

History, Providence and the Apocalyptic Paul

Abstract:

The debate concerning the apocalyptic Paul has been narrowly focused on the continuity/discontinuity of historical events as represented in Paul's writings, but if this question is to be considered theologically, it must be seen to concern a specific or localized *part* of God's relationship with the creation and its constituent creatures. This relationship has classically been understood in terms of some account of 'providence.' Rightly understood as a 'distributed doctrine' that straddles theology and economy, with the latter including soteriology, providence contextualizes and informs all talk of God's involvement with the cosmos and its history, thereby establishing necessary linkages between otherwise separate concepts. By relocating the debate within the framework of providence, the seemingly absolute and irreconcilable claims made on each side will be relativized: the different claims made on each side may each be seen as valid when understood to represent distinct areas within a bigger account of the relationship of God and cosmos. At the same time, this recognition necessarily constrains the language with which the claims ought to be made. All of this provides a safeguarded space within which the details of the Pauline texts, particularly his representation of historical process, can be considered without the risk of naïve naturalization.

Keywords: Paul; providence; apocalyptic; salvation history; N.T. Wright.

One of the most theologically interesting—and interested—debates in recent New Testament scholarship has centred on the 'apocalyptic' interpretation of Paul and its critique of salvation-historical accounts of the apostle's thought, particularly those that assert the continuity of the salvation brought about by the person of Jesus with the covenants and the law of Israel. The most celebrated representative of the latter today is almost certainly N.T. Wright, and while, on the other side, the apocalyptic school is usually traced through J. Louis Martyn¹ to the work of Ernst Käsemann,² the most

¹ Most importantly *Theological Issues in the Letters of Paul* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1997) and *Galatians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (Anchor Yale Bible 33. New York: Doubleday, 1997; reprinted by New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010).

² Particularly to his seminal essay, 'Die Anfänge christlicher Theologie', *ZThK* 57 (1960), pp. 162–85. The essay was translated as 'The Beginnings of Christian Theology', *JTC* 6 (1969).

vibrant contemporary debates have involved Wright and Douglas A. Campbell,³ with a distinct set of discussions involving Wright and John Barclay.⁴

The debate is focused on the question of how the relationship between the ‘Christ event’ and those events that preceded it temporally, including particularly the covenant(s) with Israel, is to be conceived. In broad terms, the apocalyptic approach asserts the radical newness of what has been revealed (‘apocalypsed’) in Christ and traces the evidence in Paul’s writings that suggests he understood salvation in such terms. Against, this, Wright stresses the continuity of the language used to describe the Christ event with the language used of Israel and the covenants: what is revealed in Christ is precisely the ‘climax of the covenant.’ The story of Jesus must, then, be located within a story of salvation, an unfolding drama of sequential acts that correspond to a salvation-history principally structured around covenants, which incorporates the entirety of cosmic history. The presenting issue and focus of the debate, then, has been that of continuity/discontinuity in the apostle’s account of salvation and the history of the cosmos.

In truth, however, the debate is about something more basic than the relation of one event to another: it is about the relationship of all of these events in time and history to the agency of God. It has become increasingly obvious that what is considered to be at stake by both parties is a reading of Paul that is theologically responsible, particularly as it represents God, the character of God’s relationship with the temporal cosmos throughout its history, and—crucially—how true knowledge of these is reached.⁵ Yet, while there have been numerous exchanges within the debate, there has been little sense of progress or resolution: the positions appear to be irreconcilable.

³ Both have contributed landmark volumes that articulate their own positions: N.T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God* (London: SPCK, 2013); idem, *Paul and His Recent Interpreters* (London: SPCK, 2015); Douglas A. Campbell, *The Deliverance of God: An Apocalyptic Re-reading of Justification in Paul* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010). There have also been several public debates between the two, with the most celebrated of these taking place at Duke Divinity School and at the Annual Meeting of the *Society of Biblical Literature* in San Diego, both in 2014. Although the public debates have mainly involved Wright and Campbell, other representatives of the apocalyptic approach, particularly Beverley R. Gaventa and Martinus C. de Boer, have also been targeted in Wright’s publications.

⁴ Barclay offered a robust critique of Wright’s *Paul and the Faithfulness of God* in his review of the book in *SJT* 68 (2015), pp. 235–43. Criticisms of Wright are also woven through his own landmark contribution, *Paul and the Gift* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015). Barclay is not, in a simple sense, a representative of the ‘apocalyptic Paul’ approach and is critical of its representatives at points in his own work (see, for example, his comments on Campbell in *Paul and the Gift*, pp. 171–3), but has also contributed to publications associated with the approach (e.g., Beverley Gaventa, ed., *Apocalyptic Paul: Cosmos and Anthropos in Romans 5-8* [Waco: Baylor University Press, 2013]). His comments on Wright’s reading of J. Louis Martyn’s work in the *SJT* review (p. 235, pp. 237–9) indicate a broad support for Martyn against Wright.

⁵ The recently published version of Samuel Adams’s doctoral thesis, completed under the supervision of Alan Torrance at the University of St Andrews, highlights the theological character of the underlying discussion and, specifically, of the points of division. Samuel V. Adams, *The Reality of God and Historical Method: Apocalyptic Theology in Conversation with N.T. Wright* (New Explorations in Theology. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2015).

