Workshop Session IV - #24

ESCHATOLOGY IN THE GOSPEL OF JOHN: REALIZED OR UNREALIZED?

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Introduction

Anyone who attempts a systemic study of the fourth gospel must deal with the fact that John’s central theological concepts often sound different from those presented by other New Testament authors. Concepts such as faith, atonement, and eschatology all ring a slightly different note in John’s gospel than they do in other New Testament works.\(^1\) It is the task of biblical theology to examine these Johannine peculiarities and interpret them, first within the context of John’s gospel, and, second, within the context of the New Testament canon as a whole.\(^2\) In doing so, John sheds light on bands of Christian theology which would otherwise lie in shadow. This deals with one such Johannine concept which the gospel presents in its own unique light: eschatology. In this paper, it will be advanced that interpreting John’s eschatology as fully “realized” produces a skewed interpretation of biblical texts that, if interpreted with a historical-literary-grammatical hermeneutic, speak of “unrealized” eschatology.

Proponents of a purely realized Johannine eschatology

Albert Schweitzer, at the beginning of the last century, proposed that Christ was no more than a man, and that His death and failure to rise again rendered all scripture prophecy irrelevant.\(^3\) Thus, to Schweitzer, John was the most balanced of all the gospel writers because of John’s seeming lack of interest in the last days. Schweitzer shouted in broad daylight what others had only whispered in the dark, and the story of the first half of 20\(^{th}\)-century German theology is in large part the story of how theologians reacted to Schweitzer’s propositions. Two

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\(^1\) John’s concept of faith focuses on “the totality of transformation” of the believer, including the practical ramifications of one’s faith in daily living (see Herman Ridderbos, *The Gospel of John: A Theological Commentary* [Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1997], 140), while Paul seems to stress more the proposition focus of faith; the cross in John, while not bereft of the doctrine of atonement, has a strong emphasis on Christ’s death as the revelation of God’s love (see Max Turner, “Atonement and the Death of Jesus in John: Some Questions to Bultmann and Forestell,” *Evangelical Quarterly* 62 [1990], 122) whereas Paul focuses more on the redemptive aspect of Christ’s work. John’s unique contribution to our understanding of eschatology is the focus of this paper.


\(^3\) Schweitzer, *Quest*, 359-360. Concerning influences on Schweitzer, Roderic Dunkerley (*The Hope of Jesus: A Study in Moral Eschatology* [London: Longmans, Green, 1953], 15) says that Johannes Weiss “blazed the trail” down which Schweitzer “carried the adventure forward in thoroughgoing fashion.”
commentators in particular, the German theologian Rudolf Bultmann and the Cambridge don C.H. Dodd, took up Schweitzer’s thesis and attempted to incorporate it into their theology. It was these two authors in particular, struggling with the legacy they inherited from their skeptical forebears, who challenged contemporary perspectives of Johannine eschatology by seeing John’s eschatology as entirely “realized.”

Rudolf Bultmann

Bultmann stressed that any literal, future eschatology (such as that “apocalyptic” eschatology seen most clearly in the Olivet Discourse) was irrelevant, since Christ’s death disrupted the plan; instead, Bultmann said that the author of John’s gospel left the apocalyptic imagery of eschatology in the text of scripture for people to read as an allegory for the Christian life.¹ Bultmann proposed that the “compositor” of John had reinterpreted the previous generation’s eschatology as being allegorical descriptions of what happens in a believer’s life upon salvation. Thus, Bultmann writes, “The Evangelist has used the primitive Christian ideas and hopes to describe the stages through which the life of the believer has to pass, and on which it can also come to grief.”⁵

However, Bultmann himself recognized that there were some elements in John that clearly did not fit into this scheme. These elements include clear futurist references to “the last day” (6:39, 40, and 44) and to the bodily resurrection in 5:28-29—both passages which did not bend to Bultmann’s demythologization. For these elements, Bultmann referred to them as being interpolations by later redactors.⁶

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¹ For a creative expression of how this process is conceived to have happened, read Robert Kysar, *John: the Maverick Gospel* (Atlanta: John Knox: 1976), 92.


