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RELI 522: Christology  
Date: 11/08/2009



## THE MEANING OF JESUS – TWO VISIONS BY MARCUS BORG AND N.T. WRIGHT

### I. CHAPTER 14 - THE FUTURE OF JESUS BY N.T. WRIGHT

#### 1. THE FUTURE OF THE GOOD CREATION

If God is the maker and redeemer of heaven and earth, the created world is the first stage and vital sign of God's eventual design. God intends to create new heavens and a new earth, married together, in dynamic and perhaps even material continuity with the present creation. Creation is good and will be reaffirmed at the last.

The path to life is blocked by evil, corruption, and death. The world needs rescue and redemption.

#### 2. THE FUTURE FOR A REBELLIOUS WORLD

Classical theology insists that evil is an intruder into God's good world. This holds together two other affirmations: the created order is good and God given; evil is real and powerful. Evil, though powerful, is not a necessary part of creation. God does not love evil, but "God so loved the world." This affects profoundly how we think about the end. The dualist supposes that, to escape evil, one must escape the created, physical universe.

Eternal life, however, in first-century Jewish terms, means "the life of the age to come." The promise that death will be abolished assures us both that God will be true to creation and that all our present grief will at last be healed.

#### 3. THE FUTURE FOR HUMANS

As St. Paul insists in 1 Corinthians 15 and 2 Corinthians 5, the future embodiedness of God's people will involve a new mode of physicality, over and above the present one.

The "heavenly country" for which we long, according to Hebrews 11:16, is not a disembodied existence. It is the new world in which heaven and earth are joined at last, in which what God is currently preparing in heaven is brought to birth in a world that we will recognize as physical. "Thy kingdom come," we pray, "on earth as it is in heaven," not "in heaven once we've escaped earth."

#### 4. THE FUTURE OF JESUS

First is God's promise to renew heaven and earth. This has already happened in the person of Jesus: he has united God and humanity, and his resurrection body already enjoys God's new mode of physicality.

Second is the belief that Jesus is the messiah, the true Lord of the world as he brings justice, peace, holiness, and life to the world and judges injustice, oppression, wickedness, and death itself. It is misleading to see this in terms of Jesus "returning" to our world as a kind of space invader coming to sort out a rebel planet. Rather, when God finally ushers in his new creation, Jesus will be, in person, both the standard and the instrument of that just and deeply welcome judgment and restoration.

Third is the Jewish expectation of the return of YHWH to Zion, reapplied in some early Christian writings to Jesus himself. The Jews had longed for their God to return in judgment and mercy. The Christians believed he had already done so in Jesus, but as the first part of a two-stage process. They therefore reused the language and imagery of return to express their belief that Jesus himself would be personally present as the loving and redeeming center and agent of God's new creation.

The New Testament often uses the Greek word *parousia*, frequently translated "coming," to express this "presence" of Jesus within God's future recreation of the cosmos.

#### 5. THE EARLY CHURCH AND THE FUTURE

In 1 Corinthians 15, St. Paul describes his belief about the future and hints at why he holds it. The closing paragraph declares that "we shall all be changed"; that is the heart of the matter.

The author propose that what we call the second coming, which is actually a metonym for the larger picture which includes cosmic renewal, human resurrection, the royal presence of Jesus, and the sovereign rule of God, was a very early Christian development of Jewish apocalyptic eschatology, both necessitated and facilitated by the unexpected resurrection of the messiah.

### II. CHAPTER 13 - THE SECOND COMING THEN AND NOW BY MARCUS BORG

"He will come again in glory" is central to Christian beliefs about Jesus. Of the twenty-seven books in the New Testament, twenty-one refer to it. It is also included in the church's creeds recited by many Christians each Sunday. Jesus "ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end."

The second coming is associated with what we commonly think of as "the end of the world," the subject matter of eschatology. Through the centuries, some Christians have expected the second coming (or parousia) of Jesus in their own time. Many expect it in our own day: according to one survey, approximately one-third of Americans think it will be soon.

In this chapter 13, the author first describes the expectation of the second coming in the New Testament and then turn to the question of what it might mean for us today.

## **1. THE SECOND COMING IN EARLY CHRISTIANITY**

The expectation of the second coming of Jesus is widely attested in the New Testament. Paul seems to have expected the second coming of Jesus while some of his contemporaries were still alive, including perhaps himself. In his earliest letter (and also the earliest document in the New Testament), sent to a Christian community in Thessalonica in northern Greece around the year 50, Paul wrote,

"... We declare to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord... We who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord forever" (1 Thessalonians 4:14-17).