I would suggest that the lack of progress in the debate is, at least in part, the result of the limited engagement with theological resources that speak to the question of God's relation to the cosmos and its history. For all their theological intentions, the participants in the debate have largely sought to explicate and defend their positions using the limited categories or vocabulary of historical criticism. The suggestion that I will make in this article is that the debate has reached the limits of what can be resolved on such terms and that if it is to be moved forward constructively it requires to be recast with reference to the doctrine of providence. Providence is the doctrine that articulates God's purposive relationship to temporal creatures and, as such, bears on the question of how this purpose relates to their history. It is, moreover, an important element in some emergent approaches to biblical theology.⁶ If the debate is to demonstrate a real commitment to the theological task, then, it ought to give consideration to the doctrine of providence. This application of the doctrine of providence is an act of theological systematizing, rather than historical critical retrieval: it follows from the need to set the study of Paul's gospel in an appropriate conceptual framework, rather than simply to recover the apostle's own view of the relationship between God and the temporal cosmos.⁷

1. The Apocalyptic Paul: Outlining the Debate

The 'apocalyptic' reading of Paul is generally traced, in modern scholarship, back to Ernst Käsemann. His famous statement that 'Apocalyptic is the mother of all Christian theology'⁸ articulates the conviction that the category of apocalyptic is pivotal to the understanding of the gospel. Throughout Käsemann's writings, but most notably in his studies of Paul, the gospel is represented in terms that stress the radical disruption constituted by the Christ event: the gospel involves the invasion of the world of Sin and Death by the Son, bringing that world to its end and bringing into being a new condition of eschatological blessing.⁹

⁶ See, for example, Mark W. Elliott, *The Heart of Biblical Theology: Providence Experienced* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012). The bulk of this book is given over to tracing recent accounts of biblical theology and the critiques that have emerged of these; the final chapter, however, turns to the constructive suggestion that providence (rather than, for example, covenant) might be the key to developing a coherent biblical theology.

⁷ Those interested in that particular question might consider reading Wolfgang Schrage, *Vorsehung Gottes? Zur Rede von der providentia Dei in der Antike und im Neuen Testament* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 2005). For further reflections on providence in New Testament writings, see Simon Davd Buttica, *L'Identité de l'Église dans les Actes des Apôtres: de la Restauration d'Israël à la Conquête Universelle* (BZNW 174. Berlin: de Gruyter, 2010). See now also Elliott, *The Heart of Biblical Theology*, pp. 154–8.

⁸ Käsemann, 'The Beginnings of Christian Theology', p. 40. For original publication details, see footnote 2, above.

⁹ It is significant that in the volume dedicated to exploring the theological ramifications of his own work, J. Louis Martyn begins with a personal note on the impact that Käsemann's lectures had on him while he was a student in Göttingen: 'A Personal word about Ernst Käsemann', in *Apocalyptic and the Future of Theology: With and Beyond J. Louis Martyn* (ed. Joshua B. Davis and Douglas Harink; Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2012), pp. xiii–xv.

Käsemann's work was influenced, on one hand, by the legacy of Schweitzer's handling of Pauline eschatology¹⁰—elements of which he revived—and, on the other, by Barth's resistance to *Religion*, articulated partly in opposition to the views of Käsemann's teacher, Rudolf Bultmann. Both of these influences are important to the impact that Käsemann's work has subsequently had. The connections to Barth's thought have made his contribution broadly attractive to those working from Barthian viewpoints, facilitating the level of theological interest that Käsemann's project now enjoys.¹¹ The connection with Schweitzer's work, though, has shaped the eschatological dimension to Käsemann's project and its legacy in very specific ways that require to be traced further.

When Käsemann revived Schweitzer's emphasis on eschatology in Paul's thought by factoring it into his own account of the early development of Christian thought, he maintained the basic apocalyptic-eschatological schema of two-ages that Schweitzer had inherited from Kabisch.¹² Within this, time is divided into a present evil age, within which the world is ruled by Sin and Satan, and a future age to come, in which God will invade that reality and deliver it from these principalities and powers. The apostle understands the gospel to concern that invasion, as it has occurred in Christ, and sees his own current time as positioned at the juncture of these two periods. What is so important to note about this is twofold: it represents salvation as involving participation in a cosmic drama, and it presents that drama as involving a deliverance consequent to divine invasion.

This dramatic account of cosmic 'invasion' lies at the heart of Martyn's subsequent development of the apocalyptic reading of Paul.¹³ Like Käsemann, he emphasises the invasive character of the gospel: it is a divine 'inbreaking' into the world ruled by sin. The invasion is eschatological, with the present time involving the juncture of the old and the new age, and it is anthropological: it centres on human participation not just in the drama of cosmic conflict but in the 'paradigmatic eschatological *anthrôpos*,'¹⁴ Jesus Christ. This participation involves, very specifically, participation in the death of Jesus, which is essentially an ending, a termination of the old order of the cosmos, which includes the ordering role of the law:

In this event, Paul was torn away from the cosmos in which he had lived, and it was torn away from him. For, in dying with Christ on Christ's cross, this zealous Pharisee suffered the loss of the law, surely his earlier guide to the whole of the cosmos.¹⁵

¹⁰ See Grant Macaskill, *Union with Christ in the New Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 21–4.

