THE SOUND OF THE TRUMPET:
PAUL AND ESCHATOLOGY

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At the climax of his great chapter on the resurrection Paul utters these unforgettable words: "Behold, I show you a mystery; we shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump: for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed" (I Corinthians 15.51f., A.V.).

Paul clearly had a definite programme for the future. It is equally clearly a Jewish programme, very different from the ideas about the future which the Corinthian converts from paganism had previously known. Paul here presupposes a concept of the coming of God, or of his messianic representative, for a day of judgment following a general resurrection, which was common in Jewish apocalyptic eschatology, but completely foreign to the Greeks. According to Acts 17.32, when Paul set these ideas before the Athenians they mainly scoffed at him. On the other hand, writing to the converts in Thessalonica at the time of his visit to Athens, Paul commends them because they "turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come" (I Thessalonians 1.9f.). Thus their allegiance to Christ entails service of God in place of the pagan gods, but it also carries with it the expectation of the parousia, the coming of Christ himself at the time of the future judgment.

In a recent study of Paul's theology, J.C. Beker has pointed out the striking fact that Paul resolutely refused to place the Gentile converts under the yoke of the Jewish Law, but at the same time insisted that they should accept the current Jewish apocalyptic

1 A lecture delivered in the John Rylands University Library on Wednesday, 10 October 1984.
eschatology in its Christian form as an essential feature of their new faith. It is true that acceptance of the Christian message necessarily entails acceptance of Jewish faith. It could, then, be argued that Paul's apocalyptic eschatology is just part of the package. But this is by no means a foregone conclusion, because the place of eschatology in the early Christian preaching is itself uncertain, and indeed the matter is constantly disputed by scholars. Beker notes a tendency in modern scholarship to evade, or at least to reinterpret, eschatology, which is as uncongenial to the modern mind as it was to the Greeks. Bultmann's demythologizing, Dodd's theory of realized eschatology, and Kümmel's identification of the future coming of God with the historical ministry of Jesus as Messiah, are all aimed at reducing it. "Neo-orthodoxy in all its forms collapses apocalypticism into Christology" (p. 154).

But if it is the case that Paul was constrained to impose the Christian form of Jewish eschatology on his Gentile converts, it cannot be true that he regarded it merely as the symbolic expression of a truth that could be stated in less offensive words. The attempt to describe Paul as fundamentally a Hellenist, with only a top-dressing of Judaism to his theology, has long since been discredited. The question, then, concerns not his debt to Judaism as such, but the centrality of eschatology in his thought. Is Paul, the former Pharisee, to be bracketed with rabbinic Judaism, in which eschatology is subordinated to the centrality of the Law? E.P. Sanders has shown that this is a false antithesis. It is true that rabbinic Judaism tends to be vague about the time of the future judgment, especially after the disastrous rising of Bar Cochba in A.D. 135. But imminent expectation of the eschatological events is found in various strands of Jewish thought in the time of Jesus and Paul, notably in the preaching of John the Baptist and in the Dead Sea Scrolls.

2 J.C. Beker, *Paul the Apostle* (1980), p. 170: "How is it possible that he who stakes his apostolic career on the claim that the Gentile does not need to become a Jew (through circumcision and Torah) before becoming a Christian nevertheless seems to insist that the Gentile must adopt a Jewish ideology or mentality in order to become a Christian?"


4 The eschatological thrust of the Baptist's message is missing from Josephus, *Antiquities*, xviii. 116-119, which is our only source for his teaching outside the gospels, but this is probably because he thought it unsuitable for his Gentile
One of the main concerns of Beker's study of Paul is to demonstrate that eschatology is fundamental to the whole of Paul's theology. It is not merely an adjunct to his theology, nor is it to be "collapsed into Christology", nor is it to be explained away. This is asserted in spite of the fact that, as Sanders says, "the conventions of apocalypticism had so little influence on him" that they are no more than a common background to his own creative thinking.\(^5\) Paul's major concern is with justification, and for this the central fact is the death of Christ. We "are justified by his [i.e. God's] grace as a gift, through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as an expiation by his blood, to be received by faith" (Romans 3.24f.). However, even such a statement as this can be shown to have an eschatological basis. In the continuation of the same passage it is clear that Paul has a time sequence in mind. The sacrifice of Christ, he says, "was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins" (verse 25). In other words, God had deferred the punishment due for the sins of mankind.\(^6\) The underlying thought is the inevitability of the judgment. Justification is acquittal at the divine judgment, which can be deferred no longer.

