

Biblical constant: «eschatology»

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1. Starting from its etymology

«By Christian eschatology we mean Christian theology to the extent in which, starting from what has come (namely, from the experiences that humanity, and particularly Jesus Christ, have had of God) it reflects upon what is to come, upon what is new and definitive and, starting from there, tries to interpret the present and to mediate impulses for present-day **action***.¹ It is within this interpretative framework that we should examine the profound and present meaning that eschatology has with regard to theological reflection and the missionary praxis of the Church. If the time inaugurated by Jesus is an eschatological, qualitatively new time, it is important to understand the horizon of meaning that eschatology has as a dimension that indicates the workshop of salvation in everyday life. In fact, it is not by chance that the renewal of eschatological reflection is motivated by three factors. The first, regarding questions about man's destiny in his individuality, but also in his quality as a creature in relation to the world, to others and to God. The second focuses on a reassessment of apocalyptic literature no longer understood as thought projected in a highly imaginative manner towards the next world, but as a real *theology of history*, in which one tries to understand the meaning of evil and its excess regarding any explanation, in relation to God's self-communication. The third, corresponding to a historical-salvific re-reading of creation that extends interest to an ecological interpretation of life and the world, to which the human person's destiny is related. At the same time, we must stress that eschatological reflection maintains a radical tension that cannot bring any rapid solution to the questions and doubts that assail the existences of men and women. Therefore, it is necessary to maintain one decisive point: the *eschaton* is the God who comes (*adventus*); it is the word that enters our present with an unforeseeable otherness that calls us to listen carefully to the signs of the times. Human knowledge is possible only if this future is anticipated in the present, as in the Jesus Christ event. It is within this framework that the proclamation of the Gospel can open the search to a journey that never tires of experiencing the gift of liberation capable of building a civilisation of love. Following these premises, it is not superfluous to recall the particularity of the meaning of the term eschatology, whose definition requires a more structured approach. To say that eschatology is the discourse about the *eschaton* means asking what its specific object is since the adjective *eschatos* indicates extreme, last, which does not envisage anything further. As G. Kittel,² points out, the word *eschatos*, in its various forms (adjective, noun, adverb) appears several times in the New Testament, with a meaning linked to experience of the definitiveness of salvation in Jesus Christ, within the present-future tension. Thus the word eschatology has different accentuations that reveal the whole series of meanings that it contains from the classic acceptance of eschatology as a discourse about the last realities; to the meaning of a discourse about the future of the history God opened to man; from eschatology as a discourse about the last times, to theological reflection about the principle-hope that individuates the qualifying fact in the central event of Christ. It is within the framework of these indications that the biblical interpretation on the peculiarity of eschatology in its apocalyptic and prophetic elements must be individuated.

2. The promise, interpretative category

It is not easy to trace Old Testament eschatology,³ although there is consensus on the indication of G. von Rad who insists on the dimension of expectation, to such a point that before perceiving its contents it is necessary to perceive the dynamism that runs through the entire Old Testament. H. Gross' explanation might be useful. He maintains that «we do not find ourselves before a complete, differentiated, detailed escha-tological construction from the very beginning of the salvific work: hope of salvation spreads starting from a small number of facts, from some "crystallisation nucleuses" of the subsequent discourse to a fully divulged eschatology, so that the entire evolutionary process of Old

Testament salvific expectation, even in the most advanced doctrine of the two ages of the world, must always be borne in mind when individual issues are concerned.⁴ Therefore, if any interpretation is possible, it is the category of the *promise*, as J. Moltmann suggests. Indeed, it characterises the religiosity of Israel, for the fact that at the beginning of its history there is Yahweh's promise, a *not yet* that always indicates the journey that must be undertaken. Consequently in its history Israel can commemorate God's interventions in its favour. But what must be emphasised is that the promise speaks of a *difference*, something more, when it reveals the distance and the incongruence of history from the promise. «The God who was perceived in his promises remains above any fulfilment one can experience, because in every fulfilment the promise, and what it contains, is still not perfectly congruous with reality and therefore it remains permanently surplus to it».⁵ In short it is in relation to the promised word that one can understand the unity between historical action and the word that Yahweh fulfils for his people. Action is word and word is action. Thus it is possible to trace a history of the promise as stages of a process that slowly builds the history of Israel. From this angle, the very history of Israel is an interpretation and formulation of the eschatological openness of its identity,⁶ in a constant attempt to give answers to its anxiety for its own destiny and to its dissatisfaction for a threatened and fragile existence. Asking what is the horizon of the overall sense that God offers to its interpretation and discernment means reckoning with what has been accomplished, but also with the evidence of an unfinished journey that calls Israel to an authentic and radical conversion. Consequently it is not surprising that the *Torah* is the sign of a future that the promise opens, entrusting it to the ability to realise its contents. «The commandments are not more rigid norms than the promises, but they accompany the promise, giving impulse to history and they change along the way that throughout the centuries leads to fulfilment. They are not in any way abstract norms or ideal rules that exist eternally and reflect their image on time, but they are a real anticipation of the historical perspectives offered to particular persons by the historical fact of the covenant. Therefore the commandments have an orientation towards the future, no less than the promises».⁷

