

ESCHATOLOGICAL INCONSISTENCY IN THE ANTE-NICENE FATHERS?

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From the late nineteenth century onward, eschatology has been one of the most important factors considered in determining the date, authorship, and integrity of works written during the NT and intertestamental periods. Followers of Albert Schweitzer and Johannes Weiss, for instance, have argued that eschatological ideas provide clear guidelines for separating Jesus' genuine teaching from later additions made by the church. According to this "consistent eschatological" approach to the NT, only those teachings reflecting confidence in a nearly-immediate Parousia can with certainty be attributed to the "historical" Jesus or his first followers.¹

The Schweitzer/Weiss hypothesis has been used as a starting point by many patristic scholars, most notably Martin Werner. Werner tried to show that the "de-eschatolization" of the gospel message, which took place in response to the delay of the Parousia, caused nearly every theological difficulty the church would later face.²

Recent studies in both patristics and the NT have moved away from the consistent eschatological approach. Brian Daley, for instance, provides an impressive refutation of Werner's monocausal explanation of the development of Christian theology.³

Nevertheless, there is still some tendency to make at least some use of

¹The eschatological theories of Weiss (*Die Predigt Jesu vom Reiche Gottes*, Göttingen: 1892) and Schweitzer (*Von Reimarus zu Wrede* [Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1906]), particularly the idea that disappointment in the delay of the Parousia was a major problem in the early church, have been echoed again and again, not only in twentieth-century scholarly literature, but in the popular press. There are, however, serious problems with "consistent eschatology." C.F.D. Moule offers a critique of this approach and suggests a more promising NT methodology (*The Birth of the New Testament* [London: Black, 1981]).

²Martin Werner, *Formation of Christian Dogma* (New York: Harper, 1957).

³Brian Daley, *The Hope of the Early Church* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991). Daley's challenge to Werner's ideas on patristic eschatology appeared first in *Eschatologie in der Schrift und Patristik* (Freiburg: Herder, 1986). For other alternatives to Werner, see Charles E. Hill's *Regnum Caelorum: Patterns of Future Hope in Early Christianity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992); and A. Marmorstein, "Marking Well the End: Eschatological Solutions to Dilemmas Faced by the Ante-Nicene Church" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Davis, 1988).

eschatological ideas in determining the authorship and integrity of early Christian works. Works that differ markedly in eschatology are assumed to come from different hands, regardless of what tradition might say. Many would agree, for instance, with Pierre Nautin's argument that the eschatological differences between the *Refutation of All Heresies*⁴ and some of the other works attributed to Hippolytus (e.g., *On Christ and Antichrist* and the *Commentary on Daniel*) constitute evidence against the unity of this corpus.⁵ Even Daley suggests there might be some validity to this approach.⁶

There certainly are striking eschatological differences in the works usually attributed to Hippolytus. The *Refutation* makes only passing reference to the resurrection, ignores the antichrist completely, and nowhere mentions the millennium, stressing instead the immortality of the soul and mystic unity with God as the ultimate hope of the believer.⁷ The latter two works give some of the most detailed pictures of the antichrist and of the millennial kingdom in all of Ante-Nicene literature, even going so far as to fix a time for the beginning of the millennium. Participating in the reign of Christ on this earth seems the ultimate joy of the believer.

These eschatological differences would seem to be incontrovertible evidence that it is wrong to assign all three works to Hippolytus. The problem is that, even in patristic works that are almost certainly by the same author, one can find differences in eschatology every bit as great as those one sees in the alleged works of Hippolytus. It would seem that, at least as far as patristics is concerned, the Schweitzer/Weiss hypothesis must not be considered to be valid: Eschatological ideas are of almost no value in trying to determine the date, authorship, and integrity of patristic works.

Justin Martyr is an excellent example of an Ante-Nicene writer whose

⁴Cited often as the *Elenchos*. Throughout this article I use the titles and translations found in the Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson revised edition of *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. B. A. Cleveland Coxe (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Co., 1896).

⁵Pierre Nautin, *Hippolyte et Josipe* (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1947). David Dunbar provides a clear summary of the various arguments for and against common authorship of the books attributed to Hippolytus ("The Problem of Hippolytus of Rome: A Study in Historical-Critical Reconstruction," *JETS* 25 [1982]: 63-74).

