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The Editorial

Mary-Sylvia NWACHUKWU, DDL

The Reign of Christ in Paul's Eschatological Vision:

1 Cor 15:20-28

Munachi E. EZEUGU, C.S.Sp

"Dying You Destroyed Our Death": The Significance
of the Death of Jesus For the Death We Must All 'Die'

Bede Uche UKWUIJE, C.S.Sp

The Doctrine of Resurrection in the Old Testament

Philip IGBO, CMF

The Fire of Hell: Is it Possibly the Fire of the Holy Spirit?

Bonaventure Ikenna UGWU, C.S.Sp

Eschatology in the Drama of Divine Omnipotence

MarySylvia NWACHUKWU, DDL

Women Experience of Violence and the Resurrection

Faith Anthony Ikechukwu KANU, OSA

Christian Eschatology and Ancestor Christology:

How Compatible?

Nicholas Ibeawuchi MBOGU, CMF

Book Review

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ESCHATOLOGY IN THE DRAMA OF DIVINE OMNIPOTENCE

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1. Introduction

1.1 Statement of the Problem

This paper is an investigation into the meaning of divine sovereignty and omnipotence in relation to eschatology. Both the Bible and theology make clear that following the decisive divine intervention at the Parousia, individuals will experience God's retributive judgment that takes them either to Heaven or to Hell. The questions, which could be asked in relation to the eschatological realities, are similar to the ones which believers ask in relation to the suffering of the righteous in history. Could God, all sovereign and omnipotent, allow his beloved though sinful creatures to be swallowed up by evil at the end of time? Since God's final victory over evil had already been won in the event of Jesus Christ, is the final damnation of some not a contradiction to the idea of divine sovereignty and omnipotence? What is the meaning of Hell in relation to the universal relevance of Christ's death and resurrection? Like Abraham, the question is asked if the Lord would sweep away the place and not forgive it for the sake of the righteous who are in it (Gen 18:22-33).

Questions such as those presented above have led me to this investigation into the biblical foundations of eschatology. The enquiry proceeds by looking at and understanding eschatology, the end of God's intervention in history, from the perspective of the character of God's primal and subsequent activities in creation. This perspective is offered by the similar way in which the Bible describes God's actions in Gen 12 and Rev 21:22. Both accounts show that God's creative purpose, which he set in

motion at the beginning, will reach its desired fulfilment with God's creation of the new heavens and the new earth. These two points of divine activity, which describe the nature of divine sovereignty in creation, are held together by the historical moment in which the human being is the apparent protagonist. Human mediatorial rulership of creation is shown to be detrimental to creation with the result that within history evil continues to question the power of God. I would argue, therefore, that the aim of eschatology is to show how God's plan for the world, which he set in motion at the beginning, is not frustrated even in spite of negative realities in the world.

In a very broad sense, the entire biblical message could be divided into three: creation of the world (Gen 12), what happened to the earth after creation (Gen 3Rev 20) and the new creation of heavens and the earth (Rev 2122). The Bible's description of the final stage of history reveals that knowledge of the last things is clearer only from the perspective of the first things and of the historical moment. Of these three moments, the first and the last are related as promise and its consummation. In the first moment, God demonstrated his sovereignty and omnipotence in bringing the world into being. Within history, God demonstrates his sovereignty by keeping creation in being in spite of human acts of wickedness. In the last moment, he would demonstrate the same power in saving the world. These three moments are instances of divine sovereignty and power over all negative realities against the world.

The work is divided into five parts. This introduction, the first part, is both a statement of the problem and a presentation of eschatological expectations of the New Testament. The second

part develops the content of Divine omnipotence in creation, seeking to highlight the traits of God's activity in the creation of the world, which is believed would mark God's activity in history and at the end of history. This part describes God's omnipotence as his rulership of the world characterized by his power to liberate from destructive natural and historical forces. Part Three describes the language which the Bible used to describe God's power over chaotic forces at creation and through history. It exposes certain vocabulary, which powerfully determine the understanding of how God has revealed himself in history, underscoring what God does to save in spite of sin. The fourth part is an inquiry into the character of divine omnipotence at the time of consummation. Part Five is an evaluation and conclusion.

1.2 Eschatological Expectations of the New Testament

When describing the last things, the New Testament makes a number of points, which are here presented in a very abstract way:

- a. Before his resurrection, Christ promised an unexpected second coming as king and judge. This is called the Parousia (Matt 24:42-44; Luke 12:39-40; 1 Thess 5:2-3; Mark 13:26; Matt 26:64).
- b. The Parousia will introduce two mighty events: (a) the resurrection of the dead and (b) the last judgment. In these events, the righteous and the unrighteous will appear before the judgment seat of Christ (Matt 12:36-37; 25:32; Rom 14:10; 2 Cor 5:10).
- c. The Parousia marks the end of the old age and the beginning of a new creation (Matt 19:28; 2 Pet 3:10). Signs which accompany these time are: appearance of the

antichrist, apostasy under the influence of false prophets, widespread persecution, destruction of peoples and nations by fire, eruption of earthquakes and famine, and eclipses of heavenly bodies (1 John 4:3; Matt 24:9-11,29; Mark 13:9-13; Rev 8:7-8,12; Luke 21:10-11; Isa 13:10; Joel 2:30).

