

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Why Paul doesn't mention the 'age to come'

Jamie Davies

Trinity College, Bristol, UK

Corresponding author. Email: jamie.davies@trinitycollegebristol.ac.uk

Abstract

This essay examines the popular claim that the apostle Paul deploys an apocalyptic 'two-age' scheme in his eschatology, adapted from Jewish apocalyptic thought but reworked in an 'inaugurated' configuration in his theology as 'now and not yet'. This reading is challenged as representing an oversimplified and anachronistic reading of the Jewish apocalyptic literature, and in respect of its claim to be a Pauline innovation. Furthermore, it is a reading not adequately sensitive to the fact that Paul rarely (if ever) uses the phrase 'age to come'. The second section of the essay examines this Pauline evidence, and some of the language Paul uses instead of this phrase. Finally, the essay closes with a theological proposal for why Paul might do this, and makes some suggestions regarding Paul's view of time, the relationship between time and eternity, and possible ways this might be articulated once dogmatically located within his christology.

Keywords: apocalyptic; christology; eschatology; Paul; time

The usual interpretation and its problems

The view that Paul has a modified Jewish apocalyptic eschatology of 'two ages' has a good pedigree, going back at least to Albert Schweitzer. In the time between Jesus' resurrection and return, believers live in an intermingling of the two ages. This, Schweitzer argued, was the essential shape of Paul's eschatology, modifying the Jewish apocalypticism of his day.¹ It is practically axiomatic in Pauline studies to use some version of this 'inaugurated eschatology'; it is standard in dictionary definitions² and introductory textbooks, accompanied by timeline diagrams³ and the phrases 'now and not yet', or 'eschatological tension'.

For some, this 'two age' dualism signals that Paul's entire theology must be seen as apocalyptic. J. Louis Martyn called it 'a scheme fundamental to apocalyptic

¹A. Schweitzer, *The Mysticism of Paul the Apostle* (London: A&C Black, 1931), pp. 98–9, illustrated with references to *1 Enoch*, *Daniel*, and *4 Ezra*.

²The NT borrowed the doctrine of the two aeons from Jewish apocalyptic, in which we find the same expressions from the 1st century B.C. onwards.' Hermann Sasse, 'Αἰών, Αἰώνιος', in Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey W. Bromiley and Gerhard Friedrich (eds), *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1964–), p. 206.

³A classic example would be James Dunn's linear diagrams in *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1998), p. 464.

thought⁴ and developed his apocalyptic reading of Galatians with this conviction. Martinus de Boer insists that Paul's eschatology is apocalyptic because it has conceptual affinities with 'the eschatological dualism of the two ages, "this age" and the "age to come", which is the fundamental characteristic of all apocalyptic eschatology'.⁵

While it is recognised that the doctrine of the 'two ages' is widely found in second temple Jewish apocalyptic writings, the 'inaugurated' modification of this scheme is often considered a Christian innovation. Leander Keck, for example, has argued that the christological adaptation of the 'two age' eschatology creates 'an irreducible tension between the "already" and "not yet" which is generally absent from apocalyptic theology'.⁶ Such claims are not limited to apocalyptic readers of Paul and are often made in superlative terms. Oscar Cullmann described the tension created by the overlap of the ages 'the *new element* in the New Testament'⁷ and 'the silent presupposition that lies behind all that it says'.⁸

Paul is often identified as the chief innovator. For N. T. Wright, the inauguration of the age to come is 'Paul's specific contribution' and 'foundational to [his] entire worldview'.⁹ James Dunn, while noting that similar eschatological hopes were found elsewhere, insists that 'an eschatology split in this way between such a decisive "already" and yet still a "not yet" was a new departure' and 'the distinctive feature of Paul's theology'.¹⁰ Though there are various ways in which this is filled out, there is wide agreement that this is a uniquely Christian (if not uniquely Pauline) framework, adapting a relatively stable tradition.

However, this account has recently been challenged in various ways. First, the description of the apocalypses is accused of both *oversimplification* and *anachronism*. Oversimplification, because careful reading of these texts reveals that they use a range of temporal and eschatological frameworks, including the periodisation of history, stages of fulfilment, cyclical patterns of time, the categories of *Urzeit* and *Endzeit*, and sometimes combinations within the same text.¹¹ For some, this account of Pauline eschatology represents not only a lack of nuance but a sign of a worrying trend: caricaturing the Jewish apocalyptic tradition with simplistic dichotomies in order to cast Paul as the heroic theologian who transcends them.¹²

⁴J. Louis Martyn, *Galatians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), p. 98.

