Following from Käsemann's now famous dictum that "apocalyptic was the mother of all Christian theology,"¹ it is now almost universally affirmed that Paul had an apocalyptic worldview. As Barry Matlock acknowledged (in fact, protested) some years ago, "'Apocalyptic' interpretation of Paul is, if not a consensus, then certainly a commonplace."² Beyond this basic affirmation, however, there is little consensus regarding what the label

1. Ernst Käsemann, "The Beginnings of Christian Theology," in *New Testament Questions of Today*, trans. W. J. Montague (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969), 82–107, at 102.

2. R. Barry Matlock, *Unveiling the Apocalyptic Paul: Paul's Interpreters and the Rhetoric of Criticism*, JSNTSup 127 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1996), 11.

“apocalyptic” actually suggests about Paul’s theological perspective. Indeed, lying conspicuously behind the employment of common language are many different definitions, and even competing interpretations of Paul’s letters.³ As N. T. Wright remarks, “this term has proved so slippery and many-sided in scholarly discourse that one is often tempted to declare a moratorium on it altogether.”⁴

Since the term is unlikely to disappear from the scholarly vocabulary in the immediate future, what is needed now is a forum for clarifying the nature of apocalyptic language as it is currently being used in relation to Paul. Although a few past publications have sought to justify, clarify, or even discredit the application of “apocalyptic” in Pauline studies,⁵ one problem in the rather recent surge of apocalyptic proposals is that Pauline theologians have often talked past one another. Instead of engaging in meaningful dialogue about the significance of apocalyptic language with the intent of moving toward unified employment, Pauline scholars of various stripes have simply recycled the specialized terminology of their respective theological predecessors, often leaving readers to themselves not only to decode such language, but also to differentiate between its parallel yet dissimilar usages.

In the light of the recent swell of studies on the so-called apocalyptic Paul, as well as the ambiguity that continues to accompany the “apocalyptic” label, this collection of essays aims to give voice to multiple perspectives and to place these alternative viewpoints side by side, so readers can see the similarities and differences firsthand. Moreover, we seek in this volume to further the discussion through additional exploration into the various contexts of apocalyptic discourse as well as through focused study on themes considered to be central to Paul’s apocalyptic imagination.

Before progressing, however, to chapters that expound and explore

3. Ibid., 250: “No doubt everyone who needs the term has an understanding quite suited to his or her purpose.”

4. N. T. Wright, *Paul: In Fresh Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 41.

5. See, e.g., the many contributions of Martinus de Boer (chapter 3, n. 1). See also Matlock, *Unveiling the Apocalyptic Paul*.

the various aspects of this debate, we seek in this introductory chapter to orient the reader to some of the issues involved by presenting a heuristic taxonomy of what we see as two current perspectives on apocalyptic in Paul, as well as some of the historical factors that have led to these paradigms. After sketching the history and key features of these groups, we summarize key questions in the debate and introduce the chapters in this volume.

Perspectives and Paradigms

Many rightly note that “apocalyptic” is a scholarly construct and a shorthand description of a concatenation of particular themes. It is the differing combinations of those themes, together with the nuances of their arrangement, that has led to the multiplicity of perspectives on the apocalyptic nature of Paul’s worldview. But while apocalyptic touches upon a host of theological categories, it is important to pay special attention to three main axes, emphasized to varying degrees by recent contributors to the apocalyptic debate.

The first two are the space–time axes, highlighted in John J. Collins’s important definition of “apocalypse.” According to Collins, “‘Apocalypse’ is a genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework, in which a revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient, disclosing a transcendent reality which is both *temporal*, insofar as it envisages eschatological salvation, and *spatial* insofar as it involves another, supernatural world.”⁶ Although some scholars incorporate additional aspects of Collins’s definition into their study of Paul’s apocalyptic theology, all viewpoints stress both *eschatology*—that is, Paul’s two ages paradigm (temporal/horizontal axis)—and *revelation*—that is, the intersection of heavenly and earthly realms by way of God’s redemptive activity and Paul’s mystical experiences (spatial/vertical axis). Both these axes feature prominently within constructions of Paul’s theology. However, the way they are understood shifts between the paradigms we note below.

