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Final Destinies: Qualifications for Receiving an Eschatological Inheritance
by Mark S. Kinzer
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In *What Does It Mean To Be Saved?*, Regent College professor John Stackhouse points to a misunderstanding of salvation that he sees as endemic in the evangelical world:

In his gracious but penetrating response to the essays in this volume, Oxford professor John Webster wonders whether it is particularly North American evangelicals who need to be reminded that the Bible presents salvation as offering more than getting souls to heaven. My experience of teaching soteriology for several years at Regent College – an international graduate school of Christian studies whose students come from thirty-five countries on every continent except Antarctica – leads me to think that evangelicals far and wide also need their horizons expanded. Over and over, students have betrayed an understanding of salvation that amounted to a sort of spiritual individualism that is little better than Gnosticism.

In fact, we could make an important start simply by teaching that salvation is *not* about “Christians going to heaven.” Salvation is about God redeeming the whole earth...Salvation is about heading for the New Jerusalem, not heaven: a garden city on earth, not the very abode of God and certainly not a bunch of pink clouds in the sky...And salvation is not only about what is to come but also about what is ours to enjoy and foster here and now.¹

According to Stackhouse and his colleagues, evangelicals too often view salvation in negative terms (what we are saved *from*), and as forensic, individualistic, private and pietistic, and spiritualized. In contrast, the authors argue that salvation should be viewed primarily as positive, transformative, communal, relational, cosmic, and embodied.²

Even if salvation is far more than "souls going to heaven," we cannot divorce soteriology from eschatology, nor should we minimize the significance of identifying the criteria by which individuals qualify for the final installment of the eschatological gift. Let us formulate our question in a manner that avoids soteriological ambiguity or confusion: What qualifications must

¹ John G. Stackhouse, Jr. (editor), *What Does It Mean To Be Saved?* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 9-10.

² Most Messianic Jews would also consider salvation as dealing prominently with nations, and in particular with the nation of Israel.

individual human beings possess to inherit life in the world to come? Underlying this general question is a more specific one: Do we have grounds for hope that some who do not explicitly acknowledge Yeshua before death will be among those who inherit life in the world to come?³ Within the Messianic Jewish movement the driving concern is even more specific: Do we have grounds for hope that some Jewish people who do not explicitly acknowledge Yeshua in this life will be among the redeemed in the world to come?

I call this the question of final destinies. In my view, the good news proclaimed and lived by the apostles is primarily concerned with final destiny (in the singular): the eschatological consummation of covenant history and the created order in Messiah Yeshua by God's Spirit. However, that singular destiny is manifold and diverse, and encompasses the destinies of unique individuals. It is these eschatological destinies that will occupy my attention in this paper.

A thorough and compelling response to this question of final destinies would include at least four elements: (1) a study of the explicit biblical teaching on the topic, which would focus on the Apostolic Writings (since reward and judgment in the world to come is not a major theme in Tanakh); (2) a consideration of broader theological issues that have a bearing on the question;⁴ (3) an examination of the practical implications of the available responses;⁵ (4) a summary of the

³ The distinction between implicit and explicit faith goes back to the middle ages. For its use by Thomas Aquinas, see Matthew Levering, *Christ's Fulfillment of Torah and Temple* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2002), 23-24, 92-93.

⁴ Relevant theological issues include the meaning and significance of God's attributes of mercy and justice and the relationship between them; the divinity of Yeshua and his mediatorial role in creation, revelation, and redemption; the validity of the traditional doctrine of "original sin," and its implications for a free human response to God's gracious initiative; the implications of the paradigmatic cases of infant mortality and those with severe mental limitations; the nature of Israel's enduring covenant and the ecclesiological bond between the Jewish people and the Christian Church.

⁵ Practical implications include how the embrace of the various responses affect the following: motivation for outreach; the power and attractiveness of our presentation of the good news; our relationships with those who are outside the Yeshua-faith community (especially our fellow Jews); our attitudes towards the Jewish people through history and the Jewish religious tradition; the formation of personal character that bears the image of Yeshua.

various responses to the question that have been offered through the centuries, and the reception they have received in the community of faith.⁶

Given length restrictions, I will pursue here only the first of these inquiries: a study of what the Apostolic Writings have to say about final destinies. Even on this point I will need to limit myself to the first two sub-questions: What qualifications must individual human beings possess to inherit life in the world to come? Do we have grounds for hope that some who do not explicitly acknowledge Yeshua before death will be among those who inherit life in the world to come? Our answers to these sub-questions will have implications for the third sub-question (i.e., the case of Jewish people who lack explicit Yeshua-faith), but we will not examine this as a topic in its own right.⁷

Within the Apostolic Writings I find three distinct ways of approaching this topic. They correspond roughly to three spheres of apostolic influence and activity: (1) the apostolic tradition of Peter and James (as reflected especially in the Synoptic Gospels and the General Letters); (2) the apostolic tradition of Paul (as displayed in the letters which bear his name); and (3) the apostolic tradition of John (as embodied in the Gospel and Letters of John).⁸ I will begin with the tradition of Peter and James, and then take up the traditions of Paul and of John.⁹

⁶ For an excellent recent volume that covers much of this ground, written by an evangelical theologian with a missionary background, see Terrance L. Tiessen, *Who Can Be Saved?* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 2004).

⁷ Given the passionate concerns about this topic within the Messianic Jewish movement, it is unfortunate that I am unable to address this question explicitly in the present paper. However, in my view the question of non-Messianic Jews and the world to come must be examined in the broader context provided by the studies undertaken here and in my book, *Postmissionary Messianic Judaism* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2005).

⁸ Some texts (i.e., Acts, Hebrews, and Revelation) demonstrate an overlap of traditions. On the present topic, Revelation shares the perspective of the tradition of Peter and James. Acts and Hebrews are also closest to this tradition, though they likewise have elements in common with the tradition of Paul.

⁹ My focus in this paper on biblical "traditions" has a twofold purpose: (1) to facilitate the discerning of family resemblances among various strands of teaching in the Apostolic Writings, so as to enable an exegetical treatment that takes account of similarities and differences in language, conceptuality, and focus; and (2) to underline the fact that books whose authors are not themselves apostles (e.g., Mark, Luke) rely upon authoritative apostolic testimony. I am certainly not aiming to ascribe authority to underlying "traditions" apart from the canonical text -- and context -- in which they are embodied and transmitted. I am also not asserting any grand claims regarding the composition of the individual books. My purpose is in large part heuristic.

The Tradition of Peter and James

The tradition that derives from Peter and James has much to say on the topic of final destinies – the reward and punishment of individuals in the world to come. It is usually overshadowed by the traditions of Paul and John, and read only in the light of their distinctive terminologies and emphases. This is unfortunate, and constitutes an oversight that we as Messianic Jews (to whom this tradition is especially addressed) are especially well-suited to overcome. When studied on its own terms and taken seriously in its own right, the tradition of Peter and James challenges many popular assumptions and raises important questions.

