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Eschatological Expectations  
Among Early Christians

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# Eschatological Expectations Among Early Christians

## **Introduction**

From the very beginning Christianity showed a considerable interest towards the eschatological subjects. The idea of the Second Coming of Jesus Christ, the doctrines of the End of the World and the Final Judgment of God were part of Jesus' original message, as it is recorded in the four Gospels, as well as part of the message of Jesus' disciples and the early Christian missionaries, such as Peter, Paul and John. In this paper I would like to highlight the main aspects of the early Christian eschatology tracing its origin to the recorded sermons of Jesus Christ, and further presenting a brief overview of its interpretation and development during the first three centuries of Christian religion. Thus, chronologically our discussion will be delimited by the sources appearing from the first half of the 1st century C.E. to the middle of the 4th century C.E., when the doctrine of the Second Coming of Christ would be officially codified in the final formulation of the Nicene Creed.

The Nicene Creed, an important summary of the core Christian doctrines, was originally formulated during the First Ecumenical Council of Nicaea in the year 325 C.E., with some significant additions included during the Second Council in 381 C.E. As far as our topic is concerned, the Nicene Creed contains two references to the doctrine of the End of the World. The first reference reads as follows: [Christ] shall come again, with glory, to judge both the living and the dead; whose kingdom shall have no end. The second brief reference was added in the last phrase of the Creed during its final revision in the year 381, and it adds the following mentioning of the future world: I look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. The doctrine of the End of the World, condensed into these two short sentences of the Nicene Creed, is, however, the outcome of the centuries-old debates among the early Church Fathers about the proper meaning of the sayings of Jesus Christ which often dealt with the future of this world. It would be appropriate then, to take a brief look at this original source of all subsequent Christian eschatological schemes.

## **The Gospel Message**

When we examine the pronouncements of Jesus regarding the future of the world history, as they are preserved in the New Testament, we immediately notice the two main themes in all such prophecies. First, there is a clear message that this world will come to a dramatic end, and that a new world, variously called the Kingdom of God or the Kingdom of Heaven, will be established in its place. And, secondly, there is a continuous emphasis that all these global changes will indeed transpire in the nearest future. For the brevity sake, I shall limit my overview of the New Testament eschatology mainly to the message recorded in the Gospel of Matthew, which, according to critical scholarly opinion, was written in about 80 C.E. by a Jewish Christian, who was well-versed in the genre of the Jewish apocalyptic eschatology.(1)

Jesus, as He appears in the Gospel of Matthew, makes a number of straightforward predictions about the approaching end of the present stage of the world and the imminent return of the Son of Man (i.e., Jesus Himself) in glory at the beginning of the new age. Indeed, the apocalyptic message is at the forefront of Jesus preaching from the very beginning. Matthew tells us that the content of Jesus first sermon was the following: Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven has come near (Matthew 4:17). The image of the Kingdom of Heaven appears again and again in the Gospel, referring to the future perfected state, which is destined to replace the present corrupt state of affairs. Furthermore, Jesus is pictured as a royal figure, whose future return would not only herald the establishment of a new Kingdom, but would also allow him to assume a rightful place within the spiritual hierarchy, as the head of this Kingdom.

Several other important points of the Gospel s apocalyptic message should be mentioned here by way of a short summary. Matthew mentions at least two main purposes of Jesus anticipated return. First, in contrast with His first coming to Earth, Jesus is said to come back the second time in His capacity of a Judge, who will bestow rewards and punishments according to the person s deeds. Secondly, upon His return, He will become the leader of the army

during the final battle with the forces of evil. It is significant, that the arrival of Jesus the Son of Man at the end of the days is depicted in military terms, with the image of the legions of angels, military standards and the sound of trumpets. He arrives with the angelic army, and delivers the ultimate victory in the battle between the righteous and the demonic powers. Finally, the author of the Gospel stresses that the Second Coming of Jesus Christ will be unmistakably public and perceivable by all. It will be as a flash of lightning, which lights up the whole sky (Matthew 24:27). The latter point is again set to highlight the contrast between this future public event of Jesus return, and those humble, inconspicuous circumstances of Jesus coming to this world for the first time.

The other noteworthy aspect of the Gospel message is the sense of urgency, which is conveyed by the constant emphasis on the immanency of the predicted events. It seems undeniable that the early writers of the New Testament shared a belief that the Second Coming of Jesus Christ, as well as the day of the Final Judgment, will occur within the next few decades. It is true, that no specific date is set for the end of the world, and, indeed, the Gospel writers emphasize that no human knows the exact hour of Jesus return (e.g., Matthew 24:42). Yet a number of verses in the Gospel of Matthew and elsewhere are fairly unambiguous in their central message — the end of the world, and all the terrible events that would precede it, will transpire very, very soon. Only three examples will be mentioned below.