⁵M. De Boer, *The Defeat of Death: Apocalyptic Eschatology in 1 Corinthians 15 and Romans 5* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1988), p. 7. See further Giorgio Agamben, *The Time That Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006), p. 62.

⁶Leander Keck, 'Paul and Apocalyptic Theology', in *Christ's First Theologian: The Shape of Paul's Thought* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2015), p. 86.

⁷Oscar Cullmann, *Salvation in History* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), pp. 172.

⁸Oscar Cullmann, *Christ and Time* (London: SCM, 1951), pp. 145–6.

⁹N. T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God* (London: SPCK, 2013), pp. 476–7, 562.

¹⁰Dunn, *Theology of Paul the Apostle*, p. 465.

¹¹See Grant Macaskill, 'Eschatology', in D. Gurtner and L. Stuckenbruck (eds), *T&T Clark Encyclopedia of Second Temple Judaism* (London: T&T Clark, 2020), pp. 248–9.

¹²See e.g. M. Goff, 'The Mystery of God's Wisdom, the Parousia of a Messiah, and Visions of Heavenly Paradise', in Benjamin E. Reynolds and Loren T. Stuckenbruck (eds), *The Jewish Apocalyptic Tradition and the Shaping of New Testament Thought* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2017), pp. 175–6. One example illustrates the point. At one place in his account of Pauline apocalyptic theology, Leander Keck says that in the book of Daniel, 'the theme of two aeons was fundamental whether the phrasing itself appears or not' (Keck, *Christ's First Theologian*, p. 80). This is a remarkable conclusion for a text so clearly shaped by the periodisation of history, not the eschatological dualism of 'two ages'. Daniel's visions of four beasts in chapter

As to anachronism, specialists in the Jewish apocalyptic literature have asked whether the ‘two age’ scheme as such is actually found there at all, or whether it is a later rabbinic pattern. Certainly, the ‘two ages’ are found in a wide variety of texts, from the rabbinic corpus to the *Shepherd of Hermas*, the *Testament of Job*, the *Epistle of Barnabas* and *2 Clement*.¹³ It is thus problematic to deploy it as an unambiguous indicator of Jewish apocalyptic thought. In the footnotes of Pauline commentary¹⁴ one will sometimes find the recognition that the Hebrew phrases עולם הזה and עולם הבא are not really found before 70 CE,¹⁵ but more often than not this seems to be treated as if it were incidental to the claims being made for Paul. Even if possible examples such as *1 Enoch* 71:15 are emphasised, it is certainly not the case that we are dealing with a stable and commonly used eschatological framework that Paul takes ‘off the peg’ and tailors to his needs. ‘Apocalyptic eschatology’ is more complex than a simple eschatological dualism.¹⁶

Second, there are questions about the claim that inaugurated eschatology is a Pauline innovation. Loren Stuckenbruck has recently investigated this in detail and has argued, against the inherited wisdom of much Pauline scholarship, that ‘inaugurated eschatology’ itself is not a unique feature of Christian apocalyptic thought, but an idea already found in pre-Pauline Jewish apocalyptic tradition.¹⁷ In any given apocalypse one will find various ways in which realised and future elements intertwine.¹⁸ ‘Inauguration’, therefore, should not be viewed as a Pauline or even Christian invention but evidence of a certain degree of continuity. While he does not deny that something radically new happened with the arrival of early Christian theology, Stuckenbruck has made an important contribution to how that innovation should be understood. If he is correct, the regular descriptions of the ‘two ages’ in Jewish apocalyptic thought, with which Paul is then contrasted, require some nuance, at the very least. If ‘inauguration’ by itself is insufficient, what precisely is distinctive about Paul’s christological modification of the ‘two ages’ eschatology?

7, the ‘seventy weeks’ of chapter 9 and the statue and its interpretation in chapters 10 and 11 all work with an essentially periodised eschatology, not one of two ages. In the blessing in 2:20, the phrase ‘from age to age’ (Heb. וְעַד עַד לְעַד לְעַד; LXX εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα) is used, but the context clearly suggests the point is times and seasons rather than a dualism. The only other uses of עַד / αἰῶν are in blessings and eternity formulae (e.g. Dan 2:4, 28; 3:9; 4:3, 34; 7:14, 18, 27).