¹¹ The complex of relationships is explored in helpful detail by Philip Ziegler, 'Some Remarks on Apocalyptic in Modern Christian Theology', in *Paul and the Apocalyptic Imagination* (ed. Ben C. Blackwell, John K. Goodrich and Jason Maston. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2016), pp. 203–10. The article is particularly attentive to the mutual influence of Barth and Käsemann and the place of both in the writings of Martyn *et al.*

¹² Richard Kabisch, *Die Eschatologie des Paulus in ihren Zusammenhängen mit dem Gesamtbegriff des Paulinismus* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1893).

¹³ See the works listed in footnote 1, above.

¹⁴ Martyn, *Galatians*, p. 280. The comment concerns the language of co-crucifixion that is encountered in Gal 2:19.

¹⁵ Martyn, *Galatians*, p. 280.

From the reference here to the law as ‘guide,’ we can begin to see also the epistemological dimension that is central to the apocalyptic approach and that is the true significant of its label: what has been revealed in Christ tears the veil off the world and its history, demanding and offering a new evaluation of all that has gone before as world under the reign of Sin and Death.¹⁶

Any attempt to render the gospel as the ‘climax’ of the covenant(s) with Israel, then, is considered problematic. This is not to negate ‘covenant,’ as such: Martyn offers a careful analysis of the relationship between the covenantal blessing of Abraham and the law, as represented in Galatians 3,¹⁷ in which he affirms the promissory dimension of the Abrahamic covenant. But no line can be traced from that covenant, through Sinai and the law, to the gospel: the blessing, accomplished by the gospel, is announced to Abraham and then waits in the wings.¹⁸ The law, meanwhile, belongs to the realm of death. Importantly, this Pauline claim is seen (by mirror reading) to be opposed quite deliberately to the views of Jewish ‘Teachers,’ for whom the law and its works are key to salvation.¹⁹ This representation of Pauline engagement with Jewish, or Judaizing, teachers is developed still further in Douglas A. Campbell’s work on Romans, which argues that much of Romans 1:18–3:20 is *prosopopoeia*, a rhetorically motivated quoting of Paul’s opponent, the Teacher.²⁰ Campbell’s reading of that section of Romans has won few supporters, even within the apocalyptic approach, but as a particularly strong outworking of Martyn’s position, it serves to throw into even sharper relief the lines of the argument.

This apocalyptic reading of Paul is developed in close engagement with the phenomena of the Pauline texts: it is a serious piece of historical-critical analysis that seeks to understand the negativity with which Paul appears to speak of the law, and to do so in light of his eschatological language (of old and new), his depiction of the death of Jesus as something in which others participate, and his representation of the gospel as something that originates outside the flow of Israel’s history. The advocates of the approach, however, are also sharply sensitive to its theological dimensions. Their reading of Paul asserts the unconditioned priority of divine activity, understanding God to be categorically apart from the cosmos and involving himself with it as an *other*, this being the element most clearly safeguarded by the language of invasion. A vital corollary of this is that any naturalistic interpretation of the Christ event, in which its significance is comprehended first ‘from below,’ or is rendered explicable by recourse

¹⁶ See Martyn’s classic essay, ‘Epistemology at the Turn of the Ages: 2 Corinthians 5:16’, in *Christian History and Interpretation: Essays Presented to John Knox* (ed. William R. Farmer, C.F.D. Moule, and Richard R. Niebuhr. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), pp. 269–87.

¹⁷ Martyn *Galatians*, pp. 336–52.

¹⁸ Martyn, *Galatians*, 326. Note also Martyn’s comment on Galatians 3:19–20 (*Galatians*, 342): ‘we can see, then, that the Law and its curse constitute an angelic parenthesis lodged between and differentiated from two punctiliar acts of God himself, the uttering of the promise to Abraham and to Abraham’s singular seed, and the sending of that seed, Christ. This again indicates that the Law does not stand in a redemptive-historical line between the promise and the coming of the seed. Precisely the opposite ...’

¹⁹ Note Martyn’s interaction with Jewish sources throughout the discussion noted in footnote 19, above.

²⁰ For discussion and analysis of this, see Grant Macaskill, ‘Review Article: *The Deliverance of God*’, *JSNT* 34 (2011), pp. 150–61, esp. pp. 158–9.

to a series of historical events, is ruled out. As something that does not arise from the processes or machinery of world history, the significance of the Christ event can only be comprehended by disclosure from above or from outside. Hence, the language of invasion and the language of disclosure are necessarily joined, and the question of how one reaches true knowledge of God and his activity broached: one can attain this only by his own gracious giving of himself.

N.T. Wright is not the only one to challenge this reading of Paul,²¹ but his public engagements with Campbell and de Boer, along with the discussion of Martyn's legacy in his two recent major studies of Paul, have ensured that he is seen as the leading critic of the apocalyptic school. His position can be traced a long way back through his research²² and, as such, predates Martyn's seminal work on Galatians; Käsemann's reading of Romans, however, has always been in view for Wright, and the criticisms of Martyn *et al.* really grow out of the criticisms of Martyn's teacher.

