

ST. PAUL'S ESCHATOLOGICAL TEACHINGS

A- What is Eschatology? B- Biblical Eschatology C- Paul's Eschatology D- Eschatology in Chaldean Liturgy

A- WHAT IS ESCHATOLOGY?

1- Introduction of Eschatology

Eschatology is the knowledge of the things that will happen at the end of times. It is a branch of dogmatic theology that studies the things that conclude our history and the history of the world, everything that has to do with life after death and final stage of the world. "It is about the end of history (or of the world in its present state), the resurrection of the dead, the last judgment, and related matters." (*Encyclopedia Britannica*). The eschatological problem – known in its dramatic aspect – comes from the same, proper nature of our knowledge that is unlimited, and looks to reach everything, but runs into the barrier of death which interrupts any exploration of what exists later. We want to know what will exist later, this is the eschatological issue.

This issue is taboo in the current culture: some say it is a false issue, or an issue that cannot be solved, or an issue that is not worth even to be suggested or discussed. Since we are human beings, we cannot dismiss it, or ignore it at all, and whoever says that he/she is not interested must be insincere!

We basically want to know what is there after that part of our adventure that is experimental or predictable: in a word, we want to know what our destiny is – if that is possible – and the destiny of the humanity. Although we are passing away, nevertheless, we still have curiosity to know where we are going.

Pope Benedict XVI, in introducing his book *Eschatology, Death and Eternal Life* (1977), says that eschatology was that part of theology that was taught at the end of dogmatic theology programs. Later (citing from Balthasar), it was called the "Storm Zone" of contemporary theology, and today it is dominating the whole theological atmosphere.

2- Eschatology in the Early Cultures: the Epic of Gilgamesh

Before Judeo-Christianity, some cultures believed in eternal life. Many of the myths of these cultures, especially the Greek, are about the struggle between gods and men, looking for eternity or stealing it by force, etc. In our Mesopotamian culture we have the oldest epic in the history of humanity, the "**Epic of Gilgamesh.**" The story is about the king of Uruk "Gil-ga-mesh" (2700 BC):

'A tyrannical and selfish king of Uruk (in southern Mesopotamia), he was born from an earthly father and divine mother, half man and half god. Because of his human half, he felt he would never be immortal! Gilgamesh was not loved by the people of Uruk, especially because of his bad policy of sleeping with every bride in his kingdom, the first night, before she encounters her groom! The people invoked the gods to free them from such injustice. "Enkidu": one of the goddesses heard the voice of the people and sent a strong creature to fight Gilgamesh. He was a rural man, whose body was covered of hair, living with the animals in the woods, and who used to eat the herbs. He was another figure contrary of the king's figure. After encountering "Enkidu" and fighting with him, nobody died but the king won, and both became friends, against the will of gods. But Gilgamesh's personality changes from that moment. Later, they decide to fight against the unjust will of the gods. Finally, Gilgamesh refuses to marry the god Ishtar (the goddess of love), so the gods send sickness upon his friend to break his heart. After Enkidu's death, Gilgamesh started looking for the "eternal life." Fearing death, he starts a journey seeking a cure or magic medicine that maintains the body from corruption and brings youth back. On his journey, he encounters a wise woman that is the owner of an inn, she prophesies for him that it is useless for him to look for a cure, because he is a mortal person. Not listening to the lady, he continues his journey, and decides to find the unique man who won eternal life. "Utnapishtim" (a similar figure to Noah of the OT) a man who won eternity from the gods because he was the only survivor with his family, of the great flood. After finding Gilgamesh a very stubborn man, they send him to pick the magic herb that gives eternity. Finally, Gilgamesh finds the advised drug in a magic flower, but a snake steals it from him. Then he comes back home defeated, recognizing the power of death over human beings. But Gilgamesh now is a just ruler; and he decides to build a historic fence around Uruk to leave a permanent and good remembrance of him after he dies, better than any cure.'

