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Autor:	Downing, F. Gerald
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Common Strands in Pagan, Jewish and Christian Eschatologies in the First Century

You can almost see that the stature of the whole human race is decreasing daily, with few men taller than their fathers, as the crucial conflagration which our age is approaching exhausts the fertility of human semen (Pliny sr. *historia naturalis* VII xvi 73)¹

Pliny makes this reference to the approaching conflagration, *exustio*, simply in passing in a discussion of babies and their growth. It seems to express a commonly accepted view that needs no further argument or explanation at the date (around 70CE) when he is writing. And it would seem to have much in common with the conviction announced perhaps twenty years later in IV Ezra:

You and your contemporaries are smaller in stature than those who were born before you, and those who come after you will be smaller than you, as if born of a creation which is also aging and passing the strength of [its] youth (IV Ezra 5,51).

With this second passage one may take “the world is hastening swiftly to its end”, 4,26; and “For the age has lost its youth and the times begin to grow old”, 14,10.² Not much later, we may suppose, we find something very similar in II Baruch:

The youth of this world has passed away, and the power of creation is already exhausted, and the coming of the times is very near, [indeed] has passed by. And the pitcher is near to the well and the ship to the harbour and the journey to the city and life to its end (II Baruch 85,10).³

Discussions of Jewish and then Christian cosmic, universal eschatology have mostly ignored contemporary ‘pagan’ ideas, or mentioned them only in contrast.⁴ In other areas of apocalyptic parallels have for sure occasionally been

¹ *In plenum autem cuncto mortalium generi minorem in dies fieri propemodum observatur, rarosque patribus proceriores, consumente ubertatem seminum exustione in cuius vices nunc vergat aeves;* trans., R. Rackham, LCL; cf. R. Schilling, *Pline l'ancien, Histoire naturelle*, Paris 1977.

² M. Stone, *Fourth Ezra*, Philadelphia 1990, 142.

³ A.F.J. Klijn, 2 (Syriac Apocalypse of) Baruch, in: J.H. Charlesworth (ed.), *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, I, *Apocalyptic Literature and Testaments*, London 1983, 651.

⁴ Just such a failure seriously diminishes the value of U.H.J. Körtner’s otherwise interesting “Weltzeit, Weltangst und Weltende. Zum Daseins- und Zeitverständnis der Apocalyptik”, *ThZ* 45 (1989) 32–52. I note only two recent exceptions: D. Georgi, “Who is the True Prophet?” in G. Macrae (ed.), *Christians among Jews and Gentiles*, Philadelphia 1986, 100–126; and H. Koester, “Jesus the Victim”, *JBL* 111 (1992) 3–15; though both are concerned with “realised” eschatology, not “cosmic catastrophe”, the main theme of this essay. But see also J.H. Neyrey, n. 24 below.

noted with pagan views, for instance in discussions of individual eschatology, of the topographies of Heavens and of Hades, and of tales of journeys to or visions of “the beyond”.⁵ But by and large, expectations of imminent end-time catastrophe have been depicted as important distinguishing features of homeland Jewish and early Jewish-Christian beliefs and attitudes; and then the apparent abandonment of a belief in an end at hand marks the disappearance of original Christianity into “early catholicism”, often seen also as its assimilation to its Hellenistic environment.⁶

This essay is primarily concerned with forecasts of cosmic catastrophe in various Jewish, Christian and “pagan” sources. It asks how distinctive in fact, if at all, were Jewish and Christian cosmic and imminent eschatologies. Perhaps some motifs were shared, and others, maybe, were restricted to one or another group. Then, if some motifs at least were shared, how far might such eschatologies, “imminent” and “consistent”, or “inaugurated”, or “realised” have seemed to constitute an alien field of discourse in the wider Greco-Roman world, and how far common, even commonplace? If they were commonplace, then a shift in emphasis or even a more radical change can hardly betoken a surrender to a Hellenism which itself entertained a similar range of ideas. And if these common motifs were used in various contexts by such diverse groups, can one single “interpretation” serve them all (as recently suggested in ThZ by U. H. J. Körtner)?⁷

A very sharp distinction was asserted between “the eschatological premiss of the primitive Christian sense of imminence”, and subsequent “Hellenization” by M. Werner, *Die Entstehung des Christlichen Dogmas* (1941),⁸ where this undifferentiated “Hellenism” is belatedly re-titled “neo-Platonism”, still without further warrant or explanation. There is no attempt to survey the varieties of Greco-Roman eschatology, nor to relate them in detail to “late Jewish apocalyptic”. There is a brief reference in passing to varieties of views among Christians in the

⁵ Especially T. F. Glasson, *Greek Influence in Jewish Eschatology*, London 1961; but he, too, is concerned to stress parallels with “realised” eschatology. D. Hellholm (ed.), *Apocalypticism in the Mediterranean World and the Near East*, Tübingen 1983, deals interestingly with accounts of revelations of the beyond, but barely touches revelations of an imminent end.

⁶ On “Early Catholicism” see for instance J. D. G. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament*, London 1977, XIV, 341–366, and the next paragraph but one below.

⁷ U. H. J. Körtner (n. 4).