- d. In the light of the Parousia, Christians should remain steadfast in faith and hope. The content of the Christian faith and hope is grounded in the event of Jesus Christ, and especially in his resurrection from the dead (Rom 8:18-39; 1 Cor 15:58; Col 1:22-23; 1 Tim 4; 2 Tim 4:1-8; Tit 2:13; 1 Pet 1:3-5).

In the history of theological thought, these elements of eschatology, as presented above, have received different interpretations, which explain how one should understand the nature of the last events, especially as they relate to the idea of the Kingdom of God. The background question has been how Jesus understood and preached the Kingdom of God of which he was the bearer. Is the Kingdom of God already realized in the person and ministry of Jesus, or will it break into the present age in the imminent future? This question has received a number of answers, which can be classified according to the following manner:¹

- a. In terms of realized eschatology, some authors sustain that the Kingdom is an experienced reality in the life of Jesus and in his resurrection; it is a state of inner communion with God, with the result that eternal life is a present reality for believers.²

¹All theological interpretations of the New Testament data are not presented here. This outline is drawn from R.C. Doyle's *Eschatology and the Shape of Christian Belief*, pp.27-42, serving here as a background for the theological orientation of the present interpretation.

²Proponents of this theory are: C.H. Dodd, R. Bultmann, E. Käsemann and P. Tillich.

- b. In terms of historical eschatology, the Kingdom of God is not a supernatural intervention into history. It comes into history as its fulfilment, destiny and full realization. Theologies of hope and liberation specify how history runs gradually towards its full realization.³
- c. Interpreted as futurist eschatology, G.E. Ladd, says that the Kingdom has been realised in the event of Christ and exists in humility within the present order, but it awaits consummation at the end of history. The time of consummation will be marked by the destruction of Satan, forgiveness, life and righteousness.⁴
- d. Karl Barth speaks of different phases of the same event. He distinguishes between inaugurated eschatology in the first coming of Christ, which includes the resurrection and the Pentecost event, and consummated eschatology in the Parousia. The Parousia will feature a decisive in-breaking of God into the present reality, which will change the concrete historical existence. This description is what J. Moltmann describes as transcendent eschatology.⁵

The New Testament data shows that none of these interpretations is exhaustive. Each develops one aspect or more of the New Testament description of how a final divine intervention inevitably changes our concrete existence. While it is necessary to expose these interpretations here as background to the present discussion, I would argue that a more pertinent concern is how that final act of God would bring to fruition the saving work that has been inaugurated in the event of Christ. The biblical

³Proponents of this theory are: W. Pannenberg and J. Moltmann.

⁴Cf. G.E. Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, London: Lutterworth Press, 1974.

⁵Cf. J. Moltmann, *Theology of Hope: On the Ground and Implications of a Christian Eschatology*, London: SCM, 1967, p.45-58.

foundations of eschatology, yet to be exposed in the next paragraph, would show that there is a unity in God's action. In other words, it is believed that God would act at the time of final consummation according to the manner in which he had acted at creation, through history and in Christ. In order, therefore, to facilitate investigation into the character of the final drama of divine omnipotence, it is essential to survey the theological foundations of eschatology as the Bible presents it. In the Bible, divine sovereignty explains God's rulership of the world and of history, which is defined from different viewpoints. The following sections present the content of divine sovereignty at creation and within history.

2. Content of Divine Omnipotence in Creation

This paragraph defines the content of divine sovereignty and how it defines the nature of eschatology. In creation, God's omnipotence is demonstrated in two fundamental ways: (a) as God's power over chaotic forces in nature and in history, and (b) as an act of liberation.

2.1 God's Action Against Chaotic Forces in Nature and in History

The Bible opens and closes with a confession of the sovereignty of God. This is seen in the double account of creation and recreation in Gen 1:1-2:4 and Rev 21:1-22. In these two accounts, the God of Israel demonstrates omnipotence and sovereign rule in the overcoming of initial and historical chaos (anti-life forces),⁶ in order to provide an well-ordered environment for human life. In this state of affairs, what guarantees the wellbeing of the environment is God's constant guard over the regularity of the course of nature, that is, in the rhythm of time and seasons, and in

⁶Cf. Gen 1:12 and Rev 12:13; 15:18.

the human observation of moral and cult codes (Gen 8:20-21).

What are the anti-life forces? The first are forces that are found in nature. There are forces in nature which God confined at the beginning (Gen 1:2), but which can become destructive of the created order if they are left on their own. The entire account of Gen 1:12:4a depicts an act of divine governance, defined as the overcoming of disorder by establishing an orderly reality that could be called a meaningful reality.⁷ The primordial state of disorder presented in Gen 1:2 is taken neither as evil nor as product of creation but as a fact of nature taking its own course. Therefore, the aim of the narrative is to show that nature needs to be governed and controlled for it to serve its creative purpose.⁸ In this context, therefore, divine rulership is exercised in his overcoming of the three causes of primordial disorder: darkness, the abyss and the waters. God's action in giving meaningful order to creation is the reason for the emergence of all forms of life.