Almost 5000 years ago, people of Mesopotamia wrote a wonderful piece of human art and theology, expressing their worry about the life to come. Gilgamesh represents every human being. Seeking for earthly things: power, wealth, desire, fame... (like the 3 temptations of Jesus, Mt 4:1-11). His life changes, after seeing the death of his best friend "Enkidu" in front of his own eyes. Gilgamesh then decides to start looking for something that will stay or that will never vanish or fade away; that is, eternal life. This attempt reflects the eschatological dimension in the Mesopotamian thinking, to start thinking about the things to come, the end of everything, and the end of our own life.

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## B- BIBLICAL ESCHATOLOGY

### 1- Eschatology in the OT:

**a- Announcing the "Day of the Lord:"** it looks like Israel was expecting a glorious interference from Yahweh on their side. In Amos we find the people waiting for the "day of light." From the 8<sup>th</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> century BC, we find the prophetic line consistent about this same idea of describing the "Day of the Lord" as a day of Glory.

It is a "close" day, when Yahweh will cry out to start the war. It is a day of clouds and revenge, when the heavens shall be rolled up like a scroll, and the earth shake, and the world turn to ruins, and people will live in frightening isolation as in the days of Gomorrah, or as if the world is lost in a desert. People will be scared and start hiding from the terror and confusion, and even become blind, their hearts will tremble, till they become unable to stand on their feet. It is the general destruction, the judgment, the distinguishing, the purifying, and the end.

Because this description comes after the Exile, it was referring to the last day, but it really meant to be in the first level a description and reflection of historic events.

This way we understand why the day when Jerusalem was destroyed was called "the Day of the Lord." We should understand that behind each biblical text we can find a historic background and experience. Because of Yahweh's interference in the history of Israel, the last started acknowledging God's victorious support against their enemies and his destruction of them: (he stopped the sun Jos 10: 12-14, orders the clouds to serve Jgs 5:4-5, and the thunder 1 Sm 7:10, or hurling great stones from the sky Jos 10:11).

Because of these heroic battles, Israel started forming an idea about the "Day of the Lord" affirming through these images that "Yahweh" is the Lord of history.

**b- Waiting for the Last Day:** "Yahweh" is leading history to its end. Announcing the "Day of Yahweh" for Israel will reach the whole world. This day will come not today, but at the end of times, when this world will be over. The prophets went against what people thought of "Yahweh" staying always with them no matter what they do. That day will be a victorious day for Israel, but for only for its remnant:

*Woe to those who yearn for the day of the LORD! What will this day of the LORD mean for you? Darkness and not light! As if a man went to flee from a lion, and a bear should meet him; Or as if on entering his house he were to rest his hand against the wall, and a snake should bite him. Will not the day of the LORD be darkness and not light, gloom without any brightness? (Amos 5: 18-20)*

*Therefore, hear the word of the LORD, you arrogant, who rule this people in Jerusalem: Because you say, "We have made a covenant with death, and with the nether world we have made a pact; When the overwhelming scourge passes, it will not reach us; For we have made lies our refuge, and in falsehood we have found a hiding place," Therefore, thus says the Lord GOD: See, I am laying a stone in Zion, a stone that has been tested, A precious cornerstone as a sure foundation; he who puts his faith in it shall not be shaken. (Isaiah 28: 14-16)*

*Hear, O peoples, all of you, give heed, O earth, and all that fills you! Let the Lord GOD be witness against you, the Lord from his holy temple! For see, the LORD comes forth from his place, he descends and treads upon the heights of the earth. (Micah 1: 2-3) and (Jeremiah 4).*

With Zephaniah (650 BC) that "Day" enlarged to cover not only Israel but also the adversary gentiles (Zephaniah 2: 4-15), and that will become a reason for their conversion and the renewal of Israel (3: 9-18) :

*"For then I will change and purify the lips of the peoples, That they all may call upon the name of the LORD, to serve him with one accord; From beyond the rivers of Ethiopia and as far as the recesses of the North, they shall bring me offerings. On that day You need not be ashamed of all your deeds, your rebellious actions against me; For then will I remove from your midst the proud*