Even now it is not clear that Paul is retaining a truly consistent eschatology. He may take the theme of the coming judgment of God as the framework of his theology, but in applying it to God's act in Christ he breaks the mould of the Jewish eschatological scheme. In Romans 1.17 we hear that "the righteousness of God [i.e. his act of acquittal] is revealed through faith for faith," and that must mean revealed now, because the faith to which he refers is faith in Christ. Similarly he uses the present tense in 1.18 with


\(^6\) This temporal sense is lost, or at any rate greatly diminished, if paresin is taken to be a synonym of aphesin (so Käsemann, following Kümmel), so that the two clauses 25b and 26a become almost synonymous. On this view paresin is taken to be a non-Pauline word, contributing to the theory that in these verses Paul is reworking pre-Pauline material. The usual understanding of paresin ("passing over") and the integrity of the passage as a whole as a Pauline composition are defended by C.E.B. Cranfield, Romans (I.C.C.), vol. 1 (1975), ad. loc. For the opposite view see P. Stuhlmacher, "Zur neueren Exegese von Röm 3,24-26", Jesus und Paulus (FS W.G. Kümmel) (1975), pp. 315-333.
regard to the opposite verdict: "The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of men." Finally he can sum up his argument with the statement that "since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." The framework of thought may be eschatological, but the application is to the act of God in Christ, which is already a past event, and the consequence of this act of justification is a state of affairs that appears to allow no room for a future event of comparable significance.

Now if we make Paul's teaching on justification the key to all his theology, we are bound to find that the centre of gravity has shifted to the past. But then this makes an impossible tension between the justification passages and the very different contexts in which Paul is clearly speaking of the future. Paradoxically, it is eschatology which is the common factor between them, because the justification doctrine has eschatology as its logical frame, even if it is not actually referring to the future. But this then leads to the conclusion that it is the eschatology which is fundamental for Paul, and that it is justification which is the secondary feature, however important it may be. In fact, his teaching on justification is constantly misrepresented, because it is taken out of its proper context of the Judaistic controversy. Paul argued for justification by faith, not because he wanted to oppose an idea of earning salvation by good works, but because he absolutely rejected the idea that Gentile converts should be compelled to be circumcised and to undertake the Jewish Law. All his theology, justification included, was based on the Law, interpreted in the light of Christ. His insistence on imposing Jewish eschatology on the Gentile converts was simply part of this. He made no concessions to pagan religion at all. The Law was to him "the oracles of God" (Romans 3.2). But in spite of this, he argued strenuously, and out of the Law itself, that the Gentiles should not be subjected to circumcision and the rites of purity and rules of separation which the Law requires.

The reasons for this are partly theological, but also partly sociological. From the theological point of view the Jewish tradition has had to take on board the act of God in Christ, and this has had a profound effect on it, which can be seen in the way

Paul's justification doctrine has taken the future into the past. But it is also a response to a social situation. The converts in Asia Minor and Greece were drawn mainly from the Gentiles. Though many of them had had contact with the synagogue and joined in its worship, they had been inhibited by social factors from taking the step of becoming Jews. Paul was clear that it would be entirely wrong to force them to do so. But although that was not too risky with those who had had Jewish contacts, it was quite a different matter when converts were made from those who had no such experience. The theological misunderstandings and moral dilemmas which could arise in such circumstances can be seen only too clearly in I Corinthians. Consequently the reputation of Paul's churches caused considerable alarm, and it is easy to understand why Paul was placed under great pressure to insist that the converts should break with their native culture and become Jewish proselytes in order to be Christians.