3. Apocalyptic in the Old Testament and non-canonical apocalypses

It is, however, in the apocalyptic that the promise assumes a universal dimension, above all because it covers one of the most delicate phases of the history of Israel and of its particular place in the plan of revelation history. Regardless of how difficult it may be to define its meaning, apocalyptic refers in the broadest sense to the concept of revelation, but as a technical term it indicates three levels of meaning: «1. a literary style, that of "apocalypses"; 2. a movement, a religious current; 3. a group of ideas, in some way a theology that can be found also in different literary styles*».⁸ However what must be underlined is that apocalyptic represents a decisive stage in the history of the promise, a stage that connects the Old and the New Testament. According to some experts, the apocalyptic is one of the most tragic historical periods in the history of Israel, when the people experience a disastrous history, always near to its end. Not even by turning back to worship does it seem to preserve its hope that the promise is not a tremendous illusion. Consequently movements of rebellion and protest arose within Judaism, disposed to show the inexistence of fidelity to a distant and indifferent God. Apocalyptic, biblical and non-biblical literature bears witness to this period, since it is the response of faith that the people gave before the embarrassing history of negativity. In this sense, it is not possible to understand the apocalyptic books «outside the religious, political and economic circumstances of the time, nor can one study this age without these books, whose hopes and fears reflect the faith of the chosen people*».⁹ Undoubtedly the book of *Daniel* (composed in 160 B.C.) is the perfect example of the apocalypse in the Old Testament. The literary style is allegorical, typical of the *rebus* that involves enigmatic drawings. Its object is universal history and its principle goal is the kingdom that will never end (*Dan* 3:34; 6:27; 7:14). Its coming encompasses the incomprehensible and traumatic vicissitudes of peoples. But everything is «counted, weighed and divided*», and God's saints must reckon with inevitable and unspeakable suffering, just like the Son of man. Above all the second part is of an apocalyptic nature and it assumes a paradigmatic importance for understanding the meaning of apocalyptic literature. Chapters 7 to 12 show that the second part of the book could be linked to Hasidæan circles which, according to *Mac* 2:42 are men full of zeal for the law. In *Daniel* 12:3 we read: «Those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever». The centrality of the wise is a fundamental element for understanding that *Daniel* announces the coming of an eschatological kingdom associated with the Son of man, within the drama

of a story that shows the struggles that oppose kingdoms (cf. *Dan* 8:12). But this drama will have only one time: «it will last until the end of days comes when the eschatological kingdom, which will be exercised by the saints, that is, by the chosen people to whom it has been entrusted, will be established mysteriously and immediately».¹⁰ In this perspective the symbol of the Son of man denotes the holy people in opposition to animals which symbolise kingdoms, but it has the narrative task of leading its reader to the extreme limit in which history borders on transcendence. A fundamental element of the book of the prophet Ezekiel, older than the book of Daniel, is the conviction of the possibility of knowing better who the Lord is. The book gives a great deal of space to an «*anticipated description of the last times, first dramatic and then triumphant for good*», and the salvation announced owes much to the concept of the *new covenant* prophesied by Jeremiah. Finally «Isaiah's Apocalypse* (ch. 24-27), generally considered Hellenistic (4th or 3rd century B.C.) deserves to be mentioned, where the word mystery is present as well as awareness of new meanings, which until that time has been hidden. But there are also declarations about the afterlife of a very rare nature in old Israel (26:19). The whole thing is close to a rereading of the night of the Passover (26:20) and God's archetypal victory over the evil dragon. Against the background of this *leit-motif*, we find the non-canonical apocalyptic literature, important for understanding the passage between the Old and the New Testament, starting from the important book of Enoch, which in reality is a *corpus* of revelations from different eras attributed to the biblical Enoch. In fact, one can speak of a text γ with five sections: the *Book of the Watchers* (chs. 1-36) contains the story of the fall of the angels, to explain the origin of evil. In their union with the children of men, they show them how to prepare philtres and spells as well as the science of metals and astrology. From these unions giants were born who killed animals and human beings. God's intervention was brought about by the cry of men. The *Book of Parables* (chs. 37-71) narrates three parables. The first speaks of the just, of angels and astronomical secrets (chs. 38-44). The second is a revelation on the messianic judgement of the just and of sinners (chs. 45-47). The third contains teaching on the everlasting happiness of the chosen ones (chs. 58-69). The figures of the Son of man and of the Chosen One appear. The title Son of man is enriched by a rereading of the texts on the Servant of Yahweh and the sapiential texts. The *Book of Astronomical Writings* (chs. 78-82) is a treatise of astronomy. The *Book of Dream Visions* (chs. 83-90) «is a rereading of the history of the chosen people starting from the creation with recourse to the bestiary».¹² The author is convinced of the imminence of the eschatological judgement. The *Apocalypse of Weeks* (chs. 91 and 93) divides the history of the world into ten weeks. Judgement will take place in the last week and revenge will be taken together with the angels. The book of Enoch is meant to strengthen the faith of the just as they await, the Messiah, at the same time it affirms the resurrection and immortality of the soul.

An important text concerns the *Qumran community* which sought a path of perfection, in everything that was revealed, knowing that it was living in the last generation. The qumranic dualism divides the world between the kingdom of evil and the future world from which evil will be eliminated. In this sense, expectation of the Messiah is an integral part of the community's expectations, oriented to the New Jerusalem. Indicative of all this is the text of the *Rule of War*, that is, of the war of the children of light against the children of darkness. It describes the clash that will occur when the children of light return from exile. War will be waged according to the tactical rules applied by pagans and according to the rules of wars written in the Law. Since the cosmic powers of light and darkness are involved, war requires observance of the Torah. The author of the *Rule of Warrants* to answer crucial questions, such as the time fixed for retribution, the question about the compatibility of the tactical principles of war with the biblical laws. But what is determinative is the idea of a holy war that aims to exterminate the real enemy, evil.