⁸ For instance, M. Werner, *Die Entstehung des Christlichen Dogmas*, Bern 1941; (ET) *The Formation of Christian Dogma*, London 1957, vii, 52–53; 292–94.

following centuries (especially Cyprian, to whom we return later)⁹ but this has no impact on the main argument. We find much the same in O. Cullmann, *Christus und die Zeit*: “Wohl aber lässt sich die im Neuen Testament vorausgesetzte *Vorstellung* vom Verlauf der Zeit gegenüber der typisch griechischen eindeutig bestimmen, und wir müssen von dieser Grunderkenntnis ausgehen, dass das Symbol der Zeit für das Urchristentum wie für das biblische Judentum und die iranische Religion die *aufsteigende Linie* ist, während es im Hellenismus der *Kreis* ist.”¹⁰

More recent writers seem to pass over the issue in silence, simply concentrating on Jewish and Christian material to the all but total exclusion of any other contemporary literature when eschatology as such is under discussion.¹¹ Thus, to take a particularly relevant example, in his recent commentary on IV Ezra M. Stone cites in a note a passage from Lucretius (98–55 BCE) *de rerum naturae* II 1150–53, “even now the power of life is broken, and the earth exhausted scarce produces tiny creatures, she who once produced all kinds and gave birth to the huge bodies of wild beasts”, without further comment, while it is important for him to conclude that the metaphor of “‘world history in terms of the aging of an individual’... seems to have originated in Jewish (perhaps Jewish apocalyptic) thinking”. On this latter point he cites A. Momigliano; but Momigliano only noted that he had not found the idea in pagan Greek historians – not that it was absent from Greco-Roman writers as a whole.¹² That a near contemporary, Pliny the Elder, seems to have shared with the authors of IV Ezra and

⁹ Cyprian, *ad demetrianum* 35, noted by Werner (42); in the original German edition (109), there is also a reference to IV Ezra 2,13 but with no further comment. On Cyprian, cf. C. J. M. Bartelink, “Le thème du monde vieilli”, *Orpheus* IV (1983) 342–54.

¹⁰ O. Cullmann, *Christus und die Zeit*, Zürich 1946, 44; K. Thraede, art. “Eschatologie”, RAC. Similar views appear in the following writers: A. Oepke, G. Florovsky, J. W. Bowman, E. Käsemann, A. Vögtle, S. Pétrément, E. Ferguson, T. W. Willett, W. A. Meeks, to name but a few.

¹¹ C. Rowland, *The Open Heaven*, London 1982, mentions the Sibylline Oracles in passing (20), with no further discussion of any other links with the wider cultural context, and II Baruch 85,10 and Ezra 4,50 (27) just once in a preliminary survey of the field. There is a similar neglect in G. W. E. Nicklesburg, *Jewish Literature between the Bible and the Mishnah*, London 1981. On the other hand, by identifying “Apocalyptic” so closely with its eschatological strand, Körtner misses a large proportion of the matter of Apocalyptic, its dominant fascination with “heaven now open” (Rowland), only accorded a line in passing: “Man denke nur an die Himmelsreisen und Thronsaalvisionen.” (“Weltzeit” ...n. 4, 38).

¹² M. Stone, on IV Ezra 6,50, 152–53; A. Momigliano, “The Origins of Universal History”, *ASNS* 3.12.2 (1982) 533–60.

II Baruch a very similar conviction – that a final end for a perceptibly senescent cosmos was imminent – is ignored.¹³

How in a little more detail, then, are we to understand the passing comment from Pliny the Elder with which we began? In his critical edition of book VII of the *historia naturalis* R. Schilling concludes, without supporting argument, “cette allusion conforme à la doctrine stoïcienne de l’alternance de cataclysmes”, adding a reference to a previous passage where Pliny inferred from the fires of Etna that “nature threatens the world with conflagration”.¹⁴ And when Greco-Roman eschatologies are discussed this is the usual interpretation. The Stoics accepted the idea of recurrent conflagration (*ekpyrōsis*) or of conflagration and flood, taking place when the planets returned to their supposed original alignment. In one often repeated version, the universe would be absorbed into fire, then melt into liquid, out of which there would be a rebirth of the world and a repetition of at least the main strands of its previous history: very much, it would seem, a “cyclical” view, with which to contrast the contemporary Judaeo-Christian schemes.¹⁵

None of the Stoic accounts that have come down to us give a date for the next cataclysm. The expected intervals of “The Great Year” are vast, around 10,000 years or more. There is no suggestion in the scholarly discussions that ancient Stoic writers saw themselves as nearing the end of such a period. This might afford yet another contrast with first century Jewish and Christian expectations: but it also affords a contrast with Pliny.

“*Exustio*” in Pliny *prima facie* might well suggest the Stoic *ekpyrōsis*. However, Pliny the Elder emerges as a fairly critical eclectic, with little patience for Stoic dogmatic theory (e.g., on astrology, NH II 54; and on prophecy, NH VII 178). He is unlikely to have accepted the notion of a cosmic conflagration, *exustio*, simply on the basis of Stoic teaching; and the rest of the passage shows no

¹³ It is particularly disappointing to find R. L. Fox, *Pagans and Christians*, London 1986, writing as though only Jews and Christians had traditions of eschatological myths (e.g., 266–67).

¹⁴ R. Schilling, *Pline l’ancien* (n. 1), , 159.