For Wright, the apocalyptic approach fails to see the narrative connections that link Adam, Israel and Christ and the place that the law occupies within the covenant that joins these elements together in the drama of redemption.²³ Like Martyn, his representation of the divine work of salvation is essentially dramatic, but where the apocalyptic Paul school sees the temporal framework of the drama as reducible to only two elements—the old and the new—with the evaluation of the old always made retrospectively from within the new,²⁴ Wright's drama moves through multiple acts, each leading into the next. It is a salvation-historical approach, but Wright rejects the accusation that it is *progressively* linear: the movement from one act to the next can be occasioned by human failure and by the divine refusal to allow such failure to prevent the purposes for mankind being realised.²⁵ This, in particular, shapes the movement to the Christ act, the pivotal moment for history, in which what was intended in the covenants with Israel is brought to its climax. The drama, then, moves from creation to recreation, via the narrative of Adam's fall, Israel's failure and Christ's fulfilment of the covenant. The elements are consciously represented in the Scriptural text with reference to what has gone before: the church's story is told in relation to Christ's; Christ's story is told in relation to Israel's; Israel's story is told in relation to Adam's.

Crucially, God is present and involved in every stage of this unfolding historical story; there is no part of the story from which he is absent. Each 'sub-plot' contributes

²¹ The most detailed engagement is now that of James P. Davies, *Paul Among the Apocalypses: An Evaluation of the 'Apocalyptic Paul' in the Context of Jewish and Christian Apocalyptic Literature* (LNTS 562; London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2016).

²² Most obviously, N.T. Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant: Christ and the Law in Pauline Theology* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991).

²³ For a good overview of his approach, see the chapter entitled 'The Plot, the Plan and the Storied Worldview', in N.T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, pp. 457–537.

²⁴ See Martyn, *Galatians*, p. 266, n.163. '...one recalls that Karl Barth was an exegete as well as a systematic theologian; for over a considerable period of time he correctly emphasized that Paul saw Adam in the light of Christ, sin in the light of grace, and so on.' Martyn follows Barth in this insistence that Paul moves constantly from solution to plight, and not *vice versa*.

²⁵ This nuancing of his account is now reflected in *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, where he identifies an outer, controlling story of God and creation, and various sub-plots unified by that outer story, but not necessarily linked in a linear scheme. See pp. 468–85 for the key points, which are then developed through the rest of the chapter.

in some way to the accomplishment of the goal of the governing story, that of God's rule over creation.²⁶ This comes to shape Wright's account of knowledge of God in interesting ways: God is known by our 'critically realist' knowledge of his historical activity, brokered to us by the accounts of Scripture, behind which it lies. For Adams, this is the fundamental problem with Wright's approach, since it identifies right knowledge of God with an objective reading of God's activities in the world, bypassing the need for God to give his own person as the subject of knowledge if true objective knowledge is to be attained: it is methodologically naturalistic, and naively so.²⁷ For others, Wright's account is problematic in its lining up of the correspondences seen between narrative elements into a temporally linear (if not constantly progressive) drama of salvation.²⁸

What is seen to be at stake on both sides is a theologically responsible view of God's relationship to the temporal world. For Wright, the apocalyptic approach is dualistic in its segregation of a space and a time (a history) ruled by sin and death, which God must invade if he is to save; for the apocalyptic Paul school, Wright's account of history, and the knowledge of God's presence and activity within it, is insufficiently attentive to divine transcendence and distorts a true account of God's activity by reading history forward and from within its own confines, rather than backwards, from the vantage point of the apocalypse of Jesus Christ. Despite the repeated assertions and explications of both viewpoints, there is little sense of the debate leading to much modification of either position.

2. On Providence

What then might an account of divine providence bring to this discussion, to allow it to progress beyond its current state? In this second section, I will outline some of the key ways in which a doctrine of providence might reframe some of the issues, allowing a measure of progress within the debate that does not concede the principles maintained on both sides, but that nevertheless requires some critical awareness of the weaknesses in the positions as presently formulated.

i. Preliminary Comments: The Definition and Distribution of Providence

We must, of course, begin with some kind of definition. Providence has been conceived in a number of different ways through the centuries and these conceptions have varied as to how providence is located in relation to other truths or doctrines, particularly creation, or as to how the concept of causality functions within it. Some of those

²⁶ See, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, pp. 475–516.

²⁷ See, especially, Adams, *The Reality of God*, pp. 207–27.

²⁸ Francis Watson sees Paul's gospel as non-narratable: rather than locating the story of Jesus within a singular story of Israel, Paul draws *ad hoc* on the multiple narratives of God's dealings with that people in ways that inform or shape his own explication of the gospel but do not determine it. Francis B. Watson, 'Is There a Story in These Texts', in *Narrative Dynamics in Paul: A Critical Assessment* (ed. Bruce Longenecker; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002), pp. 231–9.

accounts have been notoriously problematic;²⁹ others have been widely, and probably unfairly, condemned.

