Critical Dictionary of Apocalyptic and Millenarian Movements

Pauline Apocalypticism and the Pastoral Epistles

Author: Michael Scott Robertson
Published: 28th October 2021
Robertson, Michael Scott. 2021. "Pauline Apocalypticism and the Pastoral Epistles." In James Crossley and Alastair Lockhart (eds.) *Critical Dictionary of Apocalyptic and Millenarian Movements*. 28 October 2021. Retrieved from https://www.cdamm.org/articles/apocalypticism-pastoral-epistles

Introduction

The Pastoral Epistles are a grouping of three documents within the New Testament: 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, and Titus. The Pastoral Epistles all claim the apostle Paul as their author, but the majority of scholars consider these works to be pseudonymous compositions—that is, written by someone other than the stated author. Experts in this field have dated the documents somewhere between the early and the mid-second century CE (see Herzer 2004, 1268–82; Campbell 2014, 229–403). Some of the main reasons for rejecting Paul as the author of the Pastoral Epistles are differences in vocabulary, style, and ecclesiastical structure between the Pastoral Epistles and other, undisputed, writings by Paul (see, e.g., Baur 1835, 86; Holtzmann 1880; Harrison 1921). Another important reason has been the difference in apocalypticism between the undisputed Pauline letters (Romans, Galatians, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians, and Philemon) and the Pastoral Epistles. Scholars have generally seen that apocalypticism has less emphasis in the Pastoral Epistles compared to the undisputed Pauline Epistles.

This entry will compare the apocalypticism in the Pastoral Epistles to that of the undisputed Pauline letters. This will involve focusing on four apocalyptic elements to show the similarities and differences between Paul and the Pastoral Epistles: the eschatological coming of Christ, divine revelation, presence of divine beings, and a two-age periodisation of history. This entry will begin with a short explication of Paul's apocalypticism. It will then discuss how scholarship has understood the inherited ideas of Pauline apocalypticism in the Pastoral Epistles.

Pauline Apocalypticism

It is widely accepted that Paul's theology was heavily informed and influenced by his apocalyptic worldview (Käsemann 1969, 124–37; Beker 1982; Martyn 1985, 410–24; Wright 2013, 39–41; Blackwell, Goodrich, and Maston 2016, 3). His apocalypticism comes to the fore in his eschatological discourses. In 1 Thessalonians 4:15–18, Paul writes of the imminent return (*parousia*/παρουσία) of 'the Lord' (4:16) where those who have died will meet those who remain alive in 4:15 (seemingly including Paul himself) in the air 4:15–17. This imminent expectation of the end appears again in 1 Corinthians 15:51–52 where Paul

declares that ‘not all will fall asleep’ (15:51, all translations of the Bible are my own)—i.e., not all will die. Instead, at the last trumpet, the dead in Christ will rise, and all (seemingly assuming Paul will still be living) will be changed (15:52; Dunn 1998, 294–315; see also Schweitzer 1955, 52).

It is not only in his eschatology that Paul’s apocalypticism surfaces. An important general theme found in apocalyptic writings of Paul’s time is an emphasis on supernatural revelation (Rowland 1982, 70; Collins 1998, 5; Reynolds and Stuckenbruck 2017, 9). In line with this, Paul claims that he received his gospel through direct ‘apocalyptic revelation’ from Jesus Christ (Galatians 1:11–12; Martyn 1997, 142–44). In this passage and elsewhere in Galatians (see Galatians 2:2; 3:23), Paul uses *apokalypsis*/ἀποκαλύψις or the verbal form *apokalyptō*/ἀποκαλύπτω (common Greek terms denoting revelation) to signify that the coming of Jesus Christ constituted, in his view, a monumental in-breaking of God into the present age (Martyn 1997, 98–99). Thus, the apocalypticism found in Paul’s thought extended not only into a future (though imminent) cataclysm, but it also encompassed the first advent of Christ. Similarly, in Paul’s letters to the Corinthians, Paul discusses revelations of mysteries that were previously hidden but revealed to him by God. In 1 Corinthians 2:7, Paul claims to reveal to the Corinthians ‘wisdom in a mystery that was hidden.’ The theme of ‘mystery’ occurs throughout 1 Corinthians (2:1; 4:1; 13:2; 14:2; 15:51). As Goff explains, ‘The “mystery” is a supernatural, transcendent reality that Paul has made known to the Corinthians’ (Goff 2017, 179).