¹⁵ As noted by, for instance, M. Lapidge, “Stoic Cosmology”, in J. M. Rist (ed.) *The Stoics*, Berkley 1978, 180–85; E. Zeller, *Die Philosophie der Griechen* 3.1., Leipzig 1923, 152–63; R. Hoven, *Stoïcisme et Stoïciens face au problème de l’au-delà*, Paris 1971, 31–37; J. Mansfeld, “Providence and the Destruction of the Universe in Early Stoic Thought”, in H. J. Vermassen (ed.) *Studies in Hellenistic Religion*, Leiden 1979, 129–88; A. A. Long, “The Stoics on World-Conflagration and everlasting Recurrence”, *SJP* xxiii Supplement (1985) 13–37. None of these suggests that a possible imminence of the end of the present period is at issue in our sources.

clear signs of Stoicism. Epicureans as well as Stoics believed this world would come to an end, over against Platonists and Aristotelians, who disagreed.¹⁶ I would argue that Pliny here echoes at least in part an Epicurean commonplace, as found repeatedly in Lucretius; for instance, the passage already quoted: “Even now, indeed, the power of life is broken, and the earth, exhausted scarce produces tiny creatures, she who once produced all kinds, and gave birth to the huge bodies of wild beasts” (*de rerum naturae* II 1150–52).¹⁷ It would most likely be prompted by Epicureanism, directly or indirectly, that Pliny had learned to interpret apparent diminutions in natural forces, and especially the diminishing size of those being born, as a sign that the world as such was coming to its end. The spontaneous stoking-up of elemental fire was absorbing the thermal energy needed in procreation.

Another sign of the coming end which again anyone might recognise, was volcanic eruption. In Etna and other volcanoes “nature threatens the world with conflagration” (*exustio*, NH II 236). There is always fire under the earth, ready to break out, affirms Lucretius (DRN VI 654–720). (Epicureans and Stoics could anyway adopt and adapt one another’s ideas: Lucretius himself seems to have “borrowed” the idea of a final flood or fire, V 380–415).

But there is further confirmation for this “popular Epicurean” reading of Pliny the Elder’s *historia naturalis* VII 73, in the account that his nephew Pliny the Younger has left us of the eruption of Vesuvius in 79 CE. The hot dust and fumes that overwhelmed Pompeii and Herculaneum reached the younger man and his uncle’s household in Misenum, and earthquake shocks were continuous. They joined the crowd of terrified refugees. “Many besought the aid of the Gods, but still more imagined there were no Gods left and that the universe was plunged into eternal darkness for evermore.” That sounds like a popular version of Stoic belief, in which all the divine powers, the Gods, are to be absorbed into the one divine fire, prior to rebirth. So, given a big enough catastrophe, the end of the

¹⁶ F. Solmsen, Aristotle’s System of the Physical World, Cornell 1960, 434–39; A.-H. Chroust, “The ‘Great Deluge’ in Aristotle’s On Philosophy”, *L’Antiquité Classique* xlvi (1973) 113–122; J. Mansfeld, “Providence and Destruction” (n. 15), 138–142. On Pliny’s eclecticism, see W. Kroll, art. “Plinus der Alter”, PRE.

¹⁷ Argued more fully in F.G. Downing, “Cosmic Eschatology in the First Century, ‘Pagan’ Jewish and Cristian”, *L’Antiquité Classique*, forthcoming. For Lucretius, see W.M. Green, “The Dying World of Lucretius, AJP lxiii (1942) 51–60; F. Solmsen, “Epicurus on the Growth and Decline of the Cosmos”, AJP lxxiv (1953) 34–51; J.M. Rist, *Epicurus, an Introduction*, Cambridge 1972, 64–73 and Appendix C, 169–70; G.J.M. Bartelink, “Le thème du monde vieilli”; H. Jones, *The Epicurean Tradition*, London 1989, 38–41; C. Segal, *Lucretius on Death and Anxiety*, New Jersey 1990.

current cycle could be thought to be happening, now (wherever the planets stood!). Pliny the Younger did not believe the myth, but did believe the end was upon him, seen, again, in the Epicurean terms of a “dying world”: “I derived some poor consolation in my deadly peril from the belief that the whole world was dying with me and I with it” (*omnia mecum perire... mortalitatis solacio* VI 20 17).¹⁸

This way of interpreting appearances of change and decay may, then, have come directly or indirectly from Epicurean tradition. Yet Pliny the Elder in particular is far from being a consistent Epicurean, as witness his attitude to deity (NH II 14), and the way he eschews Epicurean empiricist positivism. But neither does he align himself consistently with the scepticism of the New Academy affected by Cicero. I think we have to take seriously the implication that the senescence of the age was in fact a commonplace idea, one that could indeed readily be referred to in passing, on the assumption that it was part of many people’s vocabulary of ideas, whether or not they took it “scientifically” as Pliny seems to have done, or as “religiously” and “mythically” as his nephew’s fellow refugees did. It was not only some Jews and many Christians who were used to reading the signs of the times in expectation of the end of the world as they knew it. And obviously the “existential” meaning would differ among such varied people as these.

Although, as we have said, the Stoic discussions of the end of the age never seem concerned or willing to suggest a date, let alone an imminent one, the imagined details are worth considering further, especially in the light of the lines from Pliny junior. The *ekpyrōsis* is alluded to a few times in passing and in brief by Epictetus. A fuller account from our period is to be found in Dio¹⁹ and in Seneca Questions of Nature.²⁰ But there is still no attempt to describe the death-throes of the previous form of the universe, no indication of how the end might be imagined.