One of the primary themes in this tradition's approach to final destinies is the warning against presumption: the misplaced confidence that *we* will be rewarded at the end, while *others* (who do not possess our qualifications) will be punished. The threatening words of John the Immerser, with which the story of Yeshua's mission begins, are typical:

John said to the crowds that came out to be immersed by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire." (Luke 3:7-9; see Matthew 3:7-10)¹⁰

Descent from Abraham – a Jewish genealogy – will not provide automatic entry into the final banquet. Similarly, Gentile descent will not ensure automatic exclusion:

"I tell you, many will come from east and west and will eat with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, while the heirs of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." (Matthew 8:11-12)

In Matthew's version of this saying, it is evident that those who "come from east and west" are Gentiles, since the words are uttered in response to the faithfulness of a Gentile centurion

¹⁰ All biblical citations are based on the NRSV, with my own modifications.

(Matthew 8:5-10). Accordingly, the "heirs of the kingdom" are Jews. Like the warning of John the Immerser, this teaching serves as an admonition against presumption based on Jewish identity.¹¹ Of course, it does not imply that *all* the "heirs of the kingdom" will be excluded, but instead contrasts the final destinies of many Gentiles with that of many Jews in order to challenge the comfortable assurance and exclusivism of the people of the covenant.

Yeshua's admonition against presumption extends beyond the claims of Jewish identity. He issues the same warning to his own disciples, and makes clear that their confession of faith in him as Lord, their public association with him, and even their mighty deeds done in his name will be insufficient to ensure their final destiny:

"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven. On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many deeds of power in your name?' Then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; go away from me, you evildoers.'" (Matthew 7:21-23)

This is an extremely significant text. It is not addressed to casual hearers of Yeshua, but to those who speak and act publicly in his name – and do so effectively! It is addressed to leaders of the Yeshua-movement – to us! Like the "heirs of the kingdom" in general, we must guard against the presumption that our participation in and apparently fruitful leadership of the community of the (renewed) covenant ensures our final destiny.¹²

Just as hopeful passages regarding the final destiny of Gentiles stand side by side with stern rebukes of Jewish presumption, so the tradition of Peter and James includes hopeful passages regarding non-Yeshua-followers that contrast with the above warning to his disciples. Of special

¹¹ The parallel in Luke has a different context, which leads to a different meaning. There the warning is issued to those who heard and saw Yeshua personally, among whom he lived and worked: "Then you will begin to say, 'We ate and drank in your presence, and you taught in our streets.'" (Luke 13:26). Those "thrust out" of the presence of the Patriarchs are not "the heirs of the kingdom," as in Matthew, but "you yourselves" (i.e., those who knew Yeshua; Luke 11:28). In this context, those who "come from east and west, and north and south" are not necessarily Gentiles, but those from outside the land of Israel, who could not have known Yeshua personally.

¹² This is a common theme in the tradition of Peter and James. See, for example, 2 Peter 2:21; Hebrews 2:1-3; 10:26-31. 12:25-26.

significance is the parable of the sheep and goats (Matthew 25:31-46). As Davies and Allison note, the Gospel of Matthew highlights the importance of this "word-picture of the Last Judgment" by placing it at the conclusion of Yeshua's fifth and final discourse.¹³ It is thus the climax of Yeshua's public mission. The beginning of the "word-picture" describes the scene: "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left" (Matthew 25:31-33). Whoever "all the nations" may be, they certainly include multitudes that were not part of the Yeshua-believing community during their lifetime. This is confirmed by the fact that they do not recognize Yeshua as the one they helped (25:37) or failed to help (25:44). Yet, many among them inherit the life of the world to come.

The "word-picture" of the sheep and the goats deals with people who have not consciously known Yeshua during their lifetimes. In another saying Yeshua even opens up the possibility of a happy ending for those who have opposed him:

Therefore I tell you, people will be forgiven for every sin and blasphemy, but blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven. Whoever speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come.¹⁴ (Matthew 12:31-32; see Luke 12:10)

Some Pharisees had asserted that Yeshua expelled demons by means of demonic power (i.e., magic). Yeshua sees this as an act of "speaking against the Holy Spirit," that is, attributing deeds that are manifestly good (and thus the work of God) to an evil source. It is to call good evil.

¹³ W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on The Gospel According to Saint Matthew* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997) 3:418.

¹⁴ Some exegetes imply that this text may refer only to the period of Yeshua's earthly mission, when he operated "incognito" (R. T. France, *The Gospel According to Matthew* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985], 210). However, would the community have preserved such a saying if it had no application to their lives? Such a reductionist explanation derives more from a preconceived doctrinal position that seeks to evade the force of the text than from serious theological exegesis.

According to Yeshua, this constitutes a basic rejection of God. In contrast, merely to speak against Yeshua is a less serious offense. It can be forgiven – that is, some of those who do it may inherit the life of the world to come.¹⁵

If being a Jew or a public follower of Yeshua is insufficient for inheriting the life of the world to come, and if being a Gentile or one outside the Yeshua-believing community does not exclude one from that life, what are the qualifications for a happy final destiny? The teaching of the tradition of Peter and James shows remarkable consistency in answering this question. Yeshua's words in Matthew 7:21 are emblematic of this answer: "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven." What counts are actions (i.e., words and deeds) that conform to the divine will.

Sometimes this tradition places particular emphasis on the action component:

"For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone *for what has been done*." (Matthew 16:27)

"I tell you, on the day of judgment you will have to give an account for every careless word you utter; for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned." (Matthew 12:36-37)

If you invoke as Father the one who judges all people impartially *according to their deeds*, live in reverent fear during the time of your exile. (1 Peter 1:17)

And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Also another book was opened, the book of life. And the dead were judged *according to their works*, as recorded in the books. And the sea gave up the dead that were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them, and all were judged *according to what they had done*. (Revelation 20:12-13)

¹⁵ On the basis of this text, Athol Dickson asks the following questions regarding the final destinies of Jewish people who do not believe in Yeshua: "Is it possible for people of this age who were taught since birth to 'speak against the Son of Man' to be forgiven for doing exactly as they have been trained to do?...Will a gracious God consider their situation, look into their hearts to see if they truly love him, and forgive 'their words spoken against the Son of Man?'" (*The Gospel according to Moses* [Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2003] 253). C. S. Lewis concluded from this text that "honest rejection of Christ, however mistaken, will be forgiven and healed" (*God in the Dock* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970] 111).

Sometimes the tradition emphasizes that the deeds required are those that conform to the will of God as expressed in the commandments (*mitzvot*) of the Torah, i.e., righteous deeds:

Then someone came to him and said, "Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?" And he said to him, "Why do you ask me about what is good? There is only one who is good. *If you wish to enter into life, keep the mitzvot.*" (Matthew 19:16-17)

"For I tell you, unless your *righteousness* exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." (Matthew 5:20)

The most important commandments that lead to life are those that summon us to love God and neighbor:

Just then a lawyer stood up to test Yeshua. "Rabbi," he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" He said to him: "What is written in the Torah? What do you read there?" He answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself." And he said to him, "You have given the right answer; *do this, and you will live.*" (Luke 10:25-28)

Blessed is anyone who endures temptation. Such a one has stood the test and will receive *the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him.* (James 1:12)

Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of *the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him?* (James 2:5)

You do well if you really fulfill *the Torah of the Kingdom* according to the scripture, "*You shall love your neighbor as yourself*" ... So speak and so act as those who are to be judged by *the Torah of liberty.* (James 2:8, 12)

The love that fulfills the Torah is not a sentiment, but an action done in the context of a relationship – a relationship with God, and a relationship with other human beings.