Secondly, divine judgment on human disobedience is a force more destructive than the vicious forces in nature. The account of the Flood in Gen 6:5-9 explains the outcome of a tendency to evil in human beings which belongs to them naturally (Gen 6:5), and which judgment and punishment do not alter in a fundamental way: "I will never again curse the ground because of humankind, for the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth; nor will I ever again destroy every living creature as I have done..." (Gen 8:21-22). Human disobedience against God was the reason for God's curse of the earth (Gen 3:17), and it continues to be a force that is capable of making God to take decisions that could put

⁷L. Ijezie, "Creation Account in Gen 1:1 2:4 as a Model of Political Governance", in Mary-Sylvia Nwachukwu et al. (eds.), *Theology, Faith and Environment*, African Journal of Contextual Theology, vol. 2 (2010) 30.

⁸Ijezie, "Creation Account", pp32-34.

human existence in danger and destroying the foundations of the earth. God decides, ultimately, to put up patiently with human sin and with the state of affairs that is thereby created. This promise of God, given here at the beginning, determines the course of the God-human relationship in the world and in Israel's history.⁹ The covenant (Gen 9) initiates a history of blessing and promise, which explains the nature of God's saving action in order to safeguard his creation. It has to be emphasized that this history of blessing describes both God's assurance and self-obligation to save the world in spite of human sin (Gen 9:11-17).

The third anti-life force is human acts of violence and wickedness to themselves. This is expressed in the stories of envy, murder, revenge and human subjugation of fellow human beings. Although stories of human wicked acts are found at the first pages of the Bible (Gen 46), the idea develops fully out of the context of foreign political rule and oppression of God's people giving coherence to the entire gamut of the account of oppressive domination of Israel by the more powerful states. The story of the Tower of Babel (Gen 11:1-9) seems to imply that as imperialistic ambitions of the powerful states of the Ancient Near East became more and more tyrannical and detrimental to the sphere of divine worship, the Jews began to think that this was a battle which only God, not human beings, could fight. God was expected to show sovereign power over the nations that oppress other peoples and who despise his sovereign rule. In the history of Israel, this experience of political oppression heightened the expectation of God's appearing, judgment, and the destruction of evildoers and wicked people with this passing world. The end time was near in which God would demonstrate his supreme power over the

⁹Cf. C. Westermann, *Genesis III*, Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1984, p456.

forces of evil.¹⁰

The ideas presented above came to form the content of Old Testament apocalyptic, but since they speak of what God would do at the end of time, they are also called eschatological ideas. Apocalyptic is the language of power, of dominion and of subjugation, but also of oppression, injustice and destruction. These ideas do not belong to ancient times. Our contemporary times have known similar oppression, injustice and undue demonstrations and wielding of power to the detriment of persons, peoples institutions and nations. We are still living in situations of social and political unrest. How God deals with this particular anti-life force, which is found in the human being, is explained in the story of kingship in Israel. This is the second major content of divine sovereignty and omnipotence in creation, which is presented as an act of liberation.

2.2 God's Action as Liberation

The beginning of Israel's history provides the substantial foundation of the idea of God as ruler over his people. This is expressed in the event of the exodus as God's liberation of his people from Egyptian slavery through the power of his arm (Exod 15:6). Egyptian enslavement of Israel is presented in the exodus story as a form of historical chaos, which disrupts the plan of God for his people. God's response to this state of affairs is a judgment of Egypt and establishment of Israel on the Promised Land. At the end of the exodus event, Israel proclaims God as her king forever and ever (Exod 15:18). God's commitment to ensure freedom and wellbeing for Israel defines his eternal reign over his

¹⁰These ideas were developed in literatures that we call Apocalyptic, because they also portray the end of time as revealed supernaturally in dreams, visions and ecstatic rapture. These literatures were not transmitted to elicit the conversion of the wicked but to encourage the suffering people of God to persevere till the end.

people. According to the biblical tradition, the exodus event underscores the sovereignty of the God of Israel.¹¹

The content of the exodus event as liberation from slavery determined the nature of God's rulership throughout the history of Israel. It spells out the character and language of God's rulership in terms of God as judge, victor and liberator. Therefore, the basic content of God's rulership is the promise of redemption from all anti-life and enslaving forces. Divine sovereignty guarantees that redemption remains a constant reality in the life of his people, through history and until the end of time.

God ruled his people through the mediation of human leaders. Here, God's gracious act of deliverance inaugurated a new order of life and a form of leadership that stands against oppression and inequality, and which fosters justice and prosperity in the land and a compassionate treatment of the vulnerable (Ps 72:2-4). In other words, the act of deliverance from Egyptian slavery set in motion a dynamic process that led to their identity as the people of God. This identity demanded two clearly specified responses from Israel: (a) Israel must give God absolute allegiance. God alone must be worshiped as the source and centre of life and freedom and (b) God's act of deliverance must become the standard of righteousness within the Israelite community. God correspondingly expected of his people a just and merciful response to the poor, the weak, orphan, widow and the vulnerable of the society.

