

Pannenberg's metaphysical proposal and Biblical Eschatology

Introduction

Wolfhart Pannenberg (1928-2014) was one of the great theologians of the second half of the twentieth century and it is fitting to reflect on his contribution to theology in the wake of his death.¹ I will do so by examining one particular area of his thought — his metaphysical proposal and its use of the motif of anticipation and compare his approach to some aspects of New Testament eschatology.

In this paper I will present an interpretation of Pannenberg's metaphysical proposal, showing something of its motivation and importance as well as its key claims. I will then suggest some comparisons with New Testament eschatology and argue that the New Testament pattern is different to Pannenberg's at important points.

Pannenberg's metaphysical proposal, though a limited area in his project, is a key one. Shults argues persuasively that the *Grundprinzip* of Pannenberg's thought is to view all things *sub ratione Dei*.² As the title of an article by Shults suggests, Pannenberg offers "A Theology of Everything", that is Pannenberg's theology seeks to understand the whole of reality in light of its relation to God.³ I will show that 'anticipation' and the associated metaphysical proposal allow him to relate all things to God. Thus Shults' thesis can be refined, not to displace *sub ratione Dei* as the basic principle in Pannenberg's thought, but to indicate that such a view is possible in anticipation of the eschaton and so requires Pannenberg's metaphysical proposal.⁴

Pannenberg's metaphysical proposal and his theological career

Pannenberg's spiritual and intellectual biography helps to explain why the metaphysical proposal is so important in his thought.⁵ He came from a secular family with no direct exposure to

¹ This paper was presented to the faculties of Presbyterian Theological Seminary and Luther W. New Jr. Theological College in Dehradun in September 2014. I thank them for their interest and stimulating interaction about the content of the paper. Pannenberg died on the 5 September, just few weeks before the paper was presented.

² F. Leron Shults, *The Postfoundationalist Task of Theology: Wolfhart Pannenberg and the New Theological Rationality* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 84-92.

³ F. Leron Shults, "A Theology of Everything? Evaluating Pannenberg's Interdisciplinary Method—Review Essay" *Christian Scholar's Review* 29, no. 1 (1998):155-63.

⁴ P. Clayton, "Anticipation and Theological Method", *The Theology of Wolfhart Pannenberg* C. E. Braaten and P. Clayton, eds. (Minneapolis: Augsburg; 1988), 123, recognises, and demonstrates, that "the concept of anticipation lies at the heart of Pannenberg's theological project".

⁵ For a short appreciation of Pannenberg and a discussion of his life see my recent tribute to him at <http://www.abc.net.au/religion/articles/2014/09/09/4084194.htm> or more fully see J. A. McClean, *From the Future: getting to grips with Pannenberg's thought* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2013), 1-43.

the church or the Christian faith and his first encounter with Christianity came through reading the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900). Pannenberg was not, finally, convinced by Nietzsche's critique of Christianity, but he always considered it something to be overcome rather than ignored. Soon after beginning to read Nietzsche, Pannenberg had an experience which opened him to the possibility of the existence of God.

The single most important experience occurred in early January 1945, when I was 16 years old. On a lonely two-hour walk home from my piano lesson, seeing an otherwise ordinary sunset, I was suddenly flooded by light and absorbed in a sea of light which, although it did not extinguish the humble awareness of my finite existence, overflowed the barriers that normally separate us from the surrounding world. ... I did not know at the time that January 6 was the day of Epiphany, nor did I realize that in that moment Jesus Christ had claimed my life as a witness to the transfiguration of this world in the illuminating power and judgment of his glory. But there began a period of craving to understand the meaning of life, and since philosophy did not seem to offer the ultimate answers to such a quest, I finally decided to probe the Christian tradition more seriously than I had considered worthwhile before.⁶

When Pannenberg returned to Berlin to study after the war he met Christians who were "jolly and joyous human beings", nothing like Nietzsche had led him to expect. Indeed, he was attracted to Christianity and began to study theology.

Having come to Christianity from secularism he was aware that faith is not straightforward for many modern people and he did not lightly dismiss the criticisms of intellectual atheism. His philosophy teacher Karl Lowith, had been a student of Wilhelm Dilthey and Martin Heidegger — two critics of metaphysics and belief in God. They both thought that a historical study of philosophy showed that metaphysical beliefs are constantly changing and so cannot be reliable. Why should we accept that there is an unchanging stable reality if the description of that reality is itself always changing? Lowith conveyed to the young Pannenberg the importance of this question and he saw the imperative that any serious belief in God must be able to supply an answer. At the same time Gerhard von Rad introduced him to an approach to Old Testament exegesis which was both critical and theological and focussed on God's revelation in history.

⁶ Pannenberg, "God's Presence", *Christian Century* (11 March 1981): 260.

