

The Parousia: Getting our Terms Right

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If we are going to assume that one of the signs that a biblical teaching is important lies in the amount of space given to it in the Bible, then it is clear that Jesus' return to earth is one of the most important teachings to be found in the NT. It is frequently spoken about, clearly taught, and consistently applied from the teaching of Jesus himself right through to the last writing of the NT period. Our investigations into the life of the earliest generations of believers demonstrate very clearly that the anticipation of the return of Jesus was a vital part of their faith. The declaration 'Maranatha!' (Come, Lord!) was a common greeting when they met. However, there is also little doubt that in many of our churches today, certainly in Britain, scant attention is given to this cardinal doctrine and hope. It is there in our creeds; it is there in our Advent guidelines; it is there in our Bibles: but it is all too often missing from our sermons, our meetings for prayer and our daily lives.

Of course, there are differing interpretations of verses and passages. Christians differ over questions of the timing of the parousia, and over questions of the nature of the signs of our Lord's return, etc. Nevertheless, the *fact* of his return and the *purpose* of his return should not be neglected. We shall remark on the purpose only in a brief comment in the conclusion. The fact, however, is the better grasped if we get our terminology right. It is to this task we now turn.

Terms apart from 'parousia'

There are several terms which are used in the NT in association with the return of Jesus, although the chief of these is certainly the term 'parousia'. Our focus will therefore be on this term. However the other terms also play their part in our understanding of what God has chosen to reveal to us, and we shall begin by looking at these.

1. The Day of the Lord

There are verses which speak about the great 'day' to come in the works of almost all of the writers in the NT. In Paul's letters we have, for example:

The night is nearly over; the day is almost here. So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armour of light (Rom. 13:12).

In the synoptic Gospels we find the following examples:

No-one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father (Mk. 13:32).

But I tell you that men will have to give account on the day of judgment for every careless word they have spoken (Mt. 12:36).

The book of Acts is also represented here:

For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead (Acts 17:31).

We could go on into other parts of the NT, but I shall cite only one other passage, namely 2 Peter 3:11b-12a:

You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming.

If we examine all of the references to this day in the NT, then we shall find that there are a number of specific and related expressions used. We find 'that day', 'the day of wrath', 'the day of judgment', 'the day of the Lord', 'the last day', 'the day of the Son of Man', 'the day of Christ', 'the day', and 'the great day of God'. This 'day' is one of both punishment and vindication, of

final death and resurrection, and therefore of both fear and joy. This is clear from the events associated with it in the relevant verses, and this in turn fits perfectly the pattern of teaching in the Hebrew Bible about the day of the Lord. *Indeed we shall note this double purpose as a characteristic of our findings.*

A second characteristic is the inseparability of spirituality and morality when it comes to the significance of this event. Its impact on us will depend on our attitudes and behaviour to one another as well as on our attitude to God. So much is this the case, that in several verses we are admonished to live our daily lives in the shadow of that day. Having quoted Romans 13:12 above, let us remind ourselves of the verse which follows it:

Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy.

Bearing in mind these two points, we move on.

2. Maranatha

This Aramaic expression is only found once in the NT, at the end of Paul's first letter to the Corinthians:

If anyone does not love the Lord – a curse be on him. Come, O Lord! (1 Cor. 16:22)

The expression itself is capable of two interpretations, each of them based on the two Aramaic words, *maran/marana* (= our Lord) and the verb *'ata'* (= to come). We are either dealing here with a simple perfect form of the verb (*maran ata*), giving us the proclamation that 'Our Lord has come!', or with an imperative form (*marana ta*), expressing the longing, 'Come, our Lord!' There is evidence of both interpretations being favoured by different scholars and churchmen in the Patristic period, but there is also evidence of a growing consensus that the imperative form was the more likely in Paul's context.