On one occasion Jesus is described as dispatching his disciples on a mission to spread the good news of the Gospel all over Israel. Before the disciples leave, He instructs them by saying: When you are persecuted in one place, flee to another. Truly I tell you, you will not finish going through the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes (Matthew 10:23). On another occasion, after recounting the threatening signs of His return and the end of the age, Jesus says: Truly I tell you, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened (Matthew 24:34). Finally, perhaps the most straightforward verse expressing the belief in the immanency of the

Second Coming appears in the Gospel of Mark, where Jesus makes the following prediction in front of his disciples: Truly I tell you, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see that the kingdom of God has come with power (Mark 9:1).

We can generalize from the verses cited that one of the main characteristic features of the Christian Church in the first century of the common era was the belief in the imminent end of the world and the speedy return of Jesus Christ in His capacity of a Judge and a military-like leader of the forces of righteousness. We can judge of the sincerity of this belief from the accounts in the Book of Acts, where the early converts to Christianity are described as selling all their property and establishing religious communes, having no doubt that very soon there will be no need for any earthly possessions. It remains now to briefly overview how these eschatological conceptions have developed and changed in the following two centuries of the Christian history.

### **The Patristic Period(2)**

There was one obvious doctrinal problem that the early Christian Church of the second and third century had to deal with, as more and more time would pass from the period of Jesus' life and the lives of His immediate disciples. It is a problem of Jesus' apparent delay, or a problem of, what one might call, the unfulfilled prophecy. By the second century C.E. it was quite obvious that the generation of people who were eyewitnesses to Jesus' ministry have passed away, and yet the world would continue existing as before, and no clear sign of Jesus' return would be visible. It became more and more obvious that the Church was here to stay for a much longer period than estimated by the first generation of Christians. This realization, in turn, required a modified approach to doctrine of the Second Coming of Jesus Christ.

But despite the apparent need to readjust the original time-line of the eschatological hope, it had little effect, as Brian Daley observes (Daley, 2010), on the overall content and strength of Christian faith, and caused no great upheaval or massive disappointment for the early Christians. Each subsequent

generation of Christians, though, had to deal with the inevitable questions of the return of the risen Lord, suggesting an appropriate exegetical scheme, which would allow interpreting the Gospel pronouncements in a less than literal way. Below I will describe several major trends in the Christian theology of the first two-and-a-half centuries after Christ, which address the issues of the end of the world and the dawning of a new age.

To begin with, the early Church Fathers recognized the need to explain the apparent delay of Jesus return. For example, Justin, one of the earliest post-New Testament writers whose work we possess, wrote an Apology in year 155 C.E., where he suggested that the end has been delayed because the number of the just to be included in the Kingdom of God is still incomplete. (3) Yet both Justin and other important figures in early Christianity (such as Irenaeus, the bishop of Lyon, died in 202 C.E.) clearly expect the end to come very soon, this expectation of an immediate end of the world would typically intensify among ordinary believers and theologians during the periods of active persecution of Christians by the Roman authorities, at which point many would attempt to give an exact date of the end. For example, Firmilian of Caesariaea writes of a local prophetess who urged the faithful to go immediately to Jerusalem, since the Lord would come back during the persecution under Maximinus Thrax in year 236.(4)

Nonetheless, the uninterrupted continuation of the world as we know it called for a more systematic approach to the question of the timing of Christ's triumphant return. Starting with the early 3rd century we observe a gradual rise of a new conception of the historical timeframe, which would prove quite influential in the centuries to come. The conception takes its main inspiration from the story of creation in the first book of the Bible, the book of Genesis, which describes the process of creation as taking place during six days, and designates the seventh day as a sacred day of God's rest. But if the whole world was created in six days, it seems natural to suppose that the world will also last only six time-periods, where the dawn of the seventh day would also trumpet the beginning of a new era. Incidentally, the book of Revelation, the most

mysterious book of the New Testament, talks about the Millenarian Kingdom, a thousand-year long reign of God on Earth after the final defeat of the Antichrist. If, then, we identify the predicted thousand-year Kingdom with the seventh day, or the Lord's Sabbath, then we get to a conclusion that the world itself would last for only six thousand years after creation.

Thus, Hippolytus, an early bishop of Rome who was martyred in year 235, points to several scriptural passages, which he interprets as suggesting that Jesus Christ was born in the year 5500 after creation, and thus predicts that the world would come to an end in the year 500 C.E.(5) In a similar vein, Cyprian, bishop of Carthage who died in 258 C.E., observes that the contemporary events unmistakably point to the fact that the six thousand years allotted to history since creation were almost exhausted, although, unlike Hippolytus, he avoids giving an exact date of the end.(6) Among the signs of the last times Cyprian mentions the increased persecution of the Christians, the plague that ravaged the West in 252-54, the internal dissent within the Church, and the general depletion of the natural forces of history as the result of the cumulative effects of sin.