It is not necessary at this point in the discussion to develop a fully articulated doctrine of providence of our own. What is necessary, rather, is for us to offer a core statement of what we mean by providence and to do so without naïveté, recognising the attendant risk of distorting the doctrine by mistakenly collapsing it into something else. For this core statement of the doctrine, I employ the one offered recently by John Webster:

The Christian doctrine of providence concerns God's continuing relation to the world that he has created. In his continuing work of providence, God acts upon, with and in each particular creature and created reality as a whole. As God so acts, God preserves created reality and being, maintains its order and directs it to the end that he has established for it. God's providence enacts his enduring love for that which he has made and shows him to be a faithful Creator.³⁰

I choose Webster's statement because it is self-consciously shaped by classical accounts of providence, and his development of it is fully conversant with the problems identified in these by modern thought.³¹ As such, it provides a useful core definition from which we can work, as well as being embedded in a body of subsequent reflection that can further aid our reflection. Moreover, Webster's definition aligns well with the concept of providence that appears to be operative in some of the more significant recent deployments of the doctrine, such as those of Kathryn Tanner³² and David Kelsey.³³

Before we consider how the doctrine of providence might bear on the apocalyptic Paul debate, it is important to note and reflect upon several issues highlighted by Webster, and by others who have sought to defend the importance of the doctrine.

²⁹ Most obviously, the deist conception of providence that locates the doctrine within the doctrine of a perfect creation. For a discussion of this approach that acknowledges the value of what it seeks to maintain, see Katherine Sonderegger, 'The Doctrine of Providence', in *The Providence of God* (ed. Francesca Aran Murphy and Philip G. Ziegler; London: T&T Clark, 2009), pp. 145–9.

³⁰ John B. Webster, 'Providence', in *Mapping Modern Theology: A Thematic and Historical Introduction* (ed. Kelly M. Kapic and Bruce L. McCormack; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2012), p. 203. Webster offers a similar statement in 'On the Theology of Providence', in Murphy and Ziegler (eds.), *The Providence of God*, p. 158: 'Providence is that work of divine love for temporal creatures, whereby God ordains and executes their fulfilment in fellowship with himself. God loves creatures and so himself orders their course to perfection: *mundum per se ipsum regit, quem per se ipsum conditit.*'

³¹ For this, see the articles listed in footnote 31, *passim*.

³² Notably in *Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002), particularly pp. 5, 41–45, but also in *The Politics of God: Christian Theologies and Social Justice* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), esp. pp 98–108. The concept is broadly assumed but largely un-named in *Christ the Key* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

³³ David Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence: A Theological Anthropology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009), pp. 215–41.

First, providence is a ‘distributed doctrine’: it belongs to theology proper and economy³⁴ and, as Fergusson notes, classically operates as an aspect of various specific doctrines.³⁵ This observation is important if we are to avoid narrowing providence from its proper range of function or isolating it from its necessary contexts.³⁶ Some of the most significant problems with the handling of the doctrine have arisen from the neglect of this point. As importantly, the distributed character of providence means that when we invoke it in relation to a specific issue, we are forced to acknowledge the linkages that providence establishes between that issue and others that may have been overlooked in the discussion. This why providence, precisely as a distributed doctrine, has such potential significance for the apocalyptic Paul debate: its distribution enables it to link concepts that have become isolated problematically in that context.

Second, and as a corollary of this, providence is connected to history and to eschatology, but cannot simply be identified with either, precisely because of the distribution of providence between theology and economy. This distribution requires that we are attentive to the ceaseless agency of God in these areas and that we affirm the correspondence of that agency with its operation in creation. While attempts to locate providence entirely within the doctrine of creation have justly been criticised, the failure to link the doctrines is also problematic.

Third, providence has commonly been divided into specific kinds: e.g., general providence (by which God cares for all things), special providence (by which he cares for humans), and singular providence (by which God fulfils his purposes for the church).³⁷ Such divisions may not always be helpful,³⁸ but they have a value in highlighting appropriately the architectonics of God’s providential activity. If the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God (Rom 8:19) and if this is the *telos* of God’s working of all things together for good (8:28), then it is right to affirm that ‘In the Church, the end of creation is being reached; that is why the history of the church is the meaning of the world’s history, which is the unification of all things in Christ (Eph 1.10).’³⁹ But, precisely because this teleological affirmation is embedded in a broader account of providence, it cannot be allowed to eclipse the ceaseless and ubiquitous divine care for creatures.

ii. Providence and the Apocalyptic Paul Debate

From these general points, I turn now to a set of more specific reflections on how the doctrine of providence bears on the apocalyptic Paul debate.

i. Providence allows us to affirm and to speak of the history of the creation in a way that is fundamentally resistant to naturalisation, provided the doctrine of God by which it is informed recognizes the categorical distinction between God and the creation.

³⁴ For the expression, ‘distributed doctrine’, and its significance, see Webster, ‘On the Theology of Providence’, pp. 159–61.

³⁵ Fergusson, *Creation*, pp. 52. The comment specifically concerns the patristic deployment of the doctrine.

³⁶ Webster, ‘On the Theology of Providence’, pp. 159–62.

³⁷ For these distinctions, see Webster, ‘On the Theology of Providence’, pp. 169.

³⁸ Fergusson, *Creation*, pp. 53.

³⁹ Webster, ‘On the Theology of Providence,’ pp. 169.

