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# WHY ESCHATOLOGY?<sup>1</sup>

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**I**T is long since anything has made me feel so modest as your action in conferring upon me the presidency of this distinguished society. It is with a very great and very real sense of the honor you have done me that I stand before you. In asking me to preside over your deliberations of the present session you have made it incumbent upon me to indicate in some degree my own attitude toward the studies which make our bond of union. I am glad of an opportunity to say that my attitude is that of one who pursues a course of study for what he can get out of it, for himself and for others. I study the Bible (specifically the New Testament) for a purpose. I believe that our attitude should be profoundly pragmatic. There is that kind of Biblical study—we have all met it in books, in articles, in lectures—which inevitably provokes the question: Why? As an exercise in ingenuity a game of chess would have done quite as well. Whatever be true of art, Biblical science is not an end in itself. We rightly regard our researches as in a very genuine sense akin to the ministry of religion; a large proportion of us, inevitably, are clergymen. That is not because of the material on which we work, it is because of the purpose for which we work.

I shall, therefore, not apologize (save as these introductory comments are a kind of *apologia*) for asking: Why? Why do these matters about which we write papers and read them to

<sup>1</sup> President's Address at the meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature & Exegesis, Chicago, December 29, 1924.

each other at these meetings really concern us? What difference does it make? If I choose thus a topic rather practical than academic, if I consider the values of critical results rather than present the critical processes by which such results are attained, if, in brief, you find me homiletic rather than scholastic, you will know that it is of deliberate purpose. The scholarly tradition of our society, witnessed by a long succession of presidential addresses of a very high order, will more than restore the balance.

As an example of the problems we work at, let me choose one: a topic, indeed, on which we held a symposium at a meeting not many years since: a topic on which as critics we have all whetted our scholastic blades. The topic I have in mind is eschatology. Why does it vex us so sorely? Why bother about it? Biblical students, especially students of the New Testament, cannot leave it alone; in all their lectures, their articles, their books, their discussions of whatever sort, its problems are always thrusting themselves to the fore. If we cannot leave it alone, it is because it will not leave us alone: it will be heard. We may attempt to make it marginal and secondary; we may grant it only grudging and half-hearted recognition, but we cannot so act with a perfectly clear conscience. We have a guilty feeling that it really belongs far more in the center of the stage than we have allowed it to appear, that it really comes far nearer being the hero of the piece than one of the supernumeraries.

Yes, for better or for worse, the truth has won our perhaps reluctant assent and must now be definitely acknowledged. The New Testament is an eschatological product; it is the deposit of what today we should call a millenarian movement. Not a single document of the twenty-seven but is definitely oriented with reference to this one conviction. Even a writing so positively non-eschatological as the Fourth Gospel is none the less controlled by this concern: its writer is not free: he must perforce be anti-eschatological. This traditional John is quite as clearly a witness to the eschatological nature of primitive Christianity as his antipodal colleague, the actual John whose apocalypse closes our New Testament. However much we dislike these notions in our own time, and repudiate the type of

Christianity which makes them central, they are none the less part and parcel of our religion in its earliest stages, of the faith of the founders and of the church as they founded it. We may cast aside as worthless and illusory what Jesus believed, what Paul taught, but we must be honest enough to admit that they did so believe, so teach, even if we do not.

I am stating categorically what is, of course, not yet universally recognized. Despite all the work of Christian scholarship in this field for the last generation, there is still in most Christian circles, even in some circles of theological scholarship and teaching, a vast deal of confused thinking or confused failure to think, on this cardinal matter. The dilemma seems too harsh, too cruel. We cannot believe the Kingdom of God to be at hand in this first third of the twentieth century: we know it was not at hand in the first third of the first century. We know, equally, that Jesus confidently believed in its imminence and to this conviction related his whole religious message; to interpret the sources otherwise is a simple exegetical sin. And yet we would not be wiser than Jesus or reject as false what he fondly believed to be true. A disciple is not above his master—at least he is uncomfortable if he finds himself so elevated. It is a dilemma not so much theological as personal and religious. We are assured that Jesus knew better than we; yet we honestly think we know better in this matter than he. The time is past for evasions and "interpretations" and all forms of self-deception. The exegetical sin just referred to is a sin against the light. We whose allegiance to the single pursuit of truth qualifies us as members of this Society of Biblical Scholars and brings us to this gathering as guests of a great university, we must do all in our power to mediate clarity and certainty to those whom we teach and through them to the great hosts of men and women who make up that fellowship of religion, however named, which is, in the end, the object of all our service.

I have said that the presence of eschatology as an integral element in Christianity at its initial proclamation, must be accepted. Let me go on to ask: must it be accepted under protest, reluctantly, regretfully? And let me answer: By no means. Let us accept it joyfully, enthusiastically, appreciatively. Or rather

let us stop *accepting* it, as something thrust upon us, and begin to *claim* it, as something of value we would not willingly do without, which adds power and vitality and significance to our religion. In short, I would speak a good word for eschatology. And I would speak it in this presence, not only because eschatology is a prime element in the documents with which we here, as witnessed by the name of our Society, are especially concerned, but because I believe our preoccupation with these documents has an end beyond itself. We study the Bible because the Bible is worth studying. We have not come here to work out cross-word puzzles; we have come that by our associated labors we may become more fruitful in bringing to bear upon the world's life the world's great spiritual treasure, the Bible. Of that treasure the eschatological element is an integral and important part; it has its rich contribution to make. At present that contribution is made only imperfectly, because of misapprehensions and ignorances which it is precisely our task to clear away so that eschatology may do its perfect work.