¹⁸ *plures nusquam iam deos ullos aeternamque illam et novissimam noctem mundo interpretabantur... me cum omnibus, omnia mecum perire, misero magno tamen mortali atis solacio credidisse;* in Pliny, Letters and Panegyricus, trans. B. Radice, LCL. A. N. Sherwin-White, The Letters of Pliny, Oxford 1966, 360, comments only on (Stoic) ideas of Conflagration, and not on the world “dying”. It is worth noting that a Jewish writer, the author of Sibylline Oracles 4 also saw this eruption as a sign that the final conflagration was at hand (130–135); cf. M. Simon, “Sur quelques aspects des Oracles Sibyllins”, in D. Hellholm, Apocalypticism 218–233.

¹⁹ See Dio Chrysostom, Discourses 36. 42–61 (trans. J. W. Cohoon and H. L. Crosby LCL).

²⁰ See Seneca, *Naturales Quaestiones* XIII 1 (trans. T. H. Corcoran, LCL); cf. P. Oltramare, Seneque, *Questions Naturelles*, Paris 1961.

However, in tragedy Seneca allows himself to be more graphic. The dreadful death of Hercules must involve the death of all else:

Now, now, to the universe there comes the day when (natural) laws are overwhelmed, the southern skies fall on the Libyan plain and all the lands of the scattered Garamantians. The northern heavens overwhelm all that lies beneath that sky, subject to Boreas' withering blasts. (Fallen) from the stricken sky the fearful Titan (sun) banishes day. The palace of heaven collapses, dragging down east and west, as a death of sorts overwhelms all the Gods/divine powers in a shared destruction, and death executes a final sentence on itself (*et mors fata novissima/in se constituet sibi: Hercules Oetaeus* 1102–1117).²¹

In a similar passage of Seneca's *Thyestes*, the Chorus imagines the response of the universe to the enormity of his unwitting crime, when the sun will cease to shine, and the moon, too will fail, and asks,

Have we of all humankind been deemed deserving to have heavens' pillars shattered and ourselves crushed in its fall? has the last day come upon us? (*in nos aetas ultima venit?*)... Greedy indeed for life is one who would not rather die when the world is perishing around him (*Thyestes* 835–884, quoting only 875–884).

We may remark the resonance with Pliny the Younger's "the whole world was dying with me and I with it" (Letters VI 20 17, cited above).

It is probably worth noting, however, that Seneca is not bound by a single imaginative picture of the future catastrophe. A little later in *naturales quaestiones* (XXVII) he foresees an initial destruction of the world by flood, rather than in the collapse of the heavenly firmament; but compare also *ad marciam, de consolatione* 26–27, where the Flood is accompanied by "clash of star with star".²² And then again there is a picture more like that from Seneca's *Thyestes*, in ps. Seneca, *Octavia*. Human wickedness must be resulting in catastrophe, if, as it seems, "this sky is growing old, doomed wholly once more to fall into blind nothingness. Then for the universe is that last day at hand which shall crush sinful humankind beneath heaven's ruin..." (*aetheris magnis... qui si senescit: Octavia* 391–94).

People, I suggest, would recognise the imagery if they heard Mark's fellow Christians say,

In those days, after that tribulation, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken... heaven and earth will pass away... (Mk 13,24, 31; cf. Mt 24,29, 35; Lk 21,25–26).²³

²¹ Seneca's Tragedies, trans F.J. Miller, LCL.

²² Seneca, Moral Essays, trans. J. W. Basore, LCL.

²³ There is of course an anticipatory disappearance of sunlight in Mark's account of Jesus' death (Mk 15,33), as for the death of Hercules in Seneca.

Even though the Markan passage most likely depends at least in part on Isa 13,10; 34,2–4; 51,6; Ezek 32,7, there is nothing here that would appear unusual to those used to popular Stoic teaching, or even aware of Epicurean science. We may conclude much the same for Rev 6,12–14.

But more striking still is II Pet 3,5–7, 10–13:

By the word of God the heaven existed long ago, and an earth formed out of water and by means of water... but by that same word the heavens and earth that now exist have been stored up for fire... Then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and the works that are upon it will be burned up. Since all these things are to be dissolved... the heavens kindled and dissolved, and the elements melt with fire... a new heaven and a new earth...

Christians who said and wrote such things could but be aware that this was common parlance.

The assembly of ideas in II Peter 3,3–13 in particular has too much in common with the ideas I have been drawing attention to, for them to be understood simply in terms of Jewish and ancient Mesopotamian tradition, with the Greco-Roman material set aside. That the Stoic ‘end’ was only the end of a cycle, while I Peter seems concerned with a once-for-all and ‘linear’ end²⁴ is not all that important: other, Epicurean influenced eschatologies were, as just explained, not cyclical, either. And for individuals, divine beings included, the end envisaged by Stoics was final so far as any self-awareness was concerned. That some contemporaries of the writer of II Peter say “All things have continued as they were from the beginning of creation” seems to indicate a further awareness of Greco-Roman controversies over cosmogony and eschatology: it is, as we noted, a characteristic position of Aristotelians and Platonists which both Epicureans and Stoics felt they had to counter. Taking into account creation *ex hydatis* and *di-hydatis*, the burning up to come both of the earth and all the elements, and the counter to the suggestion that we are in a totally stable universe (*panta*), we have too many elements additional to known ancient Jewish traditions for them to be either coincidental or merely incidental (even though other strands again do seem more specifically Jewish – creation by word, the fire as judgement and so forth; but see further below).