Where this is not the case, in those theologies that do not maintain this distinction, providence offers nothing to change the terms by which we consider historical process.

The doctrine of providence proceeds from and is necessarily subordinate to the doctrine of God; its economic dimensions are derivative of its properly theological ones. This is one of the key reasons that providence no longer occupies the place that it once did in various theological accounts: as the doctrine of God has been subject to various reinterpretations in the modern period and, particularly, as the nature of the relationship between God and the creation has been subject to revision, traditional accounts of providence have been considered problematic or inadmissible.

For our purposes here, it is not necessary to respond to such shifts or to provide a defence of this particular account of providence, for the doctrine of God held by all parties in this specific debate is essentially in agreement (in principle, at least). That is to say, over against the direction of travel seen in much modern scholarship towards an account of God that understands him in some sense or another to be subject to the effects of the world—effectively to be a thing among things—the participants in this debate share a commitment to a doctrine of God that is constrained by the classical monotheistic distinction between Creator and creation. In the case of Wright, such a commitment is at the core of his argument, which rests on the affirmation of strict monotheism in the Judaism of the Second Temple Period: monotheism, as he understands it,⁴⁰ involves an identification of God as the one who alone rules and upholds all things. In the case of the apocalyptic Paul school, such a commitment reflects the programmatic resistance of *Religion*, shaped in some cases with reference to Barth.⁴¹

If a classical account of the relationship between God and the cosmos is in place, then the deployment of the term ‘providence’ in relation to history removes historical processes from a framework in which they are seen as fully intelligible from below, in which their workings can be completely analysed according to naturalistic criteria. They can be *partially* analysed according to these, but this should not be considered to represent a full critical description of history. By invoking providence, then, we safeguard a space in which we can freely talk of history and historical process without the risk of unwittingly naturalizing these.

ii. Precisely because it is derivative of the doctrine of God, as construed above, a responsible account of providence necessarily requires an element of revelation or disclosure by which its patterns can be rendered intelligible or by which the believer can, by faith, assert the purposeful work of God when such patterns cannot be identified. The workings of providence can never simply be comprehended from below or derived from simple reflection on the progress of events, for God is not reducible to

⁴⁰ Wright’s account of monotheism is resistant to the recent drive towards seeing Second Temple Jewish monotheism as much looser than traditionally assumed. As an example of the very different pathways that such an approach takes, see David Litwa *We Are Being Transformed: Deification in Paul’s Soteriology* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2012). For further bibliography on this approach, see his discussion on pp. 229–57.

⁴¹ Barth’s own account of providence, of course, represents a revision of the tradition, not least because of his understanding of the relationship of being and act. It is, nevertheless, an essentially classical conception of the relationship between God and cosmos, one that refuses to elide the fundamental distinction between the two. See Christopher Green, *Doxological Theology: Karl Barth on Divine Providence, Evil and the Angels* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2011)

a constituent part of the machinery and the machine itself does not constitute the totality of reality.

Consequently, a doctrine of providence requires a reading of history that is necessarily apocalyptic (in the sense that it requires the self-disclosure of God) and christocentric. This is a necessary correlate of the priority of God considered Christianly: if the doctrine of God is now necessarily conditioned by christological convictions, by what has been revealed in Christ, as all involved in this debate would surely agree, then Christology (rightly developed in relation to the incarnational narrative) must inform the consideration of all divine activity in history, within which particular space must be allocated to his covenantal dealings with Israel.

It also, however, requires attention to the doctrine of Scripture, since this is necessarily part of the discussion of the self-disclosure of God. It is here, I would suggest, that much of the effort in the debate from here on requires to be focused. What has become increasingly explicit in the apocalyptic Paul debate is that it concerns how right knowledge of God is acquired and how this relates to historical events. Within this, the doctrine of Scripture has seldom been discussed in its own distinctive relation to the doctrine of God:⁴² rather, the term ‘Scripture’ has been deployed in a very underdetermined way, with the principle focus of debate being on historiography and epistemology.⁴³ The invocation of providence—which is distributed in such a way that it is both informed by Scripture and, in turn, contributes to the account of Scriptural formation and canon—requires that the doctrine of Scripture be properly addressed. For if providence requires us to recognize the need for revelation, it also requires us to see that the incarnation does not provide this revelation in isolation from Scripture. Providentially, our cognitive access to the incarnational reality involves its contextualised rendering by Scripture.

The point bears heavily on this discussion. Arguably, the apocalyptic Paul debate has been distorted by the dislocation of incarnation as revelation from its relationship to the canon of Scripture, meaning that the former is inadequately illuminated by the latter, or the latter inadequately conditioned by the former. This is understandable when the debate is limited to the historical critical reading of Paul, but it requires to be challenged as the scholars in question move to make truly theological claims. This, of course, takes us to one of the core problems within the debate: the contributors have moved directly from the Pauline text to the theological claim, without seeking to locate Paul’s writings within a responsible account of Scripture and Canon. Paul’s eschatological and invasive language (and debates about how these are to be

⁴² It is important that the doctrine of Scripture is properly located within theological systems and rightly derived from the doctrine of God, rather than being considered as itself a foundational doctrine. See John Webster, ‘The Dogmatic Location of the Canon’, in his *Word and Church* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2001), pp. 9–46.

