

Suffering and Triumph  
Dr. Thomas Scott Caulley  
Institute for the Study of Christian Origins, ThBingen, Germany  
Prague, Czech Republic  
March 2005

“‘To this you have been called’: Christian Identity in 1 Peter  
as Individual and Corporate, Spiritual and Social”

Abstract: The “revelation” of Christ sets the eschatological stage for the discussion of behavior (ethics). The end of all things is at hand (4:7). Especially in light of the end, these readers are called to do right no matter what their situation, and thereby honor God (“let them see your good deeds and glorify God,” 2:11-12). The “mundane” suffering of 2:11-4:11 prepares the readers of 1 Peter to endure the “fiery trial” that is soon to come upon them. In the church, as in the world, believers are to be humble and obedient towards God, and submissive to their spiritual superiors. Those purified by suffering have ceased from sin, resist the devil, and cast all their anxieties upon Him. After they have suffered for a little while, the God who called them will restore, establish, and strengthen them. His dominion is forever, and Christians are members of that kingdom.

The small airplane’s engine sputtered and died. The craft circled silently in a lazy arc, making for the washboard air strip. One wing clipped a tree, and the plane spiraled to the ground with a thud. The pilot held his breath, and then grabbed for the only passenger, his eight-year-old daughter. She was unhurt. As he quickly carried the girl away from the scene, however, some fuel ignited, and there was an explosion. A glob of burning fuel splashed into the girl’s small face. Her father was unharmed and the girl untouched, except for the severe burns on her face.

In her book *Holy the Firm*, Annie Dillard explores faith questions raised by such a tragic accident, the unutterable pain experienced by burn victims, and her own response to the suffering of others, especially this child. Elsewhere Dillard likens her own role as observer of the world to that of an Anchorite nun, early ascetics who dwelt in hermitages called “anchor-holds,” makeshift shelters built against the outside wall of the church. This symbolic sojourn, “clamped onto the side of the church as a barnacle on a rock,” reminded them of their sanctified vocation (in but not of the world), of their own mortality--the temporary sojourner's existence--but also of their task as equippers, facilitators, “prayer warriors,” and vicarious sufferers on behalf of all of God’s people. In the touching conclusion to this story, Dillard speaks to the little girl lying in the hospital, reassuring her that she will recover, and that meanwhile Dillard will pray for her like one “clamped onto the side of the world,” one who wrecks her heart in prayer, working the world’s hard work, suffering in silence beside her: “I will be your (helper); I will pray for you.”

The Christians in Asia Minor were called to suffer in Christian fashion. Suffering for their faith was probably not a matter of official martyrdom, but of unofficial pressure,

because of their faith ridiculed, harassed, and ostracized by their neighbors. Peter never suggests that Christians will not suffer—in fact, the opposite is assumed. What did suffering in Christian fashion mean for them, and what does that mean for us?

Time and the “end of time.” In the New Testament we often hear of the “end of the age,” and of the “end times.” We hear that also in 1 Peter. “The end of all things is at hand,” Peter writes, and speaks several times of Christ who will be “revealed” at the end of time. Judgment is about to begin with the household of God. Although we hear much in America about the “end of time,” especially because of popular fiction books about Christ’s return, we need to try to hear the message of 1 Peter in terms the readers would recognize.

In the Hellenistic world “time” was a political commodity. And, as we have already witnessed, politics and religion were inseparable. This was true of the Romans, and was also true of Jews and Christians. It should not surprise us that the clash between these cultures included disagreements over ideas of time. The political use of “time” was already very familiar by the first Christian century. This might sound surprising to us who live in a world regulated by exacting measurements of time. Sailing to the New World and beyond created great pressure to invent marine chronometers that could withstand the rough conditions of an ocean voyage. Latitude was easily determined by the stars, but longitude was a different problem. Though sailors could tell the time of day at their position, only by comparison to Greenwich Mean Time could they determine their longitude. In an age of mechanical pendulum clocks, this pressing need called for a completely new technology. Repeated loss of ships, and sailors off course by hundreds of miles made the quest for an accurate marine time piece an urgent priority. Ever since the advent of railroads in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, keeping time—i.e., keeping to schedules--has become increasingly a driving force in western culture.

