

Jörg Frey's critique of the neutralisation of apocalyptic in Wright's Paul and the Faithfulness of God

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Jörg Frey offers a useful critique of N.T. Wright's understanding of Paul's apocalyptic in his chapter in ¹. I was asked what I think about it, so here's my brief assessment and a quick overview of how I understand Paul's eschatology.

The **key question**, according to Frey, is whether *Paul's apocalyptic vision constitutes a continuation of the "covenantal traditions of Israel"* and the narrative of salvation history or a **radical interruption of it**, the *introduction of something fundamentally new* (522).

- The first position is represented by **Wright**, who insists that Paul's apocalyptic language must be thoroughly assimilated into the covenantal narrative of Israel.
- The second position is represented by the **cosmic, a-historical apocalypticism** of the "Union School" of **Martyn and de Boer**, and more recently by Douglas **Campbell**.
- In Frey's view neither answer to the question about continuity is satisfactory in itself. *Wright has neutralised apocalyptic* by means of a symbolic reading that **overstates the political and covenantal** aspects and places too much weight on the "inaugurated" part of the "now and not yet" formula (493-502). *Martyn and de Boer rely on an outdated understanding of Jewish apocalypticism* and the anachronistic idea that the world is normally "closed" to transcendence (508-12).

These are not contradictory perspectives. Paul's apocalypticism, Frey argues, looks to the God of the covenant for a "saving intervention" in continuity with the salvation history of Israel, and Paul makes *extensive use of Israel's scriptures in order to defend his gospel*.

¹Demythologizing Apocalyptic? On N.T. Wright's Paul, Apocalyptic Interpretation, and the Constraints of Construction", in Heilig, Christoph, Michael F. Bird, and J. Thomas Hewitt (Eds.) *God and the Faithfulness of Paul* (2017), 489-531.

But this does not 'rule out the view that the Christ event was a new intervention of God or that Christ's parousia might bring about an unprecedented completion, or even an "end" of the world' (523). While there is some positive correlation between Paul's apocalyptic narrative and Israel's history, we have to reckon nevertheless with the fact that 'the cross was a fundamental skandalon for "covenantal" Jews...' (524).

The cross was a skandalon to covenantal Jews but it does not abrogate the prophetic narrative. The cross was the means by which the concrete rule of YHWH over the nations would be achieved.

In a section on **Paul as "Apocalyptic Theologian"**, Frey argues that "Paul was deeply rooted in contemporary apocalyptic thought" and that he shared his perspective with Pharisaic Judaism, John the Baptist, Jesus himself, and the early Jesus movement (520). He expected a "day of wrath and the revelation of judgment", a "day of the Lord" or "of Christ", in the *not too distant future*, when Jesus would come with his angels; the present evil age would pass away, the powers of the present world would be defeated, the kingdom of God would be established, and there would be a general resurrection of the dead. Like other apocalyptic visionaries, Paul claims that the "mystery" (mystērion) of a "hidden order of being and history that encompasses the creation and the expected end" had been revealed to him (cf. Rom. 11:25; 1 Cor. 15:51).

The neutralisation of apocalyptic in Wright

I am not entirely persuaded by Frey's critique of Wright, though I haven't gone back to Paul and the Faithfulness of God to check the details. Much of his analysis looks like qualification rather than repudiation, and he has to allow that Wright does not ignore the future aspect of Paul's eschatology altogether.

1. Frey acknowledges that we do not find in Paul the "radical dissolution of the present world as is envisaged in Rev 19-21" (495), *but he does not pursue the implications of this*. He notes only that Paul clearly expected a "radical change of the world" at the return of Christ, in his lifetime, and concludes that it is "*not possible to neutralize those expectations as merely symbolic*". **So why not at this point consider the possibility that in Paul's mind this radical change associated with the parousia of Jesus was something other than, and prior to, the final**

renewal of heaven and earth? This is an option clearly envisaged in Jewish apocalyptic thought.

2. Frey's concern about the political emphasis is tentatively expressed: such a political dimension as is obvious for Revelation does not rule out the possibility that the author seriously imagined a transcendent reality intervening in the present world and not only the destruction of the enemy "Babylon"-Rome but also of the whole present world. (496)

I would argue

1.) that Paul does not clearly describe a *transformation of the present world incompatible with the historical reality* of the overthrow of pagan Rome, as Frey has already acknowledged; and
2.) that the *key transcendent reality* in Paul's thought is the **enthronement of Jesus to the right hand of God**, the significance of which is fundamentally *future-oriented rather than "inaugurated"*. Paul's "now and not yet" arises from the fact that Jesus has been installed as king but the implications of this for Paul's world have not yet been realised.
3. I have some sympathy with the objection that Wright has given hermeneutical priority to an overarching narrative or worldview or "myth of redemption" over the precise force of the apocalyptic language. But the **problem, in my view**, is that Wright has not grasped the *full scope of the covenantal narrative*, which I think culminates not in **redemption** and **restoration** but in the **active rule of YHWH over the nations**. I think that the New Testament generally lines up with a strong, though not exclusive, tradition in Jewish apocalypticism that imagined the rule of YHWH, through his restored people, over the nations in place of Greece or Rome. This makes excellent sense within the historical purview of first-century Judaism.
4. This has a **bearing on Frey's fourth area of criticism (498-502)**. It is because Wright makes the redemption and restoration of Israel, according to the covenant, central to his understanding of Jewish apocalypticism that priority is given to the inauguration of eschatology through Jesus' death and resurrection rather than to the future realisation of the kingdom expectation. Frey is right to criticise Wright here. Paul's thought and practice as an apostle were firmly directed towards a dramatic event in a foreseeable future, even within his own

lifetime. But I think Frey is mistaken in his assumption that this event would transcend the historical frame of the political-covenantal narrative.

