

Cosmology, Eschatology, and the Diversity of Late Antique Christianity

1. Eschatology in Early Christianity

- Although the Jesus Movement and earliest Christians lived in expectation of Christ's imminent return to earth to usher in the End of Time, the passing of time (and the need to think about concrete issues of organizing the Church as a continuing institution) led later Christians to play down eschatological ideas and (like the Rabbis) to begin imagining the Resurrection of the Dead and Last Judgment as events that would happen in the far future, rather in the decades to come.
- While Rabbinic Judaism rejected both ascent apocalypses and historical apocalypses (with the sole exception of Daniel, which seems to have been retained because of its reference to Resurrection) along with their central ideas and concerns, early Christians continued to read early Jewish apocalypses and to write new apocalypses in the names of biblical figures of the far past (both from the Hebrew Bible and the NT).
- Consistent with the lack of a sense of the impending End of Time, ascent apocalypses became popular again. In the following centuries, the views of heaven and hell in such apocalypses would play an important role in shaping Christian (and modern Western) views of the afterlife, to some degree displacing the earlier concern with the Resurrection of the Dead and Last Judgment at the End of Time. In other words, the focus shifts from collective eschatology to personal eschatology. Heaven is held out as a promised reward – and as a motivation – for Christians to live good and pious lives, and Hell is held out as a warning to those who do not.

2. Ascension of Isaiah

Ascension of Isaiah is one important example of a Christian ascent apocalypse written in the name of a figure from the Hebrew Bible. This apocalypse tells how Isaiah takes a heavenly journey, guided by an angel.

- **Cosmology:** Here, there are seven heavens (and idea influenced by Hellenistic ideas about the cosmos as seven spheres) piled one on top of the other (as in 2 Enoch). The text tells of the precise contents of each heaven. In each is an enthroned angel, and as Isaiah ascends upwards through them, the heavens get more and more exalted: more angelic praises of God as one goes up, more glory.
- **Personal Eschatology:** In the last and seventh heaven, Isaiah meets all of the righteous. It is clear that heaven is the post-mortem home of righteous souls. Christians can become more glorious than the angels after death if they are pious during life.
- **Messianism and Collective Eschatology:** When in the seventh heaven, he also sees the descent, earthly life, and ascent of Jesus himself; only after his descent, Isaiah is told, will the righteous of old (such as Enoch) be able to inherit crowns and glory.

3. Apocalypse of Paul

Paul as visionary: Just as Second Temple Jewish authors composed apocalypses in the names of biblical figures of old (Enoch, Ezra, etc.), so early Christians also composed apocalypses in the names of apostles, particularly Paul, expanding his comments in 2 Cor 12:1-4 about ascent through three heavens into lengthy voyages into Heaven and Hell and otherworldly realms of reward and punishment.

Apocalypse of Paul: Most influential was the Apocalypse of Paul, an ascent apocalypse composed in the fourth century CE, likely in Egypt. Although dismissed as “apocryphal” by church leaders, it was popular among Christians and went on to shape views of heaven, hell, and the afterlife in Christian art and literature (e.g., influencing Dante).

- **Personal eschatology:** Paul sees what happens at death: the soul leaves the body, which it is told to remember so it can find it in the last days, at the time of the Resurrection of the Dead. If angels deem it righteous, and its spirit testifies on its behalf, it is allowed to ascend to heaven. If deemed wicked, it is sent to Tartarus (i.e., Hell) for punishment until the last days.
- **Collective eschatology:** Paul sees the places where the righteous will dwell after the Last Judgment the End of Time: these lie to the far ends of the earth, beyond the Ocean that encircles the known world. The Land of Promise for the righteous; Lake Acherusia in which they will be baptized, and the new Jerusalem, the City of Christ. He also visits the places that sinners will be punished, which lie to the farthest reaches of the earth to the West.

2 Cor 12:1-4: It is necessary to boast; nothing is to be gained by it, but I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord. I know a person in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven--whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows. And I know that such a person--whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows -- was caught up into Paradise and heard things that are not to be told, that no mortal is permitted to repeat.