Pannenberg's initial Epiphany experience, his reaction to Nietzsche, the critiques of Dilthey and Heidegger and the influence of von Rad all combined to set the direction of his thought.⁷ He sought to show that, as he had sensed in his vision, in God there is a single unifying truth for the whole of reality. In order to show this he had to overcome the criticisms of metaphysics mounted by the early post-modern philosophers (Nietzsche, Dilthey and Heidegger) who thought that reality is too fragmented and too subject to historical change to be open to any valid metaphysical explanation.

Pannenberg move is not a mere return to classical metaphysics, rather he meets the historicists on their own ground. He argues that God's work in history leads finally to an eschatological unity in which the glory of God will fill the earth as the waters cover the sea (Hab. 2:14). He admits that reality is fractured and changing *at present* but argues that the Christian hope is for a final glorious unity. This eschatological reality is not yet present, but is truly anticipated in the resurrection of Christ, so on the basis of God's work in history focussed on the resurrection of Christ we can assert a unified understanding of reality, a valid metaphysic.

Pannenberg's thought developed from the 1950s to the 1990s along remarkably consistent lines. His burden was to demonstrate the rational validity of holding the Christian faith, and particularly to show that the "true Infinite", that is the reality which determines and unifies all reality, is the loving Holy Trinity of Scripture. The critiques of metaphysics reject the existence of the "true Infinite" or the Absolute. In terms framed decades after Pannenberg began his project they are part of the postmodern "incredulity towards metanarratives".⁸ Pannenberg aimed to show that the only way in which there can be a unified understanding of the world is if the true God unifies reality.⁹ So in *Systematic Theology* he argues that God's unity is "the unity of the true Infinite which

⁷ In linking Pannenberg's thought to his report of the Epiphany experience I do not mean to imply that this is the full explanation of his commitment to a Christian vision. It is, however, interesting, that he himself reports this as an important start to his own journey from secularism to Christian faith.

⁸ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge, Theory and History of Literature*, G. Bennington and B. Massumi trans. (Original French edition, 1979; English edition, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984): xxiv.

⁹ Chris Mostert, *God and the Future* (Edinburgh/London/New York: T&T Clark/Continuum, 2002), 3, explains that "in the wake of the breakdown of classical metaphysical assumptions, speaking plausibly about God is far from simple. In Pannenberg's view, nothing less than a new understanding of reality—a new metaphysics—is required for this task". Mostert shows that 'temporality' is the major challenge to Pannenberg's desire to present an "ontology of the whole" (69-75).

transcends the antithesis to what is distinct from it.”¹⁰ While this can only be fully shown in the consummation, this unity is anticipated in the doctrine of Trinity.¹¹

Pannenberg’s metaphysical proposal

In classic Aristotelian metaphysics, essences determine ends. A thing exists for a certain purpose or goal because it has an essence and this essence brings the thing into existence. Taking the example of a sphere, Aristotle concludes that “there *is* no other cause of the potential sphere’s being an actual sphere; this was the essence of each”.¹² That is, the sphere existed as a sphere because, even in its existence as a potential sphere, it contained a ‘spherical essence’. This is straightforward and relatively common sense. Through time, things can and should develop into a full expression of what they are in essence. A seed is potentially a great tree, under the correct conditions it will germinate and grow into just that kind of tree, and the outcome of the historical process is grounded in the essence which existed at the beginning of the process.

Pannenberg inverts Aristotle’s claims and argues that ends determine essences. That is what comes about at the end constitutes identity, and only because it comes about in the end is it present, in anticipation, all along. What exists in the present depends on what it will be in the future.

We sometimes talk in a way which reflects something of Pannenberg’s insight. I will illustrate with an Australian example. I can state that “Sydney, the largest city in Australia was established in 1788”. But is this true? It wasn’t true in 1788 — those who first settled the area were not founding a city and did not call it Sydney, and were not part of a nation called Australia. It is only because of what has happened in the years since then that my statement is now true, though it is a statement about 1788. So an event in 1788 has its meaning because of events which, at the time, were in the future. An initial reaction to this approach may be to clarify the language and say “the area which later became Sydney, the largest city in a nation which once it was formed was called Australia, was first settled in 1788”. However Pannenberg’s approach suggests that our first statement reflects something more than a lack of precision. Even if we frame the proposition more carefully to take note of the temporal changes, it remains the case that we are interested in the

¹⁰ W. Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, G.W. Bromiley trans., 3 vols, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark; 1991-1997), 1, 445.

¹¹ Pannenberg, *ST* 1, 442, states that until the consummation “the world and humanity as they are do not fully correspond to the loving will of the Creator”.

