

John Wesley's Eschatology as Informed by the Science of his Day

A Paper by E. Maynard Moore, PhD – March 14, 2019 **REVISED AS PRESENTED**

PRESENTATION ABSTRACT: How did John Wesley think about "things eschatological" in the context of the "science" of his day, and how important was this stance in the cultivation and nourishment of his Methodist societies? This paper will demonstrate an interpretive answer to these questions through an examination of the texts in Wesley's 5 volume **A Survey of the Wisdom of God in the Creation** and in the twenty volumes of his The Arminian Magazine, published monthly from January 1778 to 1797. In his introduction to The Arminian, in the inaugural issue, Wesley says that he will argue that God's mercy extends to "all creation" (not just "The Elect") and that he will illustrate this fact "partly from Scripture, partly from Reason." Wesley includes in every issue of the monthly magazine an "extract" from his 5 volume **Survey**, and other writings from the "natural philosophers" of his day, as well as letters and essays from "a very large block of natural history." Many of these include representations from learned scholars in the Academy of Sciences and the Royal Society; already in Vol. 1 there is a favorable reference to the work of his older contemporary Sir Isaac Newton. But, of course, Wesley also read the Bible in excruciating detail, so the question arises, "How was his view of the 'last things' informed by his knowledge of science? The paper will include several specific references to citations in these Royal Society publications to illustrate Wesley's conviction that all men have the capacity to know God through their "natural endowments" and have the freedom of choice to act ethically based on this knowledge.

Several years ago, when I was living in a single family house here in Bethesda, my property was situated on a slight incline, back up off of the street fronting the house, and over several summers I was able to do considerable landscaping and actually terraced the yard in front of the house. Late one summer on a Saturday morning I was out in the front yard leveling a small plot about 9 feet square on which I was intending to place a small stone sculpture, and I noticed two young men walking up my driveway from the street, wearing dark suits, white shirt and tie – and immediately I recognized that they were either Mormons or 7th Day Adventists.. right? – suit and tie on Saturday morning? There I was down in the dirt in my jeans and as they walked up I said, “Good morning gentlemen. Please excuse me while I continue to work here, because I’m trying to get this place shaped up before Jesus comes... Nobody really knows when Jesus is coming you know... like a thief in the night the kingdom will be here, is what he said, and when he comes by here, I’d like to have this place looking half-way decent. Now I know I can’t be sure about the *Parousia*, and I may not be one of those swept up in the first wave, but I love the Lord and I do what I can to make this world a better place.... Besides, I’m Methodist clergy, and I hope the Lord will look with favor on me and my family here ... I kind of figure that the Lord might cut us clergy a little slack with forgiveness because of all the crap we have to listen to, what do you think?”.... Well, these two young men were just standing there, sort of stunned into silence, listening to me as I kept digging and talking, so I said, “Listen, I’m about ready to take a break and go inside and fix me a cucumber sandwich, would y’all like to come in and have some lunch?” Right away the taller one said, “Well, thank you sir, but I think we better go on and talk to some of your neighbors,” and they turned around and walked back down the driveway.

So I share this story to illustrate a couple of points. First, in any kind of unwelcome circumstance, you can control the situation if YOU talk first. And second, one of the maxims that I keep central in my

thinking goes like this: “Take me to the one who is seeking the truth – spare me those who have found it.” I am one who will be quick to admit being agnostic about things beyond normal comprehension, and very seldom do I gain any insight from folks who have all the answers to life’s hard questions. In fact, that is why I think the Church loses so many young people who are genuine seekers for meaning in their lives, because we are too quick with pat answers – answers for just about everything – instead of recognizing the serious questions people have. This is a lesson I learned many years ago when I was involved in campus ministry.

So what does this have to do with John Wesley, and specifically, John Wesley’s eschatology?