⁶ E.g., Bultmann, *A Theology of the New Testament*, trans. K. Grobel (New York: Scribners, 1955), 39; *John*, 261. A half-century ago, Beasley-Murray made the helpful recognition that this sort of depreciating tendency “is but an extension of that delightfully simple expedient that commentators have of dubbing all passages inimical to their interpretations as ‘interpolations’; this practice does not commend the theories in question to the discriminating reader, but rather usually makes him the more wary” (George Raymond Beasley-Murray, “The Eschatology of the Fourth Gospel,” *EQ* 18 [1946], 99). Other commentators have taken a less drastic turn, saying that the passages referring to a future eschatology were indeed written by the evangelist, but that they were only written by the evangelist because he had not yet himself worked out fully the inappropriateness of them in his theology (c.f., Robert Kysar, *The Fourth Evangelist and His Gospel* [Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1975], 213, 213 n. 20).
C. H. Dodd

C.H. Dodd, professor at Cambridge, wrote a 1936 article in which he set forth his understanding of Johannine eschatology as being exclusively “realized” in scope. 7 Like Bultmann, Dodd also views the future eschatology in the Gospel of John as being present reality, as an answer of the first-century church to the failure of Christ to come again in the time frame in which they had expected him to. 8

For the most part, Dodd stands in close relationship to Bultmann on the issue of Johannine eschatology. In some ways, Dodd goes even further: for Dodd, even the future eschatological elements dismissed by Bultmann take on a realized sphere of meaning: the bodily resurrection is code for “something which may take place before bodily death, and has for its result the possession of eternal life here and now.” 9 In Dodd’s view, there will be life after death, and the “qualitative” aspects of that life begin in the present.10

Reactions

The reaction to Dodd and Bultmann has been strong. Commentators from across the spectrum of Johannine studies have contradicted the overly-strong emphasis on realized eschatology and have offered explanations which left room for dual-emphases in Johannine theology. One such explanation is found in the growing use of the term “inaugurated” to explain the realized part of an larger unrealized eschatology. As Bock says, “The kingdom was inaugurated or was dawning in Jesus’ words and deeds, but its consummation was yet future.”11 John was not the only one to speak in “realized” terminology while yet retaining unrealized portions of his overall eschatological perspective. Keener points out that, “as in Paul, realized eschatology in the Fourth Gospel is inaugurated by Jesus’ presence and glorification, then realized and anticipated in believers’ experience through the Spirit (e.g., Rom 8:11, 23; 1 Cor 6:14, 15:12-13; 2 Cor 1:22, 5:5).”12

7 C. H. Dodd, “The Kingdom of God has Come,” Expository Times 48 (1936): 138-42. The term “realized” belongs properly to Dodd’s use of it in this article. Also, Dodd, “The Background of the Fourth Gospel,” BJRL 19 (1935), 138-42. Dodd delivered two series of lectures in 1935 in which he had proposed the same concepts; these lectures form the basis of his significant books, The Apostolic Preaching and Its Developments (New York: Harper and Row, 1964) and The Parables of the Kingdom (New York: Charles Scribner’s, 1961); however, these books were not printed until later.


9 Dodd, Interpretation, 148.

10 Ibid., 144-150.


The discussion of in what way that kingdom has begun is a topic of debate between revised and progressive dispensationalists which lies beyond the scope of this paper. However, understanding John’s “eternal life” as a personalized presentation of the kingdom in an inaugurated, already/not-yet state aids us both in understanding some key Johannine eschatological texts and in providing some protection of the traditional view against the poisonous inroads made by critics such as Dodd and Bultmann and their recent proponents. It is to one of these texts which we now turn.

**Biblical data**

With the previous history of interpretation in mind, a consideration of relevant biblical data may now be undertaken. While there are a number of passages which seem to teach unrealized eschatology in the gospel of John (i.e., 3:36; 5:21, 28-29, 39; 6:40, 54; 12:25; 21:22, 23), the passage yielding the most fruit in this study is chapter five. An examination of this passage—which shall be shown to be futuristic in its outlook—will set the stage for a literature survey of those who interpret the passage as substantially or completely realized in its eschatology.

**Evidences for an inaugurated reading**

**Passage summary**

In chapter five, verses 19-30 function as part of a discussion in which Christ is claiming the sonship of God as a justification for Sabbath healing (vv. 1-18). Jesus claims authority from God for the judgment and acquittal of the dead in the last day—a prerogative which the Jews believed was held by God alone. This claim was set forth in part to substantiate both the thoughts of the crowds—who rightly assumed that Jesus was ascribing deity to himself—and his own right for Sabbath privilege (for one who was one with the Father was also Lord of the Sabbath). It may be argued that a stronger evidence could not be found of Jesus’ authority than the fact that he had authority over the final destiny of the dead.

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13 See Bock, “Kingdom,” 58, n. 53 for a good roundup on this discussion.


16 Bultmann: “Jewish and early Christian apocalyptic had already given expression to the idea that the Messiah or the ‘Son of Man’ would exercise the office of judgement alongside or in place of God” (*Gospel*, 257; see support, 257 n. 1). Dodd, *Interpretation*, 326-327.
Evidences for an unrealized eschatology

Terminology

There are three concepts that need to be defined in working through this passage. Death, life, and resurrection all figure prominently throughout.