Ascension of Isaiah, chapter 9

1. And he took me into the air of the seventh heaven, and moreover I heard a voice saying: "How far will he ascend that dwells in the flesh?" And I feared and trembled.
2. And when I trembled, behold, I heard from hence another voice being sent forth, and saying: "It is permitted to the holy Isaiah to ascend hither; for here is his garment."
3. And I asked the angel who was with me and said: "Who is he who forbade me and who is he who permitted me to ascend?"
4. And he said unto me: "He who forbade thee, is he who is over the praise-giving of the sixth heaven.
5. And He who permitted thee, this is thy Lord God, the Lord Christ, who will be called "Jesus" in the world, but His name thou canst not hear till thou hast ascended out of thy body."
6. And he raised me up into the seventh heaven, and I saw there a wonderful light and angels innumerable.
7. And there I saw the holy Abel and all the righteous.
8. And there I saw Enoch and all who were with him, stripped of the garments of the flesh, and I saw them in their garments of the upper world, and they were like angels, standing there in great glory.
9. And there I saw Enoch and all who were with him, stripped of the garments of the flesh, and I saw them in their garments of the upper world, and they were like angels, standing there in great glory.
10. But they sat not on their thrones, nor were their crowns of glory on them.
11. And I asked the angel who was with me: "How is it that they have received the garments, but have not the thrones and the crowns?"
12. And he said unto me: "Crowns and thrones of glory they do not receive, till the Beloved will descent in the form in which you will see Him descent [will descent, I say] into the world in the last days the Lord, who will be called Christ.
13. Nevertheless they see and know whose will be thrones, and whose the crowns when He has descended and been made in your form, and they will think that He is flesh and is a man.
14. And the god of that world will stretch forth his hand against the Son, and they will crucify Him on a tree, and will slay Him not knowing who He is.
15. And thus His descent, as you will see, will be hidden even from the heavens, so that it will not be known who He is.
16. And when He hath plundered the angel of death, He will ascend on the third day, [and he will remain in that world five hundred and forty-five days].
17. And then many of the righteous will ascend with Him, whose spirits do not receive their garments till the Lord Christ ascend and they ascend with Him.
18. Then indeed they will receive their [garments and] thrones and crowns, when He has ascended into the seventh heaven."
19. And I said unto him that which I had asked him in the third heaven:
20. "Show me how everything which is done in that world is here made known."
21. And whilst I was still speaking with him, behold one of the angels who stood nigh, more glorious than the glory of that angel, who had raised me up from the world.
22. Showed me a book, [but not as a book of this world] and he opened it, and the book was written, but not as a book of this world. And he gave (it) to me and I read it, and lo! the deeds of the children of Israel were written therein, and the deeds of those whom I know (not), my son Josab.
23. And I said: "In truth, there is nothing hidden in the seventh heaven, which is done in this world."
24. And I saw there many garments laid up, and many thrones and many crowns.
25. And I said to the angel: "Whose are these garments and thrones and crowns?"
26. And he said unto me: "These garments many from that world will receive, believing in the words of That One, who shall be named as I told thee, and they will observe those things, and believe in them, and believe in His cross: for them are these laid up."
27. And I saw a certain One standing, whose glory surpassed that of all, and His glory was great and wonderful.
28. And after I had seen Him, all the righteous whom I had seen and also the angels whom I had seen came to Him. And Adam and Abel and Seth and all the righteous first drew near and worshipped Him, and they all praised Him with one voice, and I myself also gave praise with them, and my giving of praise was as theirs.

29. And then all the angels drew nigh and worshipped and gave praise.
30. And I was (again) transformed and became like an angel.
31. And thereupon the angel who conducted me said to me: "Worship this One," and I worshipped and praised.
32. And the angel said unto me: "This is the Lord of all the praise-givings which thou hast seen."
33. And whilst he was still speaking, I saw another Glorious One who was like Him, and the righteous drew nigh and worshipped and praised, and I praised together with them. But my glory was not transformed into accordance with their form.
34. And thereupon the angels drew near and worshipped Him.
35. And I saw the Lord and the second angel, and they were standing.
36. And the second whom I saw was on he left of my Lord. And I asked: "Who is this?" and he said unto me: "Worship Him, for He is the angel of the Holy Spirit, who speaks in thee and the rest of the righteous."
37. And I saw the great glory, the eyes of my spirit being open, and I could not thereupon see, nor yet could the angel who was with me, nor all the angels whom I had seen worshipping my Lord.
38. But I saw the righteous beholding with great power the glory of that One.
39. And my Lord drew nigh to me and the angel of the Spirit and He said: "See how it is given to thee to see God, and on thy account power is given to the angel who is with thee."
40. And I saw how my Lord and the angel of the Spirit worshipped, and they both together praised God.
41. And thereupon all the righteous drew near and worshipped.
42. And the angels drew near and worshipped and all the angels praised.

Apocalypse of Paul 11

And the angel answered and said unto me: Follow me, and I will show thee the place of the righteous where they are taken when they are dead. And there after will I take thee to the bottomless pit and show thee the souls of the sinners, into what manner of place they are taken when they are dead.

And I went after the angel, and he took me into heaven, and I looked upon the firmament, and saw there the powers; and there was forgetfulness which deceiveth and draweth unto itself the hearts of men, and the spirit of slander and the spirit of fornication and the spirit of wrath and the spirit of insolence and there were the princes of wickedness. These things saw I beneath the firmament of the heaven.