Such ideas of time were of course foreign to the ancients, but other aspects of time were no less pressing. Since the days of the Egyptians and Babylonians, keeping time was an important preoccupation, both for economic concerns (farming and sailing), and religious life. Of course these aspects of life were closely tied together. In Greek circles, as with the Babylonians and Persians before them, the interest in measuring time had much to do with astrology. It was necessary to keep track of the celestial time in order to fix one's birth date and astrological sign, and to predict the alignment of planets, eclipses, etc., phenomena important in making astrological predictions. Certain days were considered ominous, and others auspicious, according to the phases of the moon.<sup>1</sup> As did the Babylonians and Hebrews, the Greeks also kept track of time for the purpose of history--recording chronicles of a given king. There were local calendars, but only later, to keep track of the Olympic games, was there an attempt to have a universal calendar.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>A. T. Grafton, "Time Reckoning," *OCD*<sup>3</sup>, 1527-1528.

<sup>2</sup>Hans Kaletsch, "Zeitrechnung." *Der Kleine Pauly: Lexikon der Antike*, vol. 5 (Munich: DTV, 1979), 1479-1482.

Time and Eschatology In Jewish apocalyptic, "time" referred to God's plan throughout history. Some among the ancients conceived of time as cyclical, literally repeating itself. Biblical views of time are not cyclical in this sense, although there is a strong sense of "coming full circle," such that the "end of time" may be spoken of as a return to the beginning.<sup>3</sup> In the Old Testament, as in later Judaism, this is often demonstrated in symbolic language: "the wolf shall lay down with the lamb;" "the child will play at the viper's nest and not be harmed," etc.<sup>4</sup>

The language of "end as return" is not literal, but symbolically portrays the return to the perfection which characterized creation prior to human sin. Sabbath symbolized and celebrated this divine perfection—the perfection of creation before human sin. Theologically, all human history (Israel's history of interaction with God), is a chronicle of grace, of divine initiative through covenant to save Israel and restore God's people in proper relationship to himself and to each other. The ultimate Sabbath is "Sabbath Rest," God's restoration of his people. Each individual Sabbath looks forward to this, as it looks back ("remembers") the creation origins of Sabbath. In an important sense, Jesus' healings—especially healing on the Sabbath—are illustrative of this.<sup>5</sup>

Apocalyptic Calendars. As did other ancient cultures, the Hebrews worked with different calendars, for both agricultural and religious purposes. Intercalation was used to accommodate the agricultural calendar to the lunar year. There is evidence that the Hebrews used intercalated months to fill out the solar year.<sup>6</sup> Observation of the autumnal equinox ("the going out of the year," Ex 23:16) and the vernal equinox ("the return of the year," 1 Ki 20:26; 2 Chron 36:10) was important for determining the festivals. The year began with the new moon nearest the vernal equinox,<sup>7</sup> and Passover on the fourteenth day of Nisan coincided with the first full moon (Ex 12:2-6).<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup>For example, 1 Enoch 90 portrays the Messiah as a white bull. Eventually all the "animals" are transformed into white bulls, just as were Adam and the Patriarchs in the beginning. "The new age is a return to the beginning" (M. Reddish, *Apocalyptic Literature*, p. 43).

<sup>4</sup>Note the famous debate on biblical concepts of time: James Barr, *Biblical Words for Time*, Studies in Biblical Theology No. 11 (London: SCM, 1962). Barr argues against (among others) Oscar Cullmann, *Christ and Time*. 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1964).

<sup>5</sup>In this sense these healings were symbolic: while Jesus' healings demonstrated the present reality of the Kingdom, they symbolized not so much where the Kingdom was, but where it was going. The healings were "a small down payment on heaven."

<sup>6</sup>Bruce, "Calendar," 223.

<sup>7</sup>cf. Josephus, *Antiquities* 3:201.

<sup>8</sup>Sanders, *Judaism*, 131-133. See F. F. Bruce, "Calendar," 223.

In apocalyptic, speculative calendars became very important, not only to chart history, but to predict the future. Calendars were used eschatologically to express hope in a specific outcome to history. This fit naturally with other features of apocalyptic, which saw in human events God's imminent salvation through dramatic intervention in Israel's history. One such system, a solar calendar, was known from 1 Enoch 72-82, and is echoed in the pseudepigraphical book of *Jubilees*, written circa 100 B.C.<sup>9</sup> *Jubilees* is a retelling of Genesis, supplemented with legends about the Patriarchs and eschatological prophecy and legal material endorsing a strict sectarian interpretation of the law. *Jubilees* represents an extreme form of piety, picked up by later (New Testament-era) radicals, such as the Essenes of Qumran. The Sadducees, in charge of priestly functions since Hasmonean times, used a "luni-solar" calendar to set the official date of the feast days. That is, months were lunar (beginning and ending with the phases of the moon), but every few years, when it was clear that Passover would not fall in spring, an extra month was intercalated to adjust to the solar year.<sup>10</sup> Essenes and other pious Jews kept the *Jubilees* calendar, not least as a protest against the perceived corruption of the priestly system under the Sadducees.

