

RECLAIMING THE PURPOSE:

THE CHARACTER OF EARLY CHRISTIAN ESCHATOLOGY

The century has seen a massive growth of interest in the study of eschatology. From the rise of Darby and dispensationalism to the slow rejection of postmillennialism in the wake of the horrors of the 20th century, there has been a substantial growth in new ideas and theories of the eschaton.¹ The historical and cultural context of the modern world has shaped how people view the return of Christ. This paper will look back to second and third century Christian eschatology to discover and reclaim the character, presuppositions, and hope. The goal is to find a common hermeneutic and ethos from early Christian writers. For the early Christian writers, eschatology served a greater purpose beyond itself. The hope for the return of Christ, their crucified and resurrected Savior, was central to early Christian's faith and witness. This was part of a cohesive narrative with the entire cosmos in mind.

The Character of Modern Eschatology

Modern discussions of eschatology often start with the language of 'future' and 'prediction'. Wayne Grudem in his *Systematic Theology* calls his entire section on eschatology "The Doctrine of the Future".² Millard Erickson points out how the rapid changes in technology and communication in the modern world has created the trend of futurism.³ No doubt the blood shed of the twentieth century, the rise of AI, nuclear weaponry, and increased aggression on a global scale has added fuel to the flame of what Erickson calls "Eschatomania". Darby, the father of dispensationalism and Christian futurism greatly influenced a wide range of protestants in the nineteenth century.⁴ This is no more evident than in the *Left Behind* film series.⁵ Modern eschatological texts and discussions are characterized by the future and distant reality of the coming end, filled with charts, diagrams, and timelines. However, is this the character and ethos of the second and third century church who had ample reason to believe and interpret their times as the end?

Persecution and Early Christian's Eschatology

In the book of Acts the persecution of Christians starts with the apostles in chapter 5. Only 2 chapters later the first Christian martyr, Stephen, is killed at the hands of Jewish leaders. Eusebius writes that thirty years later, the apostles Peter and Paul were martyred by Nero. In the early second century, 111AD -113AD, Pliny the Younger wrote a letter to emperor Trajan, on how to try those who were accused of being Christians.⁶ These Christians, if tried and convicted of the 'crime', would then face execution.⁷ The early Church experienced various and localized persecution throughout the first few centuries of the church. Though the decreed and large-scale persecution of Christians was still to come, Christians were subject to suffering and oppression.⁸

¹ See Ferguson's *The War of the World: Twentieth Century Conflict and the Descent of the West*.

² Wayne A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Zondervan Academic, 2020), 1090.

³ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 1058.

⁴ Ernest Robert Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism: British and American Millenarianism, 1800-1930* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 102.

⁵ The film series spans twenty-three years. The first film was released in 2000 and the latest film was released in January, 2023.

⁶ Pliny the Younger, *The Letters of Pliny the Younger*, trans. Betty Radice (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1963).

⁷ Leonard L. Thompson, "Ordinary Lives," in *Reading the Book of Revelation*, ed. David L. Barr (Leiden: Brill Academic, 2004), 37.

⁸ Green, Bernard, *Christianity in Ancient Rome The First Three Centuries*, (New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic, 2010), 120.

By 250 AD, emperor Decius had ordered an edict for all people to make libations to the “ancestral gods”. Potter states Decius “sought to have all people declare their affinity with the gods who had preserved the empire”.⁹ This however, the Christians could not do. This led to the more intense persecution of Christians in the Roman Empire. Traditions says it was during Decius’ reign that St. Irenaeus was martyred for his faith in Lyons.

This intense persecution gave the early Christians a unique perspective and longing for the eschaton. First, it gave them hope of a world without suffering. This meant their views went beyond simply personal eschatology but the renewal of all of creation. Papius, an early Christian martyr, is quoted by Irenaeus discussing the millennial reign of Christ:

the Lord used to teach in regard to these times, and say: The days will come, in which vines shall grow, each having ten thousand branches, and in each branch ten thousand twigs, and in each true twig ten thousand shoots, and in each one of the shoots ten thousand clusters, and on every one of the clusters ten thousand grapes, and every grape when pressed will give five and twenty metretres of wine. And when any one of the saints shall lay hold of a cluster, another shall cry out, “I am a better cluster, take me; bless the Lord through me... the Lord declared, ‘They who shall come to these [times] shall see.’¹⁰

No longer would be the days of having little to eat and drink. The return of the Savior meant riches and bounty on a very *physical* and *material* world when Christ Kingdom had come.