More explicit and presumably still more deliberate assimilations are to be found in the Jewish (and later, Christian) Sibylline writings, as, for instance.

²⁴ J.H. Neyrey, “The Form and Background of the Polemic in 2 Peter”, *JBL* 99 (1980) 407–431, argues for an Epicurean provenance for some of the ideas being discussed – and mostly combatted – in 2 Peter. R.J. Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter*, Waco 1983, 314, disagrees, but without much argument.

And then a great river of blazing fire
 will flow from heaven, and will consume every place,
 land and great ocean and gleaming sea,
 lakes and rivers, springs and implacable Hades
 and the heavenly vault. But the heavenly luminaries
 will crash together, also into an utterly desolate form...
 and then all the elements of the world will be bereft...
 ...at once all
 will melt into one and separate into clear air (Sib Or II 196–213).²⁵

So it seems we must accept that by the first century CE these close assimilations of the various traditions (whether or not sharing ancient Mesopotamian roots) are widely known and accepted as part of many people's common conceptual stock – however varied their use of it.²⁶

It is also worth recalling that we have found at various points in these accounts of a physical decline a sense (justified or not) of moral decline. It is in fact already there in Lucretius: although agonising death for early humans is presupposed, yet in those first days “never were many thousands of men led beneath the standards and done to death on a single day” (V 999–1000)... “thereafter property was invented and gold found, which easily robs the strong and beautiful of honour” (V 1113–1115)... “so did gloomy discord beget one thing after another... and day by day increase the terrors of war” (V 1300), “The greater fault lies with us” (V 1425). And this deterioration of human society (despite or because of its technological advances) is just one aspect of the inevitable senile decay of our world as a whole.²⁷

In Seneca, as we saw, cosmic catastrophe is expected as a result of, not simple a concomitant with the wickedness that has been experienced. Pliny the Elder is similarly convinced of the corruption of his age (e.g., NH 2.158–59).²⁸ Much the same was said in ps. Seneca, *Octavia* – the senescence of the heavens is expected to “crush sinful man beneath heaven’s ruin” (393–94). The theme is taken up particularly vigorously in the late pagan Asclepius apocalypse (from Egypt, probably early third century CE), where it is again explicitly combined with the idea of the world’s senescence:

Egypt will allow herself to be brought into a still worse condition – much worse. She will be

²⁵ The Sibylline Oracles, trans. J.J. Collins, in: J.H. Charlesworth (ed.), *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*.

²⁶ A number of writers are willing to allow that the earlier Jewish Sibyllines may in fact have influenced later Roman authors: D. Georgi, “The True Prophet”, 110–11; H. Koester, “Jesus the Victim”, 11, citing E. Norden; J. Carcopino, *Virgile et le mystère de la IV^e Eclogue*, Paris 1930, 38–40.

²⁷ H. Jones, *The Epicurean Tradition* (n. 17), 40–48.

²⁸ Cf. W. Kroll, art. “*Plinius der Ältere*”, PRE.

defiled by still more heinous crimes... she will be a model for atrocious cruelty... the earth will no longer be firm, the sea no longer navigable, the sky no longer decked with stars... this will be the world's senescence: irreligion, disorder, confusion... (25).²⁹

And moral decline is, of course, also another sign of the imminence of the end of our world as we know it, in Jewish eschatological apocalyptic: "friends will make war on friends like enemies" (IV Ezra 6,24); "honour will change itself into shame... jealousy will arise, passion will take hold of those who were peaceful, and many will be agitated by wrath to injure many (II Baruch 48,35–37); "the land will be corrupted on account of all their deeds" (Jubilees 23,18). So, too, among Christians we are told, "In the last days there will come times of stress, for people will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, inhuman, implacable... (II Tim 3,1–5); "many will fall and betray one another, and hate one another... and because wickedness is multiplied, people's love will grow cold" (Mt 24,10–12; cf. Mk 13,12–13); "in the last days false prophets and corrupters shall be multiplied, and the sheep shall be turned into wolves, and love shall be turned into hate..." (Didache 16,3–4).

The theme of the world's senile decay to a now imminent end, the strand with which we began, appears as a commonplace, an assertion made without argument and with the apparent expectation that it will be accepted without demur, in two of our near contemporary Jewish sources, and in pagan ones. The way the end, the final destruction is pictured, seems very similar in various pagan, Jewish and Christian writings. The world's senescence as such is taken up again by later Christian writers, Cyprian, Lactantius, Augustine and others. Lactantius almost certainly quotes Asclepius, while most likely also being aware of the similar Epicurean motif in Lucretius.³⁰

In the light of this widespread common acceptance of the idea of the world's senescence, it is this motif that ought most plausibly to guide our reading of Rom 8,21–22, where Paul writes of creation, *he ktisis*, about to be "freed from bondage to decay".

The interpretation of the passage has, of course, been much argued over. Recent commentators, however, report a widespread agreement that *he ktisis* does

²⁹ Asclepius in A. D. Nock and A.-J. Festugière, *Corpus Hermeticum I-XII*, Paris 1945.