Another interesting text is *4 Esdras*, which narrates the visions that Esdras is supposed to have had in Babylonia in the thirtieth year after the fall of Jerusalem in 557 B.C. The underlying theme of the book lies in the question that Esdras puts to God about the reason for Israel's suffering and the prosperity of the wicked. A witness to the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 B.C., the question assumes a decisive importance, since the national catastrophe challenged everything, reopening the painful question of the origin of evil. Most likely, it is innate in human nature and it is transmitted through descent. If man cannot understand the mysteries of the world and of life, all the more so he cannot understand those related to eternity, which will be solved only in the next world. But beside these questions there is the problem of the happiness of the just and the punishment of those who do evil. If the author is concerned with the fate of sinners, it is because of his uncertainty about his own salvation, as well as the fact that he knows that the chosen ones are few compared to the many created. God is the creator of two worlds (cf. *Esdras* 7:50): this world whose ways are narrow and impassable and the future world promised to the just, but closed to the hope of the wicked.

The *Syriac Apocalypse* or *2 Baruch* deserves a special mention, for the fact that it refers to the capture of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple. The Apocalypse is presented in the same way as the book of Daniel. But there is an element that characterises its narration: the irruption of the messianic kingdom, which overcomes this world of suffering and opens to the heavenly period of the resurrection. Messianism is mentioned, as F. Manns points out, in three passages that do not concur: «The fertility of Palestine in the days of the Messiah and its victory over the Romans characterise the messianic times, a prelude to the world to come. The Messiah is identified with the Servant in 70:9. The resurrection has a determinative place in eschatology: it will be universal and will inaugurate the new world where the just will be rewarded and the wicked punished».¹³ Now, wanting to summarise the themes of apocalyptic literature, the scholar K. Koch¹⁴ individuates some elements that unite the texts linked to the Old Testament ambient. Firstly, expectation of the establishment of the next world, which follows the end marked by a cosmic catastrophe. The symbol of fire indicates the destruction that will allow stones to speak. Secondly, he emphasises the division of worldly time into several periods, which go from the creation to the end of the world, according to a decision already foreseen beforehand. The course of events is explained by the intervention of angels and spirits, and the final age will coincide with the first age. Thirdly, he affirms the visibility of God's kingdom on earth, with the presence of an intermediary between God and humankind, as the Son of man. Finally, the final state will be one of glory. Now however wonderful some non-canonical apocalypses may be, they show too much wisdom and are well informed about the end, the middle and the beginning of time. Instead, the canonical apocalypses have a different merit for two conditions that have made them possible: «the careful integration of wisdom, of Israel's specific revelation, avoiding however the dangers of gnosis, and in return, the radical confrontation of wisdom with the foolishness of the martyrdom of the just; preparation, in other words, for the wisdom-foolishness of the cross».¹⁵

4. Towards the New Testament

The brief presentation of some key texts of apocalyptic literature allows us to perceive the horizon of meanings that opens reflection on the value of the apocalyptic writings in salvation history. Israel knows it must see its own present as a decisive phase in the perspective of correspondence or otherwise to the covenant with God. Although marked by infidelity, Israel's existence is called to make a decision before the *kairos* of the irruption of a different time: that of the promise and election, a time that is hidden behind the veils of a conflictual, inexplicable and difficult history. And yet, the conviction that the end is close, that the last, and therefore decisive times are close, is clearly expressed in awareness that history in its totality is now under the judgement of Yahweh. This means that for apocalyptic literature history is conceived as universal, even though Israel maintains its privileged role as an anticipatory sign. Every - often catastrophic - event of its history ready for a global renewal is individuated with precision (cf. *Dan* 12:1), until the appearance of that mysterious figure who would start a decisive fight with God (cf. *Ezek* 38-39). Despite appearances God remains the lord of events, a reason that nourishes the hope that, despite everything, history is marked by God's fidelity, by his concern against any sterile empirical realism that prefers not to look away from the reality of the fact. Consequently it is not surprising that apocalyptic literature opens the heart to optimism, because it knows how to invent a different way of looking at reality and at the world, suggesting *an ethics of resistance* against every attempt at despair and surrender to facts. From this perspective, one can see how apocalyptic literature may reveal an attitude that goes beyond a particular historical moment of Israel, almost to show, in the certainty of God's intervention, an essential characteristic of the search for a different life in the quality of its dimensions. It follows that the apocalyptic is the background in which the newness of the proclamation of the New Testament is inserted with its decisive interpretation of God's promise. «Christians believe that the New Testament is the continuation and fulfillment of the Old, but the historical relationship between the two is not always clear, at least with regard to some doctrines. Apocalyptic literature helps us to fill this gap, documenting for us significant religious developments, particularly of an eschatological and messianic nature, which took place during the animated years of the inter-testamentary peri-od».¹⁶ It must also be said that in the reinterpretation that the New Testament makes of the Old Testament, reference to entirely new revelations emerges, although on ancient material, and to the future fate of the just and the wicked, the afterlife and the resurrection. «Thus in the New Testament, the real meaning of Scripture appeared like an unexpectedly revealed secret».¹⁷ The main use of Old Testament Scriptures is oriented towards the passion of Christ,

placed in relationship, at the same time, with the upheavals of the last times and with the passion of the community of disciples.