6. John J. Collins, “Introduction: Towards the Morphology of a Genre,” *Semeia* 14 (1979): 1–20, at 9 (emphasis added).

Beyond these two axes, scholars are also concerned with how God's revelatory activity affects Paul's *epistemology*. Apocalyptic, according to any account, involves cognition and enables a seer to understand previously hidden realities. But how has God's eschatological revelatory activity affected Paul's deep logic, causing him to view history differently, especially the human plight and the divine solution introduced through Christ and the Spirit? Does Paul view history *prospectively*, that is, does he understand God's redemptive work as the fulfillment of covenant promises made to Israel long ago? Or, does Paul view history *retrospectively*, that is, has God's revelation re-programmed the apostle's thinking such that he interprets the human plight in a radically new way, indeed as one disconnected from Israel's plight and promises and unanticipated in the Jewish Scriptures?

As in other debates, these themes are foregrounded or backgrounded in various ways by scholars as they expound their particular formation of ideas. While they do not always present simple binary options on this topic, scholars tend to adopt one of two general approaches as they describe how Paul's worldview is apocalyptic.⁷ We refer to these approaches as *Eschatological Invasion* and *Unveiled Fulfillment*. For most readers, the first perspective will probably be the most familiar, since it is the one perhaps most often identified as "apocalyptic" in recent Pauline studies. However, the second paradigm also justifiably utilizes this terminology, yet in different ways, and therein lies the debate.

By offering this heuristic binary, we hope to clarify the basis for the distinctive approaches. The taxonomy does not imply that these are mutually exclusive or fixed categories, but the groupings are meant to help identify similar perspectives on Paul and his contemporaries. Also, the taxonomy is not comprehensive. Others, such as Troels Engberg-Pedersen, describe Paul as apocalyptic, but their various approaches fall outside of our primary discussion.⁸ Several previous studies have ably detailed the social, intellectual, and conceptual

7. Cf. Edwin Chr. van Driel "Climax of the Covenant vs Apocalyptic Invasion: A Theological Analysis of a Contemporary Debate in Pauline Exegesis," *IJST* 17, no. 1 (2015): 6–25.

8. Troels Engberg-Pedersen, *Cosmology and Self in the Apostle Paul: The Material Spirit* (Oxford: Oxford

history of scholarship regarding apocalyptic within the field of NT studies, so we will not rehearse all those details here.⁹ Rather, we will briefly note influential figures and explain how the two paradigms relate to our three key axes (*spatial, temporal, and epistemological*).

Eschatological Invasion

Although eschatology came on the stage strongly in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century with Johannes Weiss and Albert Schweitzer, the wider acceptance of Paul as an apocalyptic thinker is a fruit of Karl Barth's separate but parallel work. As the popularity of Barth's view of divine revelation breaking into human history through Christ began to take hold in wider theological circles, it became easier to see this "apocalyptic" perspective in Paul's letters as well.¹⁰ While prominent NT scholars, such as Rudolf Bultmann, were influenced by Barth, it was Bultmann's student Ernst Käsemann who popularized this perspective. Bultmann's emphasis on existentialism (and therefore, anthropology) separated his reading from Käsemann's "apocalyptic" perspective in NT studies, which resisted Bultmann's demythologizing project and stressed the cosmological transformation wrought by God in Christ.¹¹ Käsemann primarily grounded his understanding of apocalyptic on God's act in Christ to establish his Lordship over the world and over the evil powers controlling it. The culmination of God's apocalyptic activity would arrive at Christ's imminent return as the kingdom of God was universalized and Christ's Lordship came to encompass the entire cosmos.¹²

University Press, 2011). However, Joseph Dodson's essay in this volume (chapter 8) does address this topic.