Perhaps the eschatological calendar speculations best known to us are Daniel's 70 Weeks, and apocalyptic statements in other Old Testament prophets. While similar in certain ways to the "jubilee," this idea was tied to a view of the creation order called the "Cosmic Week." One version of this Jewish tradition, which carried over into early Christian circles, was based on an interpretation of Psalm 90:4, "A day with the Lord is as a thousand years...." While the familiar interpretation of this verse is known to us from 2 Pet 3:8,<sup>11</sup> Jewish interpretation often assigned a cosmic "plan" to this statement. Human history would culminate after a total of 7,000 years, that is, 1,000 years for each day of creation, with each 1,000 year segment constituting a different "dispensation," or age.<sup>12</sup> After the 6<sup>th</sup> segment, there would be a 1,000 year cosmic Sabbath (once again, the end is a return to the beginning). The idea of a 1,000 year "sabbatical" is behind the concept of millennium as found in Revelation.<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup>Jub 6:32-38; see 1 En 74:10, 12; 82:4-6. See O. Wintermute, "Jubilees," in James H. Charlesworth, ed. *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, vol. 2: Expansions of the "Old Testament," etc. (New York: Doubleday, 1985), 35-142.

<sup>10</sup>E. P. Sanders, *Judaism*, 131-132; 360.

<sup>11</sup>2<sup>nd</sup> Peter's point is that human time is relative: "A day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as a day." At the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, the church father Irenaeus quoted Ps 90:4 echoing the older Jewish view of cosmic days.

<sup>12</sup>E. Lohse, "Chilias," *TDNT* IX, p. 468. This is not the same as modern-day Dispensationalism, but has certain ideas in common.

<sup>13</sup>E. Lohse, "Sabbaton," *TDNT* VII, p. 20, n. 156. See pp. 19, 22ff.

The Romans also had their own version of an “eschatological” calendar. Newly crowned Caesars were known to institute new calendars to fit their own agendas. This was no mere idle interest—the Roman calendar allegedly reflected divine providence in a way parallel to the Jewish speculative calendars. These were tied to auspicious cosmic signs (comets, etc), and made to reflect dates important for the Caesar, such as his birthday. Julius Caesar introduced a new calendar based on a modified solar year. The so-called “Julian Calendar” is the basis of our modern western calendar. To adjust the old way of reckoning and bring it into line with his new calendar, Julius intercalated enough days into the year to again synchronize the months with the seasons—the vernal and autumnal equinoxes, etc. Because the old lunar calendar was so far off the solar year, an intercalated year of some 445 days was needed to correct the error.

Augustus Caesar introduced a new calendar to mark the notion that with the advent of his reign, time had actually stopped and had been restarted. In Augustus the Romans had reached the “end of the age,” and the Caesar’s *Pax Romana* was the newly inaugurated Golden Age, a kind of millennial kingdom. The Olympic Games were celebrated to mark the occasion. This all was propaganda, of course, but became part of the rhetoric of the Emperor Cult.

Suffering between the times. According to 1 Peter, suffering for the faith is a fact of life for these people living “at the end of the age.” The call to them however is not to turn their backs on this world and live lives of asceticism, but to engage their neighbors and employers in appropriate ways. They are to show themselves to be Christians by their good conduct (2:11) even while living as “aliens and exiles.” This good conduct is both inner/spiritual and public/social. They are to abstain from the passions of the flesh that wage war against the soul (inner/spiritual), taking care for their own spiritual health and survival. They are to maintain good conduct among the Gentiles (public/social), which was not the behavior their neighbors expected of them. Some of the pressure of such social expectation was what led to the persecution these Christians were experiencing.

In this connection it is helpful to compare Paul’s view of suffering (cf. Col 1:24). Paul did not radically distinguish between kinds of suffering, but lumped several things together. He suffered from actual persecution, both from Romans and his own former Jewish colleagues. He suffered from physical maladies, from shipwreck, from anxiety for the churches, etc. All of this he viewed as a privilege to suffer on behalf of Christ and the church. And he invited his followers to join him (see Philippians). This view is similar to what we find in 1 Peter.