5. Messianic and eschatological context of the Kingdom

It is obvious that the Jesus Christ event is at the basis of the faith of men and women who have seen and understood that God's definitive yes to the promise (cf. 2 *Cor* 1:20) lies in this event. This, however, leads to the question about what the specificity of the eschatological promise is compared to the previous ones or, to use an expression of H. U. von Balthasar, what the value of the *apocalyptic provocation* is. It is the Judaic religious-historical context that helps to decipher the singularity of Jesus,¹⁸ even if Judaism (or Judaisms)¹⁹ in Jesus' time seemed complex and divided, marked by two elements: the first, with a Deuteronomic vision of history as the fulfilment of the prophetic word; the second, encompassing the category of the Kingdom of God, whose rule would characterise the final stage of the history of Israel. Within this perspective, eschatological expectation was linked to particular figures who, it was thought, would be helpful when the last times arrived. Very briefly they can be traced back to three: a) the figure of the Messiah; b) the Prophet who was to come; c) the Son of man. In particular this symbolic figure (cf. *Dan 1*) is interpreted by apocalyptic literature as an individual pre-existent figure (as we read in 4 Esdras and in the *Book of Parables* of the Ethiopian Enoch), who will defeat the enemies on the last day. At the same time, the *Book of Parables* (chs. 48 and 52) presents a messianic, earthly Son of man, even though this seems to contradict the tradition that attributes heavenly characteristics to this figure. The eschatological newness of the kingdom announced by Jesus of Nazareth, as Mk 1:15 describes it, must be understood based on these premises. According to this it is the programmatic synthesis of his preaching, within the context of the preaching of John the Baptist that acts as the *anthropological premise*. Following the interpretation of H. Merklein,²⁰ Mk 1:15 introduces a threefold meaning, which is justified on the basis of different references. First of all, expectation of the kingdom as expectation of salvation in reference to contemporary Judaism seems to hypothesise that the conclusion of this expectation is finite, even without further explanations. But this hypothesis does not seem very likely, because for Jesus Israel's expectation of salvation is out of place, in the sense that it can only await judgement. In the same way, if the term of reference is short-term expectation, Mk 1:15 announces that, as John the Baptist points out, what Israel awaits is the kingdom, that is to say, salvation, and not judgement. In short, only the concrete situation of Israel remains, as John had announced and as Jesus had confirmed: the judgement hanging over a people that can no longer await salvation, without a newness that surpasses the present situation and overcomes it. And yet Mk 1:15 announces an *unthinkable reversal* with regard to its situation, because God no longer takes the past into account, but he turns again to Israel with a new eschatological election able to make the people an eschatological community of salvation. In other words, if Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom comes within the apocalyptic dimension of expectation of a new and decisive time,²¹ it does, however, propose a qualitative newness, because it testifies to God's creative fidelity beyond all expectations. We are in the presence of a change that modifies the *standard* of hope of those who listened to Jesus' words, as is shown by the parables that renew the ideas of the apocalyptic kingdom. What H. Weder writes may be indicative: «In early Judaism the kingdom of God is a purely eschatological concept, related exclusively to the hereafter. It indicates the sovereignty of God who puts an end to the world and introduces a new era: sovereignty that the believer can accept as of now through his profession of faith in the Torah and in the one God, but whose realization remains something that concerns God alone. The hereafter of the *basileia* is expressed in the apocalyptic texts *a& futurity*; in them first place is given to the drastic separation between this world and the future world of God, who will put an end to it. Instead, when in Jesus' parables the *basileia* is placed metaphorically in relation to the narrated *world*, the literal meaning of this term is surpassed, since the insuperable hereafter of God's kingdom is changed into *closeness to the world*, and to the world in its worldliness». ²² This is why we are struck by the insistence on the present and on the immanence of the end of times. The closeness-presence of the Kingdom is a distinctive constant of the Gospel,²³ not even eliminated by the subsequent wording of the evangelical texts, despite the symptoms of a crisis and a denial present in the difficulties at the beginning of the Church's mission. Even after the paschal events, it was opportune, if not necessary, to recall a message that had not in any way lost its value and meaning. The logic of the promise seems to coincide with the presence of the Kingdom, as if the time of God's self-communication had reached its destination. In other words, it is as if the future, the called-for future, were already at work in the

present time, even if the newness of the proclamation did not produce those effects that were hoped possible. Resistance to and refusal of the active presence of the Kingdom at the moment of its coming in history does not eliminate its presence, nor does it weaken its claim; rather, the deferment and postponement encountered in the incredulity and difficulty of accepting this message mean that freedom is a condition for perceiving the significance of the Kingdom in the present. The ability to see and listen to the scandalous announcement of the Gospel would be the first effect of the salvific and liberating action of the Kingdom, which restores all its value, although contingent and fragmentary, to the present in its punctuality. The instant is open to a further depth, without sterile withdrawals or useless Utopias. But this indicates that freedom is refused in the present and the dynamics of liberation comes from the instant of the decision, which Jesus constantly recalls showing that the Kingdom is coming. It is on this level that there is a radical differentiation between history and the end of history: «Man does not attain salvation on his own; he does not win it at the end of a series of reincarnations, nor by rediscovering the fundamental cosmic harmony. He finds it by accepting it, but by accepting it actively, because right now it involves sharing the Spirit of this kingdoms²⁴ Nevertheless one clarification is appropriate. Although not emphasising the apocalyptic horizon, some experts point out how Jesus' interpretation is characterised by a clear prophetic intentionality, which is centred on a correspondence between present, past and future. His death is an unsurpassable criterion for individuating the meaning and truth of his message that scandalises, because it involves solidarity with the least and the marginalised. This is what H. Kiing says: «Like the great prophets, not even Jesus wants to work with new laws or with a traditional self-redeemed, salvation-assured piety and theology; with clear knowledge of the ominous situation he announces to the guilty, destined to die, who can save themselves only through a radical faith, a great conversion and a new obedience to the only God».²⁵