We may specify further the character of the love of neighbor commanded by Yeshua that serves as a key criterion for the inheritance of life. In so doing, we come to the heart of the teaching of Peter and James regarding final destinies. From what has been said thus far, one might think that the tradition of Peter and James presents an unattainable ideal of perfectionism that fails to take account of human sinfulness and our constant need for divine mercy. In reality,

these texts demonstrate a vivid awareness of our dependence on God's mercy, expressed concretely in the forgiveness of sins. But the way we avail ourselves of this mercy is by showing mercy ourselves:

"Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy." (Matthew 5:7)

"And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. . . For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses." (Matthew 6:12-15)

"Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. For with the judgment you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get." (Matthew 7:1-2)

For judgment will be without mercy to anyone who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment. (James 2:13)¹⁶

Yeshua also conveys this central teaching through the parable of the unforgiving servant (Matthew 18:23-35). A king forgives an enormous debt owed him by one of his ministers, but that same minister fails to forgive a tiny debt owed him by one of his slaves. The parable concludes in this way:

"Then his lord summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?' And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart." (Matthew 18:32-35)

All of the above texts provide classic examples of the traditional rabbinic principle of "measure for measure" (*middah keneged middah*). According to this principle, God will treat us in the same way we have treated others. Yeshua takes up this principle, but he applies it to only one feature of our conduct: if we want God to be generous and merciful toward us, we must be generous and merciful to others. This reflects Yeshua's sense that all human beings are in desperate need for mercy. Strict justice will not produce a good result for anyone. This does not

¹⁶ Texts on *tzedakah* show the same principle at work (e.g., Luke 6:38; 16:9-13, 19-31; 19:8-90).

lead him to emphasize faith rather than deeds, but instead to emphasize one aspect of how we act toward others – our generosity and readiness to forgive.¹⁷

According to the tradition of Peter and James, Yeshua also teaches that the final judgment which determines final destinies takes account of the unique circumstances, challenges, and opportunities of each individual. The judge assesses not only what the individual has done, but also the relationship between what they have done and what they were given. This aspect of the final judgment is especially prominent in the parable of the talents (Matthew 25:14-30), placed immediately before the parable of the sheep and goats. A master entrusts property to three servants: the first servant receives five talents, the second receives two talents, and the third receives one.¹⁸ The first servant goes into business, and produces an additional five talents for his master. The second servant does the same, and likewise doubles the initial investment. The response of the master in both cases is the same: "Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master" (25:21, 23). The third servant returns the deposit without addition, and is rebuked for it. If he had produced one additional talent – thus doubling the master's initial investment – he would have received the same commendation as the other two servants. Thus, the master's pleasure is dependent not simply on what each servant produces, but on what they have done with what they were given.

This principle of relative accountability is likewise reflected in another saying of Yeshua dealing with masters and slaves:

¹⁷ See Gabriele Boccaccini, *Middle Judaism* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 217-20. Boccaccini exaggerates the difference between the Yeshua tradition and Rabbinic thought on this topic, but his exposition of the teaching of the Yeshua tradition on forgiveness is superb.

¹⁸ A talent was worth more than fifteen years' wages of a laborer.

That slave who knew what his master wanted, but did not prepare himself or do what was wanted, will receive a severe beating. But the one who did not know and did what deserved a beating will receive a light beating. (Luke 12:47-48a)

The slave who did not know what was expected of him is still held accountable – presumably because he should have known! His ignorance is culpable. Nevertheless, his punishment is light in comparison to the slave who knew what his master wanted, and did not do it. The principle of justice illustrated by this example is then stated explicitly:

From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required; and from the one to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded (Luke 12:48b).

Yeshua here teaches that the final judgment will take account of what each of us knew and did not know, of the resources each of us had or lacked. The perfect justice of God will be administered in light of God's all-seeing eye.

The tradition of Peter and James calls for faith in Yeshua as God's elect servant, and insists that the afflicted are healed when they trust in him (e.g., Mark 2:5; 5:34, 36; 6:5-6; 10:52; Matthew 8:10, 13; 15:28).¹⁹ Nevertheless, this tradition nowhere presents explicit faith in Yeshua (or lack of such faith) as a criterion of judgment in the last day.²⁰ What then is Yeshua's role in the determination of final destinies? In order to understand the perspective of the tradition of Peter and James on this question, we must attend to the eschatological expectations displayed in this

¹⁹ In keeping with the usage of the synoptic gospels, Acts 4:9 employs the verb "be saved" (*sosotai*) to refer to bodily healing. It also attributes this healing to the "name" of Yeshua and to "the faith of his name" (3:16). This is the context for Peter's claim, "There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). Obviously, "salvation" has wider meaning here than just physical healing. However, it must include such manifestations of saving power. Given this fact, John Taylor's interpretation of the text has merit: "He was saying that Jesus of Nazareth is the source of every act of healing and salvation that has ever happened. He knew perfectly well that vast numbers of people had been healed without any knowledge of Jesus, yet he made the astounding claim that Jesus was the hidden author of all healing. He was the totally unique savior because he was totally universal" (cited by Tiessen, 85).

²⁰ Of the two possible exceptions, Revelation 21:8 and Mark 16:16, the *apistos* who are cast into the lake burning with fire are not "the unbelievers" (KJV, NASB, NIV) but "the faithless" (RSV, NRSV, NEB, ESV), "the unfaithful" (CEV), or "the untrustworthy" (Stern).. JB properly paraphrases as "those who break their word," while TEV has "the traitors." This reading is supported by Revelation's universal use of the positive form of the adjective (*pistos*) to mean "faithful" rather than "believing" (1:5; 2:10; 2:13; 3:14; 17:14; 19:11; 21:5; 21:6). The other possible exception to this generalization (Mark 16:16) will be treated later, for reasons to be explained at that point.

tradition. John the Immerser had proclaimed an imminent judgment on Israel as part of the birth pangs of the Messianic age (Matthew 3:1-12). Yeshua came to renew Israel's covenant (Luke 22:20) and to restore the twelve tribes (Matthew 19:28), but first he had to take upon himself the judgment that belonged to Israel so that Israel and the nations might receive divine forgiveness (Matthew 20:28; 26:28). As his death involves the bearing of Israel's judgment, so his resurrection anticipates and secures Israel's ultimate eschatological resurrection (Matthew 27:52-53).

Yeshua's redemptive work thus focuses first on Israel's – and the world's – final destiny. The destinies of individuals receive their particular meaning only within the framework of that singular but multifarious national and cosmic destiny. The mission of Yeshua thus has a direct bearing on the life and destiny of every individual. But does the tradition of Peter and James provide any further insight into what this entails?

This tradition tells us three additional things about Yeshua and the final destinies of individuals that are of great importance. First, Yeshua himself will be the judge who determines each destiny (Matthew 7:22-23; 10:33; 16:27; 25:31-33). His teaching and his example, which provide God's definitive interpretation of the essential requirements of the Torah, will serve as the standard of judgment,²¹ and his atoning sacrifice will make available God's forgiveness. But every individual will also encounter him face to face to receive his personal verdict on their lives.