The entire history of the monarchy describes the conflict between two opposed notions of leadership: one based on Yahweh's ideal for compassion and righteousness of which David is the ideal, and

¹¹Josh 2:10; 9:9; Judg 11:13; Num 22:5,11; 23:22; 24:8.

the other based on tyrannical rule, which many kings followed to the detriment of the nation. Therefore, even with the rule of the Davidic kings, the unity of the kingdom of Israel was irreparably severed because the yoke of centralized power became unbearable for the common people as the repudiation of worship of Yahweh in favour of idols, neglect of the rights of some of the tribes reached its apex in the reign of Rehoboam (1 Kings 12). This history shows that not even divine adjustment to human leadership through the Davidic covenant could save the nation from extinction. However, hope is open to the future thanks to the unconditional character of the covenant. The messianic expectation is thus a product of the hope in a future restoration of a son of David on the throne (2 Sam 7:12-13; Ps 89:28-34). In prophetic texts, which look to a hope beyond the punishment, the Davidic theology occupies a prominent place.¹² The Davidic covenant played a crucial role in the development of Old Testament messianic expectation.

Having exposed the two major features of divine omnipotence, it is necessary also to expose the language through which these features are expressed in the biblical narratives. This is the subject of the next section.

3. The Language of Divine Omnipotence

This paragraph develops the language of divine rulership and omnipotence, and it brings forward certain vocabulary that gives a particular character to eschatology. There are concepts, which powerfully determine the understanding of how God has revealed himself in history. The most foundational of these concepts is the word *hesed*.

¹²For instance, Isa 8:239:6; 11:1-9; Amos 9:11; Mic 5:2-5; Jer 17:24-27; 23:5-6; 30:8-9; 33:14-26.

3.1 The Word HESED

The Hebrew word *hesed*, derived from the Arabic root *hašada* (band together for mutual aid), includes a wide range of meanings, which include mercy, kindness, compassion, justice, righteousness, steadfast love and grace.¹³ The abundant occurrence of this word (245 times) and its distribution in every part of the Old Testament, especially in the Psalms (127 times), shows that it determines principally the relationship between God and his people.¹⁴

Hesed is a word for interpersonal relationship, involving people related by blood (Joseph and Jacob - Gen 47:29), marriage (Sarah and Abraham - Gen 20:13), friends (Jonathan and David - 1 Sam 20:8,14), sovereign and subjects (Saul and men of Jabesh-gilead - 2 Sam 2:5) and parties (Israelites and family of Gibeon - Judg 8:35). The relationship is inaugurated by an unusual act of kindness. Applied to the religious sphere, Yahweh is the subject of *hesed*, and the recipients include individuals, groups in Israel, Israel as a people, the anointed of Yahweh and the remnant.

In itself, the relationship implied by *hesed* is that of mutuality; it demands a similar response. The one who shows *hesed* demands an equivalent act in return.¹⁵ Although this mutuality is not very evident in the relationship between God and Israel because of Israel's forgetfulness of God's *hesed* and her acts of rebellion, yet God's *hesed* is not undermined. Yahweh has revealed his *hesed* for all nations to see in the history of Israel through the exodus

¹³H.J. Zobel, *HESED* in G.J. Botterweck H. Ringgren (eds.), *TDOT V*, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1986, p.45.

¹⁴The evidence shows that it is represented in early narrative literature (49x), becomes much less important in early prophetic literature (29x), and occupies a special place in poetry (131x), but also appears in the Chronicler history (23x). The word is used in both the secular and religious sphere. The study of this word as presented here is made from Zobel's essay, p.45-64.

¹⁵For instance, Gen 21:23,27; Josh 2:12,14; 1 Sam 20:8,14f; 2 Sam 2:5f.

from Egypt, providential care of Israel in the wilderness, protection from enemies, gift of land and nationhood. God's nature inferred from his ongoing activity of leading, guiding, protecting and sustaining Israel is described as *hesed* (Exod 15:13). Without these acts of God's abiding care, his redemptive act alone in the exodus could not have brought the community to experience the Promised Land. Israel is called upon to offer thanks for the kindness and mercy of God,¹⁶ but they forget his deeds on their behalf and rebel against him.

The revelation of divine omnipotence in his *hesed* is played out most dramatically in the event of the great rebellion against God in the Exodus Numbers wilderness stories, whose interpretation has come to be termed "the murmuring motif". The features are clearly seen in the incidents in which the Israelites murmured because of food (Exod 16; Num 11), Moses' authority and office (Num 12 and 16), fear of enemies (Num 13:14), and thirst (Exod 17:1-7; Num 20:21). These narratives, according to B. Childs, introduce a pattern with the following elements: a) an initial complaint, b) God's anger and punishment, c) intercession from Moses, and d) a reprieve of the punishment.¹⁷ The origin and reason for the murmuring motif that pervades Exodus and Numbers have been explained in several ways. Without negating the options that have been given,¹⁸ the present essay finds the key to the aim of the motif in Num 14:17-19, a text that shows how Israel understood the dialectic of divine anger and mercy in their history.

