

## Eschatology: The End of this World by Justin Killam

As the end of the second millennium rapidly approaches, apocalyptic thinking dominates many people's minds. Apocalypse, which means revelation, is a vital part of the discipline of understanding the end of the world, eschatology. By studying apocalyptic literature, revelation of the end times, a greater understanding of eschatology can be made. Unfortunately, apocalyptic thinking is still dominated by literal interpretations of scripture. This only leads to confusing and frightening concepts of some sort of cataclysmic event or series of events with dramatically violent imagery and a literal destruction of the current world. When someone mentions the phrase "end of the world" images of fire and brimstone, battles between the forces of good and evil, the final judgement and a mass destruction are commonly envisioned. There are two problems with this current concept of apocalyptic thinking. The first problem is that common apocalyptic thinking remains literal in interpretation of apocalyptic scripture, while Christian study and interpretation of the end of the world has developed from a literal understanding to a more spiritual one. The second problem is that the common understanding of the end of the world is usually limited to or focused on the events leading to it, which, while important, are only a part of eschatology. These problems stem from the interpretation of classical apocalyptic texts in the bible, such as the book of Daniel and the extremely symbolic book of Revelations. The Christian development of eschatology, however, has moved towards a more spiritual, instead of literal, understanding of the end of the world through a study of it's own beginning, the events and message of Jesus. By studying the teachings of Jesus about the Kingdom of God in the four Gospels a better understanding of the end of the world can be gained, hopefully resulting in a lessening of confusion and fear.

Apocalyptic thinking does not actually deviate far from the tone and style of biblical apocalyptic writing, which can be seen in the book of Daniel. The book was written by an anonymous author during the Maccabean revolt, but was alleged to have been written four centuries before by the prophet Daniel who wrote the book as a prediction of the events that were happening in the real authors own lifetime. Although this was not the first example of Hebrew persecution followed by being saved through the providence of God, it did take on a new aspect. God's intervention on behalf of his people in the past, such as in Exodus, was to save them from their current woes by a deliverance from their persecutors. However in Daniel the hope was not that they would be delivered away from their enemies, but that their enemies would be annihilated from the earth. The Hebrews, God's chosen people, would have a final deliverance from persecution through the destruction of the godless kingdom, the end of the world. The book of Daniel also continues to develop the predictions of the end of the world with a revelation that after the destruction of the godless kingdom, God would also "establish a kingdom which will never be destroyed, nor will it ever pass to another people; it will shatter all these kingdoms and make an end of them, while it will itself endure for ever."<sup>1</sup> The book of Daniel became the model for apocalyptic scripture and thinking. It has highly imaginative symbolic imagery, a hope for the end while enduring a time of great woe, the expectation of the end during the authors own lifetime and an urgent message to the people to repent their sins.

This early apocalyptic story, although it does use symbolism to represent aspects of the future, describes a very literal event. The destruction of the world is a physical one. This physical interpretation is the first development of eschatology. Heaven, Hell, the Kingdom of God and other aspects of the end of the world are all looked at in the same way one would look at physical objects.

They exist in different places at different times, one dies and, literally, goes to Heaven or Hell, seen as a place separate from Earth. Early eschatology and apocalyptic understanding was studied in this way. The end of the world meant, literally, that the world would end, be destroyed by a cosmic force and that a new one would be created. However, this interpretation of apocalyptic thinking was left behind in the study of eschatology and a new understanding of the end of the world was developed by Christian theologians such as St. Augustine, Yves Congar and Hans Urs von Balthasar. This shift developed into a more spiritual interpretation of the end of the world. Eschatological objects became spiritual concepts with meanings deeper than that of physical places or things. This shift can be better understood through a study of Jesus and his message about the kingdom of God. This newer eschatological thinking has become the dominant, scholarly, Christian view of the end times. Unfortunately apocalyptic thinking has not shifted along with eschatological thinking.

Apocalyptic writing makes its first shift in the eschatology of John the Baptist, who preaches a harsh and urgent message of the impending judgement of God. John's message was very eschatological, but fell away from the common aspects of apocalyptic thinking. His message didn't preach about an end of the world followed by a future world of happiness, contain imaginative predictions of the future or include fantastic images of cataclysmic physical destruction. Instead he preached that the final judgment was already at hand and called for everyone to convert and repent, to make a very personal and spiritual acceptance of God. John also deviated from the norm in that he proclaimed that his message included everyone. In the eschatology of John no one was omitted from the judgement of God and unlike previous apocalyptic writing, in which the chosen people of God were exempt from the effects of the end of the world, the apocalyptic writing of the gospels had John clearly signaling them out as just as bad, if not worse, than everybody else. Through the message of John God changes from the divine avenger of his people to a universal judge. This was a major deviation from the norm, one that did not make him popular with the establishment.

Jesus, although immensely inspired by the message of John, deviates further in his eschatological teachings. The teachings of Jesus continue many of the aspects of John's, a continuing anti-establishment message that preached against a blind obedience to the law and a call for people to undergo a personal spiritual repentance which would lead to acts of charity and mercy instead of ritual observance. However the direction that Jesus took this again changed the vision of God, this time to that of a fatherly figure. "Have no fear little flock; for your father has chosen to give you the kingdom."<sup>2</sup> God is transformed from an exacting vengeful figure to a loving figure of parental guidance, which must punish in order to teach.

The eschatological message of Jesus can be seen in his teachings of the kingdom of God. This is the spiritual direction that eschatology has shifted towards. For Jesus the kingdom of God, the end of the world and the spiritual acceptance of God was one and the same thing. The spiritual acceptance of God was demonstrated by Jesus in the parable of the seeds in Mark 4, the seeds were dropped on all soils, Jesus' message was preached to all, but only those that were dropped in good soil, accepted fully by the faithful and repentant, would take root and sprout. Once this was demonstrated a connection between the acceptance of God and the growth of the kingdom of God was shown to be like "a mustard seed; when sown in the ground it is smaller than any other seed, but once sown, it springs up and grows taller than any other plant, and forms branches so large that birds can roost in its shade."<sup>3</sup> This also connects with Jesus' teaching about the end of the world, the coming and yet already upon us, kingdom of God. The kingdom of God is present with those who accept God and grows with the growth of acceptance by God's people, which by Jesus' teachings now includes all of humanity. It is already present, but not yet fully realized. The kingdom of God became

a spiritual connection between a loving God and his child, not a sort of physical place that is to be created from the destruction of this one.

This marks the extreme difference between the current eschatological thinking and the common apocalyptic thinking, the difference between a violent physical end and a spiritual shift brought about by the growth of God's acceptance. The kingdom of God is a more fulfilling picture of the end of the world as it encompasses our past beginnings of Christianity through Christ, our present state of a continuing growth of God's kingdom through a spiritually personal relationship to God and a future realization of God's kingdom brought about by his divine plan, known only to him, and providence throughout history. St. Augustine sums up this eschatological thought in his writing: "After this life, God himself is our place"<sup>4</sup> Apocalyptic thinking however seems to be dominated by horrific ideals of chaos, epic battles and graphic destruction taking place over a grand cosmic map of places.