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Introduction: Was Jesus Wrong About the Eschaton?

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You are not supposed to be starting this book right now. Life, as we know it, is supposed to have ended. At least, according to Harold Camping.

Apocalypse . . . Now?

In the spring of 2011, Harold Camping became a household name. Former president of Family Christian Radio in California and host of the show "Open Forum," Camping used his significant communications network to advertise his calculation that on May 21, 2011, Jesus would return to rapture the faithful and judge the world. His listeners responded in droves, donating tens of millions of dollars to spread

the apocalyptic word through books and pamphlets in no fewer than 75 different languages.[1] Five thousand billboards sprang up across the USA, proclaiming "Judgment Day May 21," and emblazoned with a yellow seal of faux-authentication which certified the prediction: "The Bible Guarantees It."

This was not Camping's first attempt at rapture prognostication. A couple of decades earlier, his book *1994?*,[2] published by a vanity press called *Vantage*, anticipated that the end of days would likely occur in September of the eponymous year. That set of dates enjoyed rather better circulation than did the ciphers he had adduced in the 1970s and 1980s, but even the interest in Camping's 1994 forecasts paled in comparison to the enthusiasm he generated in early 2011.[3]

In contrast to Camping's previous apocalyptic auguries, the 2011 campaign did some serious damage. People sold their homes, pulled their children out of school, and liquidated all their assets to support the end-of-the-world evangelization effort. This time around, disturbed listeners attempted—and sometimes succeeded at—committing suicide. A Taiwanese man launched himself from a building to avoid the imminent cosmic upheavals; a California mother attacked her young daughters with box cutters before opening her own throat in terror of the tribulation.[4] The atheists sneered; the orthodox shook their heads. And the sun came up on May 22, 2011.

Undaunted, Camping denied that his prophecies had failed entirely. Instead, he explained to his stunned adherents that the judgment had begun *spiritually*, and that things would get properly wrapped up in five months. In his own words,

> Indeed, on May 21 Christ did come spiritually to put all of the unsaved throughout the world into judgment. But that universal judgment will not be physically seen until the last day of the five month judgment period, on October 21, 2011. . . . Thus we can be sure that the whole world, with the

1. Robert D. McFadden, "Harold Camping, Dogged Forecaster of the End of the World, Dies at 92," *New York Times*, December 17, 2013.
2. Harold Camping, *1994?* (New York: Vantage, 1992).
3. Sarah Pulliam Bailey, "Harold Camping, Radio Host who Predicted World's End, Dies at 92," *Religion News Service,* 2013.
4. McFadden, "Harold Camping."

> exception of those who are presently saved (the elect), are [sic] under the judgment of God, and will be annihilated together with the whole physical world on October 21, 2011, on the last day of the present five months period. On that day the true believers (the elect) will be raptured. We must remember that only God knows who His elect are that He saved prior to May 21.[5]

Of course, October 21, 2011, came and went. Occupy Oakland took over the US news-cycle as police tear-gassed protesters. Justin Bieber released a Christmas album. People forgot about Camping, who died on December 15. Family Christian Radio remains on the air.

But this will happen again.

It will happen again because, despite the Gospels' statements that "concerning that hour or day, no one knows"[6] (Matt. 24:36//Mark 13:32), the New Testament is emphatic that Jesus will return. Soon. In fact, that imminent return is at the epicenter of Christian hope. To some degree, Camping came by his deeply misguided predictions honestly, because the Bible—from the Prophets through the Gospels and into the Apocalypse—is littered with prognostications and prophecies and timelines. From the time of Jeremiah, the Israelites started counting down to the eschaton, excitedly anticipating the end, having their hopes dashed, rewinding the clock and starting again (see chapter 2, pp. 24–33). Accordingly, some could even try to argue that Camping has a respectable prophetic pedigree. Perhaps the real problem with the Parousia is not that the Campings of the world keep predicting it, but that Christians still expect it. Perhaps the basic issue is just that the Son of Man did not come when he was supposed to, back in the days of the apostles.

After all, Jesus had promised his disciples, "Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see that the kingdom of God has come with power" (Mark 9:1). He assured

5. Harold Camping, "What Happened on May 21?," http://www.familyradio.com/x/whathappened.html. This page has since been removed by Family Christian Radio, although extracts remain available on many other websites.
6. All English translations of the biblical text derive from the *NRSV*, unless otherwise indicated.

them, "Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place" (13:30)—"all these things" apparently including reference to the "Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory". In light of that promise, he adjured them again and again, "keep alert . . . keep awake . . . keep awake" (Mark 13:33–37), for "truly I tell you, you will not have gone through all the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes" (Matt. 10:23).

But Jesus did not come back. His coming, his Parousia, was *significantly* delayed. As we will see, the fact that "this generation" *did* pass away before the Son of Man returned created concerns for some early Christians. But in successive centuries, the Church found a way to move ahead, cycling between promises that Jesus' return was just around the corner[7] and a more tranquil contentment with the fact that the religion was doing well, wherever its founder might be. On the margins, cranks and "prophets" kept leading laity into the wilderness to await Jesus' return, but the respectable clergy and the proper scholars moved on, and for the most part, set aside that irksome delay of the Parousia, patiently nodding their heads and intoning the truisms that "no one knows the hour or the day" and "with the Lord a day is like a thousand years" (2 Pet. 3:8). Jesus's apocalyptic buzz grew increasingly soft . . . until Johannes Weiss kicked the hornet's nest in 1892.