¹² Aristotle, *Aristotle in Twenty-three Volumes*. Volume 17. *The Metaphysics. Books 1-9*, trans. H. Tredennick (London: Heinemann, 1975), VIII.vi.5, 425.

events of 1788 only because of later events and the meaning of an event some 226 years ago is determined by what happens after it.

However Pannenberg's point is not simply that what comes about in the future determines the past meaning of the past, but that all things have their essence or reality because of *God's future*. God's future brings an end which completes and stabilises the history which precedes it. If history offered only constant development and change, then the future would always simply change the past. What may be true about Sydney now, may turn out to be something quite different in another century. Nothing and no one would have a stable identity or existence. In contrast, the Christian conviction that finally all things find their completion in unity with God gives a promise of a stable future. The security of identity now is based on the final state of all things in God's future. Pannenberg expresses this by stating that things are what they are now in anticipation of what they will be.

It is not that the eschatological completion cancels or diminishes what has come before. Rather it sums it all up and brings it into perfect unity. So that which has been distended through time is unified in the future of eternity. One image Pannenberg uses for this is that of a musical chord. What has been played as a melody is now summed up and unified in communion with God as a full harmony.

Pannenberg argues that an anticipatory view allows for the historicity of knowledge without conceding the case to a thorough-going epistemological relativism. This is particularly important in theology, for discussion of the Absolute in any meaningful way is impossible if the case of epistemological relativism is granted, since true knowledge of the Absolute cannot be ultimately relative.¹³

When Pannenberg uses the concept of anticipation he expresses a notion that is both epistemological and ontological.¹⁴ The epistemological notion is straightforward: a thing is revealed as it is and known and understood in its essence at the end of its existence and fully at the end of the historical process. It is only when all events have played out that we can finally say what each thing is. The ontological notion is counterintuitive: what is revealed as the essence is *determined* from the end of the process, so that a thing has its essence during the temporal process

¹³ Alan D. Galloway, "Theology Today", in *The History of Christian Theology* Volume 1 *The Science of Theology*, (ed. G.R. Evans, Alister E. McGrath, Allan D. Galloway; Marshall Pickering: Basingstoke, 1986), 347, comments that Pannenberg's "viewpoint lays the foundation for the reintegration of the historical and existential with the metaphysical and essential".

¹⁴ See also Mostert, *God and the Future*, p. 116.

in anticipation of the final reality. The correlate to this claim is that because the essence has been present, in anticipation, throughout the process it can be known provisionally before the end.

The fact that what exists at the end of history is constitutive for present reality is what Pannenberg in an early article calls “the power of the future”. There he states that “the future creates the past and the present”.¹⁵ In *Metaphysics and the Idea of God* he makes a similar assertion: “the future is to be construed as the source of the wholeness of finite being, and its being as the anticipation of its future”.¹⁶

What to make of Pannenberg’s metaphysics?

Pannenberg’s proposal can be assessed in several ways — against philosophical criteria or on the basis of an examination of how the proposal is employed in his theology.¹⁷ In this paper I will compare it to the New Testament presentation of eschatology. Pannenberg’s proposal makes use of the notion of ‘realised eschatology’: that Jesus’ life, death and resurrection and the coming of the Spirit are proleptic of the eschaton. Each is described in eschatological terms so that the Old Testament expectation of the “Day of the Lord” is found in all three events (Mk 9:1; Matt. 12:28; 27:51–53; Acts 2:17–21), even though it still awaits a final Day in the return of Christ. Twentieth century biblical scholarship has argued that a realised or a ‘now–not yet’ tension runs all the way through the New Testament.¹⁸ The question I ask in the paper is how well Pannenberg’s proposal reflects New Testament eschatology?

Some methodological questions

¹⁵ W. Pannenberg, *Theology and the Kingdom of God*, Richard John Neuhaus, ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969); 56, 61.

¹⁶ *MIG*, p. 88.

¹⁷ In *From the Future*, 91-151 I consider how Pannenberg’s proposal affects his Christology, doctrine of Reconciliation and Theology proper.

¹⁸ For classic discussions see Werner Kümmel, *Promise and Fulfilment* (London: SCM, 1957); Reginald H. Fuller, *The Mission and Achievement of Jesus* (London: SCM, 1954); Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus* (London, SCM: 1963) and *New Testament Theology* (London: SCM, 1971); George E. Ladd, *The Presence of the Future* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974). This view has continued to be affirmed by more recent scholars; so Wright, *New Testament and the People of God*, (London: SPCK, 1992), 459, concludes, “it is basic to early Christianity that the Jewish hope has already been fulfilled. But the very shape of this belief demanded that there be another hope, a hope yet to come”.

