

First Century Expectations

An often neglected subject is the expectations of first century Christians. Many believers were “eyewitnesses” to the events surrounding the ministry and crucifixion of the Lord. They underwent a period of persecution coupled with an exponential growth of the gospel, especially in the *Diaspora* of Asia Minor. In the meantime they experienced an inexorable breakdown of the Jewish nation state with increasing acts of “terrorism” and collaboration between the priesthood and imperial Rome. It is pertinent to ask what these Christians expected and if their expectations differed from their Jewish counterparts. However, first we must qualify our distinction as many “Christians” were also “Jews” and therefore both parties held the Old Testament in esteem.

The return of Jesus

“When they therefore were come together, they asked of him, saying, Lord, wilt thou at this time restore again the kingdom to Israel? And he said unto them, It is not for you to know the times or the seasons, which the Father hath put in his own power” (Acts 1:6-7).

Even a casual reading of the gospels demonstrates that first century Christians expected three things to occur:

1. The destruction of Jerusalem
2. The return of Christ
3. The establishment of the Kingdom

First century Christians expected these events to occur *quickly*, without any delay between the events and for them to happen *within their lifetime* (not sometime in the distant future). As we know, the first event (the destruction of Jerusalem) occurred within the lifetime of many first century Christians but the other events did not. The belief that the return of Jesus was imminent was widespread among the churches and was also held by the Apostles:

- ...for now salvation is nearer to us than when we believed. The night is almost gone, and the day is near. (Rom. 13:11-12, NASB)
- ...Do not seek a wife. (1 Cor. 7:27b)... This is what I mean...the appointed time has grown very short.... For the present form of this world is passing away. (vv. 29-31)
- ...we who are alive, who are left until the coming of ...the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep.... we shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed (1 Cor. 15:51b)
- Now these things ...were written for our instruction, upon whom the ends of the ages has come. (1Cor.10:11)
- ...it is already the hour for you to awaken from sleep; for now salvation is nearer to us than when we believed. The night is almost gone, and the day is at hand. (Rom.13:11,12)
-encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near. (Heb. 10:24-25)
- For yet in a very little while, He who is coming will come, and will not delay. (Heb.10:37)
- ...the coming of the Lord is at hand. ...the Judge is standing right at the door. (James 5:7-9)
- ...the Judge is standing right at the door. (James 5:9)
- The end of all things is at hand...(1Pet.4:7)
- For it is time for judgment to begin with the household of God... (1Pet.4:17)
- Children, it is the last hour... (1 John 2:18)
- The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave Him to show to His bond-servants, the things which must shortly take place... (Rev.1:1)
- ...for the time is near. (Rev.1:3)
- ... He is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see Him, even those who pierced Him...(Rev.1:7)
- I am coming quickly...(Rev.3:11)

- Because you have kept the word of My perseverance, I also will keep you from the hour of testing, that hour which is about to come upon the whole world, to test those who dwell upon the earth. (Rev.3:10)
- ...things which must shortly take place. (Rev.22:6)
- ...I am coming quickly. (Rev.22:7)
- ...Do not seal up the words of the prophecy of this book, for the time is near. (Rev.22:10)
- Behold, I am coming quickly.(Rev.22:12)
- Yes, I am coming quickly. (Rev.22:20)

Despite the admonition by Jesus that it was not for them to “know the times or the seasons” it is quite clear from the above texts (I have only quoted a few) that first century Christians saw themselves as living in the “end times” and the general expectation was for a first century return and establishment of the Kingdom. Even the disciple’s questions regarding the end of the age in the Olivet Prophecy are flexible and open to more than one interpretation.¹

Jewish Expectations

The expectations of first century Christians should be placed in the wider context of Jewish messianic expectations. This should not be surprising, as many Christians were Jews and both Christians and Jews sprouted from the same Old Testament belief system. Although many Jews refused Jesus as the Messiah they still held messianic expectations. There was a general understanding that the Messiah would establish His kingdom on earth near the first century B.C. or the first century A.D. The historical records reflect this belief. Josephus mentioned that it was found in the “sacred writings that about that time one from their country [Judaea] should become governor of the habitable earth” (Josephus, Wars, VI, 313). The Roman historians of the first century were also aware of the prophecy: “A firm belief had long prevailed through the East that it was destined for the empire of the world at that time to be given to someone who should go forth from Judaea”(Suetonius, Vespasian, iv). Tacitus also said: “The majority of the Jewish people were very impressed with the belief that it was contained in ancient writings of the priests that it would come to pass that at that very time, the East would renew its strength and they that should go forth from Judaea should be rulers of the world” (Tacitus, History, v. 13). Even the Roman Emperor Nero was advised by one or two of his court astrologers that it was prudent for him to move his seat of empire to Jerusalem because that city was then destined to become the capital city of the world (Suetonius, Nero, 40).