Second, those who hear his call to discipleship and leave all to follow him, and remain faithful to the end, will inherit the life of the world to come (Matthew 19:21, 29; Mark 8:35). Following

²¹ Wolfhart Pannenberg notes that the Beatitudes allot the inheritance of the kingdom to categories of people whose character reflects the teaching and example of Yeshua, regardless of whether they have ever heard of him: “The message of Jesus is the norm by which God judges even in the case of those who never meet Jesus personally...all to whom the Beatitudes apply will have a share in the coming salvation whether or not they ever heard of Jesus in this life. For factually they have a share in Jesus and his message, as the day of judgment will make manifest.” (*Systematic Theology, Volume 3* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998], 615).

Yeshua is the perfect observance of the Torah (Matthew 19:16-21), and thus qualifies one for that inheritance. Those who live in a manner that acknowledges before the world their relationship to Yeshua, will have that relationship acknowledged by Yeshua the judge before the Father (Matthew 10:32). Even those who hear that call at the end of their lives, and respond sincerely, will be with Yeshua in Paradise (Luke 23:39-43). However, if one becomes a disciple and then, in a situation of stress, denies knowing Yeshua (like Peter in Matthew 26:69-75) and fails to repent (unlike Peter), then Yeshua the judge will deny that person before the Father (Matthew 10:33). This accords with the principle of accountability, "From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required" (Luke 12:48b).

Finally, as noted above, some who were not conscious and explicit followers of Yeshua will be welcomed at the end by Yeshua the judge with the words "Come, you that are blessed by my Father; inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world" (Matthew 25:34). But, according to this crucial "word-picture of the Last Judgment," these heirs of the kingdom actually had a history of responding faithfully to the personal call of Yeshua, and were inheriting the kingdom because of that response. That call had come through Yeshua's family members – the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, the imprisoned (Matthew 25:35-36, 40). Apparently, what Yeshua had said of the apostles also applies to the needy: "Whoever welcomes you welcomes me" (Matthew 10:40).²² Thus, even those who are never conscious of Yeshua's presence or call (Matthew 25:37-38, 44), which comes to all people, are judged by how they respond to that call.

²² Exegetes disagree over the identity of Yeshua's "family members" in Matthew 25. Some see them as disciples of Yeshua, either apostles or other suffering members of the community (see, for example Craig S. Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999], 604-6). Others, such as Davies and Allison, see them as the needy in general. While I incline to the latter view, it is significant, regardless, that (1) the sheep and goats are those outside the covenant community, and (2) they did not know that they were encountering Yeshua when they cared for his "family members."

To summarize: the apostolic tradition of Peter and James challenges the presumption of Jews and Yeshua-believers regarding final destinies, and insists that the final judgment will involve a just and merciful assessment of everyone's deeds. While the judgment will take account of the particular circumstances, gifts, and limitations of each individual, it will also scrutinize the deeds of all according to the Torah as definitively interpreted by Yeshua. That definitive interpretation places special emphasis on the requirement that we show mercy to others, giving and forgiving. Yeshua himself will be the judge, and his assessment of our deeds will also reveal how we related to him during our lives – explicitly or implicitly.

The Tradition of Paul

It is enlightening to read Paul in light of the tradition of Peter and James rather than the reverse. We find that Paul employs his own distinct conceptual framework and addresses a situation unlike that described in the Gospels (e.g., a mission outside the land of Israel, among Gentiles, which focuses on the establishment of stable Yeshua-faith communities). However, his message on the topic of final destinies departs little from that of the tradition of Peter and James.

The tradition of Peter and James sets the question of the final destinies of individuals within the broader context of the final destiny of Israel's eschatologically renewed national life.²³ The tradition of Paul paints on an even vaster canvas. Creation as a whole suffers in bondage to decay, and longs for the cosmic liberation that will come when the "children of God" are glorified (Romans 8:18-23). Paul recognizes that God's saving purpose affects "all things," and that God's self-offering to *each* will be definitively bestowed when God rules over *all*: "When all things are subjected to him [Yeshua], then the Son himself will be subjected to him who put all things under him, that God may be everything to every one" (1 Corinthians 15:28). To expand

²³ See Scot McKnight, *A New Vision for Israel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999).

our vision beyond the horizons of our narrow individual concerns, God reveals to us the ultimate goal of "all things": "For He has made known to us in all wisdom and insight the mystery of his will, according to his purpose which he set forth in Messiah as a plan for the fulness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth" (Ephesians 1:9-10). Our individual destinies are wrapped up in the destiny of "all things."

But Paul does have much to say about those individual destinies. Like the tradition of Peter and James, he warns sternly against any form of presumption in the face of divine judgment. Physical descent from the patriarchs and matriarchs (Romans 9:8), the covenantal sign of circumcision (Romans 2:25-29), and possession and knowledge of the Torah (Romans 2:17-24) are all privileges of enormous value (Romans 3:1-2; 9:4-5), but they cannot guarantee the inheritance of the life of the world to come. Gentile Yeshua-believers have been grafted into Israel's tree, but they must not boast arrogantly of their spiritual superiority over Jews, or God will cut their branches from the trunk (Romans 11:17-22). They also must not revert to their past Gentile life of idolatry and sexual immorality, thinking that their immersion in the Messiah and their participation in his covenant meal will ensure their final redemption; such a return to paganism would resemble the conduct of the generation of the exodus, and would elicit the same judgment as received by those wayward Israelites (1 Corinthians 10:1-13). Paul makes clear that even he, an apostle of the Messiah, cannot presume a favorable judgment, but must persevere in faithfulness to his calling (1 Corinthians 4:4-5; 9:24-27; Philippians 3:11-14).

Paul likewise suggests that we should avoid hasty conclusions about the final destiny of those outside the community of God's manifest covenantal action in Israel and in Yeshua. In Romans 2 Paul cites the example of virtuous Gentiles in order to chasten the presumption of his fellow Jews:

When Gentiles, who do not possess the Torah, do instinctively what the Torah requires, these, though not having the Torah, are Torah to themselves. They show that what the Torah requires is written on their hearts, to which their own conscience also bears witness; and their conflicting thoughts will accuse or perhaps excuse them on the day when, according to my good news, God, through Yeshua the Messiah, will judge the secret thoughts of all.²⁴ (Romans 2:14-16)

So, if those who are uncircumcised keep the requirements of the Torah, will not their uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision? Then those who are physically uncircumcised but keep the Torah will condemn you that have the written text and circumcision but break the Torah. (Romans 2:26-27)

Both of these texts have the final judgment in view, as do previous verses in the chapter (see Romans 2:5-13). Paul does not imply that such Gentiles are perfect in their conformity to the law "written on their hearts," but only that their implicit relationship with the God of Israel will culminate at the end in an explicit acknowledgement of them as servants of the Most High.²⁵

For Paul, as for Peter and James, the needle that bursts all bubbles of presumption is the sober expectation that God will judge the deeds of every one at the last day:

But by your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath, when God's righteous judgment will be revealed. For he will repay according to each one's deeds: to those who by patiently doing good seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life; while for those who are self-seeking and who obey not the truth but wickedness, there will be wrath and fury. There will be anguish and distress for everyone who does evil, the Jew first and also the Greek, but glory and honor and peace for everyone who does good, the Jew first and also the Greek. For God shows no partiality. (Romans 2:5-11)

Some see these words as hypothetical and rhetorical, and refuse to take them at face value. Such rejection of the plain sense of Paul's words finds support neither in the wider canonical witness

²⁴ James D. G. Dunn underlines the significance of the reference to "my good news!" in this context: "The introduction of the gospel as criterion is not at odds with the preceding argument, as though in speaking of divine judgment Paul suddenly narrowed the much broader criteria with which he had been operating to the narrower one of faith in Christ. On the contrary, his point is precisely that his gospel operates with those broader factors, with faith in Christ seen as of a piece with a less well defined responsiveness to the Creator... Faith in Christ is of course the goal of his own mission and preaching (cf. 10:14-17), but as a fuller and normative rather than exclusive expression of such responsiveness" (*Word Biblical Commentary, Volume 38a, Romans 1-8* [Dallas: Word Publishing, 1988], 103).