It could be objected that we cannot consider ‘the eschatology of the New Testament’ since the New Testament texts themselves are not consistent on this matter. However, it is a commonplace in New Testament scholarship to treat the ‘now–not yet’ tension as a feature of the thought of all, or most, of the New Testament.¹⁹ Further, I will examine the Synoptic Gospels, John’s Gospel and Paul’s writings separately and note differences between them, arguing that the eschatology of John’s Gospel is a particular challenge to Pannenberg’s account.

A second possible objection is that I assume that theology is bound to the thought forms of the New Testament while this is not Pannenberg’s own method. Primarily, Pannenberg holds that the value of the New Testament is in its testimony to the revelation of Jesus, which is understood in the light of historical-critical study and not simply from the text of the New Testament.²⁰ So it may seem that the thought forms in which the New Testament presents its witness are secondary in Pannenberg’s theology. Yet Pannenberg applies historical criticism conservatively and works closely with the text of Scripture as he develops his thought. What is more, his own basis for the assessment of theology is that “statements in theology are to be judged not substantiated if . . . they cannot be shown to express implications of biblical traditions”²¹. That is, he is interested in the patterns of teaching in the Bible. This criterion invites an assessment of the way Pannenberg has developed biblical concepts. Further, Pannenberg claims that his use of anticipation draws on the apocalyptic thought reflected in the New Testament. He does not claim to demythologise these thought forms, so it is valid to ask how well his account reflects New Testament eschatology.

Pannenberg’s schema: anticipation–actualisation

Pannenberg’s theology is structured on a schema of ‘anticipation-actualisation’. This can be most easily discerned by considering the points at which he discusses the mid-twentieth century debate about the tension between the sayings of Jesus about the kingdom as future and those that refer to the kingdom as present. Some scholars accepted one or other group of sayings as

¹⁹ e.g. Thomas R. Schreiner, *New Testament Theology: Magnifying God in Christ* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 115-16 treats the tensions between the already and the not-yet as the organising principle for his work and argues that the same tension can be found in all parts of the New Testament.

²⁰ Alister E. McGrath, “Christology and Soteriology: A Response to Wolfhart Pannenberg’s Critique of the Soteriological Approach to Christology”, *TZ* 42?3 (1986): 228, argues for the significance of the Gospels as “witnesses and expressions of faith” in explicit contrast to Pannenberg’s treatment of them.

²¹ W. Pannenberg, *Theology and the Philosophy of Science*, F. McDonagh, trans. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976), 345.

authentic.²² Pannenberg emphasises a futuristic interpretation, in which the kingdom is predominantly a future event though its effects are brought into the time of Jesus' minister. In an early article, Pannenberg explains that the eschatology of the kingdom is not "future extension and completion of that which has broken in [sic] the present". Rather, "in the ministry of Jesus the futurity of the Reign of God became a power determining the present". He claims that in Jesus the kingdom "becomes determinative of the present and therefore becomes present" (so the appearance of Jesus constitutes the arrival of God).²³ That is, the present is what it is because of the future.

This emphasis on the future is a key part of Pannenberg's project. In his christology Pannenberg views the resurrection as determining the reality of what came before.²⁴ He argues that Jesus' identity as Saviour is an aspect of his pre-Easter life only because of the resurrection.²⁵ His affirmation of the pre-existence of the Son depends on the historical life of Jesus and his resurrection. That is, the pre-existence of the Son is an anticipation of what is actualised in history and finally in the eschaton. In turn, the saving effect of Jesus' death and resurrection depends on anticipation. For Pannenberg statements about Jesus as Saviour are only true when the correlate of "saved and reconciled humanity" comes into existence. As such, they "anticipate something that is still open to question in the course of history".²⁶ The present work of the Spirit, which brings about the reconciliation is also anticipatory because the Spirit "himself is eschatological reality".²⁷ He is the "eschatological gift" and his work is an "eschatological event." So his work of completion of reconciliation is an "anticipation of the eschatological outpouring of Spirit".²⁸ In Pannenberg's account, there is a line of anticipatory events stretching through history. The son exists "before the creation of the world" because of Jesus' life; Jesus' life is the presence of the kingdom because of the resurrection; Jesus death and resurrection are salvation because a saved and reconciled

²² A. Schweitzer and Weiss portrayed Jesus as having a (futuristic) 'consistent eschatology', Dodd gave definitive form to the view of 'realised eschatology'. Between these were a series of mediating positions (Kümmel, Jüngel, Jeremias on the German scene), for a helpful summary see C.C. Caragounis "Kingdom of God/Heaven", in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, J. B.Green, S. McKnight, I. H. Marshall, eds, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 420-22.

²³ *TKG*, 133, cf See *ST 2*, 327-34.

²⁴ *ST 2*, 345.

²⁵ *ST 2*, 445 explains, "The historical Jesus ... was neither priest nor king nor, in the strict sense, prophet".