¹³E.g. mSanh. 10.1–4; Herm. 24.1–7 (combined here with a historical periodisation eschatology); 53.1–8; *T. Job* 4.6; *Ep. Barnabas* 15.8 (again a combined scheme); 2 Clem 6.3–5.

¹⁴E.g. Martyn, *Galatians*, p. 98; Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, p. 1059.

¹⁵Prior to 70 A.D. the attestation is limited and uncertain.’ Sasse, ‘Αἰὼν, Αἰῶνιός’, p. 206.

¹⁶It is possible, then, that at least part of the explanation for the absence of the ‘age to come’ in Paul’s letters is that this language is still in its infancy, Paul being something of an early adopter. If the framework had not yet settled into a fixed pattern, there’s no reason that Paul should be bound to use the second phrase of the pair. However, this hypothesis becomes more difficult to sustain once the evidence of the Synoptic Gospels is taken into account (Mark 10:30, Luke 18:30: τῷ αἰῶνι τῷ ἐρχομένῳ; Matt 12.32: ἐν τούτῳ τῷ αἰῶνι οὗτε ἐν τῷ μέλλοντι; see also μέλλοντος αἰῶνος in Heb 6.5). The phrase was clearly in wide enough circulation to be used without too much explanation as early as the composition of Mark. This is still a little later than Paul, but it is a pretty narrow historical window in which to operate.

¹⁷Loren Stuckenbruck, ‘Overlapping Ages at Qumran and “Apocalyptic” in Pauline Theology’, in J. S. Réy (ed.), *The Dead Sea Scrolls and Pauline Literature* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), pp. 309–26; and Stuckenbruck, ‘Posturing “Apocalyptic” in Pauline Theology: How Much Contrast to Jewish Tradition?’ in *The Myth of Rebellious Angels* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014), pp. 240–56. See also Macaskill, ‘Eschatology’, p. 249.

¹⁸Macaskill, ‘Eschatology’, pp. 248–9.

A third and final problem is that the phrase ‘age to come’, though widely considered an important feature of Pauline eschatology, never occurs in Paul. I will now examine this in more detail. Though this investigation could easily open up a whole swathe of texts pertinent to Pauline eschatology, my scope here will be much more modest and restricted to this particular linguistic phenomenon.

What Paul didn’t say

Paul does frequently use ‘the present age’ and equivalents.¹⁹ The expression ὁ αἰὼν οὗτος occurs five times in Romans and the Corinthian correspondence,²⁰ in which the expression ὁ κόσμος οὗτος is often close by in synonymous parallel.²¹ In Galatians we find the slightly expanded τοῦ αἰῶνος τοῦ ἐνεστώτος πονηροῦ,²² which Martyn’s apocalyptic reading of the letter highlights. Elsewhere, in the pastoral epistles the preferred equivalent is ὁ νῦν αἰὼν.²³

We do not, however, find the same frequency of usage when it comes to the contrasting phrase we might expect: the ‘age to come’. There are, in fact, no unambiguous examples of the phrase in Paul.²⁴ The one place we do find it is Ephesians 1:21, but this is problematic, not only because of the authorship question but also because Ephesians uses the language in ways that frustrate a simple ‘two age’ analysis. Here the plural ‘ages’ speak of *past* ages (Eph 3:9), not an eschatological dualism of present and future.²⁵ In one place the plural is even used to denote multiple ages *still to come* (τοῖς αἰῶσιν τοῖς ἐπερχομένοις, Eph 2:7). This appears more suggestive of historical periodisation than of eschatological dualism. Elsewhere in Paul, the plural usage of ‘ages’ is common, but most of these are in the benediction formula εἰς τοὺς αἰῶνας [τῶν αἰώνων], a Hebraism rendering עַדְלָמַד and denoting not a duality of ages but the notion of eternity.²⁶

This leaves us with 1 Corinthians 10:11, where Paul describes the saints as those εἰς οὓς τὰ τέλη τῶν αἰώνων κατήντηκεν (‘on whom the ends of the ages have met/come’).

¹⁹This section has much in common with an unpublished paper delivered by Ann Jervis at the 2018 meeting of the Society for New Testament Study in Athens titled ‘Did Paul Think in Terms of Two Ages?’ While the analysis of the Pauline evidence presented here is my own, I want to acknowledge, with gratitude, that I have been greatly helped in my thinking by correspondence with Ann, especially in our conversations about the theological questions raised, to which I turn in the third part of this essay (though I suspect at this point we part company in some respects). I eagerly anticipate her forthcoming monograph on Paul’s theology of time, but in the interim one might usefully consult her ‘Promise and Purpose in Romans 9.1–13: Toward Understanding Paul’s View of Time’, in T. D. Still (ed.), *God and Israel: Providence and Purpose in Romans 9–11* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2017), pp. 9–34.