²⁵ See Dunn, 101.

of the Apostolic Writings, nor in the remainder of the Pauline corpus, where a final judgment of our deeds is taken for granted:

Yes, we do have confidence, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord. So whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to please him. For all of us must appear before the judgment seat of Messiah, so that each may receive recompense for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil. (2 Corinthians 5:8-10; see Romans 14:10-12)

Paul's joyful expectation and hopeful confidence never degenerate into presumption, for he knows that "all of us" will give an account for what we have done.²⁶

Like the tradition of Peter and James, Paul implies that the final judgment will take account of the particular circumstances of each individual. One will be judged according to what one has done with what one was given. Paul sees this principle at work in the differentiated judgment of Jews and Gentiles:

All who have sinned apart from the Torah will also perish apart from the Torah, and all who have sinned within the framework of the Torah will be judged by the Torah. For it is not the hearers of the Torah who are righteous in God's sight, but the doers of the Torah who will be justified. (Romans 2:12-13)

Paul then proceeds to speak about Gentiles who "do instinctively what the Torah requires" and who show thereby that "what the Torah requires is written on their hearts" (Romans 2:14-15). In verses 12-13 "Torah" includes the detailed ordinances addressed specifically to Israel and the commandments that presume an explicit knowledge of the God of Israel; in contrast, "what the Torah requires" in verses 14-15 consists only of basic moral and religious teaching such as that later codified under the Noachide laws. Those who have been instructed and formed in the Mosaic Torah will be judged in the light of that instruction, whereas those whose knowledge of God and God's requirements is more general will be judged in light of that general knowledge.

²⁶ The importance of this theme in Paul's teaching has recently been emphasized by Chris VanLandingham, *Judgment & Justification in Early Judaism and the Apostle Paul* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2006), 175-241.

The tradition of Peter and James stresses that observance of the Torah prepares one for the life of the world to come, and that the two love commandments constitute the core of that observance. The apostle Paul acknowledges the central role played by love of neighbor in the Torah as a universal and enduring guide to life in the Messiah (Galatians 5:14; 6:2 Romans 13:8-10), and he sees the fulfillment of this commandment as an anticipation of the life of the world to come (1 Corinthians 13:8, 13). As an essential expression of this love, the Pauline tradition echoes that of Peter and James in its teaching about forgiveness (Colossians 3:12-14; Ephesians 4:1-3, 31-32; 5:1-2). Paul focuses on the way such forgiveness responds to, participates in, and replicates the forgiving love of God in Messiah, but – unlike the tradition of Peter and James – he does not teach about the granting of forgiveness as a condition for receiving forgiveness.

The most distinctive feature of the Pauline teaching on final destinies, in comparison to the tradition of Peter and James, is the role of faith (Romans 1:16; 1 Corinthians 1:21; 15:1-2). The good news of Messiah Yeshua's obedient life, sacrificial death, and victorious resurrection brings God's salvation to Israel, the nations, and all creation, and the saving power of this good news is effective among those who respond with faith:

"The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart" [Deuteronomy 30:14] (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); because if you confess with your lips that Yeshua is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved. The scripture says, "No one who believes in him will be put to shame." For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him. For, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved." (Romans 10:8-13)

We must pay close attention to what Paul says and does not say here. Many bring to the text assumptions about what Paul means by "faith" that are unsupported by his actual words.²⁷

²⁷ For an insightful and up-to-date study of Paul's use of *pistis*, see Douglas A. Campbell, *The Quest for Paul's Gospel* (London: T&T Clark, 2005), 178-207.

First of all, in the Pauline letters faith involves belief in certain key truths. In Romans 10, the key truths concern the resurrection of Yeshua and his enthronement as Lord.²⁸ In Romans 4, Paul pictures God's giving a son to the aged Abraham and Sarah as a kind of resurrection (4:17, 19), and explicitly compares Abraham's faith in God's promise with our belief that God raised "Yeshua our Lord" from the dead (4:24). Why this focus on Yeshua's resurrection and Lordship? According to Paul, Yeshua rises from the dead as "the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep" (1 Corinthians 15:20). His resurrection is the beginning of the resurrection of the righteous, and his glorified humanity becomes the agent of the life-giving transformation of all who belong to him (1 Corinthians 15:21-22, 45, 48-49). In this context to believe that God raised Yeshua from the dead is to believe that God will also raise us from the dead in him, with him, and through him.

Second, while this faith involves belief in a set of key truths, it is far more than the intellectual affirmation of a set of propositions. Romans 4 presents Abraham as the model of faith, and his belief in God's promise of a son took the form of heroic trust over many years (4:19-21). His faith (*pistis*) was thus expressed as faithfulness (another meaning of *pistis*), and could also be characterized as obedience (Romans 1:5; 16:26). Elsewhere Paul speaks about "faith working through love" (Galatians 5:6). Thus, "Paul does not regard faith in purely passive terms: rather, it has very definite moral aspects which determine how the believer should live 'by faith' or 'by the Spirit.'"²⁹

Third, Paul often associates faith with water-immersion (Galatians 3:25-27; Ephesians 4:5). In fact, scholars commonly view the confession of faith referred to in Romans 10 as an integral part

²⁸ "It is significant that it is the Resurrection which is mentioned – an indication that for Paul the belief that God raised Jesus from the dead is the decisive and distinctive belief of Christians" (C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Epistle to the Romans, Volume II* [Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1979], 530).

²⁹ John M. G. Barclay, *Obedying the Truth* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1988), 236.

of the ritual of immersion in the early Yeshua-community.³⁰ This is significant because it implies that Pauline "faith" is enacted in a communal context. It is not merely a private, individual, and subjective experience, but an action realized in a corporate setting.

Finally, this association with immersion also implies that "faith" is one of Paul's ways of speaking about union with the Messiah.³¹ Just as Paul connects "faith" and "salvation," so Paul connects union with Yeshua in the Spirit and the final destiny of life in the world to come:

If we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his...if we have died with Messiah, we believe that we will also live with him. (Romans 6:5, 8)

If the Spirit of him who raised Yeshua from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Messiah from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you. (Romans 8:11)

The importance of belief in the resurrection of Yeshua becomes evident in this context. In the ritual act of immersion, and in suffering affliction for Messiah's sake (Romans 8:17), the follower of Yeshua participates in his death. We do so in hope that this participation will culminate for us in the resurrection life and glory that Yeshua now possesses as "Lord."