What has made the conception which was central for Jesus so peripheral and so distasteful for us, his twentieth century disciples? Why is it that we at best "admit" that he held such conceptions? Is it not, in the first instance, because we live, even the most fundamental of us, in an evolutionary world? Deny it as some of our brethren may, they and we alike draw our mental breath in the clear air of development, process, and the chief moral mandate of our age is the universal insistence that we put our hands to the shaping of the better social order, else it will go unshaped. Our eschatology is no dream of the Kingdom of God, but a determination to achieve the democracy of man. We expect no *parousia* of a heaven-sent Messiah; we put our trust in our own slow processes of education, of legislation, of leagues and plans and conferences. The event toward which our whole creation is moving we conceive as necessarily a human achievement and as very far-off. To each word in Jesus' pronouncement we oppose a sharp denial. The Kingdom of God is at hand? No kingdom, but a democracy—not of God, but of man—not at hand, but to be won only by generations of slow and patient effort. The first-century thought-world

that shaped Jesus' assurance is passed away like a childhood dream.

And in the second place, ancient eschatology is distasteful to many of us because, so at least we claim, it is materialistic, political, external; it is too Jewish; it is human, all too human. In an age like ours, indeed, this ought to be no disqualification. Are we not ourselves of all generations most concerned with an environmental salvation, with the shaping of a social order within which men's economic needs may find their due satisfaction, and the goods of this world shall be equitably shared by all? It is surely a monstrous irony when modern Christians insist that the expression of Jesus' hopes for mankind shall be "purely spiritual", untainted by concern with food and shelter, with labor and its product, with government and the state. Clearly, this objection, whatever truth it may contain, cannot really hold.

More valid is the feeling that the eschatology ascribed to Jesus must be discredited on the ground that it was obviously illusory. These expectations, if he cherished them at all, he cherished mistakenly. If he meant that the Kingdom of God was really at hand, he was quite wrong, for it simply wasn't. Indeed the Kingdom of God itself, as conceived by him and his contemporaries, was an ideal which at that time or any other, could not be, and should not be, at hand. What have we here but one of the classic errors of history, pathetic, perhaps, but sheer error still? So many feel; and we cannot wonder that many, so feeling, shrink from ascribing the great mistake to Jesus himself. Many in all times have believed the great consummation near at hand in their own generation; one and all they were victims of a fond delusion. There are such gratuitous blunderers today; can we class Jesus among them? Perhaps no consideration has done more than this to drive men to a more or less thorough-going refusal to group Jesus among the eschatologists.

And one other point must be touched upon. By their fruits ye shall know them. In all Christian centuries since the first, whenever eschatology has played a major part in the shaping of men's thoughts and feelings, it has seemed an influence, not for good, but for evil. It has turned men away from the legit-

imate concerns of life, from true religion and social duty; it has made them fanatical, narrow, bigoted, intolerant. Where is breadth and vision, where consecration and hope and sweet reasonableness, where the veritable spirit of Jesus, helpful, healing, compassionate, tender with publican and sinner and the bruised and broken life? Not, one feels, with the millenarians of this world. Between them and the Master whose convictions they claim to reproduce is too often apparent to others only a glaring incongruity. He cannot, simply cannot, have meant what they mean. We others, to whom the whole millennial scheme is but a folly and an intense aversion, we it is who are really his representatives.

Thus I have tried to give a few (only a few) of the many reactions against the alleged eschatology of Jesus which the "modern man", in some of his endless embodiments, feels. All of them I have met, in various individuals, as doubtless each of you has. In the face of these well-founded objections, with some or all of which some or all of us may have distinct sympathy, can we still speak a good word for eschatology? I would still essay to do so.

Cannot we whose professional duty it is to understand the Bible and the history it presents and to make others understand them, see with all clarity what is the heart of the eschatological conviction? Can we not see also that it represents an integral and deathless element in all true religion? What made Judaism the most religious of ancient religions, so that in a truer sense than the Hebrews dreamed, they were a chosen people, an elect vehicle in which man's divinest impulse was most certainly carried down to later ages? It was that Judaism was a religion of history, concerned with a cosmogony. It had a sense of two great realities, both primarily related to human kind, the one contradicting the other. The first was that this world and everything in it was the creation of a good God and that its crowning constituent, man, was the image of his Creator. The other was the profoundest sense the ancient world anywhere possessed of moral evil, of the wrong and shame, the ungodlike, the anti-divine, permeating every human life. Each of these convictions had corollaries in plenty, the sum of which makes

up what is loosely called Jewish theology: but these are central. The collision of these two convictions in the Hebrew mind gives rise to those great reflections on religion and life which make the Old Testament immortal. Now eschatology stands ultimately for a third conviction, which sprang out of the interplay of the other two. It was born very early, in that prophetic consciousness which is really a unique element in Jewish racial history. It developed and underwent alteration and deepening; it applied itself to spheres of human life and destiny as numerous and varied as the reflections of the prophets who voiced it. But at bottom it is one thing, and a simple thing.