²⁰Rom 12:2; 1 Cor 1:20; 2:6–8; 3:18; 2 Cor 4:4.

²¹1 Cor 1:20; 3:19; 5:10; 7:31.

²²Gal 1:4.

²³1 Tim 6:17; 2 Tim 4:10; Tit 2:12.

²⁴2 Cor 9:9 comes close with the phrase εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα, but this occurs in a quotation of Ps 111:9 and is usually (and I think rightly) translated ‘forever’. This reading is supported by the textual variant εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα τοῦ αἰῶνος, which brings the quotation in line with the LXX and suggests that this should be read as an eternity formula. Another contender is εἰς τὸ μέλλον in 1 Timothy 6:19, but the crucial term αἰὼν is conspicuous by its absence.

²⁵Eph 3:9 is also echoed by Col 1:26 and 1 Cor 2:7–10, where again the reference is to past ‘ages’, and the apocalyptic theme of mysteries hidden and revealed.

²⁶Rom 1:25; 9:5; 11:36; 16:27; 2 Cor 11:31; Gal 1:5; Phil 4:20; 1 Tim 1:17; 2 Tim 4:18 and Eph 3:21, where the phrase is the slightly modified εἰς πάσας τὰς γενεὰς τοῦ αἰῶνος τῶν αἰώνων.

This is the only place where a ‘two ages’ reading can reasonably be sustained,²⁷ but it requires taking τὰ τέλη to mean something like the ‘tail end’ of the present age and the ‘leading edge’ of the age to come, an analysis that is hard to support lexically or theologically.²⁸ Perhaps it is simpler to read it as an intensifying plural or even evidence of eschatological periodisation, the ‘ages’ being the epochs of history reaching their appointed ‘ends’. In addressing his contemporaries, for whom this was a live option, it would be strange for Paul not to make himself clearer if this was not his intended meaning, especially when the surrounding context describes a series of pivotal events in Israel’s history. In any case, this is an isolated and ambiguous piece of evidence, and it ought not to be the foundation for a Pauline eschatological dualism.

Sometimes Paul even appears to go out of his way to avoid saying the phrase ‘age to come’ where it might be more logical to use it. In 1 Corinthians 1:20 and 2:6–8, for example, the ‘wisdom of this age’ (σοφία τοῦ αἰῶνος τούτου) is contrasted not with the ‘wisdom of the age to come’, as one might expect, but with ‘God’s wisdom’ (θεοῦ σοφία). Mirror-reading Corinthian enthusiasm might well help explain why Paul would do this, but perhaps his reasons are more positive. In Galatians 4, in the Hagar and Sarah allegory, Paul contrasts the ‘present Jerusalem’ (ἡ νῦν Ἰερουσαλήμ) not with the ‘future Jerusalem’ or the ‘Jerusalem to come’ but, awkwardly, with the ‘Jerusalem above’ (ἡ ἄνω Ἰερουσαλήμ). This asymmetry suggests, to me at least, an avoidance of the straightforwardly temporal language of an inaugurated coming age.

Elsewhere, when Paul wants to contrast the present age with something, he deploys a range of alternatives including ‘new creation’²⁹ and the ‘kingdom of God’.³⁰ These are often read as paraphrases of the ‘age to come’, the missing piece of an assumed eschatological dualism. Indeed, it is remarkable how little the absence of the phrase has dented the enthusiasm for the ‘two age’ reading of Paul’s eschatology, particularly among apocalyptic readers of Paul. The argument is that, although the idea is never clearly stated by Paul, it is obviously implied in these alternative expressions,³¹ which are ‘surely other ways of speaking about the age or world to come’.³²

²⁷As has been suggested by some. See e.g. Agamben, *The Time that Remains*, p. 73; Alexandra Brown, in *The Cross and Human Transformation* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), p. 124, argues that Paul ‘presupposes the two ages’ in this passage. Martinus de Boer suggests that 1 Cor 10:11 ‘may be an allusion’ to eschatological dualism and offers such a reading in a brief parenthesis: *Paul, Theologian of God’s Apocalypse: Essays on Paul and Apocalyptic* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2020), p. 5. Richard Hays names it as one possible reading, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989), pp. 168–9, citing Johannes Weiss as an advocate. N. T. Wright proposes it before immediately accepting its problems in a footnote in *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, p. 552.