However, although this controversy was the catalyst of Paul's finest and most original contribution to Christian understanding, it is a mistake to concentrate on it too much. The eschatological passages which are not concerned with justification are much more likely to represent Paul's normal teaching, because they are not tied to a particular controversy. It is true that in most of them Paul is clearing up points of misunderstanding, but that only serves to emphasize the central position of eschatology in his teaching. Paul's earliest letter is I Thessalonians, and we have already seen that the recipients were converts from paganism, unfamiliar with Jewish doctrine, who had "turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven" (1.9). Thus Paul has led them to believe that a particular event will take place, the coming, or parousia, of Jesus from heaven. It is clear that Paul thinks of Jesus as the exalted Messiah and Lord, who is reserved in heaven to be God's agent in the judgment, which will happen very soon. They are now waiting for

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9 According to Acts 18.12 Paul came to Corinth from Thessalonica when Gallio was proconsul of Achaia, and this must be dated A.D. 51 or 52 (or 50 at the earliest) in the light of the Delphi inscription which refers to Gallio, cf. F.F. Bruce, 1 & 2 Thessalonians (Word Biblical Commentary) (1982), p. xxxv. Some scholars argue that Galatians was written first, but this is unlikely in view of the close connection between it and Romans. For the problems of the Pauline chronology, cf. R. Jewett, Dating Paul's Life, 1977.
it expectantly, and Paul could hardly express himself in this way, if he thought it might be long delayed.

The claim that this represents Paul's normal teaching can be supported by comparing passages in four epistles, which span a period of eight or ten years in his career, I Thessalonians, I and II Corinthians and Romans. In making a brief study of these passages, we shall hope to see the consistency of Paul's thought, but also watch for any signs of change. In particular it has often been held that the delay of the parousia began to present a problem to Paul during this period, resulting in a modification of his thought when he wrote II Corinthians, which is also visible in Philippians.

I THESSALONIANS 4.13 — 5.11

Our first passage is I Thessalonians 4.13 — 5.11. We have seen that the Thessalonians were waiting for the parousia. But soon they were in difficulties. This was not because the time of waiting had proved longer than Paul had led them to believe, but because some of their number had died already, and the Thessalonians were worried about their fate. In fact it seems from 2.17 that it is only a short time since Paul left them. Accordingly there is much to be said for the suggestion that the dead were victims of the persecution which is mentioned in 2.14. K.P. Donfried has shown the importance of the pagan cults in the social and civic life of Thessalonica at the time.¹⁰ The effect on the converts of Paul's absolute refusal to compromise with Greco-Roman religion was bound to arouse suspicion and hostility from their fellow citizens. It would not be surprising if some had died as a result of mob violence. According to Acts 17.1-9 it was the unbelieving Jews who had been instrumental in arousing public disapproval, but this is not borne out by Paul's letter, which says nothing about a local Jewish community.

At any rate, the death of some of their number found the Thessalonian Christians unprepared. Their newly-acquired faith carried with it the expectation of the imminent coming of Jesus, and did not allow for the death of any of their members before this event should take place. In reply Paul makes two points. The

first is that those who have died will not be disadvantaged at the parousia (4.12-18). The second is that in any case the exact time of the parousia cannot be worked out in advance ("the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night"), so that the Thessalonians must live in readiness and confidence all the time (5.1-11).

Claiming that what he says has the authority of "the word of the Lord", Paul states categorically "that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, shall not precede those who have fallen asleep" (4.15). Obviously he is referring to a saying of Jesus, but we look in vain for a suitable one in the gospels. F.F. Bruce, in his recent commentary, lists various suggestions, but in the end decides that it is a hopeless quest. But we should not jump to the conclusion that Jesus said no such thing. Rather, we have here a salutary reminder of how much of the Jesus tradition, still available in Paul's day, is now lost.

But perhaps we can go further and conclude that eschatological ideas which Jesus held in common with Jews of his day have not survived precisely because there was nothing distinctive about them. They were matters which could be taken for granted among like-minded people, and it is only because the Thessalonians belong to such a completely different culture that they have not understood this point about the state of the dead from the first.

This means that we should look to Jewish sources of New Testament times in order to elucidate Paul's teaching. The evidence is sufficient to show that his views are fully consistent with contemporary Jewish ideas. The only difference is the position accorded to Jesus himself, who has anticipated the general resurrection and already sits at the right hand of God in readiness for his action on behalf of God at the parousia. As for the rest of

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11 II Thess. 2.1-12 contradicts this by giving details of the events leading up to the parousia, but these are so obscure that they have been the subject of endless debate. Though the Pauline authorship of II Thessalonians is upheld by Bruce, it is denied by many scholars, including Beker.