²⁶ *ST 2*, 442-43.

²⁷ *ST 3*, 6. See also *ST 2*, 383-84, for a discussion of the doctrine of God with regard to Spirit as the unity of Father and Son, and so of economic and immanent Trinity; and *ST 3*, 622-26, for exposition of the work of the Spirit in the consummation of salvation.

²⁸ *ST 3*, 7.

humanity is formed; the work of the Spirit is reconciliation because he is eschatological reality. So all of these are only what they are because they will be completed in the eschaton and the eschaton is their summation.

This summary of Pannenberg's treatment of the eschatological tension shows that in his discussion of Biblical material, as in his metaphysical proposal, the 'weight' rests on the future. Mostert concludes that for Pannenberg "the futurity of the kingdom of God is primary" and "it is not a question of *realised* eschatology; the eschaton is still future".²⁹ It is the future that constitutes the present and it is from the future that the kingdom irrupts. Certainly, the future comes into the present and its identity depends on what occurs in history, but Pannenberg repeatedly shows that the reality of the Son's identity, of reconciliation and of God's identity can be affirmed because they to exist in the eschaton. Each phase in redemption draws its significance and power from what follows it, from that which it anticipates.

New Testament schema: achievement–consummation

In contrast to Pannenberg's approach the New Testament has a pattern of achievement–consummation. I will explore three points where this emerges: the presentation of the kingdom in "deeds of power" in the Synoptic Gospels, Johannine eschatology and Pauline eschatology. The discussion will consider how Pannenberg deals with the same texts and themes.

Synoptic Gospels and deeds of power

According to Schreiner, in the Synoptic Gospels "the kingdom was inaugurated in Jesus' ministry but not yet consummated".³⁰ The inauguration involves the accomplishment in and by Jesus of much that was expected in Jewish eschatology. The presentation of Jesus' deeds of power (δυνάμεις, see Mark 1:13; cf. 1:39; 3:14-15; 6:12-13; Matt. 4:23) is a theme in the Synoptic Gospels that shows the presence of an inaugurated eschatology.

Pannenberg has little to say about Jesus' pre-Easter works. *Systematic Theology* and *Jesus—God and Man* make passing references, and mainly present the claims that miracles could only

²⁹ Mostert, *God and the Future*, 42, 113.

³⁰ Schreiner, *New Testament Theology*, 79.

partially confirm Jesus' claims.³¹ The point that requires exploration is not the revelatory value of these works, but the light they throw on the eschatology of the Gospels. In mid-twentieth century discussion Luke 11:20 and Matthew 12:28 was a focus of interest, and particularly the meaning of ἔφθασεν in those verses. Does Jesus claim his exorcisms show that the kingdom of God 'has come' or that it 'is about to come'? Pannenberg reflects views which translate the word as 'is about to come'.³² This view follows Schweitzer's understanding that Jesus has a 'consistent eschatology'. Bultmann, to whom Pannenberg refers, has a similar understanding of eschatological views of the historical Jesus.³³

In contrast, Wright reports, "exegetes now agree that this [word] denotes the emphatic presence, not just imminent futurity, of the kingdom".³⁴ This is not to deny that Jesus' deeds of power have an aspect of looking forward to the fullness of the kingdom. They are, however, not presented as anticipatory in Pannenberg's terms, for they are a powerful presence of God's kingdom which is being established by the presence and works of Jesus. The not-yet dimension of the Synoptic Gospels seems to rest on what it achieved in the 'now', while for Pannenberg the 'now' has its reality because of the eschaton. Blackburn, for instance, asserts, "the synoptists regard Jesus' miracles ... as one mode of God's assertion of his royal power, so that while the kingdom in its fullness still lies in the future, it has already become a reality in Jesus' words and works".³⁵

The conclusion that the Synoptics do not present merely anticipatory eschatology is reinforced by a consideration of Jesus' exorcisms. The crucial pericope (Mark 3:27; Matt. 12:29) indicates that these are evidence of the present defeat of Satan in Jesus' ministry (the tying of the strong man) not as evidence of a future defeat. In Matthew, Jesus' works identify him as the messianic servant (Matt. 8:17; 12:15-21). In Luke, healings are the work of Jesus who by the Spirit brings "the year of the Lord's favour" (Luke 4:22; cf. 7:20-23). In all these cases the Gospels claim more than 'anticipation'. Witherington represents a widely held conclusion that in Jesus' miracles people

³¹ W. Pannenberg, *Jesus—God and Man*, L. L. Wilkins and D. A. Priebe, trans. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1968), 64.