Resurrecting the Apocalyptic Prophet: Johannes Weiss and Albert Schweitzer

If anyone can be identified as touching off the modern critical-eschatological debate, it is Johannes Weiss. The previous decades of Jesus scholarship had been especially preoccupied with issues of supernatural (miracles, the virgin birth, the resurrection, etc.) and source-critical (favoring either the depictions of the Synoptics or of John's Gospel) sorts. But Weiss's little book *Die Predigt Jesu vom Reich Gottes* reframed historical Jesus scholarship in terms of the

7. For a droll survey of failed Christian apocalyptic predictions, see Bart D. Ehrman, *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet of the New Millenium* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 4–18.

eschatological expectation of Jesus, correcting the scholarly neglect of the subject which had characterized the century following the posthumous publication of Reimarus' *Wolfenbüttel* fragments (1787). Albert Schweitzer vividly described the experience of the reader who has slogged through liberal nineteenth-century Jesus studies and finally arrives at Johannes Weiss. In Schweitzer's inimitable words, such a scholar feels like "an explorer who after weary wanderings through billowy seas of reed-grass at length reaches a wooded tract, and instead of swamp feels firm ground beneath his feet; instead of yielding rushes he sees around him the steadfast trees."[8]

As the volume title indicates, Weiss placed the proclamation of the kingdom of God back at the center of Jesus' preaching, and that kingdom kerygma, for Weiss, was irreducibly eschatological. While this observation is now commonplace for seminarians, among Weiss's predecessors that point had been quite obscured.[9] Weiss argued that Jesus internalized the expectation of the kingdom's imminent arrival and conventional history's end—an end for which Jesus prepared by casting out demons, even though he did not conceive of himself as the active founder of that kingdom.[10] Nonetheless, Jesus also believed that in the eschaton, he would be the Messiah and Son of Man in a heavenly and exalted sense.[11] The ultimate significance of Weiss's landmark work is that it obliged all subsequent Jesus scholars to make a basic decision between an eschatological and a non-eschatological Jesus.

Nonetheless, Weiss's insights may not have proven quite so decisive had not Albert Schweitzer so successfully won over the academy to this eschatological Jesus. Schweitzer too claimed messianic self-consciousness for Jesus, but by his reconstruction, Jesus knew himself to be far more than a mere "herald" of the kingdom, someone

8. Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus: First Complete Edition*, trans. W. Montgomery, et al. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 198.
9. See further the editors' introductory comments in Johannes Weiss, *Jesus' Proclamation of the Kingdom of God*, trans. Richard Hyde Hiers and David Larrimore Holland, Scholars Press Reprints and Translations (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1985), 2–7.
10. Ibid., 74–81.
11. Ibid., 114–20, 27–29.

announcing the kingdom without bringing it about.[12] Schweitzer argued that Jesus considered himself to be the agent of the kingdom, who even tried to force the hand of God toward the final consummation.[13] Sadly, as Schweitzer's Jesus took a leap of faith into the arms of the eschaton, he was caught by the beams of the cross, and died forsaken by a God who did not thereafter bring about the kingdom.

> There is silence all around. The Baptist appears, and cries: "Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand." Soon after that comes Jesus, and in the knowledge that He is the coming Son of Man lays hold of the wheel of the world to set it moving on that last revolution which is to bring all ordinary history to a close. It refuses to turn, and He throws Himself upon it. Then it does turn; and crushes Him. Instead of bringing in the eschatological conditions, He has destroyed them. The wheel rolls onward, and the mangled body of the one immeasurably great Man, who was strong enough to think of Himself as the spiritual ruler of mankind and to bend history to His purpose, is hanging upon it still. That is His victory and His reign.[14]

This grim tale, along with Schweitzer's five-hundred-page Feuerbachian critique of every previous liberal life of Jesus, largely silenced the guild . . . at least for a while.

The details of Schweitzer's reconstruction did not carry the day, but together with Johannnes Weiss, he fixed eschatology as a crucial axis for contemporary historical Jesus research. Today, there are three basic positions on the issue.

Rejecting the Apocalyptic Prophet: The Jesus Seminar

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, it became fashionable to reject Schweitzer's eschatological Jesus *tout court*. The Jesus Seminar argued that all the apocalyptic-eschatological material ascribed to Jesus is historically spurious. Exemplified by people such as Robert Funk,[15]

12. Schweitzer, *Quest*, 326.
13. Ibid., 349–50.
14. Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus: A Critical Study of its Progress from Reimarus to Wrede*, trans. W. Montgomery (London: A&C Black, 1910), 368–69. Intriguingly, this stirring comment only appeared in the early editions of Schweitzer's *Quest* and was subsequently removed.

Stephen Patterson,[16] and J.D. Crossan,[17] the Seminar explained that Jesus was originally a disciple of John the Baptist, who was indeed an apocalyptic and eschatological prophet.[18] Jesus, they said, broke away from John and preached a present kingdom, the apprehension of God's divine governance over the world in a new and inclusive community.[19] Nonetheless, after Jesus' death, his disciples wanted to capitalize on the momentum of the Jesus movement, and so they reconceived their (unresurrected) master as a miracle worker and reintegrated him into the eschatological-apocalyptic framework that Jesus himself had rejected.[20]

The perspective generally endorsed by the Jesus Seminar incited quite the media frenzy, and some even spoke (prematurely, it turns out) of the "collapse of the apocalyptic hypothesis."[21] This perspective has, however, fallen on rather hard times, in particular, for methodological reasons. While fellows of the Jesus Seminar are not monolithic in their approach,[22] they tend to share key common elements. Especially important is their reliance upon the *Gospel of Thomas*[23] and upon John Kloppenborg's stratigraphy of Q. *Thomas* is notoriously non-apocalyptic in its orientation. Q does include