²⁸Lexically, I am not convinced that the word τέλος can be stretched to mean ‘beginning’ in this way. Theologically (and assuming ‘eternal life’ is anything like synonymous with ‘the age to come’), I am also not sure Paul would have said that eternity had a ‘leading edge’.

²⁹2 Cor 5:17; Gal 6:15.

³⁰Rom 14:17; 1 Cor 4:20; 6:9, 10; 15:24, 50; Gal 5:21; 1 Thess 2:12. Paul’s alternative expressions were helpfully explored in more detail by Jervis, ‘Did Paul Think?’

³¹To speak of the present age is obviously to imply that there is another age (or something like another age) and reflects Paul’s ‘assumption of eschatological dualism’ (Martyn, *Galatians*, p. 98). Martyn’s qualification of the first claim by adding ‘or something like another age’ is an important point that I will take up shortly.

³²De Boer, *Paul, Theologian of God’s Apocalypse*, pp. 5–6. See also p. 207, n. 34, where he suggests that it is ‘probable’ that these phrases are ‘other ways of speaking about the age to come (looked at from different angles)’.

It is not coincidental, I think, that most of these readings of Paul build on definitions of apocalyptic in which a ‘two age’ eschatological dualism is effectively the defining characteristic. As others have noted, this is a problematic feature of some ‘apocalyptic’ readings of Paul, which often rely on what many consider outdated analyses of apocalyptic thought.³³ Of course we must be aware of the word-concept fallacy, and it’s quite possible that Paul does indeed endorse the concept of the ‘age to come’ despite the absence of the phrase from his letters. But there is also the opposite danger of argument from silence: that what Paul is said to assume is actually not there at all. Given that the ‘two ages’ framework is problematic as a defining characteristic of first-century Jewish eschatology, and given how Paul seems to avoid the phrase, we should be wary of building too much on this. To be clear, I *do* think that Paul’s theology can be described as ‘apocalyptic’, but I do not consider it either necessary or wise to require the ‘silent presupposition’ of an expression Paul doesn’t use because it fits an assumed analysis of apocalyptic eschatology.³⁴

Having said all of that, we must still account for Paul’s clear and frequent use of ‘the present age’, and why he would use this phrase but avoid ‘the age to come’. An obvious option is that he never uses it because, reasoning backwards after Jesus’ resurrection, Paul realises that the ‘age to come’ is now present: the phrase is obsolete.³⁵ While this seems a compelling explanation, it is not clear that ‘eschatological inauguration’ by itself should result in the obsolescence of the phrase ‘age to come’. In two other places in the New Testament, Ephesians 1:21 (ἐν τῷ αἰῶνι τοῦτῳ ἀλλὰ καὶ ἐν τῷ μέλλοντι) and Hebrews 6:5 (μέλλοντος αἰῶνος), we find ‘age to come’ language in contexts discussing the resurrection of Jesus and present ‘inaugurated’ experience without any sense that the expression is obsolete.

Another option is that, since ‘eschatological inauguration’ is not unique to Paul, perhaps his eschatology is essentially continuous with his Jewish contemporaries. That is certainly possible, but in my view it does not account for the profound transformation that Paul’s theological claims entail. If Paul believed (as I think he did) that the God of Israel had come in Jesus Christ, who had died and had been raised, then this requires a radical modification of his eschatological thought. This is not an apologetic defence of ‘Paul’s genius’,³⁶ but simply taking seriously the significance of the resurrection of Jesus for his thinking. This is regularly cited as the reason for Paul’s inaugurated eschatology, the resurrection being the dawn of the age to come, but as yet I don’t think we have gone far enough in explaining why Paul doesn’t use that phrase.

³³Often Koch and Vielhauer are the sources for this. See Klaus Koch, *The Rediscovery of Apocalyptic: A Polemical Work on a Neglected Area of Biblical Studies and Its Damaging Effects on Theology and Philosophy* (London: SCM, 1972); and Phillip Vielhauer, ‘Introduction’, in Wilhelm Schneemelcher (ed.), *New Testament Apocrypha*, trans. R. M. Wilson (London, James Clarke: 1965).

³⁴Cullmann, *Christ and Time*, p. 145.

³⁵See Keck, *Christ’s First Theologian*, pp. 93, 106; de Boer, *Paul, Theologian of God’s Apocalypse*, pp. 5–6, 9, 207.