Let us put it in Hegelian terms. Eschatology is the ultimate synthesis which shall resolve the antinomy of the thesis that God made all things good and man in his own image with the antithesis that there is not one righteous, no not one, and the whole world groaneth and travailleth together in pain. It is the *Doch* to Creation's *Ja* and Sin's *Nein*. It is indispensable; without it Hebrew religion would be only a baffled cry, an anguished query without an answer. True Jewish eschatology was always a *palingenesis*, a restoration of all things, a going back to that primeval situation in which God looks upon every thing which he has made, and beholds it as very good; and unto man he says: Thou art my beloved son, in thee I am well pleased. That is what eschatology really means. What would religion be without it? It is the undefeatable conviction that in the end God, and not the devil, shall rule, that all the age-long course of sin and shame shall end in purity and peace, that what creation made implicit shall become explicit, that the universe is at heart good and from it evil as a foreign intruder shall ultimately be expelled.

I have often been grateful to Professor Kirsopp Lake for a remark he somewhere makes that the Greek is separated from the perfect world by space, the Jew by time. The religion of the Jew, and by the same token, the religion of the Christian, is therefore a religion of history: it inevitably includes an eschatology, a conviction as to the destiny, not of men only, not of men primarily, but of man. The time-element, like the social concern, is of the essence of our religions. By hope are we



saved, whatever be true of others. The realization of our dream lies ahead, and the length of the vista at the end of which it gleams is the simple measure of our faith in its reality and in its certain fulfilment.

Why should it be a defect that for the faith of John and Jesus and Paul the great day was at hand, very near, very real, only just beyond their outstretched hand—*there comes one after me—there be some that stand here—ye shall see—we that are alive, that are left?* Was not this intense foreshortening of historical perspective rather a virtue? To a whole generation these things were things that must shortly come to pass. And how greatly they were thereby brought near—how much did come to pass! All that was meant, in the last analysis, was that the divine *dénouement* was real, was sure, was graspable—*fear not, little flock, it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the Kingdom!*

The assurance of faith translated itself in these men into terms of the time-equation, but what concerned them was not an item of chronology, but a mighty giving of substance to things long hoped for. Nor is the equation invalid; the assurance of faith does hasten the time, it does quicken the pace. How swiftly did the human spirit in those illumined years of the first century make progress towards its goal, leaping where we crawl! We shall spring forward once more, rejoicing as a strong man to run a race, when prophets rise again, telling our time, in its language, that the goal no longer gleams afar, but is very near, because intensely believed-in. Such a message will not rest on calculations from ancient texts or on any mechanical interpretation of ancient prophecies, not even those of Jesus. It will spring out of a fresh contemporary religious experience.

So it was with those great eschatologists whom both Judaism and Christianity are proud to claim. The moment we ask seriously: why was John, why was Jesus, sure that the Kingdom of God was at hand, we get a new approach to their eschatology. Not because the time and times and half a time of Daniel the prophet were reckoned to have elapsed, but because the divine world had drawn very close to their spirits. If, as interpreters of our historical faiths, we keep alive the eschato-

logical sense, we shall help to kindle again, in our confused and troubled time, where ultimate realities have become obscured, a flaming up of the synthetic conviction that sees deeper than the antinomies, beyond the battle, to where beyond these voices there is peace—with victory. We who study and teach the Bible have as the largest element among our students those who are in training for the ministry of religion, whether in synagogue or in church. We shall fall far short of conveying to them the dynamic that throbs in our great Scriptures, which through them is to vitalize all human relations, if we fail to implant in them the eschatological faith that burns white-hot at the heart of those Scriptures.

The world suffers today from the lack of a genuine eschatology. The millennialists' attempt to transfer to our time the empty apocalyptic thought-forms of the first century, without knowledge of the reality which then filled these forms and overflowed them, with concern only for the unessential and the transient, is of course working at quite another task and is doing rather less than nothing to meet this need. Those who seriously and understandingly expound the prophets and Jesus and Paul can do much to meet it. Is it too much to expect that the Society of Biblical Literature and Exegesis shall justify its existence, not merely as the ancient scribes were said to do, by the elucidation of ancient texts as an end in itself, but also as one did of whom it was said that he spoke as one having authority and not as the scribes—one in whose brief and incredibly dynamic career the Kingdom of God was actually at hand, within grasp, had all men been as ready as he? Emily Dickinson once pathetically wondered whether the love of God couldn't be presented so that it didn't sound like bears; I wonder whether, even in meetings like this, the assurance that the Lord God the Almighty reigneth may not be presented so that it sounds not like long Greek words such as eschatology and apocalyptic, but like the Hallelujah Chorus!