13 J. Jeremias assumed that a lost saying of Jesus lies behind Paul's words, but others have taken it to be "a logion of the exalted Lord spoken through a prophet" (E. Best), and Mearns even suggests that the prophet was Paul himself, cf. C.L. Mearns, "Early Eschatological Development in Paul: the evidence of I and II Thessalonians", NTS, xxvii (1980-1), 137-157.

mankind, their souls are parted from their bodies at death and go to a place of waiting until the general resurrection. One classic description of this is I Enoch 22, where hollow places in what one may call the foothills of heaven are assigned to various classes of persons according to their moral worth. This permits the notion that some may be much nearer to God than others. This idea can be illustrated from the decidedly Jewish picture in Revelation 6.9, where John “saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne”. The heavenly altar, according to Revelation 4, is the nearest possible place to God. The martyrs, so placed, long for vindication of their witness, but they are “each given a white robe and told to rest a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and their brethren should be complete” (6.11). But when the parousia takes place there will be the general resurrection, and the souls who have thus waited will be reunited with their bodies in readiness for the judgment and the inauguration of the everlasting kingdom.

All of this fits what Paul now says in I Thessalonians 4.16: “The Lord himself [i.e. Jesus] will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the archangel’s call, and with the sound of the trumpet of God”. As the next verse shows, the occasion is the

15 Four hollows are described, one light for the righteous, and three dark for the unpunished sinners, those who have had some punishment on earth (Charles; others interpret it of the martyred righteous), and those who have had full punishment respectively. In II Esdras (IV Ezra) 4.35 the righteous are depicted as waiting in their chambers, and it is explained that they must wait until the full number of the righteous is complete. In 7.32 the chambers deliver up the souls consigned to them at the general resurrection, and 7.75-105 gives seven classes of the wicked and seven classes of the righteous with their various expectations in anticipation of the coming judgment. Justin, Dial., 5, gives as the Jewish view: “The souls of the pious remain in a better place, while those of the unjust and wicked are in a worse, waiting for the time of judgment”. See E. Schürer, The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ, rev. edn. ii (1979), 514-47.

16 There is a close parallel to this in a saying attributed to Rabbi Akiba (died A.D. 135) in Aboth of Rabbi Nathan, 26: “Whoever was buried in the land of Israel was just as if he were buried under the altar, and whoever was buried under the altar was just as if he were buried under the throne of glory”.

17 The basic text is Dan. 12.2, where it is said that “many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake”. The portent mentioned in Matt. 27.52f., where “many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised” at the time of the death of Christ, shows influence from this passage, and also possibly of Ezekiel’s vision of the dry bones (37.1-14), which is understood as a prophecy of the general resurrection in the frescoes of the synagogue at Dura-Europos.
general resurrection, and the trumpet is to rally the people, both living and dead, for this great event.\(^{18}\) So Paul continues: "And the dead in Christ will rise first". Though we cannot tell what Jesus himself had said to support Paul's statement, we can now see that the reason why the dead in Christ take precedence is that they have been nearest to Christ, and therefore nearest to God, in the place of waiting. "Then", says Paul in verse 17, "we who are alive, who are left, shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air". By saying "we who are... left", Paul obviously includes himself, and thereby shows that he expects the parousia within his own lifetime. We may note further that the distinction between living and dead is done away in the general resurrection. Paul says nothing about what they will do when they meet the Lord in the air, but it may well be his intention to suggest that they now form his entourage for the judgment which follows.\(^{19}\) This then ties up with Paul's claim in I Corinthians 6.2f. that "the saints will judge the world", indeed that "we are to judge angels".\(^{20}\) There may also be an allusion here to the prophecy of