The End of the World in Roman Thought

Christopher Star in *Apocalypse and The Golden Age*, shows that there had been a long tradition of thinking and speaking about the end of the world in Roman thought. In the modern world, doomsday narratives in film, literature, and other avenues focus on the actions that humans can take to prevent the end. In the Roman mind, the end was more of an expected, inevitable cosmic event.¹¹ This Greek and Roman philosophy of the eschaton gave a foothold for Christianity’s fixed hope on the return of Christ at a particular time. The Stoic’s emphasis on the creation and recreation of the universe also gave a framework for later Christian writers like St. Irenaeus to write about the world being anew, however for Irenaeus that would be its final iteration.

The Didache

The *Didache* is a short first century document containing the teaching of the apostles. The tone of the *Didache* seems to be one of moral and procedural instruction for the Church which utilizes the gospel of Matthew frequently with very little theology discussed. In the last chapter, Christians are called to watch for the coming of the Lord quoting the Olivet discourse from Matthew 26. The author, or authors, urge Christians that their faith will be useless if they fall into disobedience in the “last times” (ἐσχάτω καιρῷ).¹² This is connected to the next verse by “γὰρ” meaning *since* or *for*. “For in the last days false prophets and corrupters shall [future tense] be multiplied, and the sheep shall be turned into wolves, and love shall be turned into hate”¹³

⁹ D. S. Potter, *The Roman Empire at Bay, AD 180-395* (London: Routledge, 2014), 243.

¹⁰ St. Irenaeus of Lyons, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, trans. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, vol. 1 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1986), 563.

¹¹ Christopher Star, *Apocalypse and Golden Age: The End of the World in Greek and Roman Thought* (Baltimore, MA: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2021), 226-227.

¹² Joseph Barber Lightfoot and J. R. Harmer, *The Apostolic Fathers in Greek* (Macmillan and Co., 1891), 224.

¹³ “Didache”, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, trans. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, vol 7. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1986), 382.

The difficulty here is in determining if they viewed their current time as the last days. Does “γὰρ” connect the Christians of that time to those who would experience the last days? *The Epistle of Barnabas* which is very similar to the *Didache* and shares some of the same exhortations, speaks of the end times being the “events at hand”. This alone however is not enough evidence to show that the *Didache* is using “γὰρ” to mean that Christians at that time were already in the ‘last days’.

Later in the *Didache* the author says that there shall appear one called “the world deceiver” which has traditionally been interpreted as the antichrist. This does not necessitate that it will take place far into the future. The *Epistle of Barnabas* shows that in the late first century Christians anticipated the return of Christ quite quickly. The end of the *Didache* says, “but those that endure in their faith shall be saved from under the curse itself”.¹⁴ This would point again to the instruction “[seek] the things which are befitting to your souls: for the whole time of your faith will not profit you, if ye be not made perfect in the last time”, meaning that the last times have started or will very soon.¹⁵ This means that the earliest extra biblical sources viewed Christ’s return as imminent. It was used mostly to admonish and exhort Christians toward upright behavior as their Savior could return at any moment. By the time of Justin the Martyr’s (100 AD - 165 AD) writings, Christians seemed to come to terms with waiting a longer period for the parousia.¹⁶ Yet, early Christians never lost the expectation of Christ’s impending return, or its usefulness for teaching and exhortation toward faith and perseverance.