A simple reconstruction of Paul's eschatology

1. For much of the time with Paul we can't see the wood for the trees. *Eschatology is pervasive but mostly in the background*, as he addresses the numerous theological and practical needs and challenges that his eschatological mission has generated at ground level.
2. The *controlling expectation* is that eventually the *Messiah who made himself a servant to Israel will rule over the nations* (Rom. 15:8-12). He is Isaiah's "root of Jesse", who "arises to rule the Gentiles, in him will the Gentiles hope". Since Paul then immediately prays that the "God of hope" will fill the saints in Rome "with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope", we must take it that Paul does not think that the rule of Jesus over the nations has already begun. It is something still to be hoped for—and the maintenance of that hope will not be easy (Rom. 15:13).

This is the *supreme political and covenantal outcome*. It is implicit in Paul's account of his gospel in *Romans 1:4*, where *Psalm 2* is invoked: "I will tell of the decree: The LORD said to me, "You are my Son; today I have begotten you. Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession"" (Ps. 2:7–8). By his resurrection from the dead Jesus is confirmed as the Son, the descendant of David, who will inherit the nations (cf. Acts 13:33; Heb. 1:5; 5:5).

The same outcome is in view in the *Christ-hymn of Philippians 2:6-11*. Jesus did not behave after the manner of the pagan kings who have dominated Israel's world; but he has been highly exalted and given the name which is above every name so that the whole pagan world would confess him as Lord, in keeping with the *vision of régime change and transfer of allegiance* described in *Isaiah 45:22-23*.

3. The cross was a **skandalon to covenantal Jews**, as Frey says (524), but it does *not abrogate the prophetic narrative*. As is especially clear from the Christ-hymn, the

cross was the means by which the concrete rule of YHWH over the nations would be achieved.

4. What needs to be **stressed** here, particularly in light of Frey's *questioning of Wright's symbolic reading* (493-95), is that this constitutes at core a fully realistic future, not a way of speaking about something else. Like the author of Revelation (cf. Rev. 19:15-16; 20:4), Paul expected Christ to *rule from a heavenly throne*, alongside the throne of God, over the nations *throughout the coming ages of human history*. This is why I think we have to take very seriously the historical fulfilment of this vision in the conversion of the Roman Empire and establishment of European Christendom.
5. The *communities* that held to and proclaimed this hope in the future rule of Jesus over the nations *would inevitably face persecution*. There would be a "day of fire" that would test the work of the apostles (1 Cor. 3:10-15). The time was coming when the saints in Rome would have to put on the "armour of light" if they were to survive the day of battle (Rom. 13:11-14).
6. Such a **political realignment of the ancient** naturally entailed a judgment on the *old order*—wrath against the Greek, the passing away of the wisdom and rulers of the present age of pagan domination, the opponents of the churches would be destroyed (Rom. 1:18; 2:9; 1 Cor. 2:6; Phil. 1:28).
7. The **parousia of Christ would be the climax of this narrative**. *How realistically Paul imagined this royal coming is difficult to say, but the real-world consequences are clear*: persecution would be brought to an end, the churches would be vindicated for their faithfulness, Jesus would be confessed as Lord by the nations, and a new political-religious order would be inaugurated in fulfilment of a belief that had its origins in Old Testament texts that foresaw the rule of YHWH, through his king or through his faithful people, over the nations that made up the old pagan empires (cf. Ps. 2:7-9; 22:27-28; 72:8-11; 82:8; 89:3-4, 22-27; 96:13; 98:9; 110:1-2; Dan. 7:13-27; Zech. 9:9-10).
8. The **resurrection of the "dead in Christ" in conjunction with the parousia is not a final resurrection of all the dead** (1 Thess. 4:14-17; 1 Cor. 15:18-23). As in *Daniel 12:1-3* it belongs to the theme of the *vindication of the persecuted righteous* during a period of national crisis. Arguably, though not certainly, this is also the *victory over death described in 1 Corinthians 15:50-57*. Whether we are bound to think that it was literally fulfilled is another matter.
9. Paul expected the **kingdom of Jesus, his rule over the nations, to last until all things have been put under his feet**. Then he will give back to God the authority

to rule and will become subject to him again (*1 Cor. 15:25-28*). Christ needs to reign only as long as there are enemies that threaten the security of God's people and impugn the righteousness of God—only as long as the world is imperfect. When God is finally "all in all", creation presumably will gain the freedom from corruption and decay that it saw revealed in the "children of God" glorified at the parousia (Rom. 8:20-22).

See also:

1. Did Paul believe in an imminent parousia?
2. Either Paul got the timing wrong or we've got the end wrong
3. Paul's apocalyptic gospel: vindication, non-universalism and imminence