\(^{18}\) In the Old Testament a trumpet is blown to rally the troops either before or after battle. It is applied to the eschatological gathering of the dispersion in Isa. 27.13. In Joel 2.1 it is used to sound alarm at the approach of danger (the day of the Lord), and then in verse 15 it accompanies a call to fasting and prayer in connection with this terrifying event. This liturgical use appears in Lev. 25.9, where the ram's horn (\(yôbêl\)) announces the Jubilee year of release from debts and servitude. In New Testament times it is applied to the expectation of God's action to liberate his people from political oppression in Psalms of Solomon 11.1. Similar words are employed to express the eschatological deliverance in the tenth of the Eighteen Benedictions (the \(Amidah\)), still recited in the synagogue. In the scroll 11Q Melchizedek the divine intervention is described in terms of the year of release, using a midrash of Lev. 25, but the explanation of the sounding of the trumpet comes just at the point where the fragment breaks off. This document has the additional interest of assigning the judgment to Melchizedek (probably a name for the archangel Michael in this context) as the agent of God. Finally, Matt. 24.31 adds the trumpet to the description of the parousia, in which of course it is Jesus who is to be the agent of God. With so many Jewish precedents for Paul's use of this vivid symbol, it seems unnecessary to try to link the present passage more closely with Matthew, as is done by D. Wenham, "Paul and the Synoptic Apocalypse", Gospel Perspectives II, ed. R.T. France and D. Wenham (1981), pp. 345-375.

\(^{19}\) Paul's word for "meet" (the noun \(apantìsís\)) can have a technical meaning for an official welcome by a civic deputation going out to meet a distinguished visitor, but Bruce cautions against the assumption that Paul has this usage in mind here.

Zechariah 14.5 that "the Lord will come, and all the holy ones with him", which is taken up in I Enoch 1.9 and quoted from there in Jude 14. Though these passages think of the angels as God's escort, the appellation "holy ones" oscillates in Jewish literature between angels and the holy people of God, and it is the latter which is implied by Paul's use of "saints" in the Corinthians passage.\(^{21}\)

I AND II CORINTHIANS

The same picture is implied in I Corinthians 15. Here the problem is not the death of some individuals, but the denial of the general resurrection altogether by some of the Corinthians. So first Paul recalls the basic kerygma of the resurrection of Jesus (verses 1-11), and then he puts that into relation with the apocalyptic eschatology which I have suggested is his normal teaching (verses 20-28). Resurrection follows a definite plan: "Christ the first fruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ" (verse 23). This is the clearest indication that Paul, and no doubt the early Christians in general, regarded the resurrection of Jesus as the first stage of the general resurrection, which is due to follow shortly.\(^{22}\)

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\(^{21}\) It is disputed whether the "saints of the Most High" in Dan. 7 refers to the angels or to the people of Israel, and the evidence of the use of "holy ones" ( qedôšîm ) in the Qumran scrolls has been invoked to solve the problem. C.H. Brekelmans, "The Saints of the Most High and their Kingdom", Oudtestamentische Studien, xiv (1965), 315-326, argues that it has both meanings at Qumran, but L. Dequeker, "The "saints of the Most High" in Qumran and Daniel", id., xviii (1973), 108-187, insists that it always refers to the angels. This does not prevent the possibility that Paul interpreted Zech. 14.5 ( qedôšîm, lxx hagioi ) of the people of God, as he regularly uses hagioi in this sense.

\(^{22}\) It is possible that Paul intends to suggest a third stage, if verse 24 implies an interval between the general resurrection and the 'end', and this has been taken as evidence that Paul supported the idea of the millennium on earth, followed by a further resurrection before the consummation, cf. Rev. 20.5. This is strongly denied by G. Vos, The Pauline Eschatology ²(1961), pp. 227-260, and by H. Ridderbos, Paul: An Outline of his Theology (1977), pp. 556-562. They rightly insist that millenarian doctrine cannot be read out of Paul's words, but the impression remains that the destruction of "every rule and every authority and power" is not the work of a moment. Perhaps there is a hint of the two-stage eschatology commonly used in connection with nationalist aspirations, e.g. in the Qumran War Scroll (IQM), where the liberation of Israel takes seven years, and the liquidation of the rest of the nations after the destruction of the Kittim takes
greater detail in verses 51ff, which is the other place where Paul mentions the trumpet: “the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed” (verse 52). So here again there are two groups. The dead are raised first, and then “we”, i.e. Paul and others alive at the parousia, will undergo the transformation to the resurrection state without first dying. In this case, however, Paul has a different aspect of the matter in view, and that is the nature of the resurrection body. Obviously this is the crucial question for those who deny the resurrection. He has already gone some way to meet their difficulty by granting that “flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God” (verse 50). So now he explains that the reuniting of soul and body at the general resurrection is not simply the revival of the perishable body, which Paul knows has been mouldering in the grave, but the putting on of a new imperishable and immortal body (verse 53). Thus the soul has, as it were, a new suit of clothes, made to measure for the incorruptible life of the everlasting kingdom. It is clear that Paul means a transformation. The souls of the dead are reunited to transformed bodies, and those who are alive at the parousia are transformed without separation of soul and body.