Ethical implications of eschatology. 1 Peter calls its readers not just to suffer, but to conduct themselves appropriately. They are reminded that those who suffer cease from sin. This is a purifying aspect of suffering. Then the readers are called to appropriate behavior, what we call “ethics.” The fact that “the end of all things” calls the readers to be sober, be watchful; to resist the devil; and to hold unfailing your love for one another. This is a preparatory mindset (be sober and watchful), a defensive posture (resist the devil), and a call to proactive living on behalf of fellow Christians (love one

another). Christian love (*agape*) is never just an emotional experience or a feeling: love is ethical—that is, it acts on behalf of the other, and specifically in the other’s best interest (sometimes that love is not easy).

In face of unjust suffering, Peter says “do not return evil for evil, reviling for reviling” (3:9). Christ himself is the example of that (“for to this you have been called”). To illustrate what behaviors are expected, Peter then quotes from Ps 34:12: “He that would love life and see good days...” (3:10-12) should: (1) keep his tongue from evil and his lips from guile; (2) Turn from evil and do right; (3) Seek peace and pursue it; (4) Sanctify in your hearts Christ as Lord (*kyrios*); and (5) Humble yourselves under the might hand of God that he may in time exalt you (5:6). This list is interesting. First, it starts with speech. How much we can benefit if we learn the importance of speech ethics! (cf. William R. Baker, “Sticks and Stones,” IVP). The two-part structure of this Psalm reminds us not only to avoid the negative (turn from evil), but to embrace the positive (do right). Seek peace—pursue it! is an amazing thing to say. The word for “pursue” can sometimes mean “persecute.” These people who were being “pursued” in some subtle and unsubtle ways, are here advised to “pursue” peace. This peace is God’s proactive plan for the perfection of Creation (Shalom!), the reason that Jesus healed on the Sabbath. In the face of persecution, these Christian people are encouraged to be purveyors of God’s proactive Peace and Love, agents of God’s Reign in the here and now.

Roman Triumph vs. God’s Triumph. The readers are reminded that suffering temporary; afterwards, God the Creator (*ktistēs*) will establish and strengthen you (5:10). We should remember that in this verse “God the Creator” is contrasted with the earlier description of Roman rulers as “human creations/institutions.” The Caesar was hailed as *ktistēs* (“founder”), but we are here reminded of his temporary and derivative power.

In 1 Peter’s last section, which warns of the apparently apocalyptic “fiery trial” to come upon them, we are faced with a picture of suffering that goes beyond the “mundane” suffering described in the center section (slaves suffering at the hands of unjust masters, etc.). Scholars have often wondered what would constitute that “fiery trial.” One provocative suggestion is that this is a reference to the suffering of the Jews under Babylon, as described in the book of Daniel. This language reminds us of the story of the three young men who because of their faith were thrown into the fiery furnace. Their brave response to that unjust suffering was, “If God chooses, he can deliver us. But if he chooses not to save us, we will still obey him!” They were thrown into the furnace, stoked so hot those dispatching them died from the heat, but God spared them—and present with them, a “fourth man in the fire,” was an angel of the Lord. This inspiring story became a symbol for the Christians suffering under the Romans (remember that 1 Peter refers to Rome symbolically as “Babylon,” 5:13). In Rome archaeologists have found Christian sarcophagae carved with the scene of the three young men in the fiery furnace, a symbol of hope and commitment. The message is clear: As Christians were suffering and sometimes even required to die for their faith, the challenge of the three young men rings loudly: “If God chooses he can save us. But whatever happens, we will remain faithful!” And God will be with us in suffering, “a fourth man in the fire.”

The language of the Emperor Cult can be heard in 1 Peter at this point: 1 Peter reminds us that government, though necessary, is only temporary, and government domination is limited. To Christ belongs the dominion (*to kratos*), not to Caesar or Rome. God is Creator, not Caesar (*ktistēs*); Christ is Savior, not Caesar; Christ is Lord, not Caesar; God's people are his royal priesthood, not those liturgists of the emperor cult; God's Kingdom is indeed present, and will triumph, not Rome (or any other earthly power); when the chief shepherd is revealed you will receive the true crown of glory (not a Roman wreath). As government is temporary, so is suffering. Though you suffer now a little while, whatever the source of trouble, afterwards God the *ktistēs* will establish and strengthen you (5:10). To this you have been called: now conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of your calling. God's call is a call to faith in our spiritual identity, and to living in this world, day in and day out, based on that faith. As Swiss theologian Karl Barth once said, God wants people who are like spiritual "dogs": people who thrust their noses firmly into "today," and there catch a scent of eternity. To *this* we have been called.