Paul's concept of "faith" thus has enormous depth and scope. It cannot be equated with the acknowledgment of Yeshua as Lord condemned in Matthew 7:21-23, which is compatible with disobedience to God and alienation from the Messiah. It also cannot be equated with the purely intellectual assent condemned in James 2:14-26, which exists independent of any appropriate deeds. In fact, its closest correlate in the tradition of Peter and James is faithful discipleship. As

³⁰ For example, see Cranfield, 527; James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 9-16* (Dallas: Word Books, 1988), 607; Leander E. Keck, *Romans* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2005), 254. Dunn compares the confession of faith in Yeshua as "Lord" with the Shema: "The confession which follows functions therefore as an (or the) equivalent of the Shema (Deut 6:4): as he who says the Shema identifies himself as belonging to Israel, so he who says *kyrion Iesoun* [Yeshua is Lord] identifies himself as belonging to Jesus. As a 'slogan of identification' it would no doubt be used at baptism, but also much more widely in worship (1 Cor 12:3), evangelism (2 Cor 4:5), and parenthesis (Col 2:6)."

³¹ Some recent Scandinavian studies of Luther have concluded that the Reformer likewise understood "faith" primarily in terms of "union with Christ." See Carl Braaten and Robert Jenson, eds., *Union with Christ, The New Finnish Interpretation of Luther* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).

noted above, that tradition proclaims that all who follow Yeshua as his disciples, and remain faithful to the end, will inherit the life of the world to come (Matthew 19:21, 29; Mark 8:35). Just as an intimate and loyal relationship with Yeshua the itinerant Master provides assurance of a happy final destiny, so union with the crucified and risen Lord – in "faith" – offers the same assurance.

If "faith" – signifying a bond of union with the Messiah – leads to a happy final destiny, what leads to a tragic ending? Several Pauline texts address this question:

Do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived! Fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes, sodomites, thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers – none of these will inherit the kingdom of God. (1 Corinthians 6:9-10)

Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these. I am warning you, as I warned you before: those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. (Galatians 5:19-21)

Put to death, therefore, whatever in you is earthly: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed (which is idolatry). On account of these the wrath of God is coming on those who are disobedient. (Colossians 3:5-6)

Be sure of this, that no fornicator or impure person, or one who is greedy (that is, an idolater), has any inheritance in the kingdom of Messiah and of God. Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes on those who are disobedient. (Ephesians 5:5-6)

Paul stresses the link between Yeshua-faith and the eschatological inheritance of God's kingdom. However, when speaking about those who are excluded from that inheritance, Paul lists types of behavior that are in fundamental violation of the universally applicable norms of the Torah (in Rabbinic terms, the Noachide commandments). He does not include in the list "unbelief" (i.e., lack of explicit Yeshua-faith). As we inferred earlier from our reading of Romans 2, Paul does not divide the world neatly between Yeshua-believers (who are "saved") and those who lack explicit faith in Yeshua (who are "damned"). Judgment for all will be according to deeds rather

than beliefs or experiences, though beliefs and experiences shape deeds. Just as the deeds of the "righteous Gentiles" of Romans 2 demonstrate an implicit Torah inscribed on their hearts, so the deeds of some outside the visible walls of the ekklesia may bear witness to their implicit faith in the crucified and risen Messiah.

In conclusion, Paul addresses a different audience than the tradition of Peter and James, and develops a new concept of "faith." Nevertheless, his teaching regarding final destinies bears a close resemblance to that of his fellow apostles.

The Tradition of John

Like the apostolic tradition of Paul, the tradition of John emphasizes "faith" as the proper response to the person and message of Yeshua. John writes his Gospel with a clear and single purpose, and he conveys that purpose unambiguously at the end of the book: "But these [signs] are written so that you may come to believe that Yeshua is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name" (John 20:31). What does John mean by "believe"? And what does he mean by "have life in his name"?

As in Paul, faith involves the affirmation of certain truths. In John faith focuses less on particular eschatological events enacted in Yeshua (i.e., his death and resurrection), and more on Yeshua's personal identity.³² Faith affirms that Yeshua is the Messiah (John 11:27; 20:31; 1 John 5:1), the Son of God (John 11:27; 20:31; 1 John 5:5), who comes from and is sent by God (John 16:27; 17:8, 21). But faith sees Yeshua as more than merely a faithful servant, entrusted with a unique redemptive mission: he is the Holy One of God (John 6:69), who dwells in the Father and in whom the Father dwells (John 10:38; 14:10-11). He is the one who shares the Divine Name

³² "Doubtless the prime interest of a gospel...is to set forth the *action* of God in Christ for the fulfillment of his purpose of grace...But the unremitting concentration of [John] the Evangelist on the person through whom God acts makes it plain that for him 'function and person are inseparable'" (George R. Beasley-Murray, *Word Biblical Commentary, Volume 36, John* [Waco: Word Books, 1987], lxxxiv).

and nature (John 17:11-12), and faith in Yeshua acknowledges that he rightly proclaims, "I Am" (John 8:24; 13:19; see 8:58-59, 18:5-6). In contemporary idiom, we could say that for John the central truth affirmed by faith is the deity of Yeshua.

However, John shows no more interest than Paul in purely intellectual assent to propositional truths. One does not "have life" through affirming creedal formulas. Believing that Yeshua is the way, the truth, and the life (John 14:6) necessarily involves answering an invitation to enter and nurture a relationship. It is the proper human response to a personal encounter with the One who embodies the self-revelation of Israel's God. It involves "coming to" Yeshua (6:35), "loving" Yeshua (16:27), and "obeying" Yeshua (14:21; 15:10; 3:36; 8:51; 12:47-48). As in Paul, so in John faith serves an equivalent role to that played by discipleship in the tradition of Peter and James.³³

What is the "life in his name" received by those who believe in Yeshua? In the apostolic tradition of Peter and James, "life" refers to a gift bestowed in the future, in the world to come (Matthew 7:14; 18:8-9; 19:16-17, 29; 25:46). Therefore, we might reasonably think that John's primary concern is to assure those who believe in Yeshua of their future destinies. However, close attention to John's usage makes clear that this is not the case. In John "eternal life" is received now, in *this* world. It is a present possession, not one merely anticipated in the future.³⁴

Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life... (John 3:36)

"Very truly, I tell you, anyone who hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life, and does not come under judgment, but has passed from death to life." (John 5:24)

³³ "'Believe' thus refers to the proper response to God's revelation, a faithful embracing of his truth, as in OT 'faithfulness'; it is a conviction of truth on which one stakes one's life and actions, not merely passive assent to a fact" (Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John, A Commentary, Volume One* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2003), 327.

³⁴ "For the Synoptics, 'eternal life' is something that one receives at the final judgment or in a future age (Mark 10:30; Matt 18:8-9), but for John it is a present possibility" (Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the Gospel of John* [New York: Doubleday, 2003], 239.

"Very truly, I tell you, whoever believes has eternal life." (John 6:47)

"Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life." (John 6:54)

The present possession of eternal life gives confident hope for the future world (John 6:40, 54; 11:25-26). However, John focuses not on that future hope, but on the life that those who believe receive *now*.