Paul reverts to this issue in II Corinthians 5, and here we have the place where it has often been held that Paul has significantly modified his position. He is speaking of the transformation which follows death, and suggesting that it is a far better state than we can experience now. “For while we are still in this tent”, he says, “we sigh with anxiety; not that we would be unclothed, but that we would be further clothed [ependusasthai], so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life” (II Corinthians 5.4). The language and the basic ideas, including the metaphor of clothing, are the same as in I Corinthians 15. Paul expects the souls of the dead to have new bodies, fitted for the life of incorruption and

a further thirty-three years. There is a parallel to this in Paul’s concept of missionary strategy in Rom. 11.11f., which presupposes that the proper plan would have been the conversion of all Israel, followed by the conversion of the Gentiles, had not the unbelief of the Jews upset the scheme. So also it is not impossible that Paul thought of the judgment as followed by a period in which the verdicts are put into effect. As “the last enemy to be destroyed is death” (verse 26), there can be no question of a further death and resurrection for the righteous.
immortality. But the problem is that now he seems to leave no room for the period of waiting between death and the parousia. The transformation appears to follow immediately. Moreover a few verses later he speaks as if he no longer expects to be alive at the time of the parousia: "We are of good courage, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord. So whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to please him" (II Corinthians 5.8f.). This agrees with Philippians 1.23, where he expresses his desire "to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better". Statements like this are bound to give the impression that Paul now thinks that the resurrection of Christians follows immediately on death, and this really leaves no place for the parousia as it was previously understood.

This impression, however, is incorrect. It comes partly from singling out the one aspect of Paul's teaching with which he is dealing to the exclusion of his overarching eschatology, and partly from failure to appreciate his concept of the state of the dead in the interval between death and parousia. Paul does not leave the parousia out of account, for he immediately goes on to say: "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive good or evil, according to what he has done in the body" (verse 10). It is the concept of being "at home with the Lord" which causes the confusion. But once we recall that Jewish ideas of the afterlife included the notion of different places of waiting between death and the general resurrection, and that Paul had asserted in I Thessalonians 4.16 that "the dead in Christ" have a privileged position, then we can see that the proper interpretation of Paul's idea of being "at home with the Lord" is nearness to Christ during the period of waiting.

Unfortunately Paul never specifies the nature of this interim state more closely. But it seems inevitable, in spite of arguments

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23 C.F.D. Moule, "St. Paul and Dualism: the Pauline Conception of the Resurrection", NTS, xii (1965-6), 106-123, sees the difference between I and II Corinthians as the addition of the resurrection body in I Cor. 15, so that it is not a matter of transformation, whereas in II Cor. 5 he is teaching the exchange of the earthly body for the heavenly, for which the idea of transformation is no longer inappropriate. He recognizes that Paul retains the parousia expectation, but cannot evade the impression that it is really anticipated at the death of the individual. Contrast J. Hering, The Second Epistle of Saint Paul to the Corinthians (1967), p. 38: "We therefore see no doctrinal contradiction between I Cor. 15 and [II Cor.] 5. Never at any time did the Apostle envisage taking possession of the glory-body before the parousia."
to the contrary, that he thinks of it as some sort of disembodied state. However, we can see here, if not a modification, then at least an important development in Paul’s thought. The fact that he no longer expects to be alive at the parousia shows that he is now reckoning with a longer interval, and this makes it more difficult to disregard the intermediate state. So he makes the point that we already have the Spirit as a “pledge” (arrábôn, NEB) or “guarantee” (RSV) of the future (verse 5). This suggests that the work of the Spirit, which is to conform us to the likeness of Christ (Philippians 3.21), continues during the intermediate state, so that the general resurrection is the completion of a process rather than a sudden transformation following a period of complete inactivity.