15. See e.g. Robert W. Funk, *Honest to Jesus: Jesus for a New Millennium* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), 68–70, 145–46, 66–69, 254–55.
16. See Stephen J. Patterson, "The End of Apocalypse: Rethinking the Eschatological Jesus," *Theology Today* 52 (1995): 29–58.
17. See e.g. John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1991), 227–60.
18. Obviously, there are distinctive features of the works written by different representatives of the Jesus Seminar. Here, we want only to highlight common traits and typical rebuttals thereto without trying the readers' patience with extensive critique of a paradigm whose popularity has already been waning for some years.
19. Crossan, *Historical Jesus*, 261–98.
20. Funk, *Honest to Jesus*, 241–56.
21. Patterson, "End of Apocalypse," 41.
22. Crossan, for example, places a great deal of importance of his so-called "Cross Gospel" (rearranged from bits of the *Gospel of Peter*), the Egerton Gospel, and the *Gospel of the Hebrews* (Crossan, *Historical Jesus*, xxviii–xxxiii, 427–29), a methodological decision that has not been enthusiastically received by many. Marcus Borg, a member of the Jesus Seminar who was early in signaling his skepticism about the apocalyptic Jesus, constructs his argument in a rather different manner (see e.g. Marcus J. Borg, "An Orthodoxy Reconsidered: The 'End-of-the-World Jesus'," in *The Glory of Christ in the New Testament: Studies in Christology*, ed. L.D. Hurst and N.T. Wright (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987), 207–17; Marcus J. Borg, *Jesus in Contemporary Scholarship* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1994), 47–90; his proposal has been discussed in detail by Dale C. Allison, *Jesus of Nazareth: Millenarian Prophet* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1998), 113–22.
23. To which the Seminar tends to assign quite an early date.

apocalyptic sayings, but Kloppenborg has proposed the existence of multiple layers of Q, of which he claims that the earliest (dubbed Q1) is devoid of eschatological expectations.[24] A Jesus built primarily from *Thomas* and Q1 can be easily purged of apocalyptic peculiarity.

Critiques of Crossan, Funk, and Patterson are numerous,[25] and rather than engage in an exercise of pale imitation, it is merely necessary to echo some of the high points of those criticisms. To begin with, Q1 and the *Gospel of Thomas* are not sturdy pillars with which to erect a thesis. There is a good deal of skepticism about the viability of extracting multiple strata of Q, let alone the methodological circularity involved in determining what elements belong to which layer.[26] So also, it is probably fair to say that dating *Thomas* earlier than Mark is very much a minority position,[27] and even if one were to date the former gospel early, it is clear that *Thomas* is aware of and opposed to the apocalyptic construal of Jesus (*Gos. Thom.* 3, 18, 37, 113)—a fact which actually *confirms the prior existence* of that construal.[28]

Moreover, the construction of a "sapiential" Jesus *sans* apocalyptic expectation requires the marginalization of the witness of Mark's Gospel (e.g. Mark 8:38–9:1; 13:1–37), Paul (e.g. 1 Thess. 4:13–18), Luke (e.g. Luke 12:35–59), Matthew (e.g. Matt. 25:1–46), and even John's Gospel (5:28–29), insofar as all of these texts depict Jesus as an apocalyptic and eschatologically-oriented prophet. So, adapting Mark Twain's pithy adage, reports of the apocalyptic Jesus' demise have been greatly exaggerated.

24. See e.g. John S. Kloppenborg, *Excavating Q: The History and Setting of the Sayings Gospel* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000).
25. For example, Dale C. Allison, *Constructing Jesus: Memory, Imagination, and History* (London: SPCK, 2010), 116–36; Allison, *Millenarian Prophet*, 122–36; cf. Ehrman, *Jesus*, 128–39.
26. See further, Allison, *Constructing Jesus*, 118–25.
27. For a history of recent research on the subject, see Nicholas Perrin, "Recent Trends in *Gospel of Thomas* Research (1991–2006): Part 1, The Historical Jesus and the Synoptic Gospels," *Currents in Biblical Research* 5, no. 2 (2007): 183–206.
28. See Allison, *Millenarian Prophet*, 124; Allison, *Constructing Jesus*, 125–34.

Reconceiving the Apocalyptic Prophet: N.T. Wright

N.T. Wright has suggested a second approach,[29] which many people have received with great enthusiasm because it respects the canonical form of the text while addressing the awkward synoptic texts (e.g. Mark 9:1//Matt. 16:28//Luke 9:27; Mark 13:30//Matt. 24:34//Luke 21:32; Matt. 10:23) that appear to presage imminent and cosmic judgment.[30] Wright argues that Jesus' florid apocalyptic language in Mark 13:24–37 (and parallels) refers not to fantastic earth-rending, time-stopping events, but to sociopolitical upheavals, as was typically the case when such language was used by the Old Testament prophets.[31] Accordingly, in the Olivet Discourse, Wright's Jesus does not prophesy the imminent consummation of the kingdom, but rather, the judgment of Israel through mundane[32] means. Wright also interprets the various Gospel texts[33] referring to the coming of the Son of Man as allusions to Dan. 7:13, which are to be understood as describing the heavenly enthronement of Jesus after his death.[34]