And now, therefore, let the power of the LORD be

¹⁶Ps 107:8,15,21,31.

¹⁷B. Childs, *Book of Exodus: A Critical Theological Commentary*. The Old Testament Library, Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974, pp.258-259.

¹⁸cf. F.R. McCurley, *Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers*, Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979, p.95.

great in the way that you promised when you spoke, saying, 'The LORD is slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, forgiving iniquity and transgression, but by no means clearing the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children to the third and the fourth generation.' Forgive the iniquity of this people according to the greatness of your steadfast love, just as you have pardoned this people, from Egypt even until now (Num 14:17-19).

God would have consumed and destroyed Israel in his anger but he chose to limit the deserved death sentence: none of the people who witnessed the signs in Egypt would enter the Promised Land (vv22-23). The effectiveness of Moses' intercession lay in his invocation of the power of God to forgive according to the greatness of his steadfast love (*hesed*). God's *hesed* is that divine intervention in Israel's history that preserves and promotes the life of his people. By this very power, God ruled Israel.

This revelation of God's nature implies that God remains faithful to his promises in spite of the obduracy of his people. The wilderness narrative is a lesson in the divine *hesed*. Through history, Israel learnt to turn to their God in prayer for help and deliverance, just as Moses did.¹⁹ According to Zobel, this knowledge that God restores his people after judgment is determinative for both preexilic (Hos 2:21), exilic prophecy (Isa 54:8,10) and exilic poetry (Lam 3:22,32).²⁰ God's *hesed* is the foundation of statements about God's faithfulness (*em unâ*). In fidelity to his promise, God would save his people only for the

¹⁹Ps 44:26-27; 85:7-8; Mic 7:18,20.

²⁰cf. Zobel, *HESED*, p.55.

sake of his glory. The close association of *hesed* with *em et* and *em unâ* speaks of its certainty, permanence and lasting validity.²¹

In the New Testament, a concept that most clearly brings out the meaning of *hesed* is *dikaïosune* (righteousness), a word which describes both God's covenant faithfulness and his faithfulness to his creation. In revealing his righteousness, God reveals both his wrath against sin (Rom 1:18) and his power to save a sinful creation (Rom 5:9), ushering creation into a new life that moves forward to eternal life. In this sense, the event of Christ is God's way of reclaiming the world that he loves, which was experiencing corruption and decay (Rom 8:18-27). The language of God's *hesed* determines the character of God's response to human sin.

3.2 Divine Wrath and Mercy as Central Terms of Divine Omnipotence

According to H. Spieckermann, the wrath and mercy of gods are the most significant divine features of any religion in antiquity.²² In ancient polytheistic religions, gods show either favour or animosity to human beings, and their actions are often viewed as emotional and arbitrary, lacking any degree of transparency. This poses a threat to the righteous person who could be struck to experience affliction caused by a god's irrational anger.²³ In some cases, a deity's anger cannot be appeased in spite of supplications and ritual sacrifices, and avenues did not exist through which the human being could have access to the mind or will of the gods.²⁴ This attitude of the gods had grave consequences for human fate.

²¹Jer 31:3; Ps 106:1; 107:1; 117:2; Mic 7:20. cf. Zobel, p.56.

²²H. Spieckermann, "Wrath and Mercy as Crucial Terms of Theological Hermeneutics" in R.G. Kratz - H. Spieckermann (eds), *Divine Wrath and Divine Mercy in the World of Antiquity*, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008, p.3.

²³Spieckermann, "Wrath and Mercy", pp.4-5.

²⁴Spieckermann, "Wrath and Mercy", p.7.

Alongside this image of the gods stands a description of Israel's God whose nature is dominantly determined by his inclination toward grace. This description of God is formulated in many Old Testament texts, especially in Exod 34:6-7

The LORD passed before him, and proclaimed, "The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, yet by no means clearing the guilty, but visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation."²⁵

Revealing himself in this way, God shows the pre-eminence of his mercy, grace and his loving kindness or steadfast love (*berit olam*). In the Old Testament, these three characters of God stand alongside the intensive expression of God's wrath against human sin and stubbornness. In this presentation, the God of Israel further distinguishes himself from the gods of other nations because while they could also express mercy and grace, the term 'hesed' (steadfast love) is a unique description of Israel's God. According to Spieckermann, "it is solely attested in the Old Testament, referring to the benevolence shown to humans by God and exercised among humans."²⁶ Different from the caprice and arbitrariness that characterize the gods of nations, the term 'hesed,' which predominant in the Psalter, expresses God's reliable readiness to save and his salvational affection toward a creation in need of his mercy.²⁷ God is reliable, steadfast, and his

²⁵It is also found in Joel 2:13; Jonah 4:2; Ps 86:15; 103:8; 145:8 and Neh 9:17.