³⁶David Congdon has challenged the inaugurated eschatology position as an apologetic move. The combination of present and future eschatology into an ‘already but not yet’ scheme is, he claims, one of several ‘simplistic dismissals of the problem posed by early apocalyptic eschatology’ invented in the mid-twentieth century by conservative scholars, offering ‘an easy way out’ which has since become ‘immensely attractive for obvious reasons’ (*Rudolf Bultmann: A Companion to his Theology* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2015), pp. 10–11). Congdon cites Ladd and Wright for popularising this position. Wright has responded by arguing that inaugurated eschatology is not an invented apologetic move, nor is it a second-generation phenomenon, but is there in the earliest Pauline writings, and an innovative part of his thought (‘Hope Deferred? Against the Dogma of Delay’, *Early Christianity* 9 (2018), pp. 57, 64).

Something like the ‘age to come’

As noted above, Martyn has suggested that Paul’s eschatological language implies the idea of the ‘age to come’, or at least ‘something like another age’.³⁷ To account for what this ‘something’ might be, I will need to go beyond the limitations of philological analysis and offer a theological account of Paul’s view of time.³⁸ We enter, however, through the vestibule of one last comment on vocabulary.

It will not have escaped attention that I have not commented on the phrase ζῶν ἰδιῶνιος, imperfectly rendered ‘eternal life’.³⁹ In using this phrase, Paul appears comfortable with the language of a ‘future age’. He is consistent, however, in deploying it adjectivally and not as a substantive. Paul’s noun is ‘life’; its mode or quality is ‘aional’, ‘age-y’. This strict adjectival usage suggests that what matters to Paul is not the temporal but the *qualitative* distinction between the two ‘ages’. It is therefore insufficient to describe the inauguration of the ‘age to come’ in a way that might imply a mere advance in the timeline. Moreover, the phrase itself comes up short, since what Paul discerns in the resurrection of Jesus and the presence of the Spirit is not simply a linear overlap of ‘two ages’ but the presence of ‘God’s *kind* of time’ in ours. What Paul needs to express is not merely a new phase in time, or its infinite quantitative extension, but the infinite *qualitative* distinction between our kind of time and God’s.⁴⁰ Paul can use the phrase ‘present age’ well enough when speaking of our kind of time, but when it comes to God’s kind of time, he does not use the language of ‘age to come’, because the implied linear framework cannot carry the necessary qualitative freight. His eschatological vision cannot be expressed as the overlap of two horizontals, and so the phrase ‘age to come’ is inadequate. The current ‘inaugurated existence’ of the Christian is not merely ‘the presence of the future’ (Ladd), but the presence of ‘aional life’, God’s kind of time in fellowship with ours.

However, the bare abstraction ‘infinite qualitative distinction’ does not account for the specifically *christological* shape of Paul’s eschatology; one can reach this conclusion without Jesus. 2 *Enoch* 65, for example, describes how God created time and ‘divided it into times’ (v. 3), subdividing these into years, months, days and hours. This is the ‘kind of time’ assigned to creatures: countable time, time with ‘beginnings and endings’, an appropriate concession to sinful humanity (v. 4). In the final judgement all these times will be dissipated, time itself dissolved into a singularity with ‘neither years nor months nor days nor hours’ (v. 7). All countable, creaturely time is contrasted with the ‘great age’, the kind of time proper to God, the eternal life into which the righteous will enter.⁴¹ This ‘great age’ is so different in kind that all the measured ‘times’ of human history may as well be one age (v. 8).⁴²

Something more is needed, then, in accounting for Paul’s distinctive eschatology. Here it is customary for theological readers of Paul to use geometric metaphors, though most avoid a simple horizontal overlap. For the early Barth, God’s time touches ours as

³⁷Martyn, *Galatians*, p. 98.

³⁸I will in particular read the Pauline evidence with the account of God and time offered in Karl Barth’s *Church Dogmatics*, specifically I/2 §14 and II/1 §31.3.

³⁹Rom 2:7, 5:21, 6:22–3; Gal 6:8; 1 Tim 1:16, 6:12; Tit 1:2, 3:7.

⁴⁰Kierkegaard, as received by Barth in the second preface to his *Romans* commentary. Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Edwin C. Hoskyns (Oxford: OUP, 1968), p. 10.

⁴¹The addition of the word ‘life’ at the end of verse 8 is noted as a textual gloss, but this might also indicate an elucidation of the intended qualitative distinction.