29. R.T. France also argued a very similar line to Professor Wright's, but departed from Wright by contending that Mark 13:32–37 shifts focus from the destruction of Jerusalem to the second coming of Christ; see R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 541–43. Insofar as Wright's view is only increasing in popularity, the present discussion will focus on his *oeuvre*.
30. We are most grateful to Professor Wright for taking the time to engage in a generous dialogue with us in response to a conference version of this argument (also entitled "When the Son of Man Didn't Come"), given at the Scripture and Theology Seminar of St Mary's College at the University of St Andrews in December, 2011.
31. N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, Christian Origins and the Question of God 2 (London: SPCK, 1996), 354–58; also Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, Christian Origins and the Question of God 1 (London: SPCK, 1992), 333. It bears note that in the Old Testament, the language of cosmic destruction can indeed be applied to the mundane overthrow of a single city or nation, as in Ezek. 32:7; Amos 8:9; Zeph. 1:15. Still, it has been argued that this very motif aims to apply language of final destruction proleptically to mundane events that prefigure that destruction; Edward Adams, "The Coming of the Son of Man in Mark's Gospel," *Tyndale Bulletin* 56, no. 1 (2005): 56. For the purposes of the present investigation, it suffices to highlight simply that the same cosmic destruction language was also used in the Second Temple era to describe the ultimate consummation (see below, p.11 and p. 13n43).
32. To be clear: when the adjective "mundane" appears in this chapter, it is meant in the etymologically proper sense of "this-worldly", and not in the more popular sense of "banal". Likewise, identifying events as "mundane" is not intended to deny the divine agency/sovereignty operative in the events, but only to separate the sociopolitical events in question from the sorts of cataclysmic disasters and supernatural phenomena that are (we contend) narrated in the prophetic and apocalyptic texts examined in this book.
33. E.g. Mark 13:26–27: "Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in clouds' with great power and glory. Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven."

Finally, Wright explains that when the Gospel texts correlate the "coming of the Son of Man" with visions of cosmic destruction, they intend to denote through apocalyptic tropes that the destruction of Jerusalem was to be understood as vindicatory evidence that Christ had, after the crucifixion, been enthroned at God's right hand.[35] Wright has no intention of denying the future return of Christ to resurrect the dead unto judgment and recompense; he simply distinguishes that Parousia from the New Testament texts with clearly delimited references to the first century. The attraction of Wright's reading is that it constitutes an orthodox interpretation of the text by a premier New Testament scholar that preserves the fulfillment of Jesus' time-specific prophecies within the first century.

Wright's thesis has, however, come under fire, particularly from Edward Adams. First, Adams has pointed out that Jesus' allusion to Dan. 7:13 via his comments about the "coming of the Son of Man" does not need to be construed in terms of a heavenly ascension or vindication, even if that does seem to be indicated by Dan. 7:13.[36] In fact, the first time the language of the coming of the Son of Man appears in Mark, the directionality is from heaven to earth, and not the other way around.[37] Mark 8:38 warns the disciples not to shrink from their fidelity to Jesus, lest they be punished in the final judgment: "Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them *the Son of Man* will also be ashamed *when he comes* in the glory of his Father *with the holy angels*." This text is fascinating for a couple of reasons: in the first place, it describes the Son of Man coming in judgment, rather than ascending in vindication; in the second place,

34. Wright, *Jesus*, 361, 512–15; cf. *People of God*, 291–97. See also France, *Mark*, 342–43, 500–501.
35. Wright, *Jesus*, 343–46, 362–65, 510–19.
36. Adams explores the way that Dan. 7:13 is interpreted in *4 Ezra* 13 and *1 Enoch* 37–71, showing that in these texts, Second Temple Jewish interpreters read Dan. 7:13 messianically and without adopting Dan. 7:13's trajectory from earth to heaven; Adams, "Coming of the Son," 44–48.
37. Mark 8:38 combines allusions to Dan. 7:13 and Zech. 14:5, the latter of which provides the notion of God's coming in judgment, while Daniel 7 is simply the source of the Son of Man language. *4 Ezra* 13 shares the same motif, describing the coming of a man riding the clouds from heaven who came to earth to inflict judgment. Edward Adams, *The Stars Will Fall From Heaven: Cosmic Catastrophe in the New Testament and its World*, vol. 347, Library of New Testament Studies (London: T&T Clark, 2007), 148–53; "Coming of the Son," 48–52; Alexander N. Kirk, "Yes, 'A Human Figure Flying Downwards on a Cloud': A Response to N.T. Wright and R.T. France on Mark 14:62" (paper presented at the Society of Biblical Literature International Meeting, London, June 2011).

the Gospel's very next verse (Mark 9:1, "Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see that the *kingdom of God has come with power*") clarifies that the coming of the kingdom of God in power—apparently, an event concurrent or identical with the Son's coming in judgment—will occur before the disciples have all died. Thus, contrary to Wright's assertion that it is most natural to read the allusion to Dan. 7:13 in Mark 13:26 as a reference to Jesus' heavenly ascent and vindication, Mark 8:38 has already shown that the Evangelist understood Jesus' "coming" in terms of final judgment at the consummation of the kingdom.[38]

This understanding seems to be corroborated in the other Synoptic Gospels. The parallel texts Luke 12:40//Matt. 24:44 certainly seem to think that the coming of the Son of Man refers to Jesus' return in judgment (so also Matt. 25:31), especially in light of the ensuing parable in which the Lord returns to reward his faithful stewards and punish the unfaithful (Luke 12:45–46//Matt. 24:50–51).[39] Similarly, in Luke 18:8, Jesus asks, "When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?" This inquiry, concluding the parable of the Importunate Widow, quite explicitly identifies the occasion of the Son of Man's *imminent* coming as the vindication of and provision of justice for the elect over against the wicked: "Will [God] delay long in helping [the just]? I tell you, he will quickly (ἐν τάχει) grant justice to them" (Luke 18:7–8).