A dual physical/spiritual use was found in ancient Judaism for “death” and “life.” The words could refer to either a physical death or eschatological death (sometimes meaning annihilation). Life, on the other hand, seemed to be a term that was limited to a physical existence in this world or an existence in either physical or spiritual form post-mortem; there do not seem to be any extra-biblical references to an eternal life that is internally accessible during the present life. Such an innovation seems to be attributable directly to our Lord’s teaching, and both John and Paul echo Jesus’ teaching in this respect.

Of the eight Johannine uses of anisthmi and its forms (all in the gospel) (to cause to arise), all refer to the unrealized, physical resurrection. Of the 14 occurrences of the term egeirw (to raise) in the Johannine literature (all occur in the gospel, except for one occurrence in the Revelation), one appears to mean “to accumulate renown” (John 7:52), one is in a discourse (v. 21 of this passage), and the other 12 refer to physical events. Of the three Johannine occurrences of zwopoiew and its forms (to make alive), one is in reference to Jesus’ physical resurrection (6:63), and the other two are located in 5:21. As to anastasi and its forms (resurrection), two occurrences are found in Revelation (20:5-6) which have distinctly unrealized eschatological meaning (there is one caveat; see n. 58), and the remaining four are found in the gospel (two in v. 29, and two in 11:24-25). At least one use in chapter 11 (v. 24) is certain to refer to the physical resurrection. The other use in chapter 11 (v. 25) cites that Jesus is the “resurrection”—we may assume that his gist is that he is the one who has authority and power over the eschatological resurrection which is under discussion in chapter 11. The remaining two occurrences are in v. 29. Based on all the appearances of this concept, it seems compelling that all Johannine references to resurrection outside of this passage are related to a physical resurrection. Dodd, however, asserts that the term “resurrection” in verse 29 refers to a spiritual resurrection—a salvation experience. While Christ does speak of salvation in a realized sense, He does not appear to employ specifically the resurrection word group in those discussions. Dodd must therefore make a far more convincing case as to the meaning of the term here. Aside from such argumentation, the word usage in John leads us to believe that resurrection in v. 29 is speaking of the physical resurrection.

18 Ibid., n. 162.
19 Ibid., 328-329.
20 BibleWorks, CDROM, vers. 6.0 (BibleWorks, 2003).
Discourse integrity

This portion is perhaps the strongest evidence that vv. 28-29 is part and parcel of the pericope. If it is true that 29-29 belongs with the passage, then Bultmann’s argument is further weakened.

First, the context must be taken into account. As mentioned at the outset of this discussion, the passage fits within a larger context in which John uses Christ’s authority over the final judgment to justify his claims to deity. Thus, without this final judgement in view, the pericope loses it strength. Removing verse 29 from the context (as Bultmann does) weakens Jesus’ argument and fails to explain how his audience would have recognized this as evidencing Christ’s deity.

Second, it may be argued that vv. 28-29 are the peak of the 5:19-30 discourse. “Peak” has been defined as being the point in a discourse in which the maximum number of disruptions or aberrations from the mainline are found in the text. These disruptions focus the attention on the text’s message. If we have a high number of disruptions, we should take them as red flags waving us to a peak. These disruptions are known as “peak markers”—“a bag of tricks” which allow the author to highlight certain parts of a text. Robert Longacre provides a number of markers by which the peak may be determined:

- **Rhetorical underlining**: repetition; paraphrase
- **Crowded stage** (density of participants)
- **Heightened vividness**: increased number of verbs; change in verb tense; change to a more specific person (i.e., second to first person or plural to singular); movement from narrative to pseudodialogue, or from pseudodialogue to dialogue, or from dialogue to drama
- **Change of pace**: longer/shorter tagmemes; different verb types; fewer or no conjunctions;
- **Change of viewpoint or subject focus**
- **Increased/reduced use of particles**
- **Added onomatopoeia**

Within this passage, there are a number of peak markers which signal 28-29 as being the peak of the passage to which the rest of the discourse is tied. First, *rhetorical underlining* is used in the repetition of terms and phrases (*oti erxetai wra*, *akousousin*, *zwhj*, and *krisewj*). What Bultmann refers to as “unnecessary and clumsy repetition” is arguably a strong case for tying the verses to their *prima facie* context: repetition is a common linguistic technique for indicating peak in discourse. Second, there is a *change in tense* from present to purely future in vv. 28-29. Third, *onomatopoeia* is accelerated due to the repetition of key terms and phrases from previous verses and to the repetition of a dualistic phrase (v. 29). Thus, the peak of the discourse argues for the inclusion of verses 28-29 with their existing context.