⁶Daley, 41. C. E. Hill, likewise, makes appeal to eschatology in attempting to determine the authorship of patristic works. He argues that the eschatology of the fragment *De Universo* is so different from that of other works attributed to Hippolytus that one is almost forced to conclude that it is non-Hippolytan. He notes, for instance, that Hippolytus's acknowledged works consistently view the righteous dead as having already been transferred from Hades to heaven, while *De Universo* asserts directly that even the righteous remain in Hades awaiting the resurrection ("Hades of Hippolytus or Tartarus of Tertullian? The Authorship of the Fragment *De Universo*," *Vigiliae Christianae* 43 [1989]: 105-126).

⁷Cf. Dietrich Ritschl, "Hippolytus' Conception of Deification," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 12 (1959): 388-399.

acknowledged works display marked differences in eschatology. In his two *Apologies*, Justin confines himself to one simple eschatological principle: There will be a resurrection and a day of judgment. There is no mention of the millennium in the *Apologies*, no discussion of the great tribulation, and no comment at all on the antichrist. Rather, they reflect what modern readers would term a "realized" eschatology, i.e., they show Hebrew eschatological prophecies to be largely fulfilled at Christ's first advent and in the church. Particularly interesting in this regard is Justin's interpretation of Isa 2:3: "For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. And He shall judge among the nations, and shall rebuke many people; and they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning-hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore." Modern readers would expect Justin to connect this prophecy to the millennial kingdom of Christ, but this is not at all his approach; nor would this be a common theme in second-century literature. Instead, Justin insists that the going forth of the law out of Zion refers to the apostles' preaching of the gospel message and that the references to an end of warfare anticipate the peaceful conduct of formerly violent men upon their conversion to Christianity.⁸ Likewise, Justin interprets the "rod of power" and the promise of ruling in the midst of enemies of Ps 110:2 as referring to the spread of the "mighty word" by the apostles and to the imperviousness of Christians to persecution, not to an earthly rule of Christ from Jerusalem.⁹

In the eschatological scheme of the *First Apology*, there is no apparent place for the millennial kingdom. The one passage that deals extensively with the return of Christ associates the Parousia closely with the resurrection and the final judgment.¹⁰ These passages would seem to show conclusively that Justin was either amillennial or postmillennial in his eschatology. But his *Dialogue with Trypho* gives us an entirely different picture. Here Justin cites both Isa 65 and Rev 20 in an attempt to show that there will be a thousand-year reign of Christ in Jerusalem before the final resurrection and judgment.¹¹ Thus the *Dialogue with Trypho* differs considerably from the *First Apology* in its eschatological emphasis, though there is an overwhelming consensus that both works are rightly attributed to Justin.¹²

⁸Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, 39.

⁹*Ibid.*, 45.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 52.

¹¹Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*.

¹²E. R. Goodenough, for instance, accepts unhesitatingly the attribution of both *Apologies* and the *Dialogue with Trypho* to Justin, although he complains of Justin's "inconsistencies" and "contradictions" in eschatology (*The Theology of Justin Martyr*

Similarly, the extant writings of Eusebius of Caesarea show marked differences in eschatological emphasis. This is particularly noticeable when one compares Eusebius's *De Evangelica Praeparatione* (*The Preparation for the Gospel*) with his *Demonstratio Evangelica* (*Proof of the Gospel*).¹³ The *Preparation* seems to drift toward pure Platonism in both anthropology and eschatology. Eusebius insists that Plato is quite right in viewing men as immortal souls cloaked in corruptible bodies. This, he maintains, is sound biblical teaching: "In the doctrine of the immortality of the soul, Plato differs not at all from Moses."¹⁴ Eusebius quotes at length—and with apparent approval—Plato's account of the fate of different types of souls in the afterlife. He includes Plato's description of the trial of souls, the purification of the unjust in Acheron or Tartarus, and the entry of those who had purified themselves through philosophy into the "pure dwelling place above."¹⁵

In addition to Plato himself, Eusebius draws on Plotinus and Porphyry and some otherwise unknown Platonist and Neo-Platonist authors such as Severus. Almost the entire argument in the *Preparation* is taken from such sources. But then Eusebius makes a strange reversal. In his follow-up work, the *Proof of the Gospel*, he abandons the testimony of pagan philosophers altogether and turns instead to the Hebrew Scriptures. The eschatological emphasis likewise changes markedly. Rather than the ultimate fate of the soul, Eusebius concentrates on "realized" eschatology, emphasizing ways in which the awaited eschaton had already entered history in Christ. He notes that Christ was both a "new" Moses and a "new" David, that he established a "new" law and a "new" covenant, and that he gave his followers a "new" song.¹⁶

Eusebius, then, regards himself as living in a new age, an age marked by important changes. First, the demons' hold on man has been broken. Christ has been triumphant both over the demons who oppress men in this life and the demons who formerly were able to dominate the dead. The fact that pagan oracles had ceased to speak as the gospel spread is

[Amsterdam: Philo Press, 1968], 281). The reasons for the apparent inconsistencies are well accounted for in L. W. Barnard's *Justin Martyr* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), 157-168. Barnard notes that Justin's eschatological language varies with the circumstances he addresses, but maintains that there is no ultimate contradiction.