³² JGM refers to R. Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, K. Grobel, trans. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1951), 1:7, where Bultmann concludes that a series of texts which emphasise the presence of the kingdom "does not mean that God's reign is already here; but it does mean that it is dawning". John Nolland, *Luke 9:21–18:34* (Dallas: Word, 1993), 640 refers to Wilhelm Michaelis, *Das Evangelium nach Matthäus* (1949), 2:154, for the particular view that ἔφθασεν means "to come ahead of time" and represents "a limiting case of drawing near, that still does not signify presence".

³³ See Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, 1:4-11.

³⁴ N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, (London; SPCK, 1999), 46; cf. B. Witherington, *Jesus, Paul and the End*, (Downers Grove; InterVarsity Press, 1992), 68-69.

³⁵ B. L. Blackburn, "Miracles and Miracle Stories", *DJG*, 550.

experienced the kingdom — “the *basileia* in the present means the inbreaking of God’s dynamic saving power”.³⁶ Again, it is important to note that the presence of the kingdom still awaits a consummation but that the presence now is the guarantee of the eschatological consummation, rather than the present reality depending on the eschaton.

Johannine eschatology

Dodd famously commented on John’s realised eschatology: “All that the church hoped for in the second coming of Christ is already given in its present experience of Christ through the Spirit”.³⁷ In John, eschatological blessings are present and achievements expected in the eschaton are proclaimed as accomplished and all are focussed in the historical life of Jesus: judgement occurs in Jesus’ ministry (9:35-34; 12:31), eternal life may be experienced (5:26; 6:57), resurrection is present (11:25) and living water is available (4:14). Referring to Jesus’ pre-Easter ministry Allison comments, “One is tempted to say that in John, Jesus is the eschaton, its real content”. This means that “when Jesus came the end came”.³⁸

Dorothy Lee explains that John’s eschatology moves from the “strictly apocalyptic” and “understands that everything representing ultimacy in the Christian faith belongs firmly in the present” so that “no longer is salvation of the future; now it has definitively engaged and transfigured” the present. She claims that “the peculiar shape of Johannine eschatology means that what is forged by the incarnation ... is no longer susceptible to the constraints of time”.³⁹ Even if Lee overstates the realised dimension of John’s eschatology, she makes the point that the ‘weight’ of John’s presentation rests in the “achievement” of the incarnation.

Similarly, Schreiner presents John’s eschatology through a study of the motif of eternal life. He states that “the gift of life in the present age is available only because Jesus is the resurrection and

³⁶ Witherington, *Jesus, Paul and the End*, 69.

³⁷ Charles H. Dodd, *The Apostolic Preaching and Its Developments* (New York: Willet, Clark; 1937), 121. In the years since, Dodd’s view has been qualified by a recognition that there is a future aspect to John’s eschatology (John 6:39; 14:1-3; 21:22). R.E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John* Anchor Bible (London : Geoffrey Chapman, 1966, 1971), 2: 626-27, suggests that the original reference of the material in 14:3 was the parousia, though this has been reinterpreted “in terms of the death of a Christian”.

³⁸ Dale C. Allison, “Eschatology”, *DJG*, 209.

³⁹ Dorothy Lee, “Theodicy and Eschatology in John”, in *Theodicy and Eschatology*, Bruce Barber and David Neville eds. (Hindmarsh, SA: ATF Press, 2005), 55-56, 58.

the life” and that “John anchors the believer’s enjoyment of life to the resurrection of Jesus Christ”.⁴⁰ Although Schreiner does note it, John understands life to be available in the ministry and words of Jesus before the passion (John 3:36; 4:14; 5:24; 6:33, 47; 11:25). In the incarnation the light and life of all (John 1:4) and of the gift of the Spirit (John 1:33) are present. That is, John presents the person and ministry of Jesus as already offering eschatological life (ζωὴν αἰώνιον). He also presents Jesus’ death as an eschatological achievement, viewing the cross and resurrection together as Jesus’ ‘exaltation’ or ‘glorification’ (3:14; 8:28; 12:32; 13:32; 17:1). It is the moment of “the judgement of this world”, when “the ruler of this world will be driven out” (John 12:31).

Pannenberg comments on John’s eschatology, referring to John 5:24.

The eschatological future and the present of Jesus’ message go together but without absorbing the future in the present. Instead the future is what gives the present its hidden meaning.⁴¹

He is correct to claim that John does not absorb the future into the present, and even that the future continues to inform the meaning of the present. Yet, Pannenberg’s conception of “the future” determining the reality of the present does not capture well the relationship between the present and the future in John’s thought. For example, Pannenberg attributes the words of John 5:24 — “anyone who hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life, and does not come under judgement, but has passed from death to life” — to the “Johannine Christ”, leaving open the question of whether the movement from death to life happened in Jesus’ pre-Easter ministry. John’s eschatology reflects an achievement–consummation schema far more than it does Pannenberg’s anticipation–actualisation schema.