⁴²Note also that we find here the combination of historical periodisation and ‘dualism’.

a tangent touches a circle, that is, without touching it.⁴³ In his later work, there is an adjustment, the vertical intersecting the horizontal.⁴⁴ For Martyn, the punctiliar ‘invades’ the linear.⁴⁵ For Agamben, it is the ‘Apelles’ cut’, a messianic singularity dividing the times.⁴⁶ But all of this risks becoming a discourse that deals in abstractions and not the life of God. Moreover, it tends to assume an *a priori* model of time and history in which revelation and history are essentially antithetical, perpendicular realities. Robert Jenson, critiquing Martyn’s use of ‘vertical’ and ‘horizontal’, has suggested that this characteristically late modern discourse is little more than ‘Platonism stripped to its geometry’.⁴⁷ It is far better, Jenson argues, to think of revelation embracing history, rather than the two standing in incommensurable relation.

Instead of relying on the abstractions of geometry, or even the abstraction of an infinite qualitative distinction, we should, I suggest, start with the doctrine of the incarnation.⁴⁸ It is, after all, where the New Testament starts.⁴⁹ For Paul, the revelation of Jesus Christ meant that, despite their qualitative difference, our time and God’s time have in fact met; they are ‘not in metaphysical antithesis but indissoluble relation’.⁵⁰ The nature of this relation is the proper concern not of spatio-temporal metaphysics but of christology, and it is here that the question of Paul and the ‘two ages’ should be dogmatically located. For Paul, to speak of Christ is already to speak of the coming ‘age’. The latter should not be separated from the former, for it is in Christ that there is new creation.

I want to finish now with three brief thoughts on what that might mean. First, in Paul’s understanding of God’s action in Christ, the divine life had genuinely touched time, and assumed it. To say that God became human is therefore to say that in Jesus Christ the creator of time becomes temporal: “The Word became flesh” also means “the Word became time”.⁵¹ Christ has a past and a future, and as such the chronology of past and future still matter to Paul. It is thus still appropriate (necessary,

⁴³Barth, *Epistle to the Romans*, p. 30.

⁴⁴Karl Barth, *The Theology of John Calvin*, trans. Geoffrey Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1995), p. 73; cf. Barth, *Church Dogmatics* [hereafter CD], 13 vols, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956–1974), IV/1, p. 643; in CD I/2, p. 50, Barth warns his readers about the problems with his earlier account.

⁴⁵This is found in much of Martyn’s work, but see e.g. J. Louis Martyn, ‘The Gospel Invades Philosophy’, in D. K. Harink (ed.), *Paul, Philosophy, and the Theopolitical Vision: Critical Engagements with Agamben, Badiou, Žižek, and Others* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2010), pp. 13–33.

⁴⁶Agamben, *The Time That Remains*, p. 64.

⁴⁷Robert W. Jenson, ‘On Dogmatic/Systematic Appropriation of Paul-According-to-Martyn’, in J. B. Davis and D. K. Harink (eds), *Apocalyptic and the Future of Theology: With and Beyond J. Louis Martyn* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2012), p. 160.

⁴⁸See S. G. Eastman, ‘Apocalypse and Incarnation’, in Davis and Harink, *Apocalyptic and the Future of Theology*, p. 165.

⁴⁹As a matter of fact there can be nothing but abstraction here unless we are really ready, in an honest investigation of truth, to start where the New Testament itself starts.’ Barth, CD II/1, pp. 57–8. Though Barth is sometimes fond of geometric metaphors (as noted above), he also criticises the description of eternity as a ‘mathematical point’, which may help us think about the problem of time but it cannot express the kind of time proper to God since it fails to capture God’s possession of *life* (CD II/1 p. 611; see also pp. 639–40, where he highlights the limitations of ‘the point or the line, the surface or the space’ and indeed of all geometric and abstract talk of eternity that does not speak of this living God and leads, however involuntarily, to secularisation).

⁵⁰Barth, *Theology of John Calvin*, p. 73.

⁵¹Barth, CD I/2, p. 50; see also CD II/1, pp. 616–17.

even)⁵² and not only as the creaturely mode of existence, to speak in linear chronological terms,⁵³ and in this sense even of *Heilsgeschichte*.⁵⁴ Measurable time is not merely a created and soon-to-be-dissolved concession to humankind so that we may know our finitude, as in 2 *Enoch* 65, but it has been taken up by God himself in the incarnation of Jesus. This is not so much *invasion* as *embrace*.⁵⁵ Paul may have found the 'age to come' inadequate for expressing this new reality, but he did not relegate all chronological language to obsolescence in the light of a punctiliar moment of revelation.