6. Apocalyptic in the New Testament

The presence of apocalyptic texts is limited in the New Testament, with the exception, with due distinction, of the book of the Apocalypse. Mention should be made of the apocalypses in the Synoptic Gospels (*Mk* 13:1-37; *Mt* 24:1-44; *Lk* 21:5-36), which are centred around the schema end of time/end of times; *1 Thess* 4:13-15; 5:1-11, which is based on the invitation to be watchful and to look carefully at events; *2 Thess* 2:1-12, whose basic motive is the obvious mystery of wickedness which is «already» (v. 7) at work, but is still restrained; *1 Cor* 15:20-58, where there is an advance description of the resurrection of the dead as the outcome of the final battle; and some parts' of the Second Letter of St Peter. In this sense the eschatological discourse that Mark's Gospel (13:1-37) presents as Jesus' longest discourse is indicative. Beyond some exegetical questions, the apocalyptic style runs through Jesus' words which intend to give a correct interpretation to historical events and nourish hope in the journey towards the future. The presence of evil in the world and in history, such as war, violence, oppression, cataclysms, raises crucial questions. And yet, the guidance that Jesus offers (cf. *Mk* 13:28-37) is not some information about the end and the signs of the times, but a call to responsibility and watchful vigilance. This excludes both apocalyptic fanaticism, modelled on an imaginary calendar of the world and of history, and an escape from the world that loses the objective of a historical project on a human scale. Before the crisis that blocks the life of believers and of the community, it is not necessary to resort to mythical conceptions of history, but to a *decision* that may temper apocalyptic impatience with evangelical prophecy. Not even the persecutions and betrayals that sever emotional bonds and harm community coexistence can lead to discouragement. Perseverance (*Mk* 13:13b) is nourished by the event of the resurrection, as the explosion of the kingdom of freedom and justice and the destination of all human history.

But undoubtedly it is the Apocalypse that has a unique place in the Christian canon, a work of Christian prophecy. «The continuity it maintains with the Old Testament prophecy is intentional and particularly profound, as can be seen when one compares it with the other great work of proto-Christian prophecy that has come down to us, known as *The Shepherd of Erma*, a popular book in the early Church, although it was not accepted in the canon».²⁶ The book individuates the unity of the Old Testament prophecy in the hope of the coming of God's universal kingdom, which will be realised in Jesus, with his life, death and resurrection. Before the vicissitudes of small Christian groups inserted in hostile environments, seized by the normal temptation to withdraw into themselves and to shirk their obligation in the building of a better society, the Apocalypse has prophetic boldness in nourishing hope of a different way of looking at political and cultural reality. In this sense, the book unites the apocalyptic

genre with a prophetic view, which in its discernment of a senseless history marked by conflict, invites Churches to be a significant presence, despite the fact that Christianity was seen to be at variance with Eastern religions and with the entire pagan conception of the world. But, above all, criticism of Christian communities was focussed on their rejection of the absolutist claims of the Roman imperial ideology. Within these coordinates, prophecy encourages a courageous and frank testimony, becoming a style of life that goes beyond individual contexts. Consequently the book uses a universal language to describe the power, dominion and adoration of the beast as well as the mission and witness of the Church. In particular the Apocalypse has in common with many New Testament documents, *immanent expectation*. John's prophecy reveals «what is now to take place very soon» (1:1; cf. 22:10: «the time is close»). For three times, in the conclusion, Jesus himself promises: «I am coming soon» (22:7; 12:20). And yet, the eschatological delay seems to have pre-eminence over the imminent expectation, where the cry «until when?» shows that the logic of the delay seems to contradict God's plan; or, perhaps, it indicates a patience of different times, a *pedagogy* that does not spurn the suffering of the just which, according to the apocalyptic tradition, requires God's immediate intervention and his sovereignty. The book's intention-ality, however, is to recognise that the end of history has a unique relationship with the whole of history. «It does not represent the last historical event, which immediately follows the penultimate, but it is the point where the truth of the whole of history is manifested, and it is divine judgment on the value and meaning of the whole of history. In this sense the early Christians' immanent expectation was a way of living in the light of what in God's proposal was the final content of history».

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7. The mission of the Church: eschatological practice and apocalyptic goal

In the perspective that has emerged from apocalyptic literature and, in particular, from the interpretations offered by the book of the Apocalypse, one can perceive a decisive fact: eschatology, in its prophetic quality, is a valuable pointer for understanding the meaning of mission in its dimension as an *essential and permanent event* of the Church.

Firstly, one of the tasks that the book of the Apocalypse indicates consists in purifying and renewing the Christian imagination in its dialogical-critical dimension. Within the ambit of the ways in which a dominant culture organises life and the world, the evangelization of culture is invited to expose the ideological constructions of those who think they can build the world with the logic of power, discrimination and one-way globalisation. In this case mission cannot but be *counter-cultural*, critical with regard to structures or ideals that enclose the world, life and history in a single dimension.

