

BABEȘ-BOLYAI UNIVERSITY OF CLUJ - NAPOCA
The Faculty of Orthodox Theology

**ESCHATOLOGY AND ESCHATOLOGICAL PARADOX
IN THE FOURTH GOSPEL**

- a contribution to defining the uniqueness of johannine theology -

PhD Thesis

Abstract

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CLUJ NAPOCA

2010

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Keywords: eschatology, eschatological paradox, johannine eschatology, eschatological expectations, eternal life, resurrection, judgment, the kingdom of God.

SUMMARY

All authors of the New Testament expressed in their writings the faith that in and through Jesus Christ, God entered into the human history. In other words, the eternity entered in time and the history of humanity reached its last phase, the eschatological one. The attempt to describe this new situation was not an easy one, because the human language, relative as any human experience, proved quickly to be very limited. Eschatology pointed out the lacks and the limits of the existent language, thus constraining the Christian authors to find new ways of expression. The future time, characteristic to the eschatological language, was replaced, without being completely removed, with the present time, in the attempt to show that, for Christians, the history of

humanity already entered in the final phase, and the end of history has begun. Of course, the future time of the eschatological language does not disappear, since the books of the New Testament speak of an end of history, that history which didn't end once Jesus Christ came¹. Eschatology has been inaugurated and it's in full process of fulfillment, but the fulfillment itself and the end of this process still belong to the future.

This paradox of the eschatological expressing is characteristic to the New Testament, but it is nowhere more clearly expressed as in the Fourth Gospel. From here we understand that “now is the judgment of this world” (12, 31), now is the time when “the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who will hear, will rise” (5, 25), while the one who believes in Jesus Christ already has eternal life (5, 24). On the other side, the Fourth Gospel speaks of the Second Coming of Jesus and of the “last day”, when all in the graves will rise again for judgment and rewarded according to their faith and deeds, with the eternal life or the eternal punishment (5, 28-29; 6, 39-40, 44, 54; 12, 48).

The words “the hour comes and now is here” (ἔρχεται ὥρα καὶ νῦν ἐστίν) (Jo. 4, 23; 5, 25) are the clearest expression of this Johannine paradox². This expression, characteristic to the Fourth Gospel, is intensely marked by the eschatological tension between “already” and “not yet”, putting together the present and the future aspects of the Johannine eschatology. The purpose of this PhD thesis is that of analyzing this eschatological tension and the dimension of the Johannine paradox, and to establish the relation between the present and the future aspects of the eschatology of the Fourth Gospel. In our approach, we started from the exegetical analysis of the above-mentioned expression and of the scriptural passages in which it can be found (Jo. 4, 1-42 and Jo. 5, 19-30). We continued then by analyzing the episode of Lazarus resurrection and the very interesting relation existing between this episode and that in Jo. 5, 28-29, ending with the way in which the work of the Holy Spirit influences the relation between the present and the future aspects of the Johannine eschatology. By analyzing all these, we had the opportunity to discuss the essential themes of the Johannine eschatology: the eternal life,

¹ C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John. An Introduction with Commentary and Notes on the Greek Text*, Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1978, p. 68.

² Cf. Nicole Chibici-Revneanu, “The hour comes and now is here” (In. 4, 23; 5, 25). *The Eschatological meaning of the johannine hora*, in “Sacra Scripta” no. 1, 2008, p. 73.

the judgment, the resurrection, death, the Parousia, the hour of glorifying the Son of God, the Son of Man.

I. The definition of the concepts

There are a lot of difficulties in the contemporary debate concerning eschatology, especially because of the different understanding the authors have for this concept of “eschatology”. This term was, generally, if not exclusively, related to the future, concerning either the individual, the nation or the world. During the XXth century, the meaning of this term became more and more extensive, and instead of referring to the “things of the last days” in the strictest way possible, he was understood as having a more comprehensive sense, especially as a result of adding new concepts, until then separately analyzed (e.g. the Kingdom of God).

The testimonies of the Holy Scripture point out the fact that the eschatology of the New Testament cannot be reduced to those parts of the Holy Scripture which refer to the post-mortem destiny of the human beings, and cannot be understood only in relation to those scriptural passages which speak exclusively of future eschatological events (Parousia, the Judgment, the Resurrection). We believe that this term must be understood in a more comprehensive meaning, as a final phase of the history of humanity, prepared by the events of the history of salvation and, until a certain point, already present in it.