ROMANS 8.18-39

This is worked out in much greater detail in the last of our passages, Romans 8.18-39. Unlike the other passages, Paul here is not dealing with a particular problem. Moreover it is not concerned with justification, which is the central issue in Romans. Rather it provides the eschatological setting within which the argument on justification is conducted. In this passage Paul sets the destiny of mankind within a total framework of cosmic transformation. Just as in II Corinthians 5.2 he tells how “we groan, and long to put on our heavenly dwelling”, so in Romans 8.18ff. he puts “the sufferings of this present time” into relation with the “groaning in travail” of the whole creation, which is waiting earnestly for its completion in the transformation of mankind. This is memorably, but wrongly, described as “the glorious liberty of the children of God” (8.21, RSV), as the phrase should be translated “the liberty which belongs to the glory of the children of God”. This state of glory, which can be interpreted

24 Thus Héring says ibid., “The ideal of a purely immaterial existence, so dear to Platonists, Gnostics and Kantians, is therefore at the opposite pole to the Pauline eschatology and feeling”. Cf. Ridderbos (1977), pp. 497-508. But we must beware of a too rigid contrast between Hebrew thought and Greek. Paul thinks of the continuation of the personality while the body decays, but he does not share the Platonic view that matter is incompatible with the ultimate purpose of God, as we shall see in the next section. “Flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God” because they belong to the present age. Paul’s thought is teleological rather than metaphysical.

as the restoration of Adam's lost likeness to God, is reached only at the parousia, when the process of transformation is complete. It is properly described as a state of liberty, because it comprises freedom from corruption and all that is evil, for mankind and for the whole of creation.  

The mention of glory is a hint of what will be seen on that great day of general resurrection and judgment. Paul refers to it again in verse 30, where he speaks of our future glorification as already achieved in principle in what God has done in Christ. But the rest of the chapter is devoted to giving assurance that the members of Christ have nothing to fear, either from present tribulations or from the judgment to come. And the grand climax, that nothing "will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus" (verse 39), stops short of the general resurrection. The trumpet is yet to sound.

It is thus quite wrong to suppose that Paul has abandoned the idea of the future parousia, with the general resurrection and the judgment, and has substituted for it the notion of a gradual transformation starting at death. According to his teaching the transformation has already begun in this present life through the gift of the Spirit which accompanies incorporation into Christ (Romans 8.12-17). The process continues after death in those who are near to Christ, but it does not reach its conclusion until the parousia. C.F.D. Moule has shown that this process is primarily a moral transformation.

Paul has thus significantly filled out the notion of the intermediate state, but we look in vain for further detail about the final state, for which he longs so earnestly. This is in fact characteristic of Jewish eschatology, which tends to speak of future bliss only in general terms. For Paul we must be content with such brief words as I Thessalonians 4.17: "And so we shall always be with the Lord". Nearness to Christ in the intermediate state passes beyond the judgment into everlasting fellowship with him in "the liberty which belongs to the glory of the children of God".

26 We may note here how Paul's thought takes up the idea of release from servitude which belongs to the Jubilee and is applied to the divine intervention in 11QMelchizedek.

CONCLUSION

Paul received and passed on the message of Jesus, that the time of God’s intervention is near. He accepted the central Christian affirmation that Jesus himself, crucified, risen and exalted, is the Messiah who will be God’s agent on that great day. Salvation consists in belonging to Christ by faith, for it is he who (according to 1 Thessalonians 1.10) “delivers us from the wrath to come”. What I have called “nearness to Christ” in referring to the intermediate state is morally equivalent to being “in Christ” in our present existence, and this is the essential practical meaning of Paul’s gospel. Within this relationship the process of transformation begins, as we are conformed to the likeness of Jesus, God’s Son, by the power of the Holy Spirit, and thereby the full meaning of our own sonship of our heavenly Father is realized.