Of particular interest is the fact that in the Didache (c. AD 100) the expression 'maranatha' is used in prayers which were part of the liturgy of the Lord's Supper (see 10:6, for example). Now we know from 1 Corinthians 11:26 that from the earliest times an important aspect of the celebration of this feast was a looking forward in hope to the return of the Lord:

For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

This has to be appreciated in the context of Jesus' own words at the institution of this feast:

I tell you, I will not drink of this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it anew with you in my Father's kingdom (Mt. 26:29).

We are surely right to see this as a prayer for the return of our Lord Jesus. We are both thrilled and relieved when we hear him say to us in the words of Revelation, 'Yes, I am coming soon'. And with his servant, John, we echo, 'Amen. Come, Lord Jesus' (Rev. 22:20).

3. Epiphaneia

This is the first of the three specific terms used in the NT with regard to the second coming of Jesus. It is derived from the Greek root 'to appear', a root which was in common use, although producing a cluster of words with quite specialized meanings. The two words which are best known in modern English usage from this root are: 'Epiphany', the name given to the liturgical day of 6 January, when the wise men appeared (if you are western) or when Jesus appeared at his birth (if you are eastern), and 'Phantasm', a word applied by psychics to the mysterious appearance of spectral forces. But the root is also

connected with one which has to do with light and brightness, giving us the word 'phosphorescence' in English. So it refers to something which is easily visible and which has a certain radiance.

Originally, the actual term *epiphaneia* referred merely to the outward appearance of some object; for instance, it is used of the visible aspects of a town. But it soon developed a specialized meaning, relating to the glorious or majestic appearance of a dignitary, for example a king making an appearance before his subjects. It is also important to note that it could be used on occasion to refer to the impact upon a person which such a meeting with a dignitary could cause. By the time of the NT community, it had developed a yet more specialized meaning, namely the needed and welcome appearance of a god with his people. It is invariably used in contexts of divine intervention, stressing the power of the god to act on behalf of his people.

It would also be true to say that we are dealing with a term which carries with it a sense of purpose. It is used in definite contexts rather than just to describe casual visits by the gods, and also tends to suggest an appearance which happens rather suddenly. We should further note that this word is used with respect to someone or to some god who is already known to the subject or worshipper. It is the *visit* of the visitor, and the resulting impact, which are seen as being significant and salvific. Of course, we are aware of the fact that sometimes human rulers who saw themselves as incarnations of gods, or as uniquely related to the gods, took a related term for themselves. This was so with the Roman Caesars, and also with the Syrian ruler Antiochus *Epiphanes*, known to us from the books of the Maccabees. In short, this is a powerful title, denoting a glorious appearance by gods or by kings.

In the Septuagint, we find the verbal root of this term used to translate a number of Hebrew verbal roots to do with 'shining' and 'becoming known'. This is much as we might expect. What is of importance is the fact that the contexts all have to do with theophanies of the Lord, and situations in which he comes to redeem his people (see, for example, Gn. 35:7; Dt. 33:2; Je. 29:14). The adjectival/participial form, *epiphanes*, is also found in the LXX. It can refer to the terrible and glorious deeds of the Lord on behalf of his people (2 Sa. 7:23), reflecting the issue of power, but, of particular importance to us, it usually refers to the character of the expected 'day of the Lord' (Joel 2:11, 31; Mal. 3:23 (4:5 in the translations)).

Although there is a verse in the NT where the specific term *epiphaneia* is used of the first coming of Jesus to live among us (2 Tim. 1:10), it is predominantly used in respect of his powerful return to earth after the period of his ascension. Jesus' second 'appearance' will mean the coming of judgment:

In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I give you this charge. . . . Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day – and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his *appearing* (2 Tim. 4:1, 8).

Jesus' second 'appearance' will also bring about the end of 'the man of lawlessness'. This creature who sets himself against God and who prefers the darkness will be destroyed by the shining power of the appearance of Jesus:

And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will overthrow with the breath of his mouth and destroy by the *splendour* of his coming (2 Thes. 2:8).