One of the essential questions to which the theology of the XXth century tried to answer was: what was the role and the importance of the apocalyptic elements in the eschatology of our Saviour, Jesus Christ? In the attempt of answering to this question, the term proposed by G. E. Ladd, “prophetic-apocalyptic eschatology”³ saves us, in some degree, from the unilateral approach of Schweitzer and from the antagonist understanding of the apocalyptic and prophetic eschatology. Applied to Jesus’ eschatology, the term “prophetic-apocalyptic eschatology” underlines the fact that the apocalyptic elements of

³ **George Eldon Ladd**, *Why not Prophetic-Apocalyptic?*, in *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 1957, vol. 76, no. 3, p. 194.

the Christian eschatology remain always in the prophetic tradition, that is, in the framework of the divine revelation, which gives testimony of the work of God in history and, through this, of His direct connection to the present. Thus, having always in front of our eyes the proofs of the Holy Scripture, we can speak both of the future and of the present aspects of Jesus Christ's eschatology⁴.

The relation between the "prophetic-apocalyptic" eschatology of Jesus Christ and the apocalyptic eschatology is analogous to that between prophetism and apocalypse: in spite of their similarities and common elements, they are not the same thing. The first one is a part of God's revelation through His incarnated Son (Heb. 1, 2), while the second one is a development of the prophetic eschatology, a development in which essential themes of the prophetic conception about the world were lost.

The Kingdom of God (ἡ βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ) is a very important concept in the debates related to the biblical eschatology. The circumscription of the concept is both necessary and difficult. The difficulty arises especially from the fact that Jesus Christ, although made use of it repeatedly, gave no definition of it. The same goes for the Apostles, except the words of St. Paul in Rom. 14, 17. The generally accepted definition by the contemporary exegetes is as follows: The Kingdom of God is the dynamic kingship of God, Who entered in history through Jesus Christ in order to bring to the human beings of the present age the blessings of the messianic age, and Who will be manifest again at the end of this age for fulfilling this messianic salvation.

Taking into account the concept of community implied in that of "the Kingdom of God", we have proposed a slightly interpretation of this concept and its understanding as "communion with God" rather than "kingship of God", because the members of the Kingdom are subjects no more, but already the sons of the King. The quality of being sons of God, achieved through Jesus Christ, is closely connected to the present and the future aspects of the Kingdom, asserted in an equal manner. The fact that we are now sons of God and dwellers of this Kingdom guarantees us that we will be inheritors of the future Kingdom as well (Rom. 8, 17; I John 3, 2).

As regarding the relation between the present and the future aspects of the Kingdom of God, the opinions of the exegetes are divided in three groups: those who

⁴ **Ibidem.**

consider that the Kingdom of God is exclusively a future one, those who understand the Kingdom of God as exclusively present and those who pay the same importance to the present and future aspects of the Kingdom of God. As a result of the analyses of the New Testament testimonies, two conclusions can be drawn: a) the Kingdom of God is indissolubly connected to the Person of our Saviour, Jesus Christ; b) the present and the future aspects of the Kingdom are of the same importance and must be acknowledged as such.

II. Landmarks in the contemporary biblical research in defining eschatology

The way in which theologians understood the concepts defined in the previous chapter has influenced in a decisive way their attitude toward the biblical eschatology or, in some cases, their whole theological system. The eschatology of the liberal theologians of the XIXth century, Albert Ritsch and Adolf von Harnack, minimized the apocalyptic eschatological elements contained in the teaching of Jesus Christ to a “crust” which hides the ethical core of His teaching, and the Kingdom of God became a simple social organization, to which humanity may reach through continuous moral progress. This conception was challenged by Weiss and Schweitzer, who proposed the consequent eschatology, which acknowledges the importance of the apocalyptic elements in the teaching of Jesus, but describes Him as a fanatic Jew who died for a crazy apocalyptic dream⁵.

C. H. Dodd magisterially refuted the exaggerations of the consequent eschatology, by elaborating his conception of “accomplished eschatology”, but he ended up in the other extreme and refused to refer to any future eschatological events. Oscar Cullmann is the one who came to an equilibrium in his eschatology, by giving the appropriate importance both to the present and the future eschatology. For this reason, we evaluated this approach as the true one.

Rudolf Bultmann and Karl Barth proposed an existentialist eschatology, in which the entering into the authentic existence or the eternally present “now” of God’s eternity is achieved through the personal answer of the Christian to God’s calling. We came to the

⁵ Pr. Petre Chiricuță, *Parusia sau Despre A Doua Venire*, Edit. Anastasia, București, 2001, p. 29.

conclusion that this extreme individualism is not in the spirit of the Scripture and of the Church Tradition.

In the Orthodox Church, the eschatology is understood both inaugurated and future. To be an Orthodox means, firstly, to live in the present and fully the Christian faith, therefore, the Orthodox eschatology is especially one of experience. Taking part to the life of the Kingdom of God is possible both through the sacramental life of the Church and through the mystical experience of the believer. There is no individualism here or separation between these two, because the same Holy Spirit works in both for our adoption and the participation to the life of the Kingdom.