²⁶Spieckermann, "Wrath and Mercy", 9-10.

²⁷Cf. Pss 8:6 and 103:4 where *hesed* is re-interpreted as *eleos* (mercy). Cf also Isa 54:6-10.

promises have lasting validity and permanence.

Some prophetic texts focus on the subject of judgment and salvation in relation to the revelation of God's grace in the history of Israel. The exilic prophet, Deutero-Isaiah, underscores the pre-eminence of God's steadfast love (*hesed ôlâm*) over his wrath through the concept of a 'covenant of peace' (*beritsâlôm*):

For a brief moment I abandoned you, but with great compassion I will gather you. In overflowing wrath for a moment I hid my face from you, but with everlasting love I will have compassion on you, says the LORD, your Redeemer. This is like the days of Noah to me: Just as I swore that the waters of Noah would never again go over the earth, so I have sworn that I will not be angry with you and will not rebuke you. For the mountains may depart and the hills be removed, but my steadfast love shall not depart from you, and my covenant of peace shall not be removed, says the LORD, who has compassion on you (Isa 54:8-10).

This passage is a praise of the victory of God's saving grace. Through the reference to the flood, the prophet intended to prove that God would deal with recalcitrant Israel as he had done with entire humanity in the story of the Flood. In the story of the Flood, human life is spared total annihilation only thanks to God's universal covenant oath (Gen 8:21). The prophet Isaiah recalled this, citing the character of the God, which the flood portrays, as what endures in his relationship with sinful humanity. According

to Spieckermann, the idea of a gracious peace expressed in v.10 seems to displace the covenant requirement of ritual expiation for sin or atonement of sin. Therefore, it underscores the boundlessness of salvation.²⁸

Another prophet that reflects on the dialectic of judgment and salvation in relation to God's steadfast love is Jeremiah. In Jer 31:2-3, the prophet substitutes steadfast love (*hesed ôlâm*) with 'everlasting love' (*âhabat ôlâm*), meaning that this unconditional love is the distinct character of God's nature and acting from eternity.²⁹

Thus says the LORD: The people who survived the sword found grace in the wilderness; when Israel sought for rest, the LORD appeared to him from far away. I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you (Jer 31:2-3).

Finally, it is important to underline Isaiah's remark that this acting of God out of love when he should have punished is always understood in terms of new creation.

Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. ¹⁹ I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert...the people whom I formed for myself so that they might declare my praise. Yet you did not call upon me, O Jacob; but you have been weary

²⁸Spieckermann, "Wrath and Mercy", p.13.

²⁹This message draws on older traditions that are found in Exod 34:9; Deut 7:7-8; Jer 2:2-3; Hos 11:1-4; Zeph 3:17.

of me, O Israel! You have not brought me your sheep for burnt offerings, or honored me with your sacrifices. I have not burdened you with offerings, or wearied you with frankincense. You have not bought me sweet cane with money, or satisfied me with the fat of your sacrifices. But you have burdened me with your sins; you have wearied me with your iniquities. I, I am He who blots out your transgressions for my own sake, and I will not remember your sins (Isa 43:18-25).

The next section inquires if the same character of divine omnipotence would mark the final events in the consummation of the world.

4. Divine Omnipotence and the Consummation of the World

The biblical foundation of eschatology introduced us to the revelation of divine omnipotence in creation and in the history of Israel. In this history, God manifested his supremacy through his power of forgiveness and forbearance as Paul says in Rom 3:23-26

Since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith. He did this to show his righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over the sins previously committed; it was to prove at the

present time that he himself is righteous and that he justifies the one who has faith in Jesus.

Rom 3:23-26 sums up Paul's statement on the character of God's saving relationship to creation. Biblical revelation shows that in his divine omnipotence, God demonstrates the supremacy of his mercy and love over human sin through forgiveness. Isa 43 and Hos 11 explain that the creation of a new state of affairs with God is possible through the power of God's forgiving love and compassion. God's power also includes measures which God took to remedy the situation of a sinful world and how he rehabilitates human responsibility towards creation. As the fullness of divine revelation, Jesus is the definitive manifestation of God's love and mercy towards a sinful world. Through him, God demonstrated a redemptive action that sanitized the world, setting it on the journey towards universal salvation. This final section of this essay reflects on the New Testament exposition of the final event of world history and how the character of divine omnipotence would be expected to affect the fate of human beings and of creation. This reflection is motivated by the discordant witness of the New Testament, which inclines sometimes towards universal and sometimes towards particular salvation. The question is, will the Most High not save all because of the righteous?

4.1 Consumption as Universal Salvation

Some parts of the New Testament envisage the final event of history in terms of a universal restoration and inclusion into the creative and salvific act of Christ's death and resurrection. This message stands in continuity with the tradition of Isaiah, who intensified and expanded the Old Testament hope of the new

future as a salvation that reaches beyond historical reality and opens itself to the whole world.³⁰ This idea prevails especially in Paul's letters. A classic text is Rom 8:18-23:

I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies.