In short, this appearance will be met by Christians with unparalleled relief and joy. The struggle will be over. As Paul says, it is a 'blessed hope':

We wait for the blessed hope – the glorious *appearing* of our great God and Saviour, Jesus Christ . . . (Tit. 2:13).

4. *Apokalypsis*

This is the second of the three specific terms to which we referred under (3) above. This Greek verbal root is concerned with the uncovering or revealing of things which up to the point of revelation had been unknown or hidden. The actual term in which we are interested is used almost totally in religious contexts, although it must be said that the term is not really a common one. Nevertheless, it is an important biblical term. It is invariably translated by the word 'revelation' in English.

However, this term is actually best known to us all in its transliterated form. It was simply taken over into English to describe that distinctive form of thought and literature called

'apocalyptic'. This type of religious consciousness is focused on the revelation of the hidden mysteries concerning the future of God's dealings in history. There are traces of apocalyptic in several books of the Bible, but it is especially associated with the books of Daniel, Ezekiel and Revelation. In fact *apokalypsis* is the opening word of the book of Revelation.

In the LXX, this root is used in a variety of ways, including the physical uncovering of material (for example, a woman's 'head' in Nu. 5:18; the roof of the ark in Gn. 8:13). It is commonly used in the context of disclosing or discovering significant information (see, for example, Jos. 2:20; 1 Sa. 20:2, 13; 22:8, 17). The noun *apokalypsis* only occurs once in the LXX, and that too is in a 'non-theological' context (1 Sa. 20:30). The factor to notice at this point, therefore, is that this verbal root has to do with *significant or intimate revelations*.

Ezekiel is the prophet who takes this term and uses it characteristically of the action of God in disclosing the sin and corruption of his people:

This is what the Sovereign Lord says: Because you poured out your wealth and *exposed* your nakedness in your promiscuity with your lovers, and because of all your detestable idols, and because you gave them your children's blood, therefore I am going to gather all your lovers, with whom you found pleasure, those you loved as well as those you hated. I will gather them against you from all around and *will strip you* in front of them, and they will see all your nakedness (Ezk. 16:36-37; see also 13:14; 16:57; 21:29).

This will therefore be a time of shame, but also the time when sin and guilt can begin to be dealt with.

The term is used of God's 'revelation' to those significant servants of God who have leadership roles in Israel (see, for example, 1 Sa. 3:7, 21 for Samuel; 2 Sa. 7:27 for David; Amos 3:7 for the prophets generally). The recipients of this 'revelation' receive knowledge of God's perspectives and plans. In the more commonly understood sense of 'apocalyptic', namely having to do with future mysteries, this verbal root is used in the LXX in connection with Balaam, whose eyes are 'opened' by God so that he can see what God has in store for Israel (Nu. 22:31; 24:4, 16).

When we turn to the NT, we find that this root is perhaps not as common as might have been expected. It is only used with any frequency by Paul, Peter, Matthew and Luke. Speaking more positively, the first point to note is that in the NT this root is certainly focused on theological contexts. It is used of the revelation of God's wrath and judgment, as in these verses:

The wrath of God *is being revealed* from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness. . . . But because of your stubbornness and your unrepentant heart, you are storing up wrath against yourself for the day of God's wrath, when his righteous judgment *will be revealed* (Rom. 1:18; 2:5; see also 1 Cor. 3:13).

In particular, though, the focus is on the person of Jesus. Luke is happy to introduce us at the start of his gospel to Simeon, who is inspired to recognize that Jesus is 'a light for *revelation* to the Gentiles' (Lk. 2:32). Jesus has brought revelation to an unprecedented degree. The gospel is the uncovering of a mystery which had been hidden until he came:

Now to him who is able to establish you by my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ, according to the *revelation* of the mystery hidden for long ages past, but now revealed and made known . . . (Rom. 16:25f.; see also Eph. 3:3).