III. Landmarks in the contemporary biblical research in defining the “Johannine” eschatology

Although the works which deal with issues regarding the “Johannine” eschatology are very numerous, the points of exegetical consensus are extremely few. Among the questions regarding the eschatology of the Fourth Gospel which have not received an answer unanimously accepted, we find those concerned with the present and the future aspects of the Johannine eschatology, that is, to the presence of the “accomplished” eschatology and of the “future” eschatology in the Fourth Gospel. The answers offered by the exegetes to this problem may be grouped in three directions:

1. according to the first group of exegetes, the eschatology of the Fourth Gospel is exclusively present and achieved. For John, the supreme eschatological event was the coming of Jesus into this world, a coming through which the future becomes present. All which was expected fulfilled in the Person of Jesus Christ.

2. a view with rather few supporters is that which asserts that the eschatology of the Fourth Gospel is exclusively a future one. Its partisans try to demonstrate that the assertions which imply a present eschatology are, in fact, promises and, accordingly, they refer to the future as well.

3. the larger part of the exegetes agree that John, the Evangelist, constructs the eschatology, preserving an equilibrium between the present and the future aspects of his eschatology.

The author of this PhD thesis agrees with this last opinion. In this present thesis, we have tried to bring arguments in supporting the opinion which asserts the existence of an equilibrium in the Fourth Gospel between the “inaugurated” eschatology and the “future” eschatology.

IV. Eschatology and eschatological paradox in the dialogue between Jesus and the Samaritan woman (Jo. 4, 1-42).

In Jo. 4, 1-42, the accent is stressed on those aspects of eschatology which have already been accomplished through the Incarnation and the working of Jesus into this world. The contemporaries of Jesus live already in the eschatological age, when the words of the prophets concerning the last times fulfill themselves under their eyes. Nevertheless, in the verses 21-23 we find the horizontal perspective on the redemption: the whole history of the Jewish people was a preparation for the coming of Christ. In Jesus, all the Jewish expectations, feasts and institutions find their perfection. We see in this passage how Jesus replaces the Law, symbolized by the fountain of Jacob, and the worshipping to Jerusalem and Garizim with the worshipping of the eschatological age “in spirit and truth”. Such a perspective is characteristic to the future eschatology. We have here both aspects of the Johannine eschatology – “the inaugurated eschatology” and “the future eschatology”.

The Saviour says ἔρχεται ὥρα, because the time of worshipping “in spirit and truth” is close and its expectation will end when the hour will come (death, resurrection and the glorifying of Jesus). At the same time, He can say καὶ νῦν ἐστίν, because the time of the true worship is present beforehand in His Person and working, even before the coming of “the hour”. As the resurrection of the believer is possible even before the cross (both bodily and spiritually), because Jesus is the Resurrection and the Life (Jo. 11, 25), so the worshipping “in spirit and truth” is possible before the coming of the hour of passions, death and glorifying, because Jesus is the true temple (Jo. 2, 19-22) and the bearer of the Holy Spirit (Jo. 1, 33).

All that was offered in the Old Testament regarding worshipping is fulfilled in Jesus. The worshipping “in spirit and truth” is the new worshipping of the eschatological age, which replaces and renders void all previous acts of cult. The perfect fulfillment of this belongs to the future, because the worshipping “in spirit and truth” will be fully accessible and fruitful in the future, after the death, the resurrection and the glorifying of Jesus and the sending of the Holy Spirit into this world. The worshipping “in truth” is the worshipping in the body of the resurrected Jesus. Together with the coming of the Spirit, the true worshipers may drink “the living water”, receiving the Holy Spirit in the Sacrament of Baptism and thus offering worshipping to the Father “in spirit”. Further on, the Spirit will lead these to the eternal life, revealing the presence of God in the Person of Jesus Christ. The true worshipers will then testify this presence through word and through the receiving of the Eucharist, thus worshipping the Father “in truth”.

V. The eschatological paradox of Jesus discourse in Jo. 5, 19-30

In a very impressive chiasmic construction, John the Evangelist joins the “inaugurated eschatology” (Jo. 5, 19-25) and “the future eschatology” (Jo. 5, 26-30). The same Jesus Christ tells us that the hour is come when the spiritually dead ones may be raised from the death of sin by the power of His word Who brings life, since He, the Resurrection and the Life (Jo. 11, 25), is present among people, but He also tells us that the eschatological hour of the Resurrection of all the dead still belongs to the future and to the eschatological horizon (Jo. 5, 28-29). “The hour comes and now is here”, the most condensed of the Johannine eschatological paradox, puts together the present and the future in a relation of complementarity.