We can say that by the middle of the third century, i.e., 200 hundred years since the time of Jesus Christ, the predominant eschatological story was that of Irenaeus and his famous disciple Hippolytus. This story can be summarized as follows:

1. Satan will appear as a human being in the person of the Antichrist.
2. The Antichrist will be of Jewish origin from the tribe of Dan, presenting himself as a messianic king of the Jews, and taking his seat in the rebuilt temple in Jerusalem.
3. The Antichrist will reign for three and a half years, a period marked by severe persecution of the remaining faithful Christians (The Great Tribulation period).
4. Jesus Christ will return to Earth at the end of the three and a half year reign of the Antichrist, destroying Satan's kingdom in a great battle. The resurrection of the just will occur at that time.

The mysterious figure of the Antichrist, who, in the words of Tertullian is now close at hand and grasping for the blood of Christians. (7) , and who is supposed to precede Christ's return, has given rise to a multiple attempts of identification of this arch-enemy of the Christians with the particular historical figures. Thus hardly any Roman Emperor, starting with Nero, has escaped the honor of being named the Antichrist by various Christian writers, especially those who distinguished themselves by brutal persecution of the Church.

Another trend in the eschatological thought that appears in the third century was a controversial tradition of the allegorical interpretation of those scriptural passages which seemingly predict an imminent demise of the universe as an actual event of human history. Without doubt, the most influential writer within this tradition was Origen of Alexandria, who died in year 254. Origen, in his writings aimed primarily at the intellectual elite of the Church of his time, suggests that those passages in the Gospel of Matthew, which vividly describe the end of the world and the events that would precede it, should not be taken literally, but rather, should be allegorically interpreted in terms of the personal spiritual growth of a devout Christian. Thus, the terrible famine that would precede Christ's return, according to the Gospel of Matthew, is interpreted as the Christian hunger for the deeper meaning of Scripture, the promised widespread persecutions stand for the false doctrines of the heretics, and the second coming of Christ Himself can be seen, according to Origen, as a personal event in the life of an individual Christian who reaches a certain degree of spiritual perfection. Indeed, Origen famously urges that the Kingdom of God has already come for those who live a spiritual life and obey God's word here on Earth, and that the promise of bodily resurrection refers to the renewed flesh of the believer after baptism. It is worth mentioning here, that Origen's internalized approach to Christian eschatology, although influential in many circles, has never received large following or much official support from the later Church Fathers.

The beginning of the 4th century, just 20 years preceding the conversion of the emperor Constantine to Christianity, was marred by one of the most violent

periods of persecution of Christians by the emperor Diocletian, which lasted from 303 to 313 C.E. (known as the Great Persecution). As was often the case in the earlier periods, the increased pressure from the worldly government revived a new interest in the eschatological subjects. One of the main exponents of eschatological hope at that time was bishop Victorinus, who died a martyr's death in 304. Some of the characteristic features of his extant commentaries on the New Testament prophecies include the adoption of the tradition which perceives the seventh day of the book of Genesis as the seventh millennium, in which Christ will rule with his elect, and the return to the much more literal (as compared with Origen) understanding of the upcoming end of the world and all the earthly woes that would signal it.(8)

Another equally influential writer of this decade of persecution was Victorinus near contemporary Lactantius, who died in 317. His observations of the ills of the contemporary society prompted him to conclude that the world is extremely old and almost crumbling, signifying that the end is near. Lactantius also joins those theologians who risked predicting the exact time of Christ's second coming, suggesting that the six thousand years from creation will expire in about two hundred years from then. But what proved to be a more lasting legacy of Lactantius' theology was his vividly concrete, step-by-step description of all the events that would precede the end, the events that would occur during the thousand-year rule of Christ on Earth, and everything that would happen after that. Freely using both Christian and non-Christian sources (such as Sibylline Oracles, Vergil's Eclogues, and even a Zoroastrian work the Oracles of Hystaspes), Lactantius paints a grim picture of the upcoming political disorder within the Roman Empire and its subsequent partition, invasion of a mighty enemy from the North, destruction of natural environment, and, finally, rise of the Antichrist, whom he identifies, contrary to the tradition which always implied his Jewish origin, with the King of Syria. Yet the ultimate victory over the forces of evil would usher an age of peace for God's people, the second resurrection, and the final transformation of the natural order. Lactantius' deliberate eclecticism in creating his apocalyptic myth will start a popular tradition of blending biblical eschatology with elements of folk religions, pagan mythology and literary narratives.