*braggarts, And you shall no longer exalt yourself on my holy mountain. But I will leave as a remnant in your midst a people humble and lowly, Who shall take refuge in the name of the LORD; the remnant of Israel. They shall do no wrong and speak no lies; Nor shall there be found in their mouths a deceitful tongue; They shall pasture and couch their flocks with none to disturb them. Shout for joy, O daughter Zion! sing joyfully, O Israel! Be glad and exult with all your heart, O daughter Jerusalem! The LORD has removed the judgment against you, he has turned away your enemies; The King of Israel, the LORD, is in your midst, you have no further misfortune to fear. On that day, it shall be said to Jerusalem: Fear not, O Zion, be not discouraged! The LORD, your God, is in your midst, a mighty savior; He will rejoice over you with gladness, and renew you in his love, He will sing joyfully because of you, as one sings at festivals. I will remove disaster from among you, so that none may recount your disgrace.”*

With the exile in Babylon, the subject of “the Day” comes again with more intensity as a “day of judgment” for gentiles and “victory” for the remnant of Israel. This way the “Day of Yahweh” expands for the gentiles too, and delays the end of times. Starting from Ezekiel this day became a note to the “destruction” “*An end is coming the end is coming upon you! See it coming! The dimax has come for you who dwell in the land! The time has come, near is the day: a time of consternation, not of rejoicing.*” (Ezekiel 7: 6-7)

With Daniel this day will be “the end of the world” (Daniel 9: 26, 11: 27, 12: 13): “*After the sixty-two weeks an anointed shall be cut down when he does not possess the city; And the people of a leader who will come shall destroy the sanctuary. Then the end shall come like a torrent; until the end there shall be war, the desolation that is decreed.*”

The image of Yahweh’s wars against Israel’s enemies becomes stronger, because of the cosmic image of God’s original victory over the beasts and the emptiness. Thus, Yahweh will destroy all the alliance against Jerusalem, and they will admit he is the judge of the whole universe. All people will go away, the peoples and their gods will be destroyed, the “Day of Yahweh” will mark a final victory of God over his enemies. The Psalms of the kingdom will transfer this “hope” to “prayer,” by invoking the “God of revenge” (Ps 94), and announcing the “reign of God” (Ps 93, 96-99).

After the conquest of Palestine by the Roman general Pompey the Great in 63 BC, the Jews longed for a descendant of the line of David, king of Israel and Judah “Messiah”, who would break the Roman yoke, establish the empire of the Jews, and rule as a righteous king over the subject nations. This desire ultimately led to the rebellion in AD 66-70 that brought about the destruction of Jerusalem!

## **2- Eschatology in the New Testament:**

With the coming of Jesus Christ, time takes on a new dimension that we see in the variety of terms used referring to the day of:

“Visitation” (1 Pt 2:12) “*Maintain good conduct among the Gentiles, so that if they speak of you as evildoers, they may observe your good works and glorify God on the day of visitation.*”

“Wrath” (Rom 2:5) “*By your stubbornness and impenitent heart, you are storing up wrath for yourself for the day of wrath and revelation of the just judgment of God,*”

“Judgment” (2 Pt 2:9) “*then the Lord knows how to rescue the devout from trial and to keep the unrighteous under punishment for the day of judgment,*”

“That Day” (Mt 7:22) “*Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name? Did we not drive out demons in your name? Did we not do mighty deeds in your name?,'*”

“Day of the Lord” (1 Thes 5:2) “*For you yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief at night,*” and (2 Thes 2:2) “*not to be shaken out of your minds suddenly, or to be alarmed either by a "spirit," or by an oral statement, or by a letter allegedly from us to the effect that the day of the Lord is at hand,*”

“Day of the Lord Jesus” (1 Thes 1:8) “*For from you the word of the Lord has sounded forth not only in Macedonia and (in) Achaia, but in every place your faith in God has gone forth, so that we have no need to say anything,*”