Why was a first century advent expected?

Why did both the Jews *and* Christians expect a first century advent? The Roman historian Tacitus says that, “it was contained in ancient writings of the priests” and this concurs with Josephus’ statement that it was found in the “sacred writings” an obvious reference to the Old Testament. The only prophecy that refers to the destruction of the Sanctuary and the coming of an anointed one (messiah) is the seventy weeks prophecy of Daniel. It is certainly not coincidental that when faced with questions concerning “the end” and the destruction of the Temple Jesus both alluded to and quoted Daniel in the Olivet Prophecy.² It is also not coincidental that Jesus specifically refers to the “son of man” of Daniel 7:13 when responding to the high priest; “Hereafter *shall ye see* the Son of man sitting on the right hand of power, and coming in the *clouds of heaven*” (Matt.26:64), a theme which Jesus repeats in his Revelation; “Behold, he

¹ See, P. Wyns, “The Olivet Discourse” in *The Christadelphian eJournal of Biblical Interpretation*,(eds., A. Perry, T. Gaston, P. Wyns, Willow Publications) Vol. 5. No. 3, 2011 online @ <http://www.christadelphian-ejbi.org/issues.htm#F19> (cited April 2014)

² Jesus never referred Daniel’s “Seventy” Prophecy to the crucifixion always to the destruction of the temple (and Jerusalem) and to the arrival of the kingdom.

cometh *with clouds*; and every eye shall see him” (Rev.1:7), with the added note of urgency, “things which must shortly come to pass” (Rev.1:1).

What went wrong?

Why was the Kingdom not established in the first century? Is there a precedent for God delaying or interrupting his promise?

“After the number of the days in which ye searched the land, *even* forty days, each day for a year, shall ye bear your iniquities, *even* forty years, and ye shall know my breach of promise” (Num.14:34).

The Hebrew for “breach” (תִּנְיָאָה) is translated as rejection (NKJ), displeasure (JPS) and breaking off (YLT) and most probably stems from an Akkadian root with the meaning turn back/away.³ The context is clear, “Surely they shall not see the land which I swore unto their fathers, neither shall any of them that provoked me see it” (v.23). Disobedience caused God to *delay* his promise (to that generation) they would die in the wilderness and would not enter the Kingdom.

The epistle to the Hebrews picks up on this theme and employs it as a warning to first century Christians; “Let us therefore fear, lest, a promise being left *us* of entering into his rest, any of you should seem to come short of it” (Heb.4:1) and, “So we see that they could not enter in because of unbelief” (Heb 3:19). It is not just that a particular individual would be refused entry into the kingdom because of disobedience, but disobedience by the whole congregation (the church and the nation) would cause the kingdom (his promise) to be delayed. “Where is the promise of his coming? The Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some men count slackness; but is longsuffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance”(2 Pet 3 vv.4,9). However, the warning stood that even tearful repentance would not change God’s mind if, like Esau, they “sold their birthright” (Heb.12:16). Peter remarks that turning back to Judaism (de-converting) is like a dog returning to eat its own vomit (2 Pet.2:22). So, if the nation and the church turned away/back God would turn/away back from his promise and the kingdom would be delayed. Divine punishment came upon *the church and the nation* because Judaism successfully orchestrated a deliberate campaign to corrupt the church and bring Jewish-Christians back into the embrace of the Mosaic dispensation. The only course of action to prevent this calamitous outcome and to avoid the disappearance of Christianity altogether was the destruction of the Mosaic system;

“See that ye refuse not him that speaketh. For if they escaped not who refused him that spake on earth, much more *shall not* we *escape*, if we turn away from him that *speaketh* from heaven: Whose voice then shook the earth: but now he hath promised, saying, Yet once more I shake not the earth only, but also heaven. And this *word*, Yet once more, signifieth the removing of those things that are shaken, as of things that are made, that those things which cannot be shaken may remain. Wherefore we receiving a kingdom which cannot be moved, let us have grace, whereby we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear: For our God *is* a consuming fire” (Heb.12:25-29)