And again I looked and saw angels without mercy, having no pity, whose countenances were full of fury, and their teeth sticking forth out of their mouth: their eyes shone like the morning star of the east, and out of the hairs of their head and out of their mouth went forth sparks of fire. And I asked the angel, saying: Who are these, Lord? And the angel answered and said unto me: These are they which are appointed unto the souls of sinners in the hour of necessity, even of them that have not believed that they had the Lord for their helper and have not trusted in him.

Apocalypse of Paul 13-16

13 And I said unto the angel: I would see the souls of the righteous and of the sinners as they depart out of the world. And the angel answered and said unto me: Look down upon the earth. And I looked down from heaven upon the earth and beheld the whole world, and it was as nothing in my sight; and I saw the children of men as though they were nought, and failing utterly; and I marvelled, and said unto the angel: Is this the greatness of men? And the angel answered and said unto me: This it is, and these are they that do hurt from morning until evening. And I looked, and saw a great cloud of fire spread over the whole world, and said unto the angel: What is this, Lord? And he said to me: This is the unrighteousness that is mingled by the princes of sinners.

14 And I when I heard that sighed and wept, and said unto the angel: I would wait for the souls of the righteous and of the sinners, and see in what fashion they depart out of the body. And the angel answered and said unto me: Look again upon the earth. And I looked and saw the whole world: and men were as nought, and failing utterly; and I looked and saw a certain man about to die; and the angel said to me: He whom thou seest is righteous. And again I looked and saw all his works that he had done for the name of God, and all his desires

which he remembered and which he remembered not, all of them stood before his face in the hour of necessity. And I saw that the righteous man had grown in righteousness, and found rest and confidence: and before he departed out of the world there stood by him holy angels, and also evil ones: and I saw them all; but the evil ones found no abode in him, but the holy ones had power over his soul and ruled it until it went out of the body.

And they stirred up the soul, saying: O soul, take knowledge of thy body whence thou art come out; for thou must needs return into the same body at the day of resurrection, to receive that which is promised unto all the righteous. They received therefore the soul out of the body, and straightway kissed it as one daily known of them, saying unto it: Be of good courage, for thou hast done the will of God while thou abodest on the earth. And there came to meet it the angel that watched it day by day, and he said unto it: Be of good courage, O soul: for I rejoice in thee because thou hast done the will of God on the earth; for I told unto God all thy works, how they stood.

Likewise also the spirit came forth to meet it and said: O soul, fear not, neither be troubled, until thou come unto a place which thou never knewest; but I will be thine helper, for I have found in thee a place of refreshment in the time when I dwelt in thee, when I was (thou wast ?) on the earth. And the spirit [thereof] strengthened it, and the angel thereof took it up and carried it into the heaven. And the angel said: Whither runnest thou, O soul, and presumest to enter heaven? stay and let us see if there be aught of ours in thee. And lo! we have found nothing in thee. I behold also the help of God, and thine angel; and the spirit rejoiceth with thee because thou didst the will of God upon earth. And they brought it until it did worship in the presence of God.

And when they (it?) had ceased, forthwith Michael and all the host of the angels fell and worshipped the footstool of his feet and his gates, and said together unto the soul: This is the God of all, which made thee in his image and likeness. And the angel returned and declared, saying: Lord, remember his works; for this is the soul whereof I did report the works unto thee, Lord, doing according to thy judgement. And likewise the spirit said: I am the spirit of quickening that breathed upon it; for I had refreshment in it in the time when I dwelt therein, doing according to thy judgement. And the voice of God came, saying: Like as this soul hath not grieved me neither will I grieve it, for like as it hath had mercy, I also will have mercy. Let it be delivered therefore unto Michael the angel of the covenant, and let him lead it into the paradise of rejoicing that it become fellow-heir with all the saints. And thereafter I heard the voices of thousands of thousands of angels and archangels and the cherubim and the four-and-twenty elders uttering hymns and glorifying the Lord and crying: Righteous art thou, O Lord, and just are thy judgements, and there is no respect of persons with thee, but thou rewardest every man according to thy judgement. And the angel answered and said unto me: Hast thou believed and known that whatsoever every one of you hath done, he beholdeth it at the hour of his necessity? And I said: Yea, Lord.