Justin the Martyr’s Use of Eschatology

Justin the Martyr wrote his *First Apology* in 140 AD as a defense of Christians to emperor Antoninus Pius.¹⁷ Justin was making an appeal to the emperor because of the false accusations against Christians which were being propagated by their opponents. He obviously saw the great persecution mentioned in scripture and the *Didache*, and the parousia as events to happen in the future. If he had expected the end to be upon them already, he would not bother with writing to the emperor in the defense of the Church. He never however lost the eager expectation of Christ’s return. Justin introduces his *Apology*, “For we have come, not to flatter you by this writing, nor please you by our address, but to beg that you pass judgment, after an accurate and searching investigation”.¹⁸

Justin declares that wrongdoers ought to be punished on the account of their actions, not by the name (Christianity) which they proclaim, “but in our case you receive the name as proof against us”. Apparently the procedures approved by Trajan were still being used to prosecute and punish those accused of being Christian in 112 AD. Justin sets out to rationally go through the absurd accusations being against the Christians. Then he goes through explaining the piety of Christ and what he taught the Christians to do. Justin desires to show that Jesus truly is the Son of God and that his followers were model citizens.

Justin then carefully walks through the Old Testament prophecies, the incarnation and life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ. Coming to chapter 52, he describes the Christian hope and the consummation of God’s Kingdom which is not a human kingdom. Justin seems to build his defense in a chronological order centered on Jesus Christ and the prophetic witness to his two advents.

For the prophets have proclaimed two advents of His: the one, that which is already past, when He came as a dishonored and suffering Man; but the second, when, according to prophecy, He

¹⁴ “Didache”, 382.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ L.W. Barnard, “Justin the Martyr’s Eschatology,” *Vigiliae Christianae* 19, no. 2 (June 1965): pp. 89-98, 94.

¹⁷ W. Fairweather, “The Greek Apologists of the Second Century,” *The Biblical World* 26, no. 2 (1905): pp. 132-143, 139.

¹⁸ Justin the Martyr, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, trans. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1986), 163.

shall come from heaven with glory, accompanied by His angelic host, when also He shall raise the bodies of all men who have lived, and shall clothe those of the worthy with immortality, and shall send those of the wicked, endued with eternal sensibility, into everlasting fire with the wicked devils. And that these things also have been foretold as yet to be, we will prove.¹⁹

Justin then goes on to ‘prove’ this through prophecies from the Old Testament. Since the prophecies about Christ’s first advent came true, so will the prophecies of his second coming.

Justin moves through these arguments with the style and pose of a philosopher. In this instance Justin seems to be presenting what is now called an “amillennial” eschatology. Others have argued that in Justin’s *Dialogue with Trypho*, he espouses a historic premillennial eschatology.

The dichotomy between suffering and reigning in the two advents of Christ is shown throughout Justin’s works. Perhaps he sees this as also describing the current plight, and the future of persecuted Christians. In this first ‘advent’ the disciples of Jesus are following in his footsteps of suffering and dying at the hands of their enemies and with the second ‘advent’ will come the enjoyment and reign of Christians over the earth. Justin does not press this too much. Most likely he does this because he is trying to show to the emperor the humility and piety of Christians. Too aggressive an approach on the ruling and reigning of Christians in the future might send the wrong message to a Roman emperor.²⁰

In his *Dialogue with Trypho*, Justin is not writing in a defense of the Christian community against rampant persecution so he presses more into what the reign of Christ will look like. In the *Dialogue*, Justin’s eschatology is overtly historic premillennial. His purpose is for Trypho, a Jew, to personally take up Christianity, the true philosophy which is attested to first and foremost by the Old Testament Scriptures. From this, one can see how Justin’s eschatology serves his purposes. It is not an end of itself but a means to an end. Justin is using the Christian belief in the return of Christ to persuade non-Christians to see history through the lens of Jesus Christ. He is the ultimate philosophy by which all should come to. This is felt in his plea to Trypho, “it is but a short time that is left for you to come to us, if Christ comes suddenly... Know Christ!”²¹