⁴³ See Adams, *Reality of God*, esp. pp. 65–106, but more broadly throughout. At the point where one might expect to see some genuine engagement with canon (pp. 237–40, ‘Apocalypses and the Covenant: Reading Irruption in the Context of a Long Story’), the discussion is disappointingly thin and focused only on the Martyn-Wright debate. Adams’s argument mirrors and expands the one encountered in Alan J. Torrance, ‘Can the Truth Be Learned? Redressing the “Theologistic Fallacy” in Modern Biblical Scholarship’, in *Scripture’s Doctrine and Theology’s Bible: How the New Testament Shapes Christian Dogmatics* (ed. Markus Bockmuehl and Alan J. Torrance; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), pp. 143–164.

understood), thus come to have a dominant or totalizing place in theological talk, rather than a subordinate one.

For the advocates of the apocalyptic reading, the neglect of the concept of Scripture has led to an apparent neglect of those parts of the canon that speak of the goodness of creation, or of the law, or of God's blessing of Israel through both. It is hard to imagine the apocalyptic Paul, as described by Martyn, singing Psalms 19 or 119 ('The heavens proclaim your glory'; 'Oh, how I love your law') as Christian worship, hence the accusations of a kind of Marcionism.⁴⁴ It is not just the law, but the Old Testament as a whole that appears to have been ripped from Paul and nailed to the cross. This is perhaps not what the apocalyptic school seeks to argue, but if it is a misreading of their position, it is a very understandable one. As well as the rhetoric concerning 'old' and 'new' and the negative portrayal of the story of Israel and the law, there is often little done with Old Testament material in the scholarship.⁴⁵ Yet, many of those who share the core theological commitments of the apocalyptic Paul school to an account of the gospel that aligns well with Barth's would deal much more positively and extensively with the Old Testament, essentially demonstrating a commitment to reading Paul canonically. In New Testament scholarship, Richard B. Hays is perhaps the most important example.⁴⁶ The obvious affinity of his work with that of theologically interested Old Testament scholars, such as Walter Moberly⁴⁷ or Christopher R. Seitz⁴⁸ and the lineage that all trace, through Childs and Frei to Barth, is important: it highlights that a theologically apocalyptic reading of Paul *can* be canonical.

The point has implications also for Wright, however. One of the key criticisms levelled at Wright is that he has collapsed divine self-disclosure into history, identifying that disclosure too simply with the objective consideration of the historical events *behind* the texts of Scripture: Scripture records and bears witness to these events, but its own disclosive and communicative character is obscured.⁴⁹ Asserting the place of providence with reference to Scripture requires that attention is paid *both* to the providential activity of God in those historical events, and their rendering in the Scripture that has been preserved by providential purpose.

⁴⁴ While applying the term to Martyn's work may be too easily dismissive, there is some genuine warrant for applying it to Campbell's developments of the apocalyptic approach. See Barclay's comments, *Paul and the Gift*, p. 173.

⁴⁵ See the comments to this effect concerning the Scripture index of Campbell's *The Deliverance of God*, which is rather thin on the Old Testament texts, in Macaskill, 'Review Article: *The Deliverance of God*,' p. 154.

⁴⁶ In particular, see Richard B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).

⁴⁷ Notably, Walter Moberly, *Old Testament Theology: Reading the Hebrew Bible as Christian Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2013).

⁴⁸ Christopher R. Seitz, *Word Without End: The Old Testament as Abiding Theological Witness* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998); idem, *Figured Out: Typology and Providence in Christian Scripture* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001).

⁴⁹ For Hays's criticisms of Wright on this point, see his comments in 'Knowing Jesus: Story, History and the Question of God', in *Jesus, Paul and the People of God: A Theological Dialogue with N.T. Wright* (ed. Nicholas Perrin and Richard B. Hays; Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2011), pp. 57. For the identification of Scripture in terms of speech-act theory, and for a rich theological engagement with the canonical drama, see Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004).

iii. Providence sets the consideration of history, even the divine purposes in history, in the immediate context of God's purposes for creatures, considered individually and collectively.⁵⁰ These creatures are temporally and historically identified, so that God's purposes for them are correlated with his ordering of historical realities, but that ordering is seen in terms of a purposive love that is attached to the characters and entities within the story, and should not in the first instance be abstracted to the ordering of that story itself. Neither the teleological nor the eschatological elements of our account of salvation can be isolated or abstracted from the will of God for each and every creature.