“Day of Christ” (Phil 1:6-10) “*6 I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work in you will continue to complete it until the day of Christ Jesus. 7 It is right that I should think this way about all of you, because I hold you in my heart, you who are all partners with me in grace, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel. 8 For God is my witness, how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus. 9 And this is my prayer: that your love may increase ever more and more in knowledge and every kind of perception, 10 to discern what is of value, so that you may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ,*”

“Day of Son of Man” (Lk 17:24-26) *“24 For just as lightning flashes and lights up the sky from one side to the other, so will the Son of Man be (in his day). 25 But first he must suffer greatly and be rejected by this generation. 26 As it was in the days of Noah, so it will be in the days of the Son of Man.”*

Furthermore, we encounter more sophisticated terms describing that day or that last phase of life on earth, such as:

**“Epiphaneia”** which means “vision” (2 Thes 1:7), (1 Pt 1:7-13),

and **“Apokalypsis”** which means “Appearance” (1 Tm 6:14, Ti 2:13),

and also the famous word that comes in the Chaldean Mass for ordinary days and funerals in the *“Hymn of Thanksgiving” (Raze Dansawn)*: **“Parousia”** meaning the second and glorious coming (Mt 24:3 and 27, 1 Thes 2:19, 2 Thes 2:1, 1 Cor 15:23, Jas 5:7-8, 1 Jn 2:28).

The last term gives the meaning of “Presence” (2 Cor 10:10), or “Coming” (2 Cor 7:6-7). This word was used in the Greek-Roman world referring to the official visit of the Emperors. Its usage in the NT could be also taken from the OT’s “revelation tradition” about the “coming of the Lord” (Zec 9:9)

*“Rejoice heartily, O daughter Zion, shout for joy, O daughter Jerusalem! See, your king shall come to you; a just savior is he, Meek, and riding on an ass, on a colt, the foal of an ass.”* Thus we know from the NT that the “Day of the Lord” is the “Day of Christ.”

#### **a- The Coming of the Lord:**

The question that arises is: was the coming of the Lord fulfilled with the coming of Jesus of Nazareth, who became the Lord of the world? The question is still there between the traditional eschatology and its fulfillment in the present time. John the Baptist declares that the judge of times “will come”

*“I am baptizing you with water, for repentance, but the one who is coming after me is mightier than I. I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the holy Spirit and fire”* (Mt 3:11).

Still the same John the Baptist sends his disciples to question Jesus:

*“Are you the one who is to come, or should we look for another?”* (Mt 11:3).

Jesus himself declares that “the kingdom of heaven is here,” in a similar form to that in the OT for the day of the Lord that “has come” *“the kingdom of God has come upon you”* (Mt 12:28).

The fact of Pentecost fulfills the prophecy of Joel that the day of the Lord opens the *“last days”* (Acts 2:17). In addition, the entrance of the gentiles in the church realizes the prophecy of Amos (Acts 15: 16-18). Nevertheless, neither Resurrection nor the Pentecost is called “the Day of the Lord!” This term has reached its fulfillment and realization a little bit, in the “days” of the lord Jesus (on earth). Still it handles more hope for Christians, who are waiting for his return (from heaven).

#### **b- Christ’s Second Coming is Soon and Late:**

The awaiting of the lord, in his coming, is characterized with obscurity and ambiguity. Although the believers were sure that:

*“This Jesus who has been taken up from you into heaven will return in the same way as you have seen him going into heaven”* (Acts 1:11)

but still they ignore the hour of his coming *“Therefore, stay awake! For you do not know on which day your Lord will come”* (Mt 24:42).

Considering that that Day is always “about to come,” is something that was strongly perceived in their faith consciousness. Thus, they go spontaneously after the theory of “being so close to happen!” The NT tradition affirms substantially that “That Day” is “close to happening,” within a frame of “delaying” that somehow seems to be normal or expected. Considering it “about to happen” does not mean precisely it is close in time!

#### **c- Resurrection and Glorious Coming:**

Whatever importance “the coming of the Lord” has at the end of times, it should not cover the faithful’s consciousness or terrify them, to not make them forget about the meaning of the Resurrection and of Pentecost! Christ is already living in his glory, and he is with us all the time.

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