9. Some of the essays in this volume provide abridged discussions: Shaw (chapter 2), Wright (chapter 6), and Ziegler (chapter 10). For additional surveys, see esp. Richard E. Sturm, "Defining the Word 'Apocalyptic': A Problem for Biblical Criticism," in *Apocalyptic and the New Testament: Essays in Honor of J. Louis Martyn*, eds. J. Marcus and M. L. Soards (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1989), 17–48; David Congdon, "Eschatologizing Apocalyptic: An Assessment of the Conversation on Pauline Apocalyptic," in *Apocalyptic and the Future of Theology: With and Beyond J. Louis Martyn*, eds. J. B. Davis and D. Harink (Eugene: Cascade, 2012), 118–36.
10. For the influence of Barth on the topic of Paul and apocalyptic, see Philip Ziegler's essay in chapter 10; and Douglas Harink, *Paul among the Postliberals: Pauline Theology Beyond Christendom and Modernity* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2003).
11. See Congdon, "Eschatologizing Apocalyptic," 119–27.

In the Anglo-American context, the influence of Käsemann's reading was mediated through (and modified by) J. Christiaan Beker and J. Louis Martyn.¹³ Following Käsemann, Beker maintained a focus on the parousia as the key apocalyptic event, though Beker offered a threefold definition of apocalyptic: "(1) historical dualism; (2) universal cosmic expectation; and (3) the imminent end of the world."¹⁴ Martyn, on the contrary, famously shifted the focus of apocalyptic from the second advent of Christ to the first, and particularly the cross, as the apocalyptic fulcrum for Paul's theology. Yet, in continuity with Käsemann (and Barth), the Christ-event serves as God's in-breaking to restore the world.¹⁵

Martinus de Boer, one of Martyn's students, has done as much as anybody to establish a *religionsgeschichtlich* foundation for understanding Paul as an apocalyptic theologian.¹⁶ Having outlined two "tracks" of apocalyptic eschatology operative within early Judaism (cosmological-apocalyptic eschatology vs. forensic-apocalyptic eschatology), de Boer offers these as heuristic models with which to compare Paul's own view of apocalyptic eschatology. Paul's gospel, de Boer argues, consists mainly of the cosmological type of apocalyptic eschatology; in fact, the forensic brand is easily attributed to Paul's conversation partners and/or opponents.¹⁷ A similar reading is attributable to Douglas Campbell, whose work seeks to demonstrate

12. David V. Way, *The Lordship of Christ: Ernst Käsemann's Interpretation of Paul's Theology*, Oxford Theological Monographs (Oxford: Clarendon, 1991), 119–76 (esp. 129).

13. For a longer (but still brief) survey, see N. T. Wright, "Paul in Current Anglophone Scholarship," *ExpT* 123, no. 8 (2012): 367–81, at 372–74. Other Pauline scholars influenced by Käsemann and Martyn who are not mentioned elsewhere in this section include Leander Keck, Beverly Gaventa, Alexandra Brown, and John Barclay.

14. J. Christiaan Beker, *Paul the Apostle: The Triumph of God in Life and Thought* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), 136. Beker expanded this to a fourfold definition in his *Paul's Apocalyptic Gospel: The Coming Triumph of God* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), 29–53: (a) God's self-vindication through faithfulness to his promises; (b) God's universal reign and redemption of the world; (c) the dualistic structures of time and the world; and (d) the imminent arrival of God's kingdom.

15. Martyn's *Galatians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 33a (New York: Doubleday, 1997) is his defining work, and his four essays about "Apocalyptic Rectification" in *Theological Issues in the Letters of Paul* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1997), 85–156, summarize the heart of his argument.

16. See esp. de Boer's extensive bibliography in chapter 3 of this volume.

17. Martinus C. de Boer, *Galatians: A Commentary*, NTL (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2011), 31–35 (cf. 194). De Boer's scheme is crucial also for Martyn's view of Paul and the teachers in Galatia (Martyn, *Galatians*, 97–98n51).

that Paul's gospel consists exclusively of a liberative model of salvation, whereby justification is a non-contractual/unconditional declaration of freedom upon those who are in Christ.¹⁸ Campbell is explicit about his indebtedness to Barth and Martyn, and he follows both quite closely in the second Eschatological Invasion programmatic essay of this volume as he extends a Barthian reading of Paul's "apocalyptic epistemology" (chapter 4).