¹³I use the English titles chosen for these translations by W. J. Ferrar, *The Proof of the Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981); and Edwin Hamilton Gifford, *The Preparation for the Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981). All citations below are from these editions.

¹⁴Eusebius of Caesarea, *The Preparation for the Gospel*, 11:27.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 12:6.

¹⁶Eusebius of Caesarea, *The Proof of the Gospel*, 1.4-5.

further evidence of the end of demonic dominance. Even in the *Pax Romana* Eusebius sees evidence of the new age brought about by Christ. Eusebius maintains that the peace of this period was not man-made at all, but brought about by God intentionally in order to make possible the spread of the gospel.¹⁷

The *Preparation for the Gospel* with its Platonic eschatology and the *Proof of the Gospel* with its “realized” eschatology differ greatly in eschatological emphasis. Yet no one argues against the attribution of both works to Eusebius.

There are several reasons why Ante-Nicene writers might appear inconsistent in their eschatology. First is the danger of elaborating at length on eschatological prophecy. Justin notes that when Christians spoke of a coming kingdom, the Roman emperors assumed “without inquiry” that they meant a human kingdom and, therefore, wrongly believed the Christians to be politically subversive.¹⁸ Second, these writers often seem to want to avoid controversy over nonessentials. Justin, for instance, is careful to preface his comments on the millennial kingdom with the concession that there are many “who belong to the pure and pious faith, and are true Christians,” and who do not believe in an earthly millennium.¹⁹ Finally, there is a tendency among the Ante-Nicene fathers to choose “proof texts” only from among those works already considered authoritative to the ones to whom they write. In his *Address to the Greeks*, Tatian explains why he seldom uses Christian Scripture when addressing a pagan audience:

I will not bring forth witnesses from among ourselves, but rather have recourse to the Greeks; to do the former would be foolish, because it would not be allowed by you; but the other will surprise you, when, by contending with you with your own weapons, I adduce arguments of which you had no suspicion.²⁰

Justin, Theophilus of Antioch, Athenagoras the Athenian, and Eusebius all follow a method similar to Tatian’s in their apologetic works: Wherever possible, they cite pagan rather than biblical sources in support of their arguments. One consequence of this technique is that the apologists emphasize primarily those eschatological ideas for which they can find some support in pagan writers. In works written primarily for Christians, however, the Ante-Nicene writers could make full use of Scripture and elaborate much more on their eschatological ideas.

¹⁷Ibid., 3.7.

¹⁸Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, 11.

¹⁹Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, 80.

²⁰Tatian, *Address to the Greeks*, 31.

Athenagoras openly advocates just such a dichotomy of approach:

I think that those who bestow attention on such subjects should adopt two lines of argument, one in defense of truth, another concerning truth; that in defense of truth, for disbelievers and doubters; that concerning truth, for such as are candid and receive the truth with readiness.²¹

Eusebius goes so far as to suggest that a writer might legitimately employ an overly simplified theology even in dealing with some Christians:

For which cause also among us those who are newly admitted and in an immature condition, as if infants in soul, have the reading of the sacred scriptures imparted to them in a very simple way, with the injunction that they must believe what is brought forth as the word of God. But those who are in a more advanced condition, and as it were grown grey in mind, are permitted to dive into the deeps, and test the meaning of words.²²

This is a clear indication that one might expect some important differences in the theological perspective whenever an Ante-Nicene writer switches genres or intended audience.

Such a switch in audience may also explain many of the apparent eschatological inconsistencies in the works attributed to Hippolytus. Several passages in the *Treatise on Christ and Antichrist* suggest that the author of this work had the same attitude as Athenagoras. He warns his friend Theophilus not to share the deeper truths of scriptural eschatology indiscriminately:

See that you do not give these things over to unbelieving and blasphemous tongues, for that is no common danger. . . . If then, the blessed (apostle) delivered these things with a pious caution, which could be easily known by all, how much greater will be our danger if, rashly and without thought we commit the revelations of God to profane and unworthy men?²³

Later, he again urges the need for caution in dealing with such issues:

These things, beloved, we impart to you with fear, and yet readily, on account of the love of Christ, which surpasseth all. For if the blessed prophets who preceded us did not choose to proclaim these things, though they knew them, openly and boldly, lest they should disquiet the souls of men, but recounted them mystically in parables and dark sayings, speaking thus, "Here is the mind which hath wisdom," how much greater risk we shall run in venturing to declare openly things spoken by them in obscure terms.²⁴

It would not be surprising to find an author, who expresses so clearly the need for caution in sharing the eschatological teaching of Scripture,

²¹Athenagoras, *On the Resurrection from the Dead*, 1.