³⁰ C. J. M. Bartelink, "Le thème du monde vieilli" (n. 9), 346. Some of the passages noted by Bartelink appear also in B. E. Daley, *The Hope of the Early Church*, Cambridge 1991, but here categorised as "traditional Roman sentiment" (99, 133), with no note of the parallel Jewish antecedents.

refer to the non-human creation, the entire cosmos (perhaps including non-Christian humanity) contrasted with Paul's fellow-Christians (V. 23).³¹

There is also widespread but in this instance quite unargued and unsubstantiated agreement that the “subjection” of creation to “futility” (V. 20) and to “decay” (V. 21) allude to Gen 3,17–19, to God’s curse on the ground. Yet there is in fact no verbal link whatsoever with the LXX “cursed is the ground for your work, in sorrow shall you eat of it”, and no obviously common imagery; and no evidence is offered for the Genesis passage being so re-interpreted by Paul’s contemporaries.³² The only explanatory context available for Paul’s assumption that his hearers will “know” that all creation is in decay is the popular Epicurean-based observation to which attention has here been drawn.

The “groaning in travail” is readily taken as a metaphor of birth, and we are referred to passages in both Testaments and in the Dead Sea Scrolls. But all of these apply the metaphor or simile either to various (male) humans who are in trouble, or to the Israelite community: never to creation. Nor can “the whole creation groaning in travail until now” (*achri tou nun*) allude to “pangs of the Messiah”, which would (*ex hypothesi*) only recently have begun³³.

(If this is accepted, then I Cor 7.31, “the form of this world – *hē schēma tou kosmou* is passing away” – should probably be read along similar lines.)³²

Really there is no call to scratch around for hints of similar ideas in our canonical texts, when Paul himself displays no sense of need for any such. We have here a commonplace, Epicurean in origin, but in Paul’s day widespread, one which he could obviously incorporate into his scheme of things without needing any inter-textual allusions or further elaboration. Its nearest parallels are in 4 Ezra and in II Baruch: we are born of a creation aging and long past her youth – this physical creation is an exhausted mother in apparently terminal decay, but (Paul

³¹ Commentaries consulted include M.-J. Lagrange, *Saint Paul, Epître aux romains*, Paris 1950; E. Käsemann, *Commentary on Romans*, 1973; ET London 1980; C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary of the Epistle to the Romans* (ICC), Edinburgh 1975; U. Wilckens, *Der Brief an die Römer* (EKKNT), Zürich 1980; together with J. Lambrecht’s recent “The Groaning Creation: A Study of Rom 8: 18–30”, *Louvain Studies* 15 (1990) 3–18.

³² E. Käsemann, Romans, 233, cites Gen. Rab 12,6, a saying attributed to R. Shemuel, whom he dates 260CE: “Although things were created in their fullness, when the first man sinned they were corrupted and they will not come back to their order before Ben Perez (the rectify jointline Messiah) comes”. But, quite apart from the time-gap (if the given date is allowed), the saying seems to be concerned with a lack of order, not decay.

³³ Passages often cited are Isa 26,17; 66,8; Jer 4,31; Hos 13,13; Mic 4,9–10; together with Mark 13,8; John 16,21; I Thess 5,3; and IQH 3 7–10, “I am in distress like a woman in travail...”

³⁴ Quite a close parallel, perhaps, in Seneca’s *Thyestes*, again, “deforme chaos”, 831.

is sure) in fact waiting to see the glorious outcome of her prolonged labour, the revelation of the children of God in whose liberation she will share.

Paul is sure, quite explicitly, that creation can validly be seen as expectant, hopeful: that is the Christian conviction countering the common pessimistic awareness of decay. The notion of a total decay and/or disastrous decline is often accompanied by an idea of a period when things were very much better, as well as (in some instances) the hope that the good times may be ahead, may return: stories of a good past and stories of hopes for a good future, one or both. The myth of a past Golden Age was widely shared. Hesiod had spoken of one, and Plato, too.³⁵ But how that better state was to be described differed considerably. In some accounts it is thought of as a time of great simplicity and peace, before life has been corrupted by property, technology, luxury, power. For others, the discovery of the arts of civilised living constitute an initial advance, rather than the first downward step. There is some ambivalence found in this respect in Lucretius.³⁶

We meet a lively debate between these two attitudes in Seneca, *epistulae Morales* 90, where he argues a Cynic case against the Stoic Poseidonius. We cannot choose both Diogenes with his cupped hands and Daedalus with his advanced technology (90.14). The account in I Enoch 7–8 (cf. 52, 7–8) of humans seduced by Azazel and others instructing them in the crafts echoes one side of this kind of debate, while Jubilees is closer to Poseidonius' Stoic line: angelic technological expertise is imparted before the corrupting union of angels and human women (4, 15).³⁷

But even without or before complications of crafts and property, there are differing accounts. Hesiod pictures a time of natural luxury, when the fish fried themselves and the fruit jumped into people's mouths.³⁸ Cynics, on the other hand pictured a time of radical and strenuous simplicity, a hard life but a good one, humans at peace with each other and the animals and the environment.³⁹

³⁵ A. O. Lovejoy and G. Boas, Primitivism and related Ideas in Antiquity (Baltimore 1935); H. Schwabl, art. "Weltalter", PRE Supplement XV; P. Vidal-Naquet, "Plato's Myth of the Statesman, the Ambiguities of the Golden Age and of History", JHS 98 (1978) 132–141.