With this historical overview in mind, we turn now to our three axes for analyzing this scholarly paradigm—the *spatial*, *temporal*, and *epistemological* axes. Our title "Eschatological Invasion" attempts to capture the spatial and temporal nature of God's work in Christ: "eschatological" describes the temporal shift marked out as the two ages, and "invasion" emphasizes the spatial activity of God in Christ (and the Spirit). Regarding the epistemological axis, this paradigm has a decidedly retrospective point of view, which is also conveyed by "invasion," denying, as it does, the notion of a straightforward progression.

Spatial Axis. With regard to the intersection of heaven and earth, those in the Eschatological Invasion group regularly frame the apocalyptic setting as a cosmological battle between evil powers that have usurped God's authority. God's invasive action in Christ (and the Spirit) to establish his control is the center of God's *revelation* (ἀποκάλυψις/ἀποκαλύπτω = "coming on the world scene"; cf. Gal. 3:23).¹⁹ This christological act of God is often framed as unilateral, in the sense that God's agency is set against impotent humans under the subjection of these evil powers. Humans, thus, are part of the disputed territory of the cosmos, and, until Christ liberates them, they remain under the control of evil powers—Sin, Death, Flesh, and (sometimes) Law. The stress is most often on these personified, ontological powers, but at times, demonic beings—"rulers and authorities"—come into view. Ultimately, God transcends the heaven–earth duality through Christ and the Spirit and re-establishes his control of the entire cosmos.

18. Douglas A. Campbell, *The Deliverance of God: An Apocalyptic Rereading of Justification in Paul* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009). See also his discussion in this volume in chapter 4.

19. De Boer, *Galatians*, 79–82.

Temporal Axis. While there has been a shift in the Eschatological Invasion group from a focus on Christ's second advent (Käsemann, Beker) to his first (Martyn, de Boer, Campbell), the Christ-event is seen as determinative for Paul's approach to history. That is, the advent of Christ marks the hinge between two ages, as God's action creates a new reality. In particular, the old age is marked by the control of Death and the Flesh, whereas the new age is marked by life and the Spirit, even as believers experience suffering in their participation in the death of the crucified messiah. As Käsemann explained:

[T]he apostle does not understand history as a continuous evolutionary process but as the contrast of the two realms of Adam and Christ. Pauline theology unfolds this contrast extensively as the struggle between death and life, sin and salvation, law and gospel. The basis is the apocalyptic scheme of the two successive aeons which is transferred to the present. Apparently Paul viewed his own time as the hour of the Messiah's birth-pangs, in which the new creation emerges from the old world through the Christian proclamation. Spirits, powers and dominions part eschatologically at the crossroads of the gospel. We thus arrive at the dialectic of "once" and "now," which is absorbed into anthropology in the form of "already saved" and "still tempted." In the antithesis of spirit and flesh this dialectic determines the cosmos until the parousia of Christ.²⁰

Though some others in this group would differ from Käsemann on where the fulcrum lies—the first, instead of the second advent—he captures the eschatological reserve that characterizes this perspective, even while they emphasize the radical newness inaugurated through Christ.

Epistemological Axis. According to the Eschatological Invasion model, Christ—as the true *revelation* (ἀποκάλυψις) of God—opens up new epistemic possibilities about everything: the world, the human plight, Israel, the law, and so on. Paul's new understanding extends especially to his view of history, which is fundamentally *retrospective*. That is, Paul's narrative logic develops in reverse: having experienced Christ as the divine *solution*, Paul is now able to look *back* and understand the *plight* previously misunderstood or even unknown to him. To be

20. Ernst Käsemann, "Justification and Salvation History in the Epistle to the Romans," in *Perspectives on Paul*, trans. M. Kohl (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971), 60–78, at 67.