Yeshua gives eternal life to those who believe in him (John 5:21; 10:26; 17:2). Moreover, the life he gives remains his own after he gives it away, for it is not a "thing" external to his person. Yeshua gives life by giving himself.

"For just as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself..." (John 5:26)

"I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, whoever believes in me will never be thirsty." (John 6:35; see 6:53-58)

"I am the resurrection and the life." (John 11:25)

"I am the way, and the truth, and the life." (John 14:6)

Eternal life is not merely Yeshua's gift to us – it is his presence among us and within us. This is why we need to “believe in” Yeshua in order to have that life – since “believing” means coming to him, loving him, remaining with him. When we draw near to Yeshua, we are drawing near to life. It is like the light or heat given off by a fire – one cannot have the light and heat without the fire, and one cannot have the fire apart from the light and heat.

This identification of Yeshua with “life” in John is linked to the book’s emphasis on Yeshua’s deity. God is the only one who has life “in himself.” Yet, God has granted that Yeshua likewise have life “in himself,” so that all would honor him even as they honor God. To draw near to Yeshua is to draw near to God, and to draw near to God is to have life: "And this is eternal life,

that they may know you, the only true God, and Yeshua the Messiah whom you have sent" (John 17:3).

Just as John focuses on eternal life as a present reality, so he envisions judgment as occurring now and not merely in the world to come:

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God. (John 3:16-21)

Yeshua comes as light that reveals what we have done and who we really are. Those who flee from the light are those who prefer the darkness. Their judgment is not a future verdict, but a present reality – for in fleeing from the one who is the light and the life, they condemn themselves to darkness (the absence of light) and death (the absence of life).³⁵

While believing in Yeshua is the way one receives life (since, as noted above, he *is* the life, and believing means "coming to him"), the reason why people "come to the light" is "that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God." The converse is also true: those who disbelieve run away from the light in order that "their deeds may not be exposed...because their deeds are evil." One's response to Yeshua reveals who one truly is: if we reject the one who is truth, we show that we are false; if we reject the one who is goodness itself, we show that we are evil. Thus, John dismisses neither the significance of deeds (in supposed contrast to "faith") nor the significance of the way one has lived *before* believing in Yeshua.³⁶ In this text, judgment

³⁵ See Brown, 239.

³⁶ See Tiessen, 145.

is still according to deeds, and belief or disbelief is not so much the basis of judgment as it is *the judgment itself, rendered by the one being judged!*

In the apostolic tradition of Peter and James, no explicit connection is made between "faith in Yeshua" and final destinies. In the tradition of Paul, Yeshua-faith is linked to "salvation," but judgment is rendered according to deeds that violate the Noachide commandments (with no reference to the absence of Yeshua-faith). In the tradition of John, as seen above, faith in Yeshua leads to "eternal life," and disbelief in Yeshua brings condemnation – but both outcomes are viewed primarily as present realized conditions rather than future destinies (though they have definite implications for the world to come). Nonetheless, the novel linkage between "disbelief" and judgment deserves comment.

Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. (John 3:18)

Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever disobeys the Son will not see life, but must endure God's wrath. (John 3:36)

Who are those who "do not believe in the name of the only Son of God"? Does this refer to every person in the world who is not explicitly a believer in his name? The second passage above would imply that more than this is meant by "do not believe," as it is the one who "disobeys the Son" who endures "God's wrath," and disobedience requires knowledge of a command and a Commander.

This inference draws support from other texts in John. In John 6:36, Yeshua says, "But I said to you that *you have seen me* and yet do not believe." In the verses that follow Yeshua contrasts these disbelievers with those who believe: "every one who *sees the Son* and believes in him has eternal life" (John 6:40). Just as belief in Yeshua is preceded by an encounter with him in which

the person "sees the Son," so disbelief is preceded by a similar encounter. Elsewhere John describes this personal encounter with auditory rather than optical imagery:

“I do not judge anyone who *hears my words* and does not keep them, for I came not to judge the world, but to save the world. The one who rejects me and does not receive my words has a judge; on the last day the word that I have spoken will serve as judge.” (John 12:47-48)

The disbeliever hears the words of Yeshua, and rejects Yeshua and his words. Once again, this contrasts with the believer in Yeshua: “Truly, truly, I say to you, he who *hears my word* and believes him who sent me, has eternal life” (John 5:24).³⁷

Thus, the Gospel of John says little about *non*-believers, but much about *dis*-believers!³⁸ It deals harshly with those who see the light, recognize it as light, and then turn their backs and run away from the light. It speaks of the condition of those who have encountered Yeshua and rejected him – not of those who have never encountered him at all. What does this mean for our day? To hear and see Yeshua is not just to read a book about him, hear a preacher speak about him on TV, watch a movie about his life, or receive a tract and a memorized speech from a missionary on the street. What we actually perceive in such contacts is shaped by our communal commitments and our personal and family history. To see Yeshua, in the Johannine sense, is to see *the light*, and to recognize its brightness. Such an encounter is required for genuine belief *or* disbelief to occur.

What does this mean for Jewish people who do not believe in Yeshua? Whatever was the case with his own generation who clearly “saw him” and “heard him,” and said an emphatic “no” to him, we cannot assume that all future generations of Jews who lack explicit belief in him have

³⁷ This perspective provides the necessary context for interpreting other Johannine verses, such as John 8:24: "I told you that you would die in your sins, for you will die in your sins unless you believe that I am he." As Tiessen notes, "it is important to remind ourselves that Jesus made the statement specifically to people to whom he was revealing his identity. It is critical that we not overextend such statements to the unevangelized, who are, by definition, without such revelation" (85).

³⁸ *Ibid*, 134.

encountered him and given that same negative response. Only God can distinguish between a disbeliever and a non-believer; however, even if the distinction were evident to human eyes, the extraordinary circumstances of Jewish history would incline one to extreme caution in assessing the destinies of individual Jews.

What does the tradition of John have to contribute to an inquiry into the future destiny of non-believers in Yeshua? Its assumptions appear to be similar to those discerned above in the traditions of Peter and James and of Paul. Just as the realized judgment enacted in this world through an encounter with Yeshua leads to life or condemnation depending on the previous deeds of the person who sees Messiah's light, so the final judgment will be based on deeds:

“Do not be astonished at this; for the hour is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and will come out – those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation.” (John 5:28-29)

The prologue to the Gospel of John also states that all things were made through the Word who becomes incarnate in Yeshua (John 1:13, 9, 14). In him is the life that is the light of all people (John 1:4-5, 9). Many writers in the early Church understood this to mean that the Son of God had acted in a revelatory and salvific manner outside the history of the people of Israel.³⁹ It is evident that the tradition of John itself assumed that the Son of God had acted similarly in Israel's own history (John 12:41). In this perspective, all human beings encounter Yeshua's light in some measure, and all will be held accountable for how they respond to the light they receive.

In conclusion, we find that the tradition of John has less explicit teaching about final destinies than the traditions of Peter and James or of Paul. It speaks much about "eternal life" and "condemnation," but these are seen primarily as present realized conditions rather than anticipated future recompense. Belief and disbelief in Yeshua are not so much qualifications for

³⁹ Ibid, 48-52.

future destinies as they are the judgments which individuals render on themselves in the present by turning towards or away from the light that is revealed to them.