Furthermore, Adams has shown that Second Temple Jewish apocalyptic texts often use cosmic destruction language (of the sort found in the Old Testament prophets) for the purpose of describing

38. The third place in Mark's Gospel where one encounters "the Son of Man coming" is in 14:62, Jesus' declaration that the High Priest "will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of the Power and coming with the clouds of heaven." This text presents challenges for Wright's thesis that the destruction of the Temple vindicated Jesus, insofar as the High Priest and most of those present would not have been likely to live to see the Temple's destruction in 70 CE. Noting parallel texts in the Wisd. of Sol. 5:1–7 and *1 En.* 62:1–3, Alexander Kirk has argued convincingly that Jesus' statement "You will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of the Power and coming with the clouds of heaven" refers to the final judgment, in which the resurrected Sanhedrin would witness Jesus' exaltation as the eschatological judge; Kirk, "Flying Downwards".

39. In fact, Matthew is the only Gospel to use the term *παρουσία*, and his association of the word with the final judgment is clear (Matt. 24:3, 27, 37, 39); Anthony C. Thiselton, *The Last Things: A New Approach* (London: SPCK, 2012), 103.

global, eschatological catastrophes,[40] and not only to refer to mundane sociopolitical events, the likes of which Wright emphasizes.[41] Consider, for example, the first chapter of *1 Enoch*.

> The God of the universe, the Holy Great One, *will come forth* (ἐξελεύσεται) from his dwelling. And from there he will march upon Mount Sinai and appear in his camp emerging from heaven with great power. . . . Mountains and high places will fall down and be frightened. And high hills shall be made low; and they shall melt like honeycomb before the flame. And the earth shall be rent asunder; and all that is upon the earth shall perish. And there shall be a *judgment upon all*, (including) the righteous. And to all the righteous he will grant peace. . . . Behold he will arrive with *ten million of the holy ones* in order to execute judgment upon all. He will destroy the wicked ones. . . . (*1 En.* 1.3–9)

Here, the language of cosmic destruction is coupled with the universal judgment, in a text which fascinatingly connects that destruction and judgment with the "coming forth" of the Holy One with myriads of angels.[42] This confluence of images is of obvious relevance to the Olivet Discourse, in which the cosmic destruction precedes the "coming" of the Son of Man with his "angels" (Mark 13:24–27).

One also sees this cosmic destruction language applied to the final judgment in the *Testament of Moses*, in which God comes forth from heaven; the sun, moon, and stars go dark; and the earth is shaken.

> Then his kingdom will appear throughout his whole creation. Then the devil will have an end. . . . For the Heavenly One will arise from his kingly throne. Yea, *he will go forth* from his holy habitation with indignation and wrath on behalf of his sons. And *the earth will tremble, even to its ends shall it be shaken*. In the high mountains will be made low. Yea, they will be shaken, as enclosed valleys will they fall. The *sun will not give light. In the darkness the horns of the moon will flee*. Yea, it will be broken into pieces. It will be turned wholly into blood. Yea, even *the circle of the stars will be thrown into disarray*. (*T. Mos.* 10.1, 3–5)

40. See the detailed study in Adams, *Stars Will Fall*, 52–100.
41. Making reference especially to *4 Ezra* 11–12, *2 Baruch* 35–40, *Sib. Or.* 3.669–701, and Josephus, *B.J.* 6.288–300; N.T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, Christian Origins and the Question of God 4 (London: SPCK, 2013), 170–74.
42. Angels also accompany God in the final judgment scene described in *1 En.* 102.1–4.

Adams has adduced a number of further examples of the same phenomena.[43] These texts show clearly that the language of cosmic destruction by no means requires an exclusively mundane sociopolitical referent. The scope of the envisioned destruction needs to be determined by the context in which the cosmic destruction imagery appears.

Returning, then, to Mark's Gospel, the immediate context of Jesus' comments about the coming of the Son of Man seems to indicate that Jesus has in mind the consummation of the world as well as the destruction of Jerusalem. The fact that in Mark 13:31, Jesus says that "heaven and earth will pass away" suggests that Mark 13:24–27 includes a view toward the eschatological (that is to say, final) and catastrophic judgment of all humanity.[44] This is not to deny that the events of Mark 13:5–23 refer to the events leading up to the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE; surely, they do. It is simply to say that Mark 13 assumes that the final judgment will be shortly preceded by the destruction of Jerusalem.[45]

On closer examination, it seems that Wright's key arguments are rather more vulnerable than they might appear at first glance. Mark's previous usage of the "coming of the Son of Man" language (Mark 8:38) seems to indicate a reference to coming from heaven to earth in judgment at the consummation of the eschaton, and not ascent in vindication after the resurrection. Likewise, the cosmic destruction language of Mark 13:24–27 cannot be limited to a trope for mundane national judgment; Second Temple interpreters frequently use that motif to describe eschatological consummation and Mark 13:31 seems to militate against an attempt to limit 13:24–27 to the events of the first century. So, for all its undeniable merits, it remains to be seen if Wright's reading of Mark 13 (and parallels) will carry the day.

43. *1 En.* 83.3b–5; 102.1–3; 1 QH 11.19–36; *Sib. Or.* 4.175–78; *2 Bar.* 32.1; *Apoc. Zeph.* 12.5–8; Adams, *Stars Will Fall*, 96–98; cf. Allison, *Millenarian Prophet*, 160–62.
44. Adams, *Stars Will Fall*, 161–64; "Coming of the Son," 57–59.
45. So also Thiselton, *Last Things*, 100–102.