The comfort and vindication which Jesus' followers are in need of in the midst of this fallen world are not yet revealed, but when Jesus returns the world will see that Christians were right to put their trust in him, and Christians will realize that the path of suffering really does lead to glory. Both of these truths can be hard to believe by those who will one day testify to their truth. The following examples will suffice:

God is just: He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you and give relief to you who are troubled, and to us as well. This will happen when the Lord Jesus *is revealed* from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels (2 Thes. 1:7; see also 1 Cor. 1:7f.).

I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that *will be revealed* in us (Rom. 8:18; see also 1 Pet. 1:5-7).

Of course, Jesus will also be fully vindicated when he returns to earth, and the wonderful glory which is his due will at last be manifest for all to see:

But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is *revealed* (1 Pet. 4:13).

The second coming of Jesus will come as a dramatic shock to people. It will be a sudden revelation of the glorious Son of God, and he in turn will open up to the light of his glory all the dark secrets of our lives. Just as suddenly, we shall all comprehend at last the wisdom of the Lord's ways in our lives and in our world's history.

'Parousia' itself

This is our third term and the one most frequently used for the second coming of Jesus in the NT. The verbal root means 'to be present with' someone, or 'to have come to be with' someone. The noun 'parousia' means therefore either 'presence' or 'arrival'. It is used in several contexts for the arrival of rulers or military commanders. In the Roman world it was even used as a kind of technical term for the celebration of an emperor's visit to, and extended presence with, a particular city or community.

Although this word is not really known by modern English speakers, its Latin equivalent certainly is. The Latin term is *adventus*, from which we get the English term 'advent', which is known at least from the popularity of the church season of that name. Advent is, of course, the time when we focus our thoughts particularly on the birth of Jesus (his coming to earth), and his future return (his second coming).

It is especially important for us to note that in the various Greek (and Latin) inscriptions and writings which we have concerning the 'parousia' of a visiting dignitary, the distinct impression given is that this is not simply a future visit which is listed in the people's diary, but a most significant time of meeting. It will not only have an important impact on the people when it happens, but because of its significance, and the consequent sense of eager anticipation, coupled with the massive preparation which is required for the arrival of the one who is coming, it is already having a serious impact *before the event*.

The term *parousia* is actually used in the NT in connection with the apostle Paul. However, he does not come out of it well in comparison with the parousia of Jesus! It was evidently said by some Christians that he was a better writer than a personal communicator, since, in their opinion at least, he had no real personal charisma, or 'presence', as we might say:

For some say, 'His letters are weighty and forceful, but *in person* he is unimpressive and his speaking amounts to nothing' (2 Cor. 10:10). The italicized words are a translation of the Greek phrase, 'the parousia of his body'. See also Phil. 1:26; 2:12).

In the LXX, this verbal root is quite commonly used, and in fact it serves to translate no fewer than seven Hebrew verbs, each of which lies in the overall semantic range of 'coming'. The contexts of this usage, however, are not particularly significant for our purposes, since they simply cover the basic nuances of the verb 'to come'. There is no trace of the specialized NT meaning here. The noun *parousia* is only found twice in the LXX, in neither case referring to God. Other verbal roots are used when the Hebrew Bible speaks about the 'coming' of God to be with his people (for example, Gn. 20:3; Nu. 24:2; Ps. 24:7). Even in two of the classic Messianic texts, where mention is made of the 'coming' of the Messiah, this verbal root is not the one which is used (Gn. 49:10; Zech. 9:9f.). It seems clear, then, that this particular term, *parousia*, is strictly a NT term in the sense in which we are using it here.

As we noted above, however, the noun *parousia* is also used in a more general sense in the NT. Apart from the verses quoted above which refer to Paul's *parousia*, we also find joy over the 'arrival' of Stephanas (1 Cor. 16:17), and comfort at the 'coming' of Titus (2 Cor. 7:6f.). Verbal forms of the root are used in the same way, for example in Acts 10:33; 24:19; 1 Corinthians 5:3; Galatians 4:18, 20. The verbal root of the term *parousia* is even used of the Beast in Revelation 17:8, where we read:

The beast, which you saw, once was, now is not, and will come up out of the Abyss and go to his destruction . . . he once was, now is not, and *yet will come*.