sure, Paul's understanding of the present is not determined by his understanding of the climax of a Jewish narrative within a larger story of the human plight. In fact, the reverse is true: Paul's understanding of the human plight, the Jewish narrative, and salvation history is only properly understood in light of Christ—indeed, “in Christ” (2 Cor. 5:16–17). The combination of the christological and pneumatological invasion, together with the radical newness established by Christ, reinforces this retrospective reading strategy. The effect is that discontinuity with the past is often highlighted.²¹

That said, this retrospective reading approach is not simply unidirectional. Within the Eschatological Invasion group exists a diversity of ways to approach the topic of continuity and discontinuity. While many in this group might be described as following a model of retrospective-discontinuity, Richard Hays presents a model of retrospective-continuity. That is, Paul does read backwards (i.e., retrospectively), but with an emphasis on narrative continuity, such that Paul presents God's eschatological activity in continuity with the story of Israel. Accordingly, Hays writes, “I contend that Paul's understanding of the new age in Christ leads him not to a rejection of Israel's sacred history but to a retrospective hermeneutical transformation of Israel's story in light of the story of God's startling redemptive actions. . . . [T]his requires a dramatic rereading of Israel's story, but what is required is precisely a rereading, not a repudiation.”²² Thus, Paul's theological vision is not fully captured by moving from Christ to Israel; rather, his vision begins with Christ but is two way, moving from Christ to Israel and then back to Christ again.²³

Overall, the Eschatological Invasion model has strong affinities with Barthian theology. Indeed, God's revelation in the christological invasion, which thoroughly undercuts human pretense (found in

21. With the de-emphasis upon continuity with the past, scholars at times feel the need to defend themselves against a quasi-Marcionite interpretation of their position.

22. Richard B. Hays, “Apocalyptic *Poiēsis* in Galatians: Paternity, Passion, and Participation,” in *Galatians and Christian Theology: Justification, the Gospel, and Ethics in Paul's Letter*, eds. M. W. Elliott et al. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2014), 200–219, at 204.

23. We see a similar but inverted progression with N. T. Wright, for whom the movement is from plight to Christ and back to plight again (*Paul and the Faithfulness of God* [Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013], 750).

versions of natural theology), reflects several key elements in Barth's theological vision. These echoes may be due to the direct influence of Barth's own work, though not all these scholars explicitly acknowledge a connection to Barth or his hermeneutical approach; in some instances, then, Barth has perhaps been mediated through other authors. In any case, the Eschatological Invasion group, with this shared theological perspective, has, until recently, retained a more direct and widespread influence on Pauline scholarship than our second paradigm, the Unveiled Fulfillment group, to which we now turn.

Unveiled Fulfillment

If the Eschatological Invasion group has been influenced by Barth's theological perspective, the Unveiled Fulfillment group has been impacted—though perhaps to a lesser extent—by Christopher Rowland and the wider interest in reading Paul within a Jewish narrative. Among the many important studies of Jewish apocalyptic literature, Christopher Rowland's *The Open Heaven* has proven especially influential for the Unveiled Fulfillment group.²⁴ In fact, most of those whom we align with this group explicitly acknowledge indebtedness to Rowland's work.

One of Rowland's key arguments in *The Open Heaven* is that the *revelation* (ἀποκάλυψις) of divine mysteries is central to Jewish apocalyptic texts. Therefore, when Pauline interpreters make use of Rowland, they argue that the concept of apocalyptic has as much to do with the disclosure of knowledge about spiritual activity as it does with God's redemptive work itself. The significance of spiritual agents, then, concerns not only their participation in cosmic events (as emphasized in the Eschatological Invasion group), but also their mediation of heavenly knowledge. Thus, scholars in the Unveiled Fulfillment group tend to emphasize Pauline texts that highlight the revelation of Christ himself, Paul's mystical experiences, and the revelatory activity of

24. Christopher Rowland, *The Open Heaven: A Study of Apocalyptic in Judaism and Early Christianity* (New York: Crossroad, 1982 [Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2002]).