Important also within apocalypticism is the presence of angelic or other-worldly beings (Rowland 1982, 70; Collins 1998, 5). The angelic realm is particularly prominent within Paul’s letters to the Corinthians. In 1 Corinthians 11:2–16, Paul discusses the need for head coverings, and the rationale he gives for women to cover their heads when they pray is ‘because of the angels’ (1 Corinthians 11:10 διὰ τοὺς ἀγγέλους). The exact nature of these angels is the subject of debate (whether ‘good’ or ‘fallen’ angels), but the implication of this passage is that Paul envisions that in the act of prayer, those praying are participating with angelic beings (see Fitzmyer 2008, 416–19). In 2 Corinthians, Satan surfaces on two occasions. In the first, in 2 Corinthians 11:14, Paul says that Satan himself is disguised as an angel of light. Satan’s second occurrence in 2 Corinthians is in Paul’s discussion of visions and revelations and a trip into the ‘third heaven’ in 12:1–10. Paul claims in 12:7 that God sent him an ‘angel of Satan’ to torment him to keep Paul from boasting about this vision. To bring this discussion full circle, in 1 Corinthians 6:3 Paul discusses both angels and his eschatology by saying to the Corinthians, ‘Do you not know that we will judge the angels?’

A further apocalyptic motif found in Paul’s writings is that of a ‘two-age dualism,’ which is the idea that there are two distinct periods of time—in this case, one that is present and one that is to come. This motif comes to the fore in Galatians. In Galatians 1:4, Paul mentions ‘the present evil age,’ and then in 4:4, Paul says ‘when the fulness of time came, God sent his son.’ These two statements imply that there is a periodisation of time in Paul’s thought (the period before the eschaton in which Paul is then living, and a new age after the eschaton) (Scott 2017, 208). Here, the two ages overlap, such that the present evil age and the one inaugurated by the coming of God’s son are coexistent (Scott 2017, 208).

Although much more could be (and has been) written about Paul’s apocalypticism, the above discussion is enough to establish some important points for moving forward to the discussion of the Pastoral Epistles. The first is that Paul was expecting the imminent return of Jesus Christ, and this expectation was a key part of his theology. Second, Paul’s thought was thoroughly apocalyptic even when he was not discussing eschatology. He emphasised revelation from God, and supernatural, angelic beings along with a two-age

dualism pervade his thought.

Relationship of the Pastoral Epistles to Pauline Apocalypticism

It has been common for scholars to see the Pastoral Epistles as examples of ‘early Catholicism’ (Käsemann 1969, 236; Dunn 2006, 372–79) or ‘bourgeois’ Christianity (Bultmann 1955, 226; Dibelius and Conzelmann 1972, 39–41; Brox 1989, 124–25; see also the discussion in Reiser 1993, 27–44). These labels are contentious in biblical scholarship, but they tend to be used as analytical categories to describe a perceived shift in later documents of the New Testament toward expressions of Christianity more characteristic of second-century writers such as Irenaeus (Käsemann 1969, 236; Dunn 2006, 372–79). Although scholars have described many different characteristics of ‘early Catholicism’ (see Downs 2005, 642 for a list of common features), the most salient for the current discussion is the waning of the apocalypticism (Dibelius and Conzelmann 1972, 39–41; Brox 1989, 50; Dunn 2006, 372–79). The famous German New Testament scholar Ernst Käsemann, for instance, claimed that,

> *Ever since the eschatological understanding of the New Testament replaced the idealistic interpretation, we can and must determine the various phases of earliest Christian history by means of the original imminent expectation of the Parousia, its modification and its final extinction. Early catholicism means that transition from earliest Christianity to the so-called ancient Church, which is completed with the disappearance of the imminent expectation. This by no means occurs everywhere at the same time or with the same symptoms and consequences, but nevertheless in the various streams there is a characteristic movement toward that great Church which understands itself as the Una Sancta Apostolica. (Käsemann 1969, 236–37)*

Although the Pastoral Epistles are not the only documents scholars have placed into the category of ‘early Catholicism,’ Dunn notes, ‘The clearest examples are the Pastorals [i.e., Pastoral Epistles]: in them the *parousia* hope is a faded shadow of its earliest expression’ (Dunn 2006, 396).

A number of scholars have critiqued the view that imminent apocalypticism has faded by the time of the Pastoral Epistles (MacDonald 1988, 233–34; Towner 1989, 141; Kidd 1990, 190–92; Downs 2005, 641–61). Downs in particular critiques the narrow focus on the imminence of the *parousia* in describing apocalypticism in the Pastoral Epistles by some scholars (Downs 2005, 644). After discussing a number of features of the apocalyptic worldview found in the Pastoral Epistles, Downs concludes, in direct opposition to the prevailing opinion, that ‘the Pastorals, rather than representing a decreased apocalyptic perspective, provide a vibrant embodiment of the essential ingredients of an apocalyptic worldview’ (Downs 2005, 661).

Conclusion

There are two conclusions in scholarship regarding apocalypticism in the Pastoral Epistles as compared to

Pauline apocalyptic that are diametrically opposed. The first is that the Pastoral Epistles represent a waning of Pauline apocalyptic. The second is that they present a vibrant apocalypticism. Are these two views the only options? Could the Pastoral Epistles sit somewhere between these two poles? Downs is correct that there is more to apocalypticism than an *imminent* expectation of the end; however, that is not to say that imminence should be overlooked. With that caveat in mind, it seems more likely that the apocalypticism of the Pastoral Epistles should be situated between these two main views. However, it will be instructive to analyse each of the Pastoral Epistles individually to see whether a more nuanced picture emerges. Thus, the entries on 1–2 Timothy and Titus will discuss the Pastoral Epistles themselves and note the aspects of apocalypticism or retreats from apocalypticism found therein.