³⁶ Lovejoy and Boas, Primitivism 222–242; H. Jones, The Epicurean Tradition, 40–48; for a critique of seeing any simple utopian primitivism in Lucretius, J. M. Rist, Epicurus, ch. 4, "Man and the Cosmos", 67–73.

³⁷ Cf. T. F. Glasson, Greek Influence, 64–67.

³⁸ See the collection of references in H. J. de Jonge, "BOTRYC BOHCEI: The Age of Cronos and the Millennium in Papias of Hierapolis", in M. J. Vermassen (ed.), Studies in Hellenistic Religion, Leiden 1979, 37–49.

³⁹ Cf. again Lovejoy and Boas, Primitivism, 117–154.

For Stoics there was of course a succession of Golden Ages ahead, though none but the divine pervasive rational power would recall the experience of it.⁴⁰ For Epicureans it was a matter of chance whether another fortuitous agglomeration of atoms would produce a replica of the Golden Age that once obtained on this earth. The precise conditions could not, of course, be expected to return for this world.

Cynics and others could, however, conceive of a fresh Golden Age, the age of Cronos or Saturn, within present history. Cynics claimed that it could be anticipated, by living again life according to nature: a radically “realised” eschatology.⁴¹ I have argued at some length elsewhere that the teachings of Jesus on simplicity, poverty, dependence may have been shaped in part by Cynic teaching in the tradition of Gadara, a few miles south of the Sea of Galilee. Certainly many later Christians explicitly acknowledged the analogies.⁴² (And here again, a later Epicurean, Diogenes of Oenoanda, adopts a similar hope: something of life as once it was may be lived now if people allow themselves to be saved by the teaching and example of Epicurus).⁴³ In contrast to Jesus’ invitation to simplicity, however, other Christians soon adopted for preference something closer to Hesiod’s hedonist ideal, when “every vine would bear ten thousand branches, every branch ten thousand shoots, every shoot ten thousand clusters... and when one of God’s holy ones takes hold of a cluster, another will call out, I am better, take me...”⁽⁴³⁾). But something of this strand had already been taken up into Jewish apocalyptic eschatology (e.g. II Baruch 29, 5).

Others again saw a renewed Golden Age as part of a cycle within human “political” history, as the “Great Year” comes round. How much the hope was seen as a realisable possibility, how much as a dream only to be approximated to, how much merely exploited as political rhetoric, it is hard to tell. It certainly seems to many commentators that it must have appeared ideologically powerful:

⁴⁰ See the discussion in A. A. Long, “Stoics on World Conflagration”.

⁴¹ Lucian, *The Runaways* 17; Epictetus 3,22.79 and 4.8.34; L. Vaage, *The Ethos and Ethics of an Itinerant Intelligence*, unpub. thesis, Claremont: California, 1987, argues that *Runaways* 12 is also relevant to a Cynic “realised eschatology”: cf. also B. L. Mack, *A Myth of Innocence*, Philadelphia 1988, 69–74; and next note.

⁴² F. G. Downing, *Cynics and Christian Origins*, Edinburgh 1992.

⁴³ M. F. Smith, *Thirteen New Fragments of Diogenes of Oenoanda* (Ergänzungsbände zu den Tituli Asiae Minoris VI) Vienna 1974, fragment 21, 21–27.

⁴⁴ Papias, in Ireneus, *adv. haer.* 5.33.3–4; discussed in H. J. de Jonge, “BOTRYC BOH-CEI”, along with other similar references in early Christian texts. De Jonge argues that Papias’ expectation must stem from a prior Hebrew source, already influenced by the Cronos myth.

witness its use by Virgil and by Horace.⁴⁵ When Jewish and Christian writers deployed similar motifs they are likely to have been in conscious response to and competition with the Roman imperial propagandists.⁴⁶

Golden Age themes are used, without apparent sarcasm, by Philo, looking back to the early days of Gaius' reign. "It was now not a matter of people *hoping* that they would have the possession and use of good things public and private, they considered that they had already the plenitude of good fortune..." "In those days the rich had no precedence over the poor, nor the distinguished over the obscure, creditors were not above debtors, nor masters above slaves... Indeed, the life under Cronos, pictured by the poets, no longer appeared to be a fabled story, so great was the prosperity and well-being, freedom from grief and fear, the joy which pervaded households and people" (*de legatione* 11, 13). But Philo can also use this imagery to expound an immanent Jewish hope for the future, as he does, for instance, in *de praemiss et poenis*: There will be peace among all animals, "when the Uncreated judges that there are some people worthy of salvation... because their will is to bring their private blessings into the common stock to be shared and enjoyed by all alike (87)". The peace among all animals finds precedent in Isa 11,6–9; Lev 26,6; Job 5.23; Hos 2,18. But linking that hope with a willingness to share possessions clearly echoes Golden Age tradition.⁴⁷