Second, Paul did not build his eschatology on a foundation of a generally accepted philosophy of time or phenomenon of 'history'. But nor does he begin again *ex nihilo* on Damascus Road. Prior to that encounter he already held the view that the scriptures were a witness to and expectation of the self-revelation of the God of Israel, and that a theological account of history was therefore required. That said, looking backward from the revelation of Jesus, Paul now knows what (or rather, whom) it is that the scriptures expected, and that his understanding of time cannot therefore remain unchanged. Because of the incarnation, in which there is fellowship of God's time and ours,⁵⁶ the language of 'two ages' has reached its breaking point, and all speech about past, present and future must be transformed. Time was not the given constant into which Paul had to fit the revelation of Jesus. It was now the other way around: the revelation of Jesus was the constant, and Paul's view of time had to change to fit this new reality.⁵⁷

Third, and finally, I think we can still speak of a Pauline eschatological dualism of *sorts*. We might call it an 'overlap', though the metaphor is surely now too weak. We can also speak of the 'now' and the 'not yet', but in a highly qualified sense. These phrases are not the expression of a *tension* created by a horizontal advance in the timeline, though that may be our creaturely mode of experiencing it.⁵⁸ Rather, they should indicate the presence of the eternal God in whom the 'now' and the 'not yet' do not compete in tension but coexist peacefully.⁵⁹ The עולם־הבא and αἰῶνες are times marked out in history by God, who possesses all ages, their ends and beginnings, without being limited by them.⁶⁰ These words, too, make some sense within this creaturely

⁵²Barth considered this truth, that God has temporality, to be of supreme importance. Without it, the Christian message dissolves into 'the comfortless content of some human monologue' and 'inarticulate mumbling' (*CD II/1*, p. 620).

⁵³As Paul does e.g. in Gal 4:4 and elsewhere.

⁵⁴The two possible senses of 'salvation history' are explored by Jenson, 'Dogmatic', p. 161.

⁵⁵Of course, there is a sense in which both metaphors are useful, provided they are properly framed. In respect of the anti-God powers of this age, the coming of Christ is an invasion. My point here, however, is that this does not mean that we should speak of Christ's advent in such invasive terms when speaking about time as a whole: there the better christological metaphor is one of embrace. The idea of eternity embracing time on all sides is taken from Barth, *CD II/1*, p. 623, who writes that time's extension is 'in eternity like a child is in the arms of its mother'.

⁵⁶'God's time for us' (*Gottes Zeit für uns*) as Barth puts it.

⁵⁷On this see Barth, *CD I/2*, p. 57.

⁵⁸For Paul, however, this creaturely mode of existence has also been transformed for the believer through union with Christ (2 Cor 5:17). In fellowship with Christ, the human kind of time is united to this divine mode of existence. This, I think, is why Paul frequently uses 'aionial life', 'new creation' and his other alternatives to the phrase 'age to come' in contexts where union with Christ is being described (e.g. 'new creation' 2 Cor 5:17; Rom. 6:4 / 'aionial life' Rom 5:21; 6:22–3; 1 Tim 1:16).

⁵⁹Barth, *CD II/1*, p. 612.

⁶⁰Barth, *CD II/1*, p. 610.

mode of existence. But for Paul, it is no longer possible to speak of an ‘age to come’, since what has happened is not merely the advance foretaste of another piece of marked-out time, but the gift of God’s kind of time to ours in the incarnation of Jesus.⁶¹

⁶¹Throughout this paper I have used the somewhat cumbersome phrase ‘the kind of time proper to God’ and have avoided the (apparently simpler) word ‘eternity’. It is not a word Paul uses, and this is, after all, a paper about words Paul doesn’t use. But if we were to use it in a manner coherent with Pauline theology, it would have to be redefined christologically. To speak of ‘eternity’ in the light of the revelation of Jesus cannot indicate timelessness or an eternal moment, but would necessarily include historical, ‘linear’ time. In the incarnation of Jesus Christ, God has assumed this creaturely mode of temporal existence into the divine life (Barth, *CD* II/1, §31, p. 617). The eternity that now makes sense to Paul is the eternity of the God revealed in Jesus, in whom God’s kind of time and ours have met. I have been greatly helped in thinking this matter by Ann Jervis, who pushed back against the language of ‘eternity’ in our early correspondence.