St. Irenaeus and New Creation

The writings of St. Irenaeus show his expert exegesis and ability to bring the scriptures into a cohesive unity. Stephen Presley has shown, along with others, that St. Irenaeus is the first Biblical Theologian as he brought forth the unity that already existed in the scriptures.²² Irenaeus, first and foremost exegeted the Scriptures. The source of theology and eschatology for Irenaeus is a single unchanging standard: the Scriptures backed by the authority of the Apostles.^{23,24} These two were completely intertwined. The Apostle’s witness was given in their writing, the New Testament.²⁵ He quotes both from the traditions of the fathers, like Papias and Polycarp, but mostly builds his arguments from the scriptures. It was a narrative from the beginning to the end with one unifying melody throughout.²⁶ In *Against Heresies*, Irenaeus lays out a defense against the gnostics Valentinius and Marcion. Since Irenaeus saw the scriptures as a cohesive whole, the eschaton played an important role in challenging gnostic heresies.

¹⁹ Justin The Martyr, “First Apology”, *Ante Nicene Fathers*, 180.

²⁰ L.W. Barnard, “Justin the Martyr’s Eschatology,” 93.

²¹ Justin the Martyr, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 209.

²² Stephen O Presley, “Biblical Theology and the Unity of Scripture in Irenaeus of Lyons,” *Criswell Theological Review* 16, no. 2 (2019): 7.

²³ A. Skevington Wood, “The Eschatology of Irenaeus,” *Evangelical Quarterly* 41, no. 1 (1969): pp. 41, 31.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Hans von Campenhausen, *The Fathers of the Greek Church* (Bundoora: Borchardt Library, 1985), 22.

²⁶ Presley, 7.

As mentioned earlier in his quote of Papias, Irenaeus stresses the literal earthly reign of Christ in the millennium.²⁷ This was the fulfillment of the promise to Abraham that he would own great lands. This is fulfilled in the ruling and reigning of the righteous (who are the seed of Abraham by their faith in Christ).²⁸ This means that the reign of mankind is how it was in the beginning. Irenaeus has echos of Edenic imagery throughout this section:

The predicted blessing, therefore, belongs unquestionably to the times of the kingdom, when the righteous shall bear rule upon their rising from the dead; when also the creation, having been renovated and set free, shall fructify with an abundance of all kinds of food, from the dew of heaven, and from the fertility of the earth.²⁹ He shows again the nature of what the end will be, not one of disembodied souls in the celestial realm but ruling and reigning on a renewed earth. Irenaeus is showing the recapitulation of the Garden. Humanity was meant to reign over creation but instead suffered under it. Gerald Hiestand writes, “In his battle against the Gnostics, Irenaeus was keen to insist that God will one day redeem the body, restore humanity’s earthly throne, and renew the earth itself”.³⁰

In the Kingdom when Christ is reigning on earth again, the vision for human ruling Eden is restored. This was an integral part to correcting the heresies of Valentinus and Marcion, the physical world is not inherently evil or bad. There is a beautiful and divine order in creation that is good and the eschaton is not the believers way out of it. If scripture is a cohesive whole, then God is going to work to bring creation back under his control through humanity.

Conclusion: Reclaiming and Retrieving

Modern theologians and Christians often have lost the instructive, constructive, and beautiful nature of Christian eschatology. Each of these examples shows an urgency yet not one of fear or terror but of expectancy. The most needed retrieval for modern eschatology is the imagination of St. Irenaeus who searched the scriptures and insisted on the glorious earthly Kingdom of Christ. The common belief that the earth will be used up and discarded in the eschaton and that Christians fly up as spirits with the Lord, teeters on gnosticism. Christians need to reclaim the powerful picture of the end which brings all things back into harmony between

God, man, and creation. The central character in these early Christian writers is Jesus Christ, his Kingdom, and a call to action. The imperative naturally follows, whether it is to persevere, repent and believe, or renounce heresy.

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²⁷ St. Irenaeus, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 563.

²⁸ Ibid, 570.

²⁹ Ibid, 563.

³⁰ Gerald Hiestand, “St. Irenaeus, The Beatific Vision, and the Instrumentalization of Creation,” The Center for Pastor Theologians (The Center for Pastor Theologians, June 13, 2019), <https://www.pastortheologians.com/articles/2019/6/13/st-irenaeus-the-beatific-vision-and-the-instrumentalization-of-creation>.

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