15 And he said unto me: Look down again upon the earth and wait for the soul of a wicked man going forth of the body, one that hath provoked the Lord day and night, saying: I know nought else in this world, I will eat and drink and enjoy the things that are in the world. For who is he that hath gone down into hell and come up and told us that there is a judgement there? And again I looked and saw all the despising of the sinner, and all that he did, and they stood together before him in the hour of necessity: and it came to pass in that hour when he was led out of his body to the judgement, that he (MS. I) said: It were better for me (MS. him) that I (he) had not been born. And after that the holy angels and the evil and the soul of the sinner came together, and the holy angels found no place in it. But the evil angels threatened (had power over) it, and when they brought it forth out of the body, the angels admonished it thrice, saying: O wretched sou], look upon thy flesh whence thou art come out; for thou must needs return into thy flesh at the day of resurrection to receive the due reward for thy sins and for thy wickedness; 16 And when they had brought it forth, the accustomed (i.e. guardian) angel went before it and said unto it: O miserable soul, I am the angel that clave unto thee and day by day reported unto the Lord thine evil deeds, whatsoever thou wroughtest by night or day; and if it had been in my power I would not have ministered unto thee even one day; but of this I could do nothing, for God is merciful and a just judge, and he commanded us not to cease ministering unto your soul till ye should repent: but thou hast lost the time of repentance. I indeed am become a stranger unto thee and thou to me. Let us go then unto the just judge: I will not leave thee until I know that from this day I am become a stranger unto thee. And the spirit confounded it, and the angel troubled it. When therefore they were come unto the principalities, and it would now go to enter into heaven, one burden (labour, suffering) was laid upon it after another: error and forgetfulness and whispering met it, and the spirit of fornication and the rest of the powers, and said unto it: Whither goest thou, wretched soul and darest to run forward into heaven? Stay, that we may see whether we have property of ours in thee, for we see not with thee an holy helper.

And after that I heard voices in the height of the heavens, saying: Present this miserable soul unto God, that it may know that there is a God, whom it hath despised. When therefore it was entered into the heaven, all the angels, even thousands of thousands, saw it, and all cried out with one voice saying: Woe unto thee, miserable

soul, for thy works which thou didest upon the earth, what answer wilt thou make unto God when thou drawest near to worship him? The angel which was with it answered and said: Weep with me, my dearly beloved, for I have found no rest in this soul. And the angels answered him and said: Let this soul be taken away out of our midst, for since it came in, the stench of it is passed upon us the angels. And thereafter it was presented, to worship in the presence of God, and the angel showed it the Lord God that made it after his own image and likeness. And its angel ran before it, saying: O Lord God Almighty, I am the angel of this soul, whose works I presented unto thee day and night, not doing according to thy judgement. And likewise the spirit said: I am the spirit which dwelt in it ever since it was made, and I know it in itself, and it followed not my will: judge it, Lord, according to thy judgement.

And the voice of God came unto it and said: Where is thy fruit that thou hast yielded, worthy of those good things which thou hast received? did I put a distance even of a day between thee and the righteous? did I not make the sun to rise upon thee even as upon the righteous? And it was silent, having nothing to answer; and again the voice came, saying: Just is the judgement of God, and there is no respect of persons with God, for whosoever hath done his mercy he will have mercy on him, and whoso hath not had mercy, neither shall God have mercy on him. Let him therefore be delivered unto the angel Tartaruchus (Gr. Temeluchus) that is set over the torments, and let him cast him into the outer darkness where is weeping and gnashing of teeth, and let him be there until the great day of judgement. And after that I heard the voice of the angels and archangels saying: Righteous art thou, O Lord, and just is thy judgement.

Apocalypse of Paul 19-20

19 The angel answered and said unto me: Hast thou perceived all these things? And I said: Yea, Lord. And he said unto me: Follow me again, and I will take thee and show thee the places of the righteous. And I followed the angel and he took me up unto the third heaven and set me before the door of a gate; and I looked on it and saw, and the gate was of gold, and there were two pillars of gold full of golden letters; and the angel turned again to me and said: Blessed art thou if thou enterest in by these gates, for it is not permitted to any to enter save only to those that have kept goodness and pureness of their bodies in all things. And I asked the angel and said: Lord, tell me for what cause are these letters set upon these tables? The angel answered and said unto me: These are the names of the righteous that minister unto God with their whole heart, which dwell on the earth. And again I said: Lord, then are their names also their countenance and the likeness of them that serve God is in heaven, and they are known unto the angels: for they know them that with their whole heart serve God before they depart out of the world.

20 And when I had entered within the gate of paradise there came to meet me an old man whose face shone like the sun, and he embraced me and said: Hail, Paul, dearly beloved of God And he kissed me with a joyful countenance, but he wept, and I said unto him: Father (Lat. Brother), why weepest thou? And again sighing and weeping he said: Because we are vexed by men, and they grieve us sore; for many are the good things which the Lord hath prepared, and great are his promises, but many receive them not. And I asked the angel and said: Who is this, Lord? And he said unto me: This is Enoch the scribe of righteousness.

And I entered within that place and straightway I saw Elias I and he came and saluted me with gladness and joy. And when he had seen me, he turned himself away and wept and said unto me: Paul, mayest thou receive the reward of thy labour which thou hast done among mankind. As for me, I have seen great and manifold good things which God hath prepared for all the righteous, and great are the promises of God, but the more part receive them not; yea hardly through much toil doth one and another enter into these places.