The year 313 C.E. marked a historical turnaround in the fate of Christianity. From a persecuted and despised religion of the lower classes it suddenly changed into a prestigious religious tradition, which now received the imperial patronage of the Roman Emperor Constantine himself. This new security and new freedom have certainly affected the theological interests of the Christian writers as well. It is observed by a number of scholars that the mid fourth century theologians showed noticeably less interest in the eschatological themes as compared with the previous centuries, focusing rather on other questions, such as the true nature of Christ and Christ's relationship to God the Father. The sense of urgency and the feeling of the imminent universal cataclysm, which was so characteristic of the early centuries, has given way to a more reserved attitude. In many ways, the center of concern of ordinary Christians was now a proper preparation for one's individual death, rather than for a global demise.

Even though there was somewhat of a revived interest in the topic of the end of the world in the late 4th and 5th centuries, the Church Fathers who formulated the Nicene Creed in 325, as we have observed above, decided to mention the prospect of the Second Coming of Christ in the most general terms, without addressing the question of time or the order of events that would signal the final chapter in human history. This original formulation, which was mentioned earlier, reads as follows: [Christ] shall come again, with glory, to judge both the living and the dead; whose kingdom shall have no end. In effect, from the whole enormous corpus of the earlier eschatological tradition, the bishops of Nicaea extracted these three points, which were perhaps the least controversial ones among the earlier writers: 1. Jesus Christ will return again in power and glory; 2. Both the living and the resurrected dead will face the Final Judgment, where their fate will be decided based on their earthly deeds; 3. Christ will establish an everlasting kingdom of love, peace and justice. It is perhaps fair to say that these three affirmations remain at the core of the Christian eschatological hope even in our days.

## **Conclusion**

It is undeniable that the authors of the Gospels in their eschatological speculations have been influenced by a genre of Jewish eschatological writings, which began to flourish several centuries before the birth of Jesus.(9) Deep yearning for the Messiah, for the political liberator and the spiritual redeemer who would radically change the course of history and restore the greatness of Israel has been deeply embedded in the Jewish consciousness ever since the loss of the political independence. At the same time, the content of the eschatological message that is recorded in the New Testament and later Christian writers differs in several important aspects from the traditional Jewish eschatology. And the main difference is precisely the Christian conception of the end of times as the final goal of a spiritual journey, which would bring benefits far outweighing any earthly goods, and would transcend any ethnic or political agenda.

I believe that the essence of Christian teaching about the end of the world is not in these multiple attempts to predict the exact date of Christ's return or, using the power of imagination, to speculate about the details of all the events that will occur prior to it or about the personality of the Antichrist. Historically, these have been important topics indeed, but looking at these debates from a certain temporal distance, we might perhaps be in a better position to extract what is truly lasting and fundamental in the teaching of the Christian Church, demarcating it from the historically contingent controversies. The most important legacy is the legacy of that unwavering hope that the Christian Church has preserved through the centuries, namely, the hope that justice and righteousness will ultimately prevail over all the forces of evil, the hope that was always at its strongest during the periods of history when the realization of this hope looked the least probable.

## Notes :

- 1- On the dating of the Gospel of Matthew see (Davies & Allison, 1991).
- 2- Traditionally, the age of the Church Fathers (the Patristic Period) lasts from the early 2nd century to till the end of 6th century C.E. Our overview, however, will only be concerned with the Pre-Nicene conceptions (before 325 C.E.).
- 3- Quoted in (Daley, 2010, p. 21).
- 4- (Daley, 2010, p. 232).
- 5- From the birth of Christ, then, we must reckon the 500 years that remain to make up the 6000, and thus the end shall be . Now it was the sixth hour, Jesus says, intimating by that, one-half of the day. But a day with the Lord is 1000 years; and the half of that, therefore, is 500 years. For it was not meet that He should appear earlier, for the burden of the law still endured, nor yet when the sixth day was fulfilled, but on the fifth and half, in order that in the remaining half time the gospel might be preached to the whole world, and that when the sixth day was completed He might end the present life. — Hippolytus (On Daniel, 2:6).
- 6- It is an ancient adversary and an old enemy with whom we wage our battle: six thousand years are now nearly completed since the devil first attacked man .the divine arrangement containing seven thousands of years (Cyprian, Treatise 11; Preface, 2; On the Exhortation to Martyrdom, 11).
- 7- Quoted in (Daley, 2010, p. 34).
- 8- And in Matthew we read, that it is written Isaiah also and the rest of his colleagues broke the Sabbath -that that true and just Sabbath should be observed in the seventh millenary of years .Wherefore, as I have narrated, that true Sabbath will be in the seventh millenary of years, when Christ with His elect shall reign (Victorinus, On the Creation of the World).
- 9- See (Charles, 1999) and (Rowland, 1982).

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