References

Baur, Ferdinand Christian. 1835. *Die Sogenannten Die Pastoralbriefe des Apostels Paulus aufs neue Kritisch untersucht. Tübingen: J. G. Gotta'schen Verlagshandlung.*

Beker, J. C. 1982. *Paul's Apocalyptic Gospel: The Coming Triumph of God.* Philadelphia: Fortress.

Blackwell, Ben C., John K. Goodrich, and Jason Maston. 2016. "Paul and the Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction." In *Paul and the Apocalyptic Imagination*, eds. Ben C. Blackwell, John K. Goodrich, and Jason Maston, 3–22. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.

Brox, Norbert. 1989. Die Pastoralbriefe, 5th ed. *RNT 7. Regensburg: Pustet.*

Bultmann, Rudolf. 1955. Theology of the New Testament. Vol. 2. Translated by Kendrick Grobel. London: SCM.

Campbell, Douglas A. 2014. Framing Paul: An Epistolary Biography. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.

Collins, John J. 1998. *The Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction to Jewish Apocalyptic Literature*. 2nd ed. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.

Dibelius, Martin, and Hans Conzelmann. 1972. *The Pastoral Epistles: A Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles*. Hermeneia—A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible. Philadelphia: Fortress Press.

Downs, David J. 2005. "'Early Catholicism' and Apocalypticism in the Pastoral Epistles." *CBQ* 67 (4): 641–61.

Dunn, James D. G. 1998. *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.

Dunn, James D. G. 2006. *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament: An Inquiry into the Character of Earliest Christianity*. 3rd ed. London: SCM.

Fitzmyer, Joseph A. 2008. *First Corinthians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*. AB 32. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Goff, Matthew. 2017. “The Mystery of God’s Wisdom, the Parousia of a Messiah, and Visions of Heavenly Paradise.” *The Jewish Apocalyptic Tradition and the Shaping of New Testament Thought*, edited by Benjamin E. Reynolds and Loren T. Stuckenbruck, 175–92. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.

Harrison, P. N. 1921. *The Problem of the Pastoral Epistles*. London: Oxford University Press.

Herzer, Jens. 2004. “Abschied vom Konsens? Die Pseudepigraphie der Pastoralbriefe als Herausforderung an die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft.” *TLZ* 129: 1268–82.

Holtzmann, H. J. 1880. *Die Pastoralbriefe, kritisch und exegetisch behandelt*. Leipzig: Engelmann.

Käsemann, Ernst. 1969. *New Testament Questions of Today*. Translated by W. J. Montague. Philadelphia: Fortress Press.

Kidd, Reggie M. 1990. *Wealth and Beneficence in the Pastoral Epistles: A ‘Bourgeois’ Form of Early Christianity?* SBLDS 122. Atlanta: Scholars Press.

MacDonald, Margaret. 1988. *The Pauline Churches: A Socio-historical Study of Institutionalization in the Pauline and Deutero-Pauline Writings.* SNTSMS 60. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Martyn, J. Louis. 1985. “Apocalyptic Antinomies in Paul’s Letter to the Galatians.” *NTS* 31 (3): 410–24.

Martyn, J. Louis. 1997. *Galatians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*. AB 33A. New York: Doubleday.

Reiser, Martin. 1993. “Bürgerliches Christentum in den Pastoralbriefen?” *Biblica* 71 (2): 27–44.

Reynolds, Benjamin E., and Loren T. Stuckenbruck. 2017. “Introduction.” In *The Jewish Apocalyptic Tradition and the Shaping of New Testament Thought*, edited by Benjamin E. Reynolds and Loren T. Stuckenbruck, 1–14. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.

Rowland, Christopher. 1982. *The Open Heaven: A Study of Apocalyptic in Judaism and Early Christianity*. London: SPCK.

Schweitzer, Albert. 1955. *The Mysticism of Paul the Apostle*. Translated by William Montgomery. New York: The MacMillan Company.

Scott, James M. 2017. “A Comparison of Paul’s Letter to the Galatians with the Epistle of Enoch.” In *The Jewish Apocalyptic Tradition and the Shaping of New Testament Thought*, edited by Benjamin E. Reynolds and Loren T. Stuckenbruck, 193–218. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.

Towner, Philip H. 1989. *The Goal of Our Instruction: The Structure of Theology and Ethics in the Pastoral Epistles*. JSNTS 34. Sheffield: JSOT Press.

Wright, N. T. 2013. *Paul and the Faithfulness of God.* Minneapolis: Fortress Press.

Article information

Robertson, Michael Scott. 2021. "Pauline Apocalypticism and the Pastoral Epistles." In James Crossley and Alastair Lockhart (eds.) *Critical Dictionary of Apocalyptic and Millenarian Movements*. 28 October 2021. Retrieved from https://www.cdamm.org/articles/apocalypticism-pastoral-epistles
Downloaded: 28-10-2021