While John differs from the traditions of Peter and James and of Paul in the singularity of its focus on faith in Yeshua as the One in whom God dwells uniquely, and in its predominantly realized eschatological horizon, it offers no teaching on future destinies that conflicts with the other apostolic traditions we have examined.

Mark 16:9-16

The final text to consider, Mark 16:9-16, cannot be assigned to any particular stream of apostolic tradition. While attached to the ending of the Gospel of Mark, a scholarly consensus recognizes that it does not belong to the original composition.⁴⁰ Its canonical value has been disputed, but we will not here enter that debate.

Mark 16:15-16 offers the only example in the Apostolic Writings of a passage which explicitly connects final condemnation to lack of faith in the good news: "And he said to them, "Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation. The one who believes and is immersed will be saved; but the one who does not believe will be condemned."

Does this text teach that all those who do not believe in Yeshua in this life are destined for final destruction? In context, it is evident that the point of the passage is far more limited. The previous verses tell us what is meant by "not believing." Miriam of Migdol sees the risen Yeshua, and goes to tell his followers of her encounter. Though they had been with him for three years, had loved and served him, and had heard him speak of his coming death and resurrection,

⁴⁰ See Ronald J. Kernaghan, *Mark* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 2007), 343-44. Even conservative scholars who argue for its early dating and canonical value agree that it does not belong in Mark: "It may be compared with the story of the woman taken in adultery, in John viii, as an example of an early tradition which may very well be genuine and is undoubtedly primitive, but does not belong to the actual Gospel text as it stands" (R. Alan Cole, *The Gospel According to St. Mark* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961], 259).

“they would not believe” (Mark 16:11). Two more come to them with the same report, and still “they did not believe” (Mark 16:13). Finally, Yeshua appears to them himself and admonishes them for their “lack of faith” (Mark 16:14). He then commands them to "proclaim the good news to the whole creation" (Mark 16:15). In this context, it is evident that "the one who does not believe" is one who hears the good news, encounters through it a compelling testimony to the risen Lord, and nevertheless stubbornly and persistently refuses to become a disciple (i.e., be immersed and enter the community of those who love, serve, obey, and trust him).

The teaching on belief and disbelief in Mark 16:9-16 resembles what we have found in the tradition of John. Condemnation awaits those who willfully disbelieve, that is, reject the light that has dawned upon them. These words do not refer to those who lack genuine knowledge or experience of Yeshua, but to those who, like the disciples, know him – see the light – and then refuse to accept what he has done for them. Mark 16:16 does not categorize the whole world into the two groups of “believer” and “non-believer,” and consign the latter to eternal perdition. It instead describes the two responses offered by people who have genuinely encountered Yeshua.

Conclusion

At the beginning of this paper I stated that a thorough and compelling response to the question of final destinies would include at least four elements, and that I would here be dealing with only the first of those elements. Therefore, any conclusions drawn at this point must be provisional, to be tested and refined by further theological, practical, and historical reflection. Nevertheless, our study of the explicit biblical teaching on the topic provides us with a preliminary hypothesis that deserves serious consideration.

According to this hypothesis, the apostolic teaching (as witnessed especially by the traditions of Peter and James and of Paul) begins by warning us against presumption regarding our own

"salvation" and the damnation of others. It is striking how often the apostolic instruction has been understood by evangelicals in exactly the opposite form: as assuring our salvation and the salvation of others like us (in opinions, experiences, or community affiliations), and the damnation of those unlike us. I think that Soren Kierkegaard was on the right track in his meditation on "fear and trembling":

I have never been so far in my life, and am never likely to get farther than to the point of 'fear and trembling,' where I find it literally quite certain that every other person will easily be blessed – only I will not. To say to the others: you are eternally lost – that I cannot do. For me, the situation remains constantly this: all the others will be blessed, that is certain enough – only with me may there be difficulties.⁴¹

Kierkegaard is not here making a doctrinal statement about the salvation of "the others." Instead, he seeks to exemplify the attitude that the good news aims to evoke through its warnings concerning final destinies.

The sharp needle that bursts the bubble of presumption is the universal apostolic teaching that all will be judged according to their deeds. We find this teaching in every strand of apostolic tradition that we have examined. What counts at the end, in the final analysis, is not our lineage, ethnicity, religious affiliation, religious experiences, or religious opinions, but how we lived our lives. Did we obey the divine commandments? Did we do God's will? Did we realize God's purpose for our lives?

God's justice in this final judgment is expressed in God's holding each accountable only for what he or she has received. We are responsible to take what we know and what we are given, and to make something of it. Each must respond to the light of revelation that she or he has been apportioned. This should sober us, who have beheld Yeshua's glory, and likewise temper our assessment of the destinies of others.

⁴¹ Cited in Hans Urs Von Balthasar, *Dare We Hope "That All Men Be Saved"?* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1988), 88.

God's redemptive purpose for Israel, the nations, and all creation is realized through the person and work of Messiah Yeshua and the gift of the Spirit. Since the destinies of individuals receive their character from the wider corporate and cosmic destiny in which they share, no one may attain a blessed end apart from the saving work of Yeshua. Ultimately, the happiness of the world to come will consist of an eternal community of "all things" with the Father through the Son in the Spirit. In anticipation of that day, God offers us the opportunity to enter into that eternal relationship now. This is what the tradition of Peter and James knows as discipleship, and what the traditions of Paul and John mean by "faith in Yeshua." The judgment of our actions will determine whether we have already begun living in this eternal relationship, implicitly or explicitly, and whether we have continued do so, or whether we have sought the way of escape.

For those without explicit faith in Yeshua, the judgment of their works will reveal how they have responded to the light – or, better, the *Light* – they have been given. All creatures are created and sustained by God through the Divine Word in the Spirit, whether they know it or not. All creatures – and all human beings in particular – encounter God through the Word in the Spirit every day, every hour, every moment. Yeshua is met in the person of the needy; he stands beside everyone who has been wronged, and who must decide whether to bear a grudge or let it go; he speaks to each through the Torah "written on the heart." Most significantly, Yeshua reveals himself explicitly through the proclamation of the good news, through the transmission of his teaching, and through the embodiment of his redemptive mission in the life of the community that bears witness to his name. How have we responded to Yeshua, the living Torah, in all our actions? At the end, he will ask this question of everyone.

What C. S. Lewis says about Yeshua's threats concerning Hell applies equally well to the entire apostolic teaching on final destinies:

The Dominical utterances about Hell, like all Dominical sayings, are addressed to the conscience and the will, not to our intellectual curiosity. When they have roused us into action by convincing us of a terrible possibility, they have done, probably, all they were intended to do.⁴²

In similar manner the Dominical and apostolic promises concerning the life of the world to come rouse us to action -- not by alerting us to "a terrible possibility" but by setting before us a glorious hope.

May each of us respond to the Light that has illumined our lives, and may he welcome each of us with the words, "Well done, good and trustworthy servant, enter into the joy of your Master."

⁴² C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, Chapter 8 in *The Complete C. S. Lewis Signature Classics* (San Francisco: Harper, 2002), 416.

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