VI. Eschatology and Resurrection in the episode of Lazarus (Jo. 11)

The presence of the Person of Jesus Christ provokes an anticipation of the eschatological events, and His deeds are signs of God’s glory. Wherever He is, His divine power as Judge and Master of life is present and works. The passage in Jo. 5, 19-40 seems to be the best commentary of the miracle of Lazarus’ resurrection.

Lazarus' resurrection represents the fulfillment of Jesus' words contained in Jo. 5, 28-29, but only in a symbolical or paradigmatic sense. Lazarus' resurrection is a "sign" of the power of Jesus to give eternal life in the present ('inaugurated eschatology') and, at the same time, is the warrant of the resurrection of all "in the last day" (Jo. 11, 24) (the future eschatology).

Lazarus' resurrection may be considered as an image of every Christian's life: the passing from death to life, experienced by Lazarus, is experienced by every Christian when he will raise from the death of sin to a spiritual life with Christ (Rom. 6, 4; Col. 2, 12; 3, 1). The passing from death to life will be definitively ended only in "the last day", when the body will experience the eternal life, too.

VII. The work of the Holy Spirit and Eschatology

The Johannine pneumathology influenced the eschatology of the Fourth Gospel in such a way that we find in the last one a powerful accent on the present aspects of eschatology. The specific Johannine accent is due especially to the consciousness and the experience of the Early Church regarding the presence of the Spirit. John speaks sometimes of the coming of Jesus as a coming in the Holy Spirit. We may even talk about a Parousia in the Holy Spirit, which is different and does not replace the Parousia of Jesus Christ from the end of time.

The Holy Spirit does not work independently of Christ, as if he would take over a work started by Christ and leaved unfinished. Life, death, resurrection and the glorification of Jesus are in themselves eschatological events, and the work of the Spirit is founded on these events. He gives testimony (15, 26) about Christ and puts into practice what Jesus has accomplished. The Holy Spirit is, in this way, the **eschatological continuum**⁶ in which the work of Christ, started during His earthly activity and which will be accomplished and fulfilled at His Parousia, is continued and put into practice. But the promises regarding the Holy Spirit have a second *Sitz im Leben*, namely the Church, which may be also described as a **eschatological continuum** in which the work of Christ is put into practice. The Holy Spirit testifies about Jesus, but His disciples do the same

⁶ This term belongs to C. K. Barrett, op. cit., p. 74.

(15, 26 ff.). By the cooperation in testimony, the world is persuaded. On the answer to this testimony depends the salvation or the condemnation of the world. The separation between human beings, caused by the presence of Jesus (3, 19-21; 7, 43) is perpetuated through the presence of the Holy Spirit.

VIII. The uniqueness of John's eschatology and its classification in the johannine theology

Eschatology of the Fourth Gospel has often been characterized as a person-centered eschatology: in Jesus Christ are being fulfilled and exceeded all titles and messianic expectations of the Hebrew people, the body of Jesus Christ is the new temple where the eschatological worship takes place in Spirit and Truth (In. 2, 21), Jesus Christ is the eschatological judge (In. 5:22), Jesus gives eternal life (In. 6.68), Jesus is victorious over death and resurrects the dead now and at the final resurrection (In. 5, 25-28). Johannine eschatology is therefore closely linked with johannine Christology. On the other hand johannine pneumatology influenced eschatology of the Fourth Gospel, in such a manner that in the latter, we discover a strong emphasis on present issues of eschatology. The specific johannine emphasis is mainly due to consciousness and experience regarding the presence of the Holy Spirit by the early church. John the evangelist speaks often about the coming of Jesus as a coming in the Holy Spirit. We can even talk about a Parousia in the Holy Spirit, which is different and does not replace the Parousia of Jesus Christ at the end of times. Further the awareness and the experience of the johannine community offered by the presence of the Holy Spirit in the midst of it is reflected in the ecclesiology of John's Gospel and its powerful sacramental character.

Conclusions

The entire Gospel of St. John built a balanced eschatology in which current and future issues are intertwined and mutually agree. Even if the emphasis on inaugurated eschatology is more powerful than the Synoptics, none of the characteristic themes of his eschatology (eternal life, judgment, resurrection, Parousia) abandons the tension between "already" and "not yet". He testifies as eschatological presence of the world and perfect fulfillment of the eschatological expectations only in "day" (In. 6, 39-40,44,54). "The hour is coming and now is" the most condensed expression ioaneic eschatological paradox, present and future come together in a complementary relationship. John the Evangelist wrote his Gospel from a dual perspective: from the perspective of the historical person of Jesus Christ, but also from a post-Easter perspective, to strengthen faith and reflect early Christian Church. In this case 'time is coming "reflects the position of Jesus during his earthly activity to the events predicted, while the phrase" now is (clock) reflects the early Christian Church's position towards them, when what was promised Jesus is fulfilled exactly.