A Terminological Excursus

Before moving ahead with our history of research, a brief moment of linguistic clarification is in order due to some unfortunate confusion in the use of the words *apocalyptic* and *eschatological* among scholars. This language is tricky, not least of which because the guild's understanding of *apocalyptic* has changed greatly over the past century, and also because in popular usage, the words have taken on further (and historically inaccurate) significances (as any Hollywood disaster film trailer will attest). *Apocalyptic* denotes, in the first place, the revelation of heavenly realities which give the seer insight into present and future earthly affairs; this literature quite often utilizes fantastic pictures of monsters and cosmic destruction to describe sociopolitical affairs, which may or may not be concomitant with the cessation of world affairs as we know them.[46]

Eschatology, by contrast, refers etymologically to the study of the "last things" (ἔσχατα), but insofar as the New Testament itself modifies the scope of the *eschaton* owing to its authors' belief that Jesus only began the end, it is entirely legitimate to talk about *eschatology* in terms of things that happened two thousand years ago, or in terms of things that Christians believe will happen in the future. On top of this, there are live debates about whether or not the consummation of the eschaton should be conceived of in terms of the "end of the world" or in terms of a reordering of the creation that is significant but contiguous with the creation in which we currently live. Apocalyptic literature can be eschatological in either of these senses, or it can be non-eschatological. Eschatology can be apocalyptic, but it need not be. Then, there are all sorts of questions about what is "literal" and what is "metaphorical". Consequently, scholars often feel that they are talking past one another, using the same words to say quite different things.

A good many of the printed disagreements between N.T. Wright, Edward Adams, and Dale Allison (see further below) address these

46. Cf. Christopher Rowland, *The Open Heaven: A Study of Apocalyptic in Judaism and Early Christianity* (London: SPCK, 1982), 23–29, 47–48; John Barton, *Oracles of God: Perceptions of Ancient Prophecy in Israel after the Exile* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1986), 218.

terminological issues.[47] Without attempting to create further confusion by proposing our own definitions, it is necessary to specify that we have made an effort to be intentional in our usage. For example, we use *apocalyptic* in the sense(s) proper to the (admittedly diverse) ancient genre and we speak of the *eschatological consummation* to denote the return of Jesus, the resurrection of the dead, and the final judgment.

Reasserting the Apocalyptic Prophet: Dale Allison and Bart Ehrman

As representatives of the third approach to eschatology in recent historical Jesus scholarship, Dale Allison[48] and Bart Ehrman[49] have argued that the apocalyptic language attributed to Jesus can be neither discarded as a secondary accretion to his kerygma, nor exclusively referred to sociopolitical affairs. Instead, Ehrman and Allison take the bull by the horns, affirming with Schweitzer that Jesus expected the imminent eschatological consummation and that he was wrong.

The arguments these scholars have proposed to defend their construal are compendious and formidable. Still, the length of their works reflects not any obscurity in their readings of the biblical evidence so much as the erudition of those whose perspectives they oppose.

In brief, Allison and Ehrman defend the Synoptic Gospels' ascription to Jesus of the key sayings on the imminence of the Parousia (Mark 9:1//Matt. 16:28//Luke 9:27; Mark 13:30//Matt. 24:34//Luke 21:32; Matt. 10:23).[50] They point additionally to the various "woes" that Jesus pronounces against his contemporaries (Matt. 23:13–36//Luke 11:42–52; cf. Luke 6:24–26), to his declaration that he came not to bring peace, but "a sword" (Matt. 10:34–36//Luke 12:51–53), to his teachings about the eschatological harvest,[51] and to his repeated injunctions to

47. Most recently, see the comments in Wright, *Paul*, 167–75.
48. See especially Allison, *Millenarian Prophet*, 1–171; Allison, *Constructing Jesus*, 31–220.
49. Ehrman, *Jesus*, 125–62, 83–219.
50. Allison, *Millenarian Prophet*, 149–50.

"alertness" and discerning the present time (Luke 12:35–48, 54–56; Matt. 24:42–25:13). All these texts converge to support the thesis that, irrespective of the non-specification of the precise date of the eschatological consummation, Jesus did seem to think that these events were coming rather soon. Thus, Allison says,

> Whatever one makes of Mk 9:1; 13:30; and Mt 10:23, one must come to terms with the parables that advise people to watch for the coming of the Lord or the Son of Man, with the pronouncements of eschatological woes on contemporaries, and with the miscellaneous complexes that either announce or presuppose that the final fulfillment of God's saving work is nigh. Those who dissociate Jesus from imminent eschatological expectation need to show us not only that all of this material comes from the church but additionally that it misrepresents what Jesus was all about. They have not done so.[52]

Ehrman additionally underscores the significance of Jesus being (in some way) a successor to the proclamation of John the Baptist and the predecessor (and inspiration) to the early Christians. John prophesied the imminent arrival of the kingdom of God, complete with the judgment that attended it (Matt. 3:1–12; Luke 3:1–17). The Christian leaders that followed Jesus made no bones of their imminent expectation of Jesus' return to resurrect the dead and consummate the eschaton (thus, e.g. 1 Cor. 7:29–31; 1 Thess. 4:13–18; Rev. 22:20). That being the case, it seems eminently logical that the figure who links the Baptist and the New Testament writers would share with them the basic conviction in the proximate arrival of the final judgment and restoration.[53]

Finally, Allison and Ehrman point out that the New Testament bears redactional evidence of an intra-Christian struggle with Jesus' non-return.[54] Luke 9:27 takes the edge off of Mark 9:1, for example, by removing the phrase "having come in power" (ἐληλυθυῖαν ἐν δυνάμει) from Jesus' utterance, "there are some standing here who will not taste