Pauline eschatology

The presence of an eschatological tension in Pauline theology is commonly recognised, often termed “realised”, “inaugurated” or “proleptic” eschatology.⁴² If Paul’s view of the Christian life

⁴⁰ Schreiner, *New Testament Theology*, 84.

⁴¹ *ST* 3, 604.

⁴² Andrew T. Lincoln, *Paradise Now and Not Yet* (Cambridge/ New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 197 n.27. The following treatment draws considerably on Lincoln’s work. Lincoln’s work continues to be a point of reference in Pauline scholarship and his conclusions are largely accepted; e.g. Larry J. Kreitzer, “Eschatology” in *Dictionary of Paul and his Letters*, D. G. Reid, *et al.*, eds. (Downers Grove /Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 257; Ben Witherington, *Paul’s Narrative Thought World: the*

is that of a “foretaste” of the kingdom, which still awaits its reality, then this supports Pannenberg’s position. If, however, Paul presents the Christian life as already eschatological in itself though not yet complete, this suggests a different view to that of Pannenberg.⁴³

Lincoln draws attention to the significance of the heavenly realm for Paul’s expression of the realised aspect of his eschatology. He argues that in Paul “what is to be revealed at the end can be thought of as already existing”, and that now “the eschatological centre of gravity has moved to the heavenly realm”.⁴⁴ He argues that when Paul wishes to stress the realised aspect he typically moves to “spatial categories” and appeals to “heavenly realities”.⁴⁵ Paul uses the heavenly dimension to express the present enjoyment by believers of the benefits of eschatological salvation. Lincoln opposes any confusion of Paul’s view of the heavenly realm with a timeless conception, but insists that heaven is the place where the exalted Christ now reigns and is the arena of eschatological salvation that still awaits the end of salvation history. He explains his view as follows.

The image should not ... leave the impression of the heavenly dimension as a static reality, for it signifies a reality which is, but is yet to come ... the heavenly realm is part of the forward-moving history of salvation ... it has a dynamic effect on the believing community, as its mother providing life and as a realm of freedom making possible liberation from the bondage of the old age.⁴⁶

In contrast, when Pannenberg uses the idea of heaven in theological discussion he interprets the biblical imagery in metaphysical terms explaining heaven as “the sphere of [God’s] eternal presence which is inaccessible to us” and as “a figure of speech for the eternal presence of God in which he is present to all temporal things”.⁴⁷ For Pannenberg eternity is without time flow for it is

Tapestry of Tragedy and Triumph (Louisville Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994), 351, n.237; Murray J. Harris, “Resurrection and Life in the Pauline Corpus”, in *Life in the Face of Death: The Resurrection Message of the New Testament*, ed. R. N. Longenecker, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 170; Richard N. Longenecker, “Is there Development in Paul’s Resurrection Thought?”, in *Life in the Face of Death*, ed. R. Longenecker, 202.

⁴³ See Witherington, *Paul’s Narrative Thought World*, 131-34, 160-211.

⁴⁴ Lincoln, *Paradise*, 21-22, 172. Ephesians uses the plural adjective as a substantive in a dative construction (ἐν τοῖς ἐπουρανίοις) six times.

⁴⁵ Lincoln, *Paradise*, 21-22 draws attention to the double ἐστίν referring to ἄνω Ἱερουσαλήμι in Gal. 4:26.

⁴⁶ Lincoln, *Paradise*, 29; cf. 101-106 on Phil. 1:23 and 3:20-21.

⁴⁷ M Gilbertson, *God and History in the Book of Revelation: New Testament Studies in Dialogue with Pannenberg and Moltmann* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 175, notes a similar difference between Pannenberg’s eschatology and the worldview of the Apocalypticist. He writes that “Pannenberg’s understanding of divine transcendence is expressed in predominantly temporal terms, whereas in Revelation divine transcendence is expressed in both temporal and spatial terms”.

“eternal present”: “the eternal Today of God ... has no need of recollection and expectation. God’s day lasts”.⁴⁸ Thus Pannenberg cannot conceive of “heaven” as “part of the forward-moving history of salvation”, for the heavenly eternity is the ontological terminus of history.

Lincoln shows that 1 Corinthians 15:47-48 views Jesus’ resurrection existence as heavenly and teaches that in union with Jesus by the Spirit believers now participate in that existence and can be called heavenly.⁴⁹ In Colossians the apostle counters fears of ‘the powers’ by presenting Christ’s triumphant reconciliation of the heavenly powers in his earthly work (Col. 1:19-20; 2:15; 3:1).⁵⁰ This triumph guarantees salvation and eschatological inheritance (Col. 1:5, 12). Paul assures the Colossian believers that they may put their fears aside.⁵¹ This does not deny a future hope (Col. 3:4), but stresses the present reality of that which will be finally revealed. A similar pattern emerges in Ephesians, highlighted by the striking expression of ‘realised eschatology’ that believers have been raised up with Christ and seated with him in the heavenly realm (Eph. 2:6).