A second aspect is the attention the Apocalypse has for God's truth, whose provocation challenges the nihilistic logics of a life withdrawn into itself and concerned with a well-being that does not inconvenience the individual and his needs excessively. Being *alternative believing communities* means being signs of a view of the human person and of life capable of opposing oppression, injustice and discrimination. It is not by chance that real worship of God is a force of resistance to the idolatry of military and political power (the beast) and to the ideology of the economic prosperity (Babylonia) of some over many. Here we see the possibility of an alternative future (the new creation and the New Jerusalem) which missionary praxis must increase. The coming of the kingdom, according to the messianic perspective of Jesus, the Christ, relativises structures, particularly the structures of sin, which justify injustice and oppression. The Christological peculiarity of salvation history lies in eschatological practice understood as the practice of liberation, whose perception points to evil and real suffering in history and in society. Where the painful experience of exploitation and dehumanisation processes are social constants, the Church's mission must be addressed with its saving message to men and women who are fighting for a dignified life in particular political, social, economic and religious situations. Every struggle against alienation and ideological egoism is already a saving work that weakens sinful logic. «Human progress, or, to avoid this neutral expression, human liberation and the growth of the Kingdom are directed towards the full communion of men with God and with one another. They have the same objective but they do not follow parallel or even convergent paths. The growth of the Kingdom is a process that occurs historically *in* liberation, since it signifies greater human fulfilment, the condition for a new society, but it is not exhausted in it; being realised in liberating historical facts, it denounces their limits and their ambiguities, it announces their full completion and effectively leads them to full communion*.²⁸ The Apocalypse, in accord with the entire Christian proclamation, starts from the 'perspective of the *victims of history*, from those who bear witness to the senselessness of a witness that is not interwoven with the apocalyptic recollection of suffering. The mystery of wickedness

and suffering that runs through modern history seems to be administered in a Utopian manner or as the residue of a past ever ready to be forgotten and surpassed. The removal of innocent evil and of the suffering of millions of men and women clashes with the *apocalyptic memory* of suffering that the Church's mission continues to confirm as a place of authentic and courageous reflection. All too often there is the real or illusory conviction that the future belongs only to those who can stand out as winners, promoters of progress, champions of a global culture, free from impediments. «The memory of others' suffering certainly remains a fragile category at a time when people still believe they can love with the shield of amnesia against the sufferings and misdeeds that burst at all times into their lives: the other day Auschwitz, yesterday Bosnia and Rwanda, today Kosovo, and tomorrow? Certainly this forgetfulness is not without consequences. Didn't Auschwitz perhaps dig a profound ditch of shame, from the metaphysical and moral point of view, among men, didn't it profoundly wound the bond of solidarity that exists among everything that bears a human face?».²⁹ For this *the preferen-*

tial option for the poor is something more than a simple movement of affectivity or piety.³⁰ It is an inescapable *missionary methodology*, which shows how the principle of hope, the authentic driving force of history, lies in indicating and anticipating the messianic «day of the Lord». «Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth... And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more..." And the one who was seated on the throne said, "See, I am making all things new"» (*Apoc* 21:1.3-5). Based on these presuppositions, Christianity cannot be reduced to a sectarian group, tempted by the possibility of withdrawing from the world, leaving it to its own logic. On the contrary, Christians' participation in the coming of the kingdom is an essential condition of the believer's and the Church's identity. If one omitted this function, one would run the risk of invalidating the quality of the Christian event, whose function in public life is to indicate an *ethos* that fosters authentic humanity and a religiosity of compassion and sharing. This implies dialogical ability and intercultural humility, in the conviction, however, that the principles of freedom and justice are inviolable. This makes the Church's mission even more necessary since she does not exist for herself, but to contribute to the coming of the kingdom in its liberating and salvific universality. This is an objective that indicates the quality or otherwise of missionary practice. «Although this is certainly a Judaic apocalyptic perspective on the Christian salvific event, it necessarily acts as a counterweight to a kind of fulfilled eschatology that stresses the spiritual nature of God's kingdom to the point of forgetting the unredeemed nature of the world. The future eschatology of the Apocalypse serves to keep the Church oriented to God's world and to the future that God reserves for the world».³¹ But the eschatological dimension of Christianity can and must adopt that typical prophetic criticism with regard to ideologies that, both on a political level and on a cultural and religious level, seem to take no interest in the search for a more just world attentive to those who have no rights. We should not be surprised that this view, typical of biblical-Christian apocalyptic literature, requires from the witness of ecclesial communities the courage and boldness to oppose the powers that shirk responsibility and critical prophecy. This is clearly seen in the Apocalypse, in the realistic situation of Christians in the Roman empire of the first century. The coming of the kingdom of justice and peace does not depend on authorities or powers, but on the history of resistance that Christians, in the name of him who is the Alpha and the Omega, can offer as the logic of a culture of love that does not yield to the illusions of force.³²