51. Matt. 13:24–30; Mark 4:2–9//Matt. 13:2–9//Luke 8:4–8; *Gos. Thom.* 9, 57; cf. the functionally similar trope of the net in Matt. 13:47–50.
52. Allison, *Millenarian Prophet*, 150–51.
53. Ehrman, *Jesus*, 137–39.
54. Allison, *Millenarian Prophet*, 165–69; Ehrman, *Jesus*, 130–31.

death before they see the kingdom of God [having come in power]." This revision slightly lowers the bar of fulfillment, allowing the reader more easily to identify moments such as the Transfiguration and Pentecost as "partial fulfillments" of Jesus' prophecy (on which, see further chapter 4, pp. 72–74, and chapter 6, p. 131). Similarly, Luke 22:69 recognizes the difficulty of Jesus' declaration to the High Priest, "you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of the Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven" (Mark 14:62), insofar as the High Priest would certainly have died before Luke's Gospel was written; as such, he simply avers "from now on the Son of Man will be seated at the right hand of the power of God"—a statement which he then confirms for his readers with the vision of Stephen in Acts 7:55–56.

So also, Luke 19:11[55] and John 21:22–23[56] make clear that the disciples and members of the first Christian community expected that Jesus would return quite soon to consummate the kingdom, perhaps almost "immediately" (as Luke 19:11 indicates) or at least, before the Beloved Disciple died. This indicates that, however much Jesus may have inaugurated the kingdom of God, many of those around him continued to expect a more complete fulfillment, and soon. "Jesus' prophecies were not originally construed as metaphors fulfilled in his ministry or in the time thereafter. That came only with subsequent, apologetical exegesis."[57]

As such, Ehrman and Allison seem to conclude (or at least imply) that if one is to find meaning in Jesus' life and teachings, such meaning ought not to be thought to reside in an affirmation of Jesus' own central eschatological message. By their readings, it appears that Jesus' essential proclamation, "The time is fulfilled and the Kingdom of God is near" was simply mistaken.

It might come as a surprise to readers to hear that the authors of this volume—all of whom regularly affirm the Nicene Creed's declaration

55. "He went on to tell a parable, because he was near Jerusalem, and because they supposed that the kingdom of God was to appear immediately."
56. "So the rumor spread in the community that this disciple would not die. Yet Jesus did not say to him that he would not die, but, 'If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you?'"
57. Allison, *Millenarian Prophet*, 166.

"He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his Kingdom will have no end"— agree in large measure with Allison and Ehrman's construal of Jesus' prophetic and imminent eschatological expectation (with exception of the views summarized in the preceding paragraph). As critical scholars, this strikes us as simply good exegesis and responsible history. As Christian theologians, however, we appreciate that this critical research creates some serious dogmatic problems.[58]

The Theological Problems with a Failed Apocalyptic Prophet

At the risk of stating the obvious, the principle problem with saying that Jesus was wrong about his imminent expectation of the consummation of the eschaton is that *the imminence of the kingdom of God was central to Jesus' message*.[59] As much is basically the thesis statement of what is surely the earliest canonical Gospel: "The time is fulfilled and the Kingdom of God is near; repent, and believe in the good news" (Mark 1:15). It is one thing for Jesus to be wrong or ignorant about a matter on which he does not comment (for example, germ theory or the finer points of nuclear physics), or even on a matter peripheral to his kerygma (say, the size of a mustard seed relative to that of a begonia or an orchid; cf. Matt. 13:31–32), but it is quite another thing for him to be wrong concerning the thing he cares most about—the essence of the message the Evangelists handed on. If Jesus was wrong about that, does that not eviscerate the Christian construal

58. Naturally, Allison and Ehrman draw very different theological conclusions from their similar critical understandings of Jesus' message. Ehrman is a self-proclaimed agnostic with no current commitments to the Christian faith, whereas Allison is an ordained elder in the Presbyterian Church (USA). Between his *Jesus of Nazareth: Millenarian Prophet* and *Constructing Jesus*, Allison published a smashing and short book called *The Historical Christ and the Theological Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), which is a good deal more theologically constructive than *Jesus of Nazareth* would have led one to anticipate; moreover, the final paragraphs of all three of his Jesus books are nothing short of stirring. We would do well to remember that, however much exegesis influences theology, there is no one-to-one correspondance between the ways one reads a text and the theology that one embraces. As this book hopes to show, the process is a great deal more rich than that.

59. The ideas (and some turns of phrase) in this section owe much to Dr. Christian Hofreiter, an early member of our colloquium whose expertise was invaluable in shaping our thoughts. We are grateful to him for allowing us to use his insights in this chapter.

of Jesus as Messiah, teacher, and God? Does error here not undermine the plausibility of our future hopes?

A great many people who have no allegiance to Christian orthodoxy concede that Jesus is a great moral teacher. But why should such a concession reasonably be made? If Jesus' teachings on discipleship are generated by his expectation of the kingdom of God, and the kingdom of God did not materialize, then why is it reasonable to salvage his ethical message? How can he be a credible moral teacher if the basis of his morality is a delusion?

More pointedly for orthodox Christians, how can we delude ourselves into thinking that Jesus somehow speaks for (and *as*) God if his basic message was wrong? If the beloved Son in whom the Father was supposedly well-pleased was mistaken about his essential kerygma, should we really continue to believe that God favored Jesus as much as the Evangelists claim? Should we even give earnest consideration to the suggestion that he is one and the same being as the deity that is putatively in control of the fate of the world?