It is quite obvious, then, that the same or very similar motifs appear in futurist or inaugurated or realised eschatologies, the context in each one affecting the use of shared motifs in another. And so the early Christians had a large and varied popular, widely shared vocabulary of protological as well as of eschatological ideas on which to draw, to explore and express their emerging, diverse convictions.⁴⁸ In a situation where all sorts of protologies and eschatologies were current cultural coinage there is no justification for producing interpretative schemes in which one posited original Christian view (imminent, inaugu-

⁴⁵ On the latter, see D. Georgi, "The True Prophet" and H. Koester, "Jesus the Victim". On "the great Year", see for instance, H. Schwabl, "Weltalter"; A.-H. Chroust, "The 'Great Deluge', 112–122; B. L. Van der Waerden, "The Great Year in Greek, Persian and Hindu Astronomy", AHES 18 (1977/78) 359–83; G. Roca Sera, Censorinus, *Le Jour Natal*, Paris, 1980; J. Bels, "Le thème de la Grande Année d'Héraclite aux Stoïciens", RPA VII.2 (1989) 169–183, and discussions of Stoicism listed at n. ¹⁵.

⁴⁶ See H. Koester, "Jesus the Victim", 10, and D. Georgi, "True Prophet", 124.

⁴⁷ It is not otherwise part of Jewish prophetic, wisdom or "apocalyptic" traditions; cf. F. G. Downing, *Cynics and Christian Origins*, 15–18, 127, 137–38.

⁴⁸ Cf. C. F. D. Moule, "The Influence of Circumstances on the Use of Eschatological Terms", JTS (NS) XV 1 (1964), 1–15, and L. W. Barnard, "Justin Martyr's Eschatology", VC 19 (1965) 86–98; also D. E. Aune, *The Cultic Setting of Realised Eschatology*, Leiden 1972.

rated or realised or whatever) is then changed under pressure from gnosticism, Hellenism, evangelistic failure, or whatever.⁴⁹ Much the same range of views as were available to Jews in Palestine were readily available and current and certainly comprehensible in the Greco-Roman world around – where a fair number of them probably originated, anyway.

Most attention has been paid here to similar ideas of imminent cosmic catastrophe, in Jewish, Christian and other Greco-Roman sources. But there are many more common features besides, which can now be no more than noted in passing. There are similar combinations in each of strands that may be labelled “sapiental” or “prophetic”: both so regularly occur together that it is almost certainly unhelpful to distinguish them, let alone oppose them to one another.⁵⁰ There are competing “focal” figures in at least some of the “pagan” writers to match the “messiah” of some sort in some Jewish and most Christian writing.⁵¹ There is talk of life to come, of souls discarding bodies as well as of tombs being emptied and their occupants assumed to heaven; there are prospects of punishment and reward.⁵² Particular variant combination of motifs may appear (so far) in only one strand of tradition: for instance, the emptying of tombs for most or all of humankind as a prelude to judgment, bliss, punishment or annihilation appear only in some Jewish and many Christian schemes, and not in the rest. But each selection from the common stock is likely to display some unique features, a distinctive *parole*. The *langue*, the vocabulary of motifs is still largely common and commonplace. That is how communication can happen. Early Christians would certainly not have been under any pressure from outsiders’ incomprehension to change their eschatological speculations or convictions.

But the fact that this *langue* could be shared by such different people from very different social contexts and with such varied concomitant beliefs means that it is very unlikely that just one interpretative scheme for understanding each instance will suffice. Some of those that Körtner canvasses but then discards may be apposite, and his preferred one may indeed fit some examples well. For

⁴⁹ See the references above to M. Werner, O. Cullmann, etc. It is perhaps also worth commenting that expectations of cosmic disaster do not necessarily die young (against P. Fredriksen “Judaism, the Circumcision of the Gentiles and Apocalyptic Hope”, *JTS (NS)* 42 [1991] 559, “millenarian movements tend, of necessity, to have a short half life”).

⁵⁰ Noting the over-hard disjunctions between wisdom and apocalyptic eschatology in B. L. Mack, *A Myth of Innocence*, 58–59, 70–72; and J. D. Crossan, *The Historical Jesus*, Edinburgh 1991, 227–28.

⁵¹ H. Koester, “Jesus the Victim”; D. Georgi, “True prophet”, again.

⁵² F. Cumont, *Afterlife in Roman Paganism*, New Haven 1992; T. F. Glasson, *Greek Influence*. I hope to pursue this last issue further at a later date.

some it could well be the case that “Nah ist das Ende als katastrophische Qualität der erfahrbaren Welt... Ist das Ende nahe als andrängende Dimension der Wirklichkeit, so muss auch Hoffnung auf das Ende Naherwartung sein.”⁵³ But it is hardly so for all. A proper estimate of the existential import of various eschatologies must wait upon a much greater awareness of their similarities and differences (and this already lengthy article is no place for such an attempt).

In any more detailed investigation of eschatologies (including then also the gnostic ones to which Körtner refers), the contrast between Jewish and early Christian linear eschatologies on the one hand, and necessarily cyclical Greco-Roman views on the other is one that should be deliberately dispensed with, along with the outworn notion of a movement (often “decline”) from an original eschatological purity into “early catholicism”. And we should certainly no longer even subconsciously censor our choice of illustrative comparison in studies of Christian or Jewish eschatologies from around the beginning of our era so as to exclude what was in all probability a common currency.

F. Gerald Downing, Bolton, England

⁵³ U. H. J. Körtner, “Weltzeit...” (n. 4), 52.