Jesus informed his disciples that there would not even be enough time to preach in all the cities of Israel “till the Son of man be come” (Matt 10:23). The expectation was that the kingdom would arrive in the first century. However, we forget at our peril that even though God has foreknowledge he allows for the waywardness of human freewill. Who are we to limit the Holy One of Israel? God has more than one way to achieve his purpose and fulfil his prophecies. Let us suppose for one moment that the whole nation had converted and repented at the preaching of the apostles. Let us suppose that the high priest had ripped his garments and put ashes on his head and had appealed to Jesus as God’s appointed king

³ CAD N2:198-200 sub *nē’u* see NIDOTTE entry 9481

when the Roman armies began the destruction of the Sanctuary. Let us suppose that the whole nation appealed to God in genuine repentance at that point in time. Would not Jesus have returned to claim his throne and expel the Romans? If that had occurred (and it should have) then Daniel's 490 prophecy and Daniel's image would have been fulfilled in the first century.

Our problem is that we understand history and prophecy as deterministic and continuous when that is clearly not the case. God can interrupt (or speed up) his timetable at any point and has multiple ways of fulfilling his objectives. God can follow route (a) or route (b) or route (c) and still be true to his promises, and yet we may only see route (a). Moreover, God adjusts his plans according to human response.

Manipulating Prophecy

In Matt 18:22 Jesus instructed Peter to keep forgiving his brother, “*until seventy times seven*” (490 times) which is a direct reference to Daniel's “seventy” prophecy. In other words, to keep forgiving until “an end is made of sin, reconciliation is made for iniquity and everlasting righteousness is brought in” (Dan.9:24). So, keep forgiving your brother until the kingdom arrives, until that ultimate great Day of Atonement arrives that Daniel spoke of. During his ministry Jesus himself expected the kingdom sometime in the first century, however, only part of Daniel's prophecy was fulfilled (the destruction of the Sanctuary and removal of temple sacrifice on the altar). The Jews were unrepentant and continued to sacrifice even during the siege when people were dying of famine. God did not heed their sacrifice as he had already provided his own, which they had rejected.

Daniel's 490 Prophecy was necessitated because Daniel could not understand why the return from the seventy years of exile and the rebuilding of the temple was delayed. God responds by informing Daniel that the revelation of the true temple (Christ)⁴ and the true destination (not just return to the Promised Land but “everlasting righteousness”) was not just seventy years away but seventy times seventy years away. The 490 Prophecy itself constitutes a delay and is characterised by further delays (the 21 days of Daniel 10:13 representing the 21 years between Cyrus and Darius Hystaspis *who did* restore the temple). Moreover, men have always attempted to force or derail the divine timetable, we think here of the exiles who agitated for an early return or the Maccabees who rededicated the temple and established a dynasty (kingdom) exactly 420 years after the destruction of the first temple (6x70) and approximately 490 years after Daniel's captivity - no doubt they understood themselves as the legitimate fulfilment of Daniel's prophecy. In the first century the people attempted to crown Jesus king by force (John 6:15) and later Jesus remarked that, “And from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffereth violence, and the violent take it by force” (Matt.11:12). Even now “Christian-Zionists” want to restore the temple in order to force God's hand.

Divine Grace

God is able to turn human waywardness and disobedience into an opportunity for divine grace. Towards the end of his ministry Paul understood that Jesus would not return during his lifetime, nevertheless he saw the casting off of Israel as a time of opportunity for the gentiles. Before the final reconciliation of Israel the gentiles would be grafted into the hope. The “times of the gentiles” saw the expulsion of Israel and the vindication of *faithful* first century Christians. The interruption of the divine prophetic timetable would therefore result in the extension of universal salvation. This was indeed a great “mystery” to Paul (Rom 11:25) but this “mystery” is soon to be completed; “But in the days of the voice of the seventh angel, when he shall begin to sound, *the mystery of God should be finished*, as he hath declared to his servants the prophets” (Rev 10:7). This “mystery” is finished with the final prophetic witnessing to Israel which completes the last *half-week* (1260 days) of Daniel's prophecy (Rev.11:2).

⁴ For an explanation of Daniel's Prophecies and the delays incurred see the commentary, P. Wyns, God is Judge, (Biblaridion Media, 2011)

Conclusion

The divine timetable cannot be forced or manipulated by man (but God does hear the prayers of his saints). The “Seventy Sevens” prophecy of Daniel found a *partial fulfilment* in the first century with Christ “coming in judgement” but did not inaugurate the promised kingdom. Disobedience and unfaithfulness causes delay and frustration but also allows God to adjust his prophetic programme in a “mysterious” way that further extends grace. First century events form a “template” through which we can view the final consummation. God is not bound by our understanding of prophecy or by our misinterpretation as he can act in unexpected ways and still achieve his goals and be true to his promises and his prophecies.