When Lincoln speaks of ‘anticipation’ in Paul’s view of the Christian life, he means something rather different to Pannenberg.⁵² He views the triumph of Christ as already established in the heavenly realm that is contemporaneous with present existence but spatially removed. Christian anticipation is fellowship now in what is already established but is not yet manifest on earth. Lincoln’s view of Paul’s eschatology is that of achievement followed by consummation. Pannenberg sets the achievement of the salvation in the eschaton, which has an anticipatory presence.

Conclusion

⁴⁸ *ST* 3, 598. See Mostert, *God*, 141-45; Ted Peters, "Eschatology: eternal now or cosmic future?" *Zygon* 36/2 (June 2001), 353-54.

⁴⁹ Lincoln, *Paradise*, 53.

⁵⁰ Lincoln, *Paradise*, 125; note the allusion to Ps. 110 in Col. 3:1.

⁵¹ Lincoln, *Paradise*, 125, explains that “The heavenly realm centres around the one with whom they have been raised and since he is in the position of authority at God’s right hand, nothing can prevent their access to this realm and to God’s presence”. He notes that the different pastoral concern of Colossians means Paul “comes perilously close to the position [of realised eschatology] he passionately fights in 1 Corinthians 15” (133).

⁵² Lincoln, *Paradise*, 179, comments that, “Paul’s Christian apocalyptic is defined both by the future and by the recent past and is about what happens when the life of the age to come has been made available through Christ’s resurrection and how that life does not remain centred in heaven but works itself out on earth in the present period of history”.

My argument is that the New Testament presents eschatology as a present achievement brought about in Christ, realised now in heaven and awaited and anticipated in the lives of believers. In contrast Pannenberg views salvation and the kingdom as realities which lie in the future and have an anticipatory presence. His schema is ‘anticipation–actualisation’, while the New Testament presentation can be described as achievement–consummation.

Vanhoozer observes that “Wolfhart Pannenberg’s eschatologically oriented theology enshrines apocalyptic as the way to understand the whole of scripture”. This is not precisely the case, since it is a particular way of viewing aspects of apocalyptic that provides the basis of Pannenberg’s theology, as evidenced by the fact that Gilbertson uses apocalyptic literature to raise questions about Pannenberg’s account. Vanhoozer also argues that, in contrast to Pannenberg, “a nonreductive orthodoxy ... seeks to do justice to the variety of biblical literature and to respond to each literary form according to its own kind”.⁵³ This is a valid criticism of Pannenberg’s thought. This paper shows that there is a significant element of biblical eschatology not reflected in Pannenberg’s approach.

Thiselton is more appreciative of Pannenberg. He claims that in the New Testament “we find strong justification for identifying metacritical or foundational realities with futurity” and that Pannenberg has established this insight as “a principle of hermeneutical theory” which is “not only coherent and intelligible, but deserves to be taken seriously in the widest context”.⁵⁴ My argument is that Pannenberg has identified futurity with foundational realities too strongly.

Why has Pannenberg appropriated the New Testament pattern in this way? I believe it is that his philosophical concerns finally triumph over his theological concerns. Further, I believe it can be shown that the metaphysical proposal, intriguing as it is, leads to significant problematic features in Pannenberg’s theology.⁵⁵

This critique does not deny the immense value of Pannenberg’s emphasis on eschatology in his thought. He gives an important reminder that all Christian understanding must be self-consciously ‘hopeful’ — that is done in the light of the coming glory of God. In concluding this discussion of Pannenberg, I suggest that much of what Pannenberg highlights should be applied

⁵³ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 29.

⁵⁴ A.C. Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics: the Theory and Practice of Transforming Biblical Reading* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 338.

⁵⁵ See *From the Future*, 155-57.

eschatologically rather than metaphysically. God's identity and the nature of his creation does not depend on God's future and the completion of God's plan, but simply on God. The Holy Trinity has fullness of life in and of himself and all other reality comes from him who is the first and the last (Is 41:4; 44:6; 48:12).⁵⁶ Our knowledge of God and his world is far from complete and awaits the final *apokalypsis*. "We know in part and we prophesy in part, but when completeness comes, what is in part disappears" (1 Cor. 13:9–10).

⁵⁶ John Webster, "Life in and of Himself: Reflections on God's Aseity" 107-24, *Engaging the Doctrine of God: Contemporary Protestant Perspectives*, B. L. McCormack, ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008).