²²Eusebius of Caesarea, *The Preparation for the Gospel*, 12.1.

²³Hippolytus, *Treatise on Christ and Antichrist*, 1.

²⁴*Ibid.*, 29.

completely ignoring some of his "deeper" teachings in a work which, like the *Refutation of All Heresies*, is addressed, at least partly, to unbelievers.

A close examination of the treatment of prophecy in the *Treatise on the Antichrist* and in the *Refutation* suggests that this is exactly what Hippolytus did. In the former work, the author has this to say:

For as the blessed prophets were made, so to speak, eyes for us, they foresaw through faith the mysteries of the word, and became ministers of these things also to succeeding generations, not only reporting the past, but also announcing the present and the future, so that the prophet might not appear to be one only for the time being, but might also predict the future of all generations, and so be reckoned a (true) prophet. For these fathers were furnished with the Spirit and largely honoured by the Word Himself.²⁵

Compare this passage to the discussion of the same subject in the *Refutation*:

Afterwards, just men were born, friends of God; and these have been styled prophets, on account of their foreshadowing future events. And the word of prophecy was committed unto them, not for one age only; but also the utterances of events predicted throughout all generations, were vouchsafed in perfect clearness. And this, too, not at the time merely when seers furnished a reply to those present; but also events that would happen throughout all ages, have been manifested beforehand . . . the Word by declaring them promulgated the divine commandment.²⁶

The treatment of prophecy in the two passages is virtually identical. Both emphasize the fulfillment of the prophets' visions in all generations. Both emphasize the role of the Word in prophecy. In context, both passages precede an account of the end times. The difference is that in the *Treatise on Antichrist* the ability of the prophets to foretell the future is followed by a number of very specific statements as to what they predicted and how these prophecies would be fulfilled, while the author of the *Refutation* is content merely to affirm that the prophets did utter detailed predictions of the future.²⁷

²⁵Ibid., 2.

²⁶Hippolytus, *Refutation of All Heresies*, 10.29.

²⁷While the works generally attributed to Hippolytus sometimes seem very different from one another, there is nothing in any of them that one would not expect from a student of Irenaeus. This is particularly the case when it comes to eschatology. Ritschl, 392-394, for instance, argues convincingly that the eschatological picture of *Refutation* 10.34 is derived directly from Irenaeus. The *Treatise on Christ and the Antichrist* may be dependent on Irenaeus' eschatology. Note, for instance, that *Treatise* 55 parallels almost exactly the Irenaeus' speculations on the number 666 (*Against Heresies* 5.30). The *Commentary on Daniel* also closely follows Irenaeus' eschatology, particularly in its association of the six days of Creation with six thousand years of the world's existence and the seventh day with coming millennial kingdom (*Commentary on Daniel* 2.4-5).

It would seem, then, that the different approach to eschatology in the *Refutation* and in the *Treatise on the Antichrist* and the *Commentary on Daniel* is insufficient to prove that different authors wrote them. They may all come from the hand of Hippolytus, who, in works intended for well-instructed Christians, was willing to plumb the depths of the mysteries of Scripture, but in a work intended for a general audience, was more cautious.

It would seem also that it is unsound to use differences in eschatological emphasis as grounds for supposing any two Ante-Nicene works come from different authors. The same author might well change his eschatological emphasis radically from work to work.

This should not be surprising. The books of the Bible themselves differ greatly in eschatological emphasis; sometimes emphasizing an earthly messianic kingdom, sometimes the transformed life of believers, and at others the believer's hope of unity with God.²⁸ Therefore, it was not inconsistent for an Ante-Nicene writer to reflect a diversity of emphasis.

²⁸C.F.D. Moule argues that most apparent discrepancies in NT eschatology are to be explained not as the result of theological development nor as a response to supposed disappointment at the delay of the Parousia, but as an appropriate response to different situations addressed by the authors ("The Influence of Circumstances on the Use of Eschatological Terms," *Journal of Theological Studies* 15 [1964]: 1-15). L. W. Barnard, 157, rightly suggests that Moule's explanation applies to early patristic works as well.