This text affirms that future salvation concerns not only the human being but the entire creation. It is final liberation from creation's experience of brokenness and meaninglessness, and restoration to sonship (perfect communion with God), which is grounded in the event of Christ. In explaining the outcome of the event of Christ, three words that underscore God's supremacy in the events of the last things are *palingenesia*, *apokatastasis*, and *anakephalaiosis*. The first two are considered together because they are very closely related in meaning.

The Words "Palingenesia" and "Apokatastasis"

The word *palingenesia* translated as 'new birth', 'renewal',

³⁰ f. Isa 2:2-4; 7:21-25; 11:6-9

'restoration' or 'regeneration' occurs two times in the New Testament. It is found in Matthew 19:28 where it is said that judgment will be in view of the expected restoration, and in Tit 3:5 where it is said that the salvation which God wrought through Jesus was done according to his mercy and loving kindness through renewal by the Holy Spirit. Although this word occurs only in these two contexts, the language of rebirth and regeneration is not lacking in other biblical passages. Specifically, *palingenesia* is the language of the renewal of the covenant (Jer 31:31-34; 39:40) and that of new creation (Isa 65:17-25), which are described as individual, communal and cosmic. The great prophets, Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel, describe God's restoration of Israel as renewal of covenant in view of new creation. Many NT passages describe the work of Christ in terms of new creation.³¹ The language of new creation belongs to the sphere of God's omnipotence and sovereignty.

Similar in meaning to *palingenesia* is the word *apokatastasis* found only in Acts 3:21, where it is translated as 'restoration': "...and that he may send the Messiah appointed for you, that is, Jesus, who must remain in heaven until the time of universal restoration that God announced long ago through his holy prophets."³² The use of this verb in this context already defines the nature of the expected restoration because it recalls the expression *apokathistanein panta* (to restore all things) of Mal 4:5 (LXX), used in reference to the expected Elijah figure. Jesus is understood here as the designated Messiah who would return at God's own time to restore the tribes of Jacob, reconcile parents to their children, and so calm the wrath of God before the Day of the Lord.³³ More generally, Rom 8:18-23 describes future glory as the

³¹Cf. 2 Cor 5:17; Eph 2:10; Gal 6:15; 1 Pet 1:23; Jam 1:18; Acts 16:14-15.

³²Acts 3:20-21.

³³Cf. Sir 48:10.

restoration of all creation (all things) at the time of the Messiah and as a liberation from bondage to decay: "...creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God" (Rom 8:21). This second verb, therefore, confirms the sense of this final act of God as a restoration of what God ordained for creation at the beginning, which is not discontinuous from present life. The event of Christ was meant to turn all people from their wicked ways and to usher in a period of conversion and repentance, as we await his final coming in glory.³⁴

The word "anakephalaiosis"

Another word that describes the universal scope of Christ work is *anakephalaiosis*, found in Eph 1:10 and translated as 'recapitulation'. In its context, this word implies that Christ has become the head of all things renewed because, through his death and resurrection he has restored the entire fallen humanity to communion with God. As head, Christ is joined to his members in as much as the benefits of his death and resurrection are diffused to all believers. This word describes the merit of the Christ event as fellowship with God; a restoration to God through sharing in the life of Jesus Christ. This state of affairs, as Rom 8:18-23 says, will be accomplished as in the beginning, through the mediation of those who believe in Christ, who possess the Spirit as the first fruits of the resurrection. The idea expressed here describes the event of Christ in terms of human restoration in view of universal salvation. It means that in his omnipotence, God rehabilitates weak and sinful human being through the power of the Holy Spirit to carry forward the original human responsibility to creation.

³⁴Cf. F.F. Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Leicester: Apollos, 1990, p.144.

Rom 5:12-21 develops the same idea with the notion of Christ's headship, that is, in terms of Christ's exercise of dominion in life through the free gift of righteousness:

If, because of the one man's trespass, death exercised dominion through that one, much more surely will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness exercise dominion in life through the one man, Jesus Christ. Therefore just as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man's act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all. For just as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous...so that, just as sin exercised dominion in death, so grace might also exercise dominion through justification leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord (Rom 5:17-21).

The passage, cited above, stresses the universal effects of Adam's sin as head of a disobedient humanity, and a disproportionate universal effect of Christ's act of righteousness as head of an obedient humanity. Both Adam and Christ are heads of different epochs and the character of each epoch depends on the action of its head. Adam, Paul says, is a type of the one who is to come (*melbontos* Rom 5:14). Christ's action is a total transformation of the cause of Adam's action.

This description of restoration as a definitive restoration of the human being in view of creation's salvation seems to create the

impression that the universal flavour of God's action in Christ would experience vulnerability in confrontation with human action. However, this impression is cancelled by Paul's use of the expressions "first fruits" in Rom 8:23 and "exercise of dominion in life" in Rom 5:17, which transfers the positive effect of a person's or some people's action on others. Through these expressions, Paul affirms that those who believe in Christ, who possess the Spirit, are already signs of the universal salvation which will be completed at the time of consummation.³⁵ This conclusion confirms the New Testament witness that Jesus is the goal of creation: "all things are created through him and for him" (Col 1:16) and in him is the fulfilment of all God's promises of salvation to the world and to Israel: "For in him is found the yes to all God's promises..." (1 Cor 1:20). The consummation, therefore, is the disclosure of the new world which has started in his death and resurrection. In his death and resurrection, Christ has shown us the direction towards the new creation, the new heaven and the new earth. And through God's gift of the Holy Spirit, we have been enabled to walk towards perfect communion with God.