Finally, one of the greatest responsibilities of mission is to continue to bring salvation for every man and woman, irreversibly founded on Jesus Christ, but in need of the *diakonia* of ecclesial communities. Falling into apathy and into the fatalism of a reality that seems to resist every change means softening the *apocalyptic goad* of hope that the paschal mystery has inserted in the paths of human and cosmic history. Hope gives rise to social attitudes and practices that are opposed to individual and institutional egoisms. In it, capacities for compassion, openness to a universal solidarity, criticism of a time that prefers other processes of emancipation that at times clash with the affirmation of liberty at the service of all, find energy and reasons. From this perspective, eschatology and mission are in creative tension, and not alternatively, because they express the very foundation of the Church's apostolicity as a symbolic prefiguration of the reconciliation of all things at the end of time.³³ «The People of God is a people established by God's summons, signifying the unity of an eschatological destiny, the kingdom. The condition of this people is the dignity and liberty of God's children, therefore all having equal rights. It is the Church, although all those who are not members of visible Churches are not excluded from it».³⁴ Consequently it is necessary to keep the right relationship between the *already* of the gospel

of liberation and the *not yet* of the gospel of salvation, because salvation history is not a separate story from the story of everyday life and its struggles. No Christian can take no interest in historical facts, distracted by the penultimate through a particular affection for what is ultimate. Only he sees them in a different perspective which can overcome paradoxes, delays, gaps and discontinuities, in evangelical sobriety and frankness. Reference to the experience of the early Church may be useful, which, although believing in the resurrection and awaiting the «day of the Lord» (*1 Cor 5:5; 2 Pet 3:3-10*), had to reckon with the unexpected of the delay in the *parousia*. In post-paschal Christian existence together with the eschatological enthusiasm of being considered the fulfilment of the salvific promise, in virtue of the newness of the resurrection, there is a kind of historical relaxation, a risky relativisation of the obligation to be leaven in the dough of culture and society, as the community of Corinth shows. It is true, Paul rewords the proclamation of the resurrection and gives a new meaning to expectation of the *parousia* (cf. *1 Cor 7:29*); but this does not entirely exclude the risk of not taking seriously the «not yet» of salvation that necessitates other attitudes. From this angle, Luke's perspective³⁵ as a later translation than Paul's, in recalling that the time of the Church is a consistent and determinative -albeit intermediate - time, indicates the need for concrete concern, addressed to life's issues, despite the delay of the end. The history of ecclesial communities was not always attentive to this eschatological reserve which makes them a sign and anticipation of God's kingdom. The temptation to put the end within particular horizons has reduced the prophetic dimension of the Christian witness and disperses the freshness of evangelization. On the other hand, assuming eschatological responsibility for history means living mission as an ever new interpretation of that *original apocalyptic anxiety* that made the early Christian communities the sign of a *different humanity*, capable of changing the destinies of human coexistence.

«The transcendent message of God's certain triumph gives us the distance and sobriety that are necessary with this world, as well as the reasons for undertaking the transformation of the *status quo* [...]. We must never overestimate our abilities; nonetheless, we can have confidence in the direction in which history is moving [...]. We distinguish between hope in what is final and perfect on the one hand, and hope in what is penultimate and approximate on the other. We draw this distinction reluctantly, with suffering, and at the same time with realism. We know that our mission belongs - like the Church - only to this age, not to the future age. Let us carry it out with hope».³⁶

NOTES

¹ VORGRIMLER H., *Hoffnung auf Vollendung. Aufriss der Eschatologie*, Herder, Freiburg 1980, 13. For an overall picture cf. E. SCOGNAMIGLIO, «Ecco, io faccio nuove tutte le cose»: *avvento di Dio, futuro dell'uomo e destino del mondo*, EMP, Padova 2002.

² KITTEL G., «éscatos», in *Grande Lessico del Nuovo Testamento*, III, Paideia, Brescia 1967, 995-1000.

³ Cf. the concise picture by DINGERMAN E., *L'amuncio della cadudta di questo mondo e dei misteri delta fine. Gli inizi dell'apocalittica nell'A.T.», in SCHREINER J. (ed.), *Intwduzione letteraria e leologica dell'Antico Testamento*, Edizioni Paoline, Cinisello Balsamo 19874, 539-558.

⁴ GROSS H., «Lineamenti dell'eschatologia dell'Antico Testamento e del primo giudaismo», in *Mysterium Salutis*, XI, Queri-niana, Brescia 1978, 192.

⁵ MOLTMANN J., *Teologia della speranza. Ricerche sui fondamenti e sulle implicazioni di una escatologia cristiana*, Queri-niana, Brescia 1976", 105.

⁶ Cf. BOVATI P., «La missione nella religione dell'antico Israele», in *Ricerche Storico Bibliche* 1 (1990) 2544.

⁷ MOLTMANN J., *Teologia della speranza*, 123.

⁸ NITROLA A., *Trattato di escatologia 1 Spunti per un pensare escatologico*, San Paolo, Cinisello Balsamo 2001, 351-352.

⁹ RUSSEL D. S., *L'apocalittica giudaica (100 a.C. - 100 d.C)*, Paideia, Brescia 1991, 34.

¹⁰ MANNS E., *L'Apocalisse e apocalissi*, in BOSETTI E.-COLACRAI A. (eds.), *Apokalypsis. Percorsi nell'Apocalisse in onore di Ugo Vanni*, Cittadella Editrice, Assisi 2005, 23.

¹¹ BEAUCHAMP P., *Stili di compimento. Lo Spirito e la lettura nelle Scritture*, Cittadella Editrice, Assisi, 2007, 76.

¹² MANNS F., *Apocalisse e apocalissi*, 26.

¹³ MANNS F., *Apocalisse e apocalissi*, 42.

¹⁴ KOCH K., *The Rediscovery of Apocalyptic, a polemical work on neglected area of biblical studies and its damaging effects on theology and philosophy*, SCM Pres, London 1972.

¹⁵ BEAUCHAMP P., *Stili di compimento*, 86.