The first point I want to make is that John Wesley loved science – what we today call science was called “natural philosophy” in Wesley’s day, and it is often overlooked that much of what he wrote and preached involved insights drawn from and tempered by the framework of science in 18th century England. What do we mean by using this word science?... Well, simply put, William James famously said, “Science means first of all, a certain dispassionate method of inquiry.” [1] And one of Wesley’s biographers, Frank W. Collier, long-time professor here at The American University, said of him, “Wesley’s insatiable curiosity, his keen powers of observation, his passion for making actual laboratory experiment the test of truth, his power of analysis, his tendency to formulate hypotheses as a possible solution for causes that were not otherwise proven, his ever-insistence on the universality of natural law, his taking for granted the uniformity of nature, and his lively, yet controlled, imagination, ever forecasting future triumphs for natural science – when we consider all these things in Wesley, we venture to say that they would have made him eminent as a physical scientist.” [2]

Now, I used the word “*Parousia*” in my opening story. Commonly people who have any familiarity with this Greek word usually identify it as “the Rapture” during the end of days. It is actually a legitimate scriptural word, occurring 24 times in the New Testament, and of these, fourteen times in the letters of Paul. Often Paul and sometimes his colleagues use the word to refer to the arrival of Paul or one of his co-workers in a particular city, what we might call a horizontal *parousia*, because the term itself simply means “arrival” or sometimes “presence.” Applying the word to Christ’s coming again from heaven changes the connotation of the word, what we might then call a vertical *parousia*. Thirdly, Scholars sometimes use the word to reference the arrival of one of Paul’s letters as a substitute for his actual presence, what might be called “an apostolic *parousia*.” The word appears often in extra-canonical literature (Plutarch or Cicero in describing, e.g., the tour of Julius Caesar through Italy in the year 49 bce.) – it often simply refers to the arrival of a deity or a king. But in our context, we will use the term exclusively to reference the belief in the appearance of Christ “in the final days.”

Interestingly, Paul uses the term *parousia* to refer to the coming of Christ from heaven in only three letters, all of them early – 1 Thessalonians where it is most prevalent (2:19; 3:13; 4:15; 5:23), in 2 Thessalonians twice (2:1 and 8-9), and 1 Corinthians 15:23. These are all instances where Paul is required in his teaching to discuss matters pertaining to the eschatological future, correcting misconceptions about an “over-spiritualized final judgment.” More often Paul uses language inherited from Old Testament prophets “*Yom Yahweh*,” which is usually translated in context as “Day of the Lord,” which is a Pauline favorite, though later on he substitutes “Day of Christ.” Overall, it is almost impossible to demonstrate a clear

developmental schema in regard to Paul's thinking about the so-called Second Coming. In the latest undisputed Pauline letter, Philippians (1:6 and 3:20) Paul says he is himself "eagerly awaiting" Christ's return, but it is impossible to distinguish how much of Paul's language is truly contextual. As respected Evangelical scholar Ben Witherington III says, "the stress on future eschatology early on and less emphasis in the later Pauline literature may as easily reflect a change in audience and local issues as it does a change or shift in the Apostle's thinking." [3]

So what about Jesus? Can we draw a conclusion concerning an apocalyptic preference from the Gospels? Of course, it is almost impossible to identify the "authentic" words of Jesus, but the scholars in the Jesus Seminar over three decades have come as close as anyone, and even so, they can draw tentative consensus only through identifying an authentic "voice print" from the sayings attributed to Jesus. Given this caution, what we can say is that Jesus came preaching "the coming of the kingdom of God" – or the "realm of God" if we don't like the implication of the word "kingdom." What is difficult is sorting out the sayings which seem to imply that "the kingdom is present" ("here among you"), or is yet to come.... To resolve this dilemma, can we say that the truth is less an either/or than it is a both/and? As Anglican theologian O. C. Edwards Jr. puts it, "The basic assumption of our eschatology is that history will come to an end only when the divine purpose of creation has been accomplished." [4]