This requires that talk of history, now conceived in terms of providence, is thereby appropriately linked through those terms to talk of creation:⁵¹ creaturely things are affirmed as the objects of their Creator's love and that love is affirmed to be ceaselessly active for them. Affirming this complex of linkages at the beginning of our reflection is necessary if the apocalyptic dimension of Paul's gospel is to be asserted and investigated without doing violence to the doctrine of creation or, indeed, to the identification of God as Creator. As we have noted, the apocalyptic reading of Paul is seen by its advocates to be anti-dualistic; yet to its critics, the prominence of the 'invasion' motif suggests precisely the opposite. Affirming providence allows the invasional language in Paul to be affirmed and understood within its proper limits; as such, it allows us to reflect rightly on the oppositional or conflictual dimensions of God's loving relationship to creatures, as he is positioned over and against all that is evil, without losing sight of other dimensions of the relationship.

iv. This last point involves a proper recognition of the mediatorial role of Christ and of the relations between God and all that is not God as *always-mediated* relations. This is the point that is so important to recent theological scholarship that shares the commitment to a classical understanding of the relationship between God and the world, but is otherwise outside of the apocalyptic debate. Much of this scholarship has affirmed that providence is inseparable from the concept of the incarnation. Kathryn Tanner's appropriations of Athanasius's *On the Incarnation of the Word* highlight this point nicely:

While present in the whole creation, [the Word] is at once distinct in being from the universe, and present in all things by his own power – giving order to all things, and over all and in all revealing his own providence, and giving life to each thing and

⁵⁰ Note, here, the classical statement of Aquinas (*Summa* 1a 22 I): 'It is not only in the substance of created things that goodness lies, but in their being ordained to an end, above all to their final end, which, as we have seen, is the divine goodness.' (transl. Thomas Gilby. *Summa Theologiae, Volume 5: God's Will and Providence*. [London: Blackfriars, 1966; repr. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006], pp. 89). The point of note here is precisely that providence operates with respect to 'things,' considered particularly as objects of the benevolence of God.

⁵¹ Interestingly, John Webster recently argued for the necessary distribution of the doctrine of creation across the theological system, linked to theology proper by the doctrine of providence. The distribution of each doctrine, then, is linked to the other. See John Webster, 'Non ex aequo: God's Relation to Creatures', in *Within the Love of God. Essays on the Doctrine of God in Dialogue with Paul Fiddes* (ed. A. Moore and A. Clarke. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 95-107.

all things, including the whole without being included, but being in his own Father alone wholly and in every respect.⁵²

If then the Word of God is in the universe ... and has united himself with the whole ... what is there surprising or absurd if we say that he has united himself with man also. For if it were absurd for him to be in a body ..., it would be absurd for him ... either ... to be giving light and movement to all things by his providence.⁵³

Such an account demands that the affirmation of incarnation and providence are linked. It also demands that the divine working in history is understood according to the category of 'gift,' as much as the category of 'sovereignty': God's rule is purposed towards his 'giving' of himself to that over which he rules. It is crucial that our formulations of this position recognize what is reflected in Colossians 1:15–20, namely that what has now been disclosed in Christ is a reality by which 'all things' are maintained in such mediated providence, and that this constant reality is one that can be traced back to the creation itself:

¹⁵ He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; ¹⁶ for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. ¹⁷ He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together.

We cannot, then, affirm the incarnation in the way that the apocalyptic Paul school does without also reflecting on its implications for God's providential involvement with the 'old'.

Conclusions

The contributors to the debate concerning the 'apocalyptic Paul' have demonstrated an admirable commitment to conducting their biblical research with theological attentiveness; the energy and ferocity of the debate has reflected this sense of what is at stake. They have, however, sought to move directly from the Pauline text to their theological formulations in ways that bypass relevant theological frameworks and the linkages that these necessarily establish. The result is that particular elements of Paul's specific contribution to the canon become disproportionate, or become dislocated from other relevant elements in Scripture. This decontextualisation has a distortive effect on their assertions, even if the assertions themselves are correct. The doctrine of providence, precisely as a distributed doctrine, serves to recontextualise the core assertions within a redemptive framework that should be acceptable to all parties, since it rests on a classical identification of God and his relation to created realities, of a kind that they share. This is not to say that the parties will immediately come to agreement on the reading of Paul, but it does mean that as they move between that reading and their theological claims, in the process of dialogue, their articulations will be nuanced in important ways. This *ought* to limit the scope for rhetoric on both sides, and it also ought to create space for a more finely grained analysis of the matters truly at stake.

The following points may be stated in conclusion. First, it is vital that our reading of Paul does justice to the disjunctive elements of his thought, that it takes seriously his

⁵² Quoted in Tanner, *Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity*, p. 43.

⁵³ Tanner, *Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity*, p. 5.

stress that the old has gone and the new has come. Similarly, it must take seriously his alignment of the present age with evil and his use of invasional language to represent the gospel. But, it must not do so in a way that compromises assertions about God's perfections as Creator. Neither must it do so in a way that neglects his loving involvement with all things at all times. By introducing the concept of providence into our analysis of Paul, we can be free to explore these dramatic military themes with a set of necessary safeguards in place. Second, we must ensure that our discussion of the grand storyline of God's dealings with the Creation—our debate over its disjunctions and continuities—does not lose sight of his loving commitments to each individual creature. In the sweeping character of the debate over the apocalyptic Paul, there is a risk that the little things get trampled underfoot. Again, by introducing the concept of providence, as classically articulated, this imbalance is resisted, for providence asserts both the universal and the particular. That assertion, moreover, rests on the incarnation itself as the key to providence: in Christ, all things hold together. Third, as we invoke providence, we necessarily acknowledge that Paul's writings do not shape Christian theology in isolation, but as part of the canon of Scripture; our move to the theological claim must always be regulated by that recognition and cannot, therefore, proceed immediately from the exegesis of those writings. If recognized, this point itself would require the debate to be recast in significant ways.