This transformation is a moral process, and therefore includes coping with sin. It is a mistake to suppose that Paul has a morbid preoccupation with sin, though the subject necessarily bulks large in his argument on justification. Nevertheless Paul is realistic about the weakness of human nature, and his Jewish-based eschatology retains the concept of a final judgment, which no one, not even Christians, can escape: “We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ” (II Corinthians 5.10). Membership in Christ does not dispense with the need for constant moral endeavour, because it is through moral endeavour that it is sustained and deepened.

Paul contributed two major developments to the eschatology which he inherited, and which formed the basis of his missionary preaching. The first of these is his doctrine of justification by faith. This is based on the fundamental conviction, which he shared with his predecessors, that a past event, the death and resurrection of Christ, is the guarantee of future salvation. It also builds on a further feature of the primitive preaching, that the death of Christ is the divinely appointed means of atonement for the sins of mankind. By his creative handling of these convictions Paul was able to release the apocalyptic eschatology which primitive Christianity shared with Judaism from its preoccupation with nationalism, and so provided a solid basis for the Christian doctrine of universal salvation.

Paul’s second contribution is his idea of the future life as a transformation, beginning from incorporation into Christ in this
present life, and continuing through death and the intermediate state to the final glory. Paul thus took up the notion of nearness to Christ during the period of waiting, which he had used in response to the distress of the Thessalonians, and gave it new meaning.

It is surely significant that this positive evaluation of the intermediate state comes to the fore in II Corinthians 5, which is the first place where he indicates doubt that the parousia will happen in his own lifetime. We can see here that, now that something like twenty-five years have elapsed since the crucifixion, the delay of the parousia is beginning to pose a problem. Paul shows himself capable of responding to this without abandoning the eschatological framework of his message. Paul is the first witness to the fact that the Christian proclamation contained within itself the means whereby the church could take the delay of the parousia in its stride.28

Today, after more than nineteen centuries of waiting, the idea of an imminent end seems grotesque, though the threat of nuclear destruction makes it more plausible than at any time in history. But it hardly seems possible to think of the parousia, with the sound of the trumpet and the general resurrection and the judgment on earth before the final glory, according to the eschatological thought common to Judaism and Christianity in New Testament times. Of course we have to remember that this is picture-language. It is meant seriously, but it is not to be taken in a crudely literal way. The concept of the judgment is still valuable.

28 It is evident that the creative aspects of Paul's thought are the result of grappling with problems arising in the course of his mission, and this explains the inconsistencies and polarized positions which make it so difficult to give a coherent account of his theology. H. Räisänen, "Paul's Theological Difficulties with the Law", Studia Biblica, ed. E.A. Livingstone, iii (1978), 301-320, stresses the fact that Paul reacts sharply and emotionally to situations, so that he is necessarily inconsistent, and should never be treated as if he were a professional theologian. In another paper, "Legalism and Salvation by the Law", Die Paulinische Literatur und Theologie, ed. S. Pedersen (1980), pp. 63-83, he refutes on this basis the claim of Jewish scholars (C.G. Montefiore, H.J. Schoeps) that Paul simply misunderstood the Judaism in which he had been born and bred altogether. E.P. Sanders, Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People (1983), p. 148, while welcoming the importance of Räisänen's observations, finds a "central conviction" in Paul which gives coherence to his thought, however unconvincing or inconsistent it may be in detail. It will be clear that the present article locates that central conviction in the crucial position of Christ in the divine plan of salvation.
as a future reference-point, expressing the ultimate dimension of moral decision in relation to God.

The concept of the future general resurrection, which properly precedes the judgment, is more difficult. Most people who believe in life after death tacitly accept what I have suggested is the false interpretation of II Corinthians 5, that the transformation takes place immediately at death. They are frankly uncomfortable about reciting "the resurrection of the body" in the creed. But it seems to me that what Paul is really saying makes much better sense. If we can accept the idea of separation of body and soul, we can accept Paul's idea that the soul at death goes to its proper place of waiting. This for Paul is not a kind of limbo, but a matter of being "at home with the Lord" (II Corinthians 5.8). Nearness to Christ in this life paves the way for nearness to Christ in the life to come. That is all we need to know in order to reaffirm the Christian hope. The sound of the trumpet, with the subsequent completion of the process of transformation, can await its proper time in the secret counsels of God.