What is virtually indisputable among NT scholars is that Jesus used the Aramaic phrase *bar enasha* whenever he made reference to himself – "Son of Man." Due weight must be given to the fact that nowhere does Paul or other NT writers ever refer to Jesus using this phrase or its Greek equivalent. For them, Jesus is "the Son of God," which was widely in use in their time to refer to the Roman Emperor or a King. This suggests that almost surely, the use of the phrase *bar enasha* goes back to Jesus himself. The phrase "son of man" itself has a long history in the Hebrew prophetic tradition, most notably in Ezekiel, Daniel and the books of Enoch. But note: if we acknowledge that in even just one instance that Jesus authentically referred to himself with this phrase, then we acknowledge that Jesus spoke in some sense of his own future return, because the term is rife with apocalyptic overtones. Nevertheless, one other thing in this context: Jesus never used the word *parousia* to refer to himself or any eschatological event. Not only is there no evidence that Jesus gave *any* of his sayings in Greek, but also we recognize that the use of the word *parousia* in Matthew 24 is the only place where the word appears in the Gospels, and is almost certainly redactional. Moreover the Q sayings in Matthew (24: 27 & 37) and Luke (17: 24 & 26) make no use of the word *parousia* but refer only to "the days of the Son of Man," whatever that phrase might mean. What it does mean is that Jesus did not speak of the "arrival" in the future of the Son of Man, and seemed not to place himself in any such apocalyptic context, but was giving new meaning to the title: almost certainly that the Son of Man was present among the new community he had called together. My own teacher, Dr. Norman Perrin at the University of Chicago, identified three categories for "future" Son of Man sayings: (1) those coming from Daniel, (2) those which we identify as "judgment sayings," and (3) comparison sayings with parallels in several Gospels. Perrin felt that the authentic Jesus sayings are always to be interpreted in a present context, not the future. [5] This now seems to be gaining strength as a consensus among New Testament scholars, even among those on the evangelical spectrum. As evangelical theologian Tom Greggs says, "Eschatology is not reflection about on-going and continual personal egotism for all eternity – an egoism grounded in a

belief that I will maintain my identity forever. Eschatology is, instead, about life eternal with God and life more abundantly here and now. Eschatology is not simply speculation about the future; it is about attitudes about gracious living in the present.” [6]

So, now we ask, what did John Wesley think about the eschatology of Jesus’ message? The first answer to this question is always surprising – at least, it was to me. John Wesley did not think much at all about issues that we today identify as eschatology. Among his journals, sermons and collected works, the subject is rarely mentioned, and, in fact, in the 500 page compend of Wesley’s most important, his most representative works, the volume entitled simply John Wesley, edited by my church history professor at Perkins School of Theology, Dr. Albert Outler, the word doesn’t even appear in the ten page Index of subjects. [7] There seems to be only one among John Wesley’s hundreds of Standard Sermons, the “Great Assize,” that is devoted almost exclusively to the subject of “the end times,” wherein he described an eschatology in dramatic detail [8], but after this, Wesley left the subject altogether. He could easily have done otherwise, for there were an abundance of millennial preachers traversing the land at the time, but only occasionally in a letter to one of his preachers or a correspondent did Wesley even comment on these matters. As Michael Lodahl comments, no doubt “one reason why Wesley resisted such eschatological enthusiasm was the pastoral concern for people who would undergo shattered hopes, or even a shipwrecked faith, after a failed prediction” concerning the end of the world. [9] Wesley, in fact, was teaching an entirely different approach, a concern that preoccupation with eschatological matters might confuse the nature of God’s promises for salvation *in this life*. Wesley’s approach encourages us to serve the present age, indeed to preserve it, rather than to flee it or to hope for some esoteric culmination.

According to Dr. Outler, who in his day was considered the foremost authority on John Wesley on this side of the Atlantic, Wesley’s entire approach to the subject has to be considered within the framework of Wesley’s treatment of Christian perfection. This is a critical point to realize, because, as most of us know who have taken the Methodist vows as clergy, Wesley was famous for arguing that Christian perfection is attainable within the framework of this life on earth, NOT something that is secured at the time of death, or at the moment of some culmination of time.

