



into the Melting Pot

the question is more important than the answer

Sunday 14 January 2018

Jesus is Late – the 'Second Coming'

Old Testament

'The Day of the Lord' – when God will finally visit his people in history to judge the wicked, redeem the righteous, and purge the earth of evil.

Apocalyptic Literature

Unveiling or disclosure, revelation.

After the post-exilic prophets, there were no others; God was no longer speaking to his people. Israel and Judah were ruled over by pagan kings, and for a period under Antiochus Epiphanes (168BCE) the Jewish religion was proscribed and faithful Jews heavily persecuted.

To fill the vacuum, apocalyptic writings were a common form between 200BCE and 100CE, symbolically giving hope to the 'people of God'.

They relate alleged revelations through dreams and visions and relied heavily on symbolism; they were often written as if documents from earlier times by historical figures and so were pseudo-predictive in that past events were included as 'prophecy'.

Examples: 1 Enoch, Jubilees, Assumption of Moses, 4 Ezra, 2 Esdras, Apocalypse of Baruch; some others were found among the Qumran texts.

New Testament

Early Christians, effectively a 'sect' within Judaism, and steeped in Jewish culture and tradition, interpreted Jesus' first coming as the fulfilment of prophecy (the 'Messiah', anointed one, or 'Christ' in Greek). His second coming would be the consummation of that prophecy.

The Rapture

Get right or get 'left behind' (Barbara Rossing).

Time Magazine in 2002: 59% of respondents believed the book of Revelation to be an accurate reflection of what was to happen.

The 'Left Behind' novels written by conservative evangelical Christians (endorsing anti-homosexuality, anti-environmentalism etc) encourage the 'faithful' to have no concern as the earth and all the evil therein will be destroyed.

Some fundamentalists are intentionally doing what they can to hasten 'the end times' and particularly see the Middle East conflicts and extreme weather events as a 'sign'.

The book of Revelation

It only just made the cut into the canon, being a late addition. It is the least read and most difficult of all the biblical books. It is mostly unintelligible as it abounds in symbolism readily understood by the original readers (hence the lack of explanation) but lost to us.

However – is a second coming of Jesus a violent one? If so, it negates his first coming.

Do we want a God who 'kicks butt', handing out retribution and punishment?

What was Jesus' message about the 'Kingdom of God' if it wasn't one of distributive justice and divine love?

Gospels

Mark 13:3-37 (also Matthew 24:15-28 and Luke 21:7-28)

These accounts have a conversation between Jesus and Peter, James, John and Andrew about what would happen before 'the end comes': the text has Jesus warning the disciples to be on their guard against men claiming to be himself, refers to noise of battles, earthquakes and famine, persecution (beaten in the synagogues and brought before kings and rulers), and the sun growing dark and stars falling from heaven. Also the 'Awful Horror' – quoted from Daniel (a book in the apocalyptic tradition) and *perhaps* referring to the erection of the roman Eagle standard in the temple in 70BCE.

Mark 13:26,27 – Then the Son of Man will appear, coming in the clouds with great power and glory. He will send the angels out to the four corners of the earth to gather God's chosen people from one end of the world to the other.

The Ascension

Acts 1:9-11, Luke 24:50-5 (& Mark 16:19-20 - a late addition to the original manuscript).

Acts 1:11 – This Jesus, who was taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way that you saw him go to heaven.

Pauline theology

1 Thessalonians is thought to be the first NT writing.

1 Thessalonians 4:13 – 5:12 covers Paul's early understanding of the 'day of the Lord': the archangel will shout, God's trumpet will sound, the Lord himself will come down from heaven, those who died in the faith will rise to life, then the living will be gathered in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air.

Compare 1 Corinthians 15, written some years later, when Paul attempts to explain resurrection, physical and spiritual bodies, and the importance of accepting 'resurrection' as fundamental to faith. "Where, Death, is your victory?"

Non Pauline texts

2 Thessalonians 2:3-4 – For the day will not come until the final rebellion takes place and the Wicked One appears, who is destined for hell. He will oppose every so called god or object of worship and will put himself above them all. He will even go in and sit down in God's Temple and claim to be God.

Some translations use '**antichrist**' for 'Wicked One'.

Hebrews 9:28 He (Christ) will appear a second time, not to deal with sin, but to save those who are waiting for him.

Eschatology – the study of 'last things'.

In summary

- An early expectation that the Messiah was a portent for the 'end times'
- A hope in 'cheating' death and gaining eternal life
- A close link between belief in (physical) resurrection and eternal life for believers
- A descriptive link between Jesus' ascension and a second coming

Perhaps some would like to discard all this material as a primitive understanding based on ancient Jewish ideas of good and evil and the 'end of the world' (since there had been a 'creation' or beginning), and consider a spiritual understanding about Jesus' life and teachings and how we live our lives in community, with no thought of any other existence beyond.

Reference The New Bible Dictionary, Inter-Varsity Press, 1962
The Oxford Bible Commentary, 2001

Living The Questions, Harper Collins, 2012

Bible quotes are from the Good News Bible, © American Bible Society 1992