Now, when we come to examine the specific and distinctive meaning of the term *parousia* in the NT, we find that it is used to describe the eschatological return, or 'coming', of Jesus to earth. More than this, though, we see that this 'coming' of Jesus actually has an impact on the lives of those who are expecting

his return, and who are consequently longing for it. This is the most common of the three special terms, but it is not found quite as frequently as one might think from the impression given by some Christian writers. All in all it is used 24 times, 14 of which are part of the Pauline corpus:

Pauline

- *1 Corinthians 15:23
- 1 Corinthians 16:17
- 2 Corinthians 7:6-7
- 2 Corinthians 10:10
- Philippians 1:26
- Philippians 2:12
- *1 Thessalonians 2:19
- *1 Thessalonians 3:13
- *1 Thessalonians 4:15
- *1 Thessalonians 5:23
- **2 Thessalonians 2:1, 8-9

Other

- ****Matthew 24:3, 27, 37, 39
- **James 5:7-8
- 2 Peter 1:16
- **2 Peter 3:4, 12
- *1 John 2:28

An analysis of the references asterisked shows that only one half of the Pauline references are actually to the eschatological 'arrival' of Jesus, whereas nine of the other ten (non-Pauline) references are to this event. It is also clear from this simplest of tables that the Thessalonian epistles and the Matthean apocalypse are the two main concentrations within the NT.

What, then, do we learn from these passages about the eschatological 'parousia' of Jesus? It will be the *arrival* of the moment for which we are all waiting in our need and inadequacy. It will be a time of unprecedented *meeting* with Jesus, even though in one sense all Christians may be said to have met with him already. It will be a sudden and public *appearance*; his *presence* will vindicate the faith and the hope of Christians everywhere.

The purpose of the parousia

Although, as I indicated at the beginning, we cannot go into the purpose of the parousia in this article, it may be convenient to list the five main ones found in the NT. These are found in passages which use the whole range of terms which we have been examining. The parousia *firstly* brings about the final conquest of the devil and his forces (1 Cor. 15:23-24). *Secondly*, it brings about the final judgment of the world (1 Cor. 4:5). *Thirdly*, it completes the redemption of the redeemed (1 Jn. 3:2; 1 Thes. 4:16-17; Heb. 9:28). *Fourthly*, it brings the whole of history to its climax and fulfilment (Rom. 8:19; 2 Pet. 3:13; Rev. 21:1). And *fifthly*, it establishes, once and for all, the public vindication and glorification of Jesus (Mk. 15:62; Rev. 1:7). Examples of texts could, of course, be multiplied.

Nor are these exhaustive of the purposes of the parousia. We could subdivide and further analyse the five points above. We could also add to the list. For example, I believe that the parousia will also fulfil God's purposes for the Jewish people; that when Paul states in Romans 11:26 that 'all Israel will be saved', he is preparing the Jewish people for a massive turning to faith in Jesus when he returns. But this is a theme I have developed elsewhere, and as particular controversies attach to it, I shall not pursue it here. Of course, there is a purpose too for the delay of the parousia. There seem to be two distinct and broad purposes for the fact of its delay between the two advents of Jesus, both represented in 2 Peter: (a) to give people an opportunity to come to repentance (2 Pet. 3:9), and (b) to allow needed time for the process of sanctification in Christians (2 Pet. 3:10-12). What we must constantly keep in mind as we touch on this issue, is that God's perspective differs from ours: 'With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day' (2 Pet. 3:8).

Getting our terms right in relation to the parousia is not a merely academic exercise. On the contrary, as we probe them, we should be drawn into the wonder and glory of God's promises. Our knowledge should transform our lives. If we know that Jesus will return, despite any ignorance about its 'when' and 'how', we should be mobilized for mission, seeking to win more and more people for the Lord's kingdom, committed to a holy life. That is the purpose of the revelation of the parousia. And this purpose plays its significant part in the overall purpose of the parousia itself.