If the basic message of Jesus was wrong—wrong in a way that might ostensibly falsify the Church's Christology—then how can anyone presume to find "salvation" through faith in him? More pointedly, why are people living and dying in hopes of being received into the kingdom of heaven when the terms of that offer seem to have expired nineteen centuries ago? With such (post-)eschatological knowledge, can we still maintain that the Christian hope has a meaningful referent outside its existential implications, i.e. beyond the call that we should live *etsi deus daretur*, *as if* the dead were to be raised, *as if* a just judge would one day put things to rights?

If Jesus' prophecy about the timing of the kingdom's coming was not fulfilled, then isn't this Christianity thing really just all wrong?

Volume Outline

In the following chapters, we propose to explain that, even though Schweitzer, Allison, and Ehrman are essentially correct that Jesus prophesied the consummation of the kingdom of God (judgment,

resurrection, punishment, and reward) to occur within striking distance of his earthly ministry (certainly within several decades), this should not be thought to undercut Christian hope. On the contrary, *it is our thesis that the delay of the Parousia is entirely consonant with the way ancient prophecy works and with the operations of the God that Christians worship*.

To demonstrate this point, we will first show (chapter 2) that Jesus' eschatological prophecies were, in fact, only the latest in a long series of prophetic non-fulfillments, partial-fulfillments, and deferrals. This observation might compound Christian anxiety, rather than alleviating it, but it is a necessary initial step in a longer process. Though the history of partial fulfillments and deferral may strike modernist readers as falsifying the prophecies altogether, that supposition derives from a basic failure to understand the nature of Judeo-Christian prophecy. While prophecy does entail an element of prognostication, it is perhaps more fundamentally a ministry of *activation*, of telling what God intends to do to people, given that they behave in a certain way, *for the purpose of motivating them to a course of action which might confirm or avert that prophecy* (chapter 3). For this reason, unfulfilled prophecies are not failed prophecies; sometimes, unfulfilled prophecies are successful prophecies, because prophecy is often conditional. Likewise, partially fulfilled prophecies are sometimes the only appropriate outcomes of morally inconsistent or mixed actions on the parts of the addressees, and yet, in their partial fulfillment, they sustain the forward march of the faithful, like stepping-stones across the river of sacred history (chapter 4).

In light of these observations about the conditional nature of prophecy, the non-consummation of the eschaton that Jesus prophesied is not the problem that this chapter's previous section (pp. 18–19) made it out to be. Quite the contrary, Jesus' prophecies can themselves be understood as conditional. In fact, that supposition is borne out by the witness of the New Testament and patristic authors themselves, who interpret the events following Jesus' death as partial

fulfillments of prophecy, and as deferrals of ultimate fulfillment appropriate to the conditionality of Jesus' proclamation (chapter 5).

We go on, thereafter, to demonstrate that this dynamic of prophetic conditionality, deferral, and partial fulfillment is, in fact, deeply contiguous with the sort of God that is the object (and subject) of Christian theology, and with a Christian view of how salvation history unfolds under the sovereignty of that God.

In relation to the stepping-stones argument elaborated in chapter 4, we draw on the apophatic theology of the ancient Church to discuss the distinctions between divine and human experiences of time. We argue that the partial realizations of the kingdom of God do not merely foreshadow the eschaton, but are, in fact, the in-breaking of the eschaton, as God heals the crippled linearity of human historical time (chapter 6).

The next step is to embed the exegetical argument about the contingency of the Parousia's timing (from chapter 5) in a robust theological framework. This requires initially that we articulate a traditional Trinitarian theology that explains God's essence in terms of a pure act of love between the persons of the Trinity. Such an account of God's essence explains how the immutability of God is not threatened by God's engagements with and reactions to human decisions, even to the extent of diverging from a previously prophesied action (chapter 7).

Thereafter, we continue our theological explanation of the deferral of the eschaton by articulating the way in which God has, in fact, *committed* himself to consummating human history in a manner that graciously entails the *cooperation of humans*. The pro-Chalcedonian dyothelite understanding of the hypostatic union—as well as the story of incarnation, resurrection, and ascension—supports the account of the delay of the Parousia adduced in chapter 5, because it shows that God has chosen to cooperate in his body the Church with human wills and actions to bring about the end. But the inverse is also true: lack of human cooperation can defer the return of Christ. Thus, orthodox Christology confirms our exegetical case by showing that eschato-

logical deferral is proper to the character of God himself and to the way God has bound himself to consummate the kingdom (chapter 8).

The self-sacrificial natures of the Trinity and of kenosis underscore the ways in which God deigns and delights to cooperate with those whom he loves. Thus, our argument's next step is to reflect on the ways in which the people of God throughout history have recognized God's redemptive action on their behalf and have participated in that restorative work through Jewish and Christian liturgies (chapter 9). We will explain how these liturgies bear witness to and bind together the narratives of God's people throughout the ages, how they reflect and are used by God to instantiate the linkages between heaven and earth, and how they sustain and propel the people of God toward the final consummation.

The penultimate note to be sounded in this volume will be a methodological one (chapter 10). As this brief outline has already revealed, the theological method utilized in this book incorporates historical criticism, canonical and final-form exegeses, patristic studies, constructive theology, and Christian liturgical reflections (*inter alia*). In a methodologically-obsessed profession, we would be remiss not to explain how we did what we did. Most monographs would insert such comments at about the present juncture of the volume. But since the proof of the pudding is in the eating, we chose not to share the recipe until our readers decided that they liked the dessert.

A few final pages (chapter 11) of the book will draw the whole argument together. Therein, we elaborate the way that our exegetical and doctrinal arguments reinforce one another, and we conclude with a *Maranatha*.