- 16 RUSSEL D. S., *L'apocalittica giudaica*, 25.
- 17 BEAUCHAMP P., *Stili di compimento*, 66.
- 18 Cf. the study by FUSCO V., «*Apocalittica ed escatologia del Nuovo Testamento: tendenze odierne della ricerca*», in ASSOCIAZIONE TEOLOGICA ITALIANA, *L'escatologia contempo-ranea*, ed. by CANOBBIO G.-FINI M., EMP, Padova 1995, 41-80.
- 19 Cf. BOCCACCINI G., «*Messianismo giudaico-messiani-smc cristiano: continuita e discontinuita**», in BATTAGLIA V.-DOTOLO C. (eds.), *Gesù Cristo, Figlio di Dio e Signore*, EDB, Bologna 2004, 75-97.
- 20 MERKLEIN H., *La signoria di Dio neU'aimuncio di Gesii*, Paideia, Brescia 1994, 66.
- 21 To understand the merit of the continuity-discontinuity, newness and completion relationship, see BARE ELLIS E., *L'Antico Testamento nel primo cristianesimo*, Paideia, Brescia 1999. 136-137: «Jesus, the apostles and the New Testament prophets seem for various aspects in agreement with apocalyptic Judaism: 1. they see history as being divided into two times, that is, this world or age and the future age, identifying God's kingdom with the latter; 2. they believe they are living in the *last days* that precede the end; 3. they announce God's final redemption as *salvation in history*, namely, the redemption of matter in time».
- 22 WEDER H., *Metafore del regno. Le parabo/e di Gesù: ricostruzione e interpretazione*, Paideia Brescia 1991, 98.
- 23 See CONZELMANN H., *Teologia del Nuovo Testamento*, Paideia, Brescia 1991. 95-102; MARSCH W.-D., *Futuro*, Queriniana, Brescia 1972, 115-150. In this connection, MEIER J. P.. *Un ebreo marginale. Ripensare il Gesù storico 2. Mentore, messaggio e miracoli*, Queriniana, Brescia 2002, 586-592, although indicating caution in the exact relationship between the present Kingdom and the future Kingdom, considers that the juxtaposition of future and present can be attributed to Jesus' preaching, as well as to the paradoxical and mysterious nature of the Kingdom. A useful reference is found in MALINA B. J., *Scienze sodali e ricer-ca sul Gesù storico*, in STEGEMANN W.-MALINA B. J.-THEISSEN G. (eds.), *Il nuovo Gesù storico*, Paideia, Brescia 2006, 23-24: «Thus if they were to apply the current criteria of authenticity to Jesus' proclamation of an immanent [...] kingdom of God, the relevant criteria would be embarrassment (there was no such theocracy) incongruity (the behaviour urgently insisted upon in Matthew and Luke is for groups of fictitious kinship not for a theocracy), multiple statements (all the synoptic Gospels witness to this, but strangely not Paul) and coherence (Jesus was crucified since he was a political agitator)*».
- 24 VALADIER P., *La Chiesa chiamata in giudizio. Cattolicesimo e società moderna*, Queriniana, Brescia 1989, 114.
- 25 KÛNG H., *Vita eterna?*, Mondadori, Milano 1983, 123.
- 26 BAUCKHAM R., *La teologia dell'Apocalisse*, Paideia, Brescia 1994, 170. The apocalypse of *The Shepherd of Erina*, date-able according to some between 140 and 155, according to others towards the end of the 1st century, has as its central nucleus the announcement that God gives people a second opportunity to repent of their sins, after the one given by baptism. In fact, in early Christendom to cancel serious sins committed after baptism was considered impossible (*Heb 6:4-8:1 In 3:6*). For a more complete picture cf. NORELLI E., *Il passaggio da I al II secolo*, in PENNA R. (ed.), *Le origini del cristianesimo. Una guida*, Carocci, Roma 2004, 179-231.
- 27 BAUCKHAM K., *La teologia dell'Apocalisse*, 186.
- 28 GUTIERREZ G., *Teologia della liberazione. Prospettive*, Queriniana, Brescia 1972, 172.
- 29 METZ J. B., «*Dio. Contro il mito dell'eternità del tempo. Considerazioni iniziali*», in RAINER PETERS T.-URBAN C. (eds.), *La provocations del discorso su Dio*, Queriniana, Brescia 2005, 60-61.
- 30 A profound affirmation is the one by PIERIS A., *Christ beyond Dogma. Doing Christology in the Contest of the Religions and the Poor*, in *Louvain Studies* 25 (2000) 220: «Outside God's covenant with the poor there is no salvation*».
- 31 BAUCKHAM R., *La teologia dell'Apocalisse*, 190.
- 32 I feel it is useful to recall what BAUCKHAM R. writes in *La teologia dell'Apocalisse*, 192: «An important contribution of the Apocalypse to New Testament theology consists in clearly placing the central New Testament theme of salvation in Christ within the entire biblical-theological context of the Creator's plan for all his creation. This is a perspective that needs to be rediscovered today*».
- 33 Cf. ZIZIOULAS J., *L'etrc ecclesial*, Labor et Fides, Geneve 1981, 136-170; RASPER W., *Teologia e Chiesa*, Queriniana, Brescia 1989, 284-301.
- 34 DUQUOC C., *Chiese pmvvisorie. Saggio di ecclesiologia eaanenica*, Queriniana, Brescia 1985, 57.
- 35 Cf. CONZELMANN H., *// centra del tempo. La teologia di Luca*, Piemme, Casale Monferrato 1996, 15-20.
- 36 BOSCH D. J., *La trasformaaone della missione. Mutamen-ti di paradigma in missiologia*, Queriniana, Brescia 2000, 704.

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