Of course, this raises the question as to what Wesley meant by “perfection,” – and he was continually having to defend his concept, in discussions and in his writings. First Wesley was clear as to what he did NOT mean: he was never claiming that Christian perfection implied that one reaches a state of omniscience. In one of his earliest published sermons, “The Fullness of Faith,” in 1741, Wesley said that perfection “does not imply (as some men seem to have imagined) an exemption either from ignorance, or mistakes, or infirmities, or temptations. Indeed, it is only another term for holiness.” [10] And, in a later writing, the famous essay “The Scripture Way of Salvation,” where he argues that salvation references “the entire work of God, from the first dawning of grace...” Wesley makes the strong claim that perfection and the entire life of grace is the gift of faith in this life. [11] Elsewhere, Professor Outler points out that, standing well within the Protestant tradition of *sola fide*, Wesley was intent on wedding the concepts of “faith alone” and “holy living” within the mystery of salvation. Thus, over time and with closely reasoned argument, Wesley “developed a soteriology based on classical Augustinian

foundations, that evangelized the Christian ethic, that linked justification with regeneration, that moralized the Christian evangel, that affirmed both the imputation and impartation of righteousness, that repudiated both human self-assertion and passivity,.. and wove all of these into his larger project: to describe and promote the Christian life as rooted in faith and fruiting in love.” [12]

Conceding this major observation, it appears that Wesley showed an increasing interest in God’s Dominion on earth the longer his life lasted. Wesley scholar Paul Chilcote, associate professor at Asbury Theological Seminary-Florida, points out, a careful study of Wesley’s theology “shows an increasing interest in the future dimensions of Dominion in his later and more mature years.” [13] What one must realize is that this interest in the kingdom remained rooted in the conviction that the kingdom would be realized in this life, on this earth, even if, in the future, redeeming the entire creation that God has made. The crucial fulcrum for this point of view, for both John and Charles Wesley, was the Eucharist. Remaining priests of the Church of England until their deaths, the Wesleys insisted that the people called Methodists participate in the Eucharist celebration as often as possible, at least weekly, not so much as a memory of Christ’s passion, but as a sign of future fulfillment. As Nazarene theologian Brent Peterson puts it, for them, “Christ’s presence at the table is an eschatological healing,” not an occasion for nostalgia but “a sign of Christ’s presence never fully exhausted.” [14]

In his sermon “the General Spread of the Gospel,” in which he comments on the expanding revival then sweeping England, Wesley surmises that the movement might lead to a worldwide spiritual renewal, the fruition of which might be the culmination of human history. Still, in the standard sermon “The Way to the Kingdom,” he stresses the interiority of true religion, contrasting orthodox beliefs (which he called Christianity improperly understood) with qualities of the renewed heart, namely righteousness, peace and joy (true religion). It is clear that his focus is on the effects of God’s saving activity in people’s lives here and now, which for Wesley was the heart of the matter. In the climatic appeal that concludes this sermon, Wesley reaffirms “holiness and happiness, joined in one,” are sometimes styled as “the kingdom of God...” because “it is the immediate fruit of God’s reigning in the soul, so... they are instantly filled with this righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Ghost.” [15]

This fundamental conviction of John Wesley concerning the immediate fruits of salvation realizable in the transformation of one’s life here on earth, has often been lost during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as the Pentecostal movement flourished and the eschatological vision became entwined with an apocalyptic motif. We need hardly be reminded that the return of Christ and the establishment of the millennial reign has for more than a century been at the core of most Pentecostal belief and practice. The urgency of preparing for the *Parousia* tended to eclipse strong ecological and social concerns. Amos Yong, professor of systematic theology at the Regent University School of Divinity has been at the forefront of a resurgence of interest in science among Pentecostals, as, since 2006, he coordinated the Templeton Foundation sponsored research project on Pentecostal Perspectives on the Science/Religion Dialogue. [16] Currently there seems to be a growing movement of reorientation and reinterpretation toward a Christian cosmological eschatology. Jurgen Moltmann’s “theology of hope” has been a part of this recovery. His notion of “eschatological tension” between the “yet” of the Cross and the “not yet” of our cosmic future offers Christian believers a motif toward transforming a nihilistic world bereft of

vision and a rush toward degradation and ecocide. Moltmann says, “without perception of the suffering God’s inexhaustible love, no pantheism and no panentheism can endure in this world of death. All theology would end up in pan-nihilism. It is only knowledge of this crucified God which sustains this vision of hope for our world” here and now.[17]