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Furthermore, within the discourse, the concepts expressed in vv. 28-29 function as an explanation and basis for verse 24’s assertions that the son has authority to raise the dead and enliven or judge them, and, therefore, authority equivalent to God’s. The “greater things” of verse 20 expect miracles greater than the healing on the Sabbath—vv. 28-29 provide a satisfactory “one-up” on the healing miracles.

It therefore appears that the discourse perspective argues against the exclusion of this unrealized eschatology from the realized eschatology of vv. 24-25. Rather, the two co-exist, side by side, realized and unrealized. An inaugurated, already/not yet eschatology seems more to be the focus.

A realized eschatology reading of 5:19-30

Proponents of a fully realized eschatology explain this passage in a number of ways. Reviewing their expositions will provide insight both into their redefinitions and into some of the methodological weaknesses in interpreting the text.

Bultmann sees v. 28 as having been added by a later redactor. “The editor has here added a section designed to harmonise Jesus’ bold words with traditional eschatology; for this is the only possible explanation for 5.28f.” However, as has already been demonstrated, the verses are an organic part of the pericope. Only Bultmann’s blatant theological incompatibilities can drive the text from the passage in such a way. Since Bultmann establishes his argument on the basis of seeing the text as an interpolation, his interpretation fails if one views the text as integral to the passage. Bultmann says that John’s Jesus is using the traditional Jewish terminology of end-times but is recasting them in a way that is internal, completely spiritual, and individualized. Bultmann argues that these terms were redefined by Jesus to speak of a crisis-moment encounter with God (a judgment) in which the believer will find “authenticity of existence,” a state of peace with one’s own faith (life); the reader can only understand Jesus’ terminology here if he will “turn away from the common understanding of death and life.” In this sense, Bultmann sees this passage as realized eschatology.

Dodd held that eternal life in John had an almost entirely qualitative meaning. He believed that the quantitative meaning of “life” drew its meaning from the qualities of the post-mortem life which we may enjoy today. “Eternal life” meant an experience of agape, “the life that God lives and that He imparts to His creatures in the act of loving them.” It is an assurance to us that nothing—not even death—can dissolve the band of peace with which God’s love wraps his people. Dodd saw vv. 28-29 as integral to the preceding verses. In his interpretation,

24 Ibid., 238.
25 Ibid., n. 1.
26 Bultmann, Jesus, 194-219.
27 Ibid., 258.
28 Dodd, Interpretation, 149-150.
30 Ibid., 168.
31 Ibid., 172.
Dodd sees physical resurrection as code for spiritual realities which we enjoy today.\textsuperscript{32} Lazarus, for example, “is a symbol of the real resurrection by which a man passes from a merely physical existence, which is death, into the life which is life indeed.”\textsuperscript{33} Thus, Dodd does not see vv. 28-29 in an unrealized way. Unfortunately, he offers no explanation on how he established his controls for this allegorical interpretation. Without a presentation of these controls, allegorical interpretations lie fully in the realm of personal preference—not in the realm of theology.

**Conclusion**

Based on the preceding evaluation of John chapter five, it not without support to say that the biblical data of John speaks in clear terms of an unrealized eschatology. Through a historical, literary, and grammatical review of John 5:19-30, it was seen that the text as a unified whole incorporates the unrealized eschatology of vv. 28-29 as part of its argument.

Furthermore, it is only through either higher-critical methodology or through an allegorical hermeneutic wanting of controls that an unrealized eschatology may be removed from these texts. The higher-critical methodology used by Bultmann and Schnackenburg is arbitrary and destructive to the literary unity of the text, and is thus an unreliable foundation for building one’s interpretation.

The danger of Dodd’s approach, however, lies in his allegorizing of futurist texts. Such a hermeneutical method allows readings in which interpretation is ruled by the personal inclinations or theological systems of the commentator rather than on the historical, literary, and grammatical controls of the texts. Dodd’s arguments for interpreting 5:28 as allegorical are completely absent from his comments, leading the reader to believe that they are drawn entirely from his own theological system. The text itself speaks of the future resurrection, and there is little in the text to suggest that it is not meant to be taken as such.

As evangelical commentators, we must interpret all eschatological texts, no matter how unfriendly they may be toward our contemporary thought or fresh theology, with a historical-literary-grammatical hermeneutic. Only then can we be informed of what John is saying about eschatology.

\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., 149: “For John, this present enjoyment of eternal life has become the controlling and all-important conception.”

\textsuperscript{33} Ibid., 148.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