Paul speaks of him descending from heaven, accompanied by the blast of the eschatological trumpet and the cry of the archangel, the raising of "the dead in Christ..." Paul's distinction between those who have died and "we who are alive" is most naturally understood to mean some of those then alive. Paul apparently thought Jesus would come soon.

Expectation of the imminent second coming of Jesus is also found in the gospels. The thirteenth chapter of Mark, often called "the little apocalypse," speaks of "signs" that will precede the coming of "the Son of Man." The chapter reaches its climax in these words attributed to Jesus: "...the Son of Man coming in clouds..." (Mark 13:24-27) 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.

The Jesus of Mark says, "Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place." Mark, like Paul, seems to have thought the second coming was near. Several other passages in the gospels are most naturally read the same way."

The author of Revelation also expected the second coming of Jesus in his time. "Surely I am coming soon" (Revelation 1:1,3).

Finally, the second letter of Peter, seen by many scholars as the latest document in the New Testament, acknowledges that the second coming had not happened as soon as expected. Peter defends continuing belief in the second coming by expanding the time span indefinitely: "But do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day" (2 Peter 3:4). His words are evidence of a hope disappointed: Jesus did not return as many had expected.

## **2. THE ORIGIN OF THE BELIEF**

### **a. From Jesus himself**

Many scholars in this century have thought that the early movement's expectation of Jesus' imminent second coming was grounded in things Jesus did say and believe, namely in an apocalyptic eschatology that they trace back to Jesus himself. According to this view, Jesus did not speak of his own second coming, but he did expect a dramatic divine intervention in the near future: God would act soon to establish the messianic kingdom.

Two lines of argument are used to support this view:

1. In Mark 9:1, Jesus said: "Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Kingdom of God come with power".
2. To his disciples, Jesus said, "When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next; for truly I say to you, you will not have gone through all the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes" (Matthew 10:23).

Jesus did not speak of his own second coming, but he did expect the imminent coming of the kingdom of God and the Son of Man. After his death, this expectation got transferred to the expectation of his imminent return as king of the kingdom that he had proclaimed. Put most simply: Jesus expected the kingdom of God; the early church expected Jesus. Thus, the notion of a second coming of Jesus is based on Jesus' own apocalyptic eschatology.

### **b. From the community**

The apocalyptic eschatology of early Christianity and the expectation of the second coming of Jesus emerge within the early Christian community after Easter. According to the author, it was an inference flowing out of the Easter experience. Thus the conviction that Jesus had been resurrected led to the inference that the end time (including the general resurrection) was near.

According to the author, Jesus did not speak of the imminent coming of the Son of Man and that the community later referring to Jesus. He sees this as a product of the community, created after Easter to express the conviction that Jesus would soon return as the Son of Man.

### **3. THE SECOND COMING TODAY**

A significant percentage of Christians in North America think the second coming may be near. Paul refers to "meeting the Lord in the air," an event that he thought was near, should we think that is still going to happen?

The author does not think there will be a future visible return of Christ. He sees the belief in an imminent and manifestly public return of Christ to be a mistaken belief of the early community. To explain, he imagines the end of the world. He imagines a final judgment. But he cannot imagine a return of Christ. If we try to imagine that, we have to imagine him returning to some place. To be very elementary, we who know the earth to be round cannot imagine Jesus returning to the whole earth at once. And the notion of a localized second coming boggles the imagination." He does not think it will happen.

Nevertheless, he thinks there are important meanings in the theme of the second coming in the New Testament. The notion of a second coming affirms what is already affirmed by Easter: Jesus is Lord. It adds to that claim the recognition that his lordship is not yet apparent, even as it affirms that the dream of God is the lordship of Christ throughout all of creation.

There is one thing to be suggested by the season of Advent in the liturgical year that we are celebrating. The theme of Advent is the two comings of Christ. During Advent, we remember the first coming of Jesus, even as we prepare for his second coming. And the second coming occurs each year at Christmas, with the birth of Christ within us, the coming of Christ into our lives. Christ comes again and again and again, and in many ways. In a symbolic and spiritual sense, the second coming of Christ is about the coming of the Christ who is already here.

Last but not least, the book of Revelation according to the author, despite its being mistaken about the end being near, makes the strong affirmation that Christ is Lord. Moreover, the theme of a last judgment in the New Testament makes the point that how we act within history does matter. What is striking is the criterion by which the judgment is made: have you fed the hungry, welcome the stranger, clothed the naked, cared for the sick, and visited the prisoners? The point of the parable is clear: the most important ethical issue is, "Have we lived compassionately?"

### **III. PASTORAL QUESTIONS:**

Eschatology is realized now and not yet. How do you explain to your congregation to realize that notion of eschatology now and then? What do you and others do to realize the reality of eschatology in your parish? Give specific examples/works you would do.