One thinks that John Wesley would resonate affirmatively with this perspective. While we will not find in Wesley any comprehensive theology of nature, no one can deny his abiding fascination for all things in the natural world. This drove his love of science (natural philosophy), and served to undergird his concern for all God’s creatures – even at one point praying for the recovery of his lame horse. [18]

To draw this to a close, let me sum up by saying, first, that John Wesley was very clear about the limits of knowledge. Consistent with what we now call the scientific method, objective experiment is always required. There is a form of knowledge called sense-knowledge and self-consciousness, but these forms are always subjective, experienced by individuals and technically speaking beyond confirmation or accurate communication to others. Similarly, moral certainty is also subjective because it is tainted by human will, often influenced by feelings that compel action contrary to reason. There is a lengthy passage in Volume II of the Survey of God’s Wisdom in Creation where Wesley spells this out. [19] The point here is that Wesley relies on the insights of faith as the basis of ethics and action, and seldom (if ever) crosses the line to claim authoritative knowledge. Famously, he says in several places, “I trust, whereinsoever I am mistaken, my mind is open to conviction. I sincerely desire to be better informed. I say to God and man, ‘What I know not, teach thou me.’” [20]

Secondly, Wesley was affirmative on the concept of natural law. Let’s remember that Sir Isaac Newton was an older contemporary of John Wesley, his reputation firmly established at Cambridge even while Wesley was a young student at Oxford. In several places in his letters and Journal, Wesley comments with favor on the work of “the esteemed Sir Isaac Newton,” and even though Newton’s system was mechanical and deterministic, Newton was a devout member of the Church of England and held a role for God in the unfolding universe. On questions of uncertainty, Wesley appeals in many places to the prevalence of natural law, which provides the foundation in his mind for the universal moral law, with clear implications for all of our “works of mercy.” This natural law puts limits on the laws of the State, and overcomes any speculation about the “end times,” no matter how “reasoned” such an argument might seem. The orderliness of the creation reflects the orderliness of the mind of God, “the Great Artificer” as Wesley liked to name God. There was no room in Wesley’s thinking for apocalyptic projections. And, as Kenneth Collins points out [21]. Wesley’s “ethical reasoning involved an appeal to a particular expression of natural law, not understood as some... Enlightenment conceptions, but as a subsidiary reflection and copy of the divine mind.” This is where, it seems to me, that Wesley’s commitment to the science of his day shut off any wild eschatological notions.

Finally, beyond Wesley’s pietism and his abiding faith, it was natural philosophy and the physical sciences that fascinated him, beginning in his years as a student at Oxford. Referencing an early passage in the Survey, Wesley testifies that the study of nature taught him that God is the Eternal Self-Existent Reason, the First Cause, the All-Wise and All-Powerful Mind, The Supreme Being, the One Sole Being – and that we come to these convictions about God through our study of Nature: he says, “Properly

speaking, we have no idea of God. We come to our knowledge of his very existence, not from any idea of him, but from our reasoning upon the works of the visible creation.” [22] And elsewhere, “the world around us is the mighty volume wherein God has declared himself. Human language and character are different in different nations.... But the book of nature is written in a universal character, which every human may read in his own language. It consists not of words, but things which picture out the Divine perfections.... This is elder Scripture, writ by God’s own hand, Scripture authentic, uncorrupt by man!” [23]

With Wesley, this was an acquired intellectual taste, but what might be better described as a natural penchant. It was a mindful quality that always seemed to temper his enthusiasm, to dismiss ideas overly metaphysical, and saved him from eschatological fanaticism. On the positive side, Wesley testifies that the physical sciences confirmed his conviction that there is but One God, and strengthened his belief in Scripture; moreover, he attributes science as enriching his personal devotional life, and finally leads him to some of his most important theological convictions. [24] It was his love of the natural sciences that compelled Wesley to require all of his preachers to study science and nature, and a duty that all men owe to God.

Endnotes:

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- [22] Survey, Vol 1, p. 182-194.
- [23} Survey, Vol. II. p. 308.
- [24] Survey, Vol II. pp. 463-464.