The New Testament contains many more assertions that God wants all people to be saved, which are not presented in this essay.³⁶ Alongside the idea of consummation as universal restoration and salvation, there are other New Testament witnesses that present a more restricted view.

4.2 Consummation as Heaven or Hell

Some New Testament texts affirm that the consummation of the world will happen through a final judgment that will divide the

³⁵Rom 5:12-24 has the flavour of realized eschatology, as in Gal 3:23; Col 2:17, rather than the eschatology of what is yet to come, as in Rom 8:18. Cf. J.D.G. Dunn, *Romans 1-8*, Texas: Word Books, 1988, p.277.

³⁶Cf. Rom 11:32; 1 Tim 2:4.

fate of humanity into two, some will be saved while others will experience eternal punishment or damnation. Some paradigmatic texts are:

Matt 16:27:

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.

Matt 25:31-32:

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.

2 Cor 5:10:

For all of us must appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each may receive recompense for what has been done in the body, whether good or evil.

The final judgment, expressed in this way, shows that not everyone shall be saved. The event of Christ confronts each individual with a demand for final decision for or against Christ. They also show that the idea of salvation is not concomitant to anti-nomianism. Therefore John 3:36 says:

Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever disobeys the Son will not see life, but must endure God's wrath.

The thought that some might not be saved introduces a paradox to the will of God, which states on the one hand that all will be saved and on the other hand that God's justice will be revealed as the punishment of disobedient humanity. This paradox makes sense from the perspective of the moral implications of the event of Christ. Nevertheless, without claiming knowledge of the mysteries of God's plan, there is need to affirm the hope of creation that at the time of consummation, God will bring all conceivable anti-godly powers under his supreme control and his grace will triumph to the glory of God. Against this ethical dimension of the eschatological doctrine is the impressive faith articulated in the entire Bible that the sovereign Lord will fulfil for creation and humanity his promises of definitive liberation and salvation.

4.3 Consummation as Fulfillment of God's Promises

The biblical presentation of God's revelation implies that the end will have the character of the beginning. This is shown especially in the stories of creation at the beginning (Book of Genesis) and end of the Bible (Book of Revelation). In the midst of the troubled and difficult experiences of Israel during the exile, God invited his people, through the prophet Isaiah, to believe in a beautiful future that is guaranteed on the basis of his mighty acts in the beginning:

Remember the former things of old; for I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is no one like me, declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done, saying, "My purpose shall stand, and I will fulfill my intention," ... I have spoken, and I will bring it to pass; I have planned, and I will do it (Isa 46:9-11).

This prophecy assures the fulfilment of God's sovereign will, as the Psalmist also says: "the plans of the Lord stands firm forever, the purposes of his heart from age to age" (Ps 33:11). Many New Testament books testify that all God's promises have been fulfilled in the resurrection of Jesus Christ:

This essay concludes with a reflection on the question which Abraham addressed to God shortly before his judgment on Sodom and Gomorrah: will the Lord spare the nation if he finds at least five righteous people in it?

5. Evaluation and Conclusion

This essay has pursued a particular research question, that is, what would be the overriding character of God's eschatological action? In other words, how would God reveal his supremacy and lordship over creation at the end even in his judgment of the evil that apparently rules creation at the present time? The entire essay tried to delineate the dialectic of the two aspects of God's rulership of the world: his mercy and wrath. This dialectic involves the relationship between God's merciful and unwavering commitment to save the world that he loves against evil, and the destructive possibilities of his just anger against a sinful world. In these presentations, divine omnipotence, by implication, would require that God would not allow any conceivable power to frustrate his initial plan for creation. God's supremacy is revealed in how God brings all anti-godly powers under control.

The essay presents the first major content of divine sovereignty by discussing the ways in which God exercises lordship in creation. It exposed the three major forces of evil with which God

must contend in order to secure and affirm his supremacy in creation. The anti-life forces in creation, divine judgment of human disobedience and human acts of violence against humanity are presented in the Bible as detrimental to the environment and human life. While the biblical texts show that God can confine the vicious forces in nature, divine judgment of human disobedience and of human acts of violence against humanity appear to be a more destructive force capable of putting human existence and the entire creation in danger. If God should judge human beings according to their actions, the world would be destroyed in the heat of his anger. In this context, therefore, the supremacy of God is shown in how he deals with human sin in order to establish his glory. The Flood story is presented as paradigmatic of God original decision to be merciful with sinful humanity. His promise to save creation, which he sealed through a covenant, is shown to determine the course of the God-human relationship in the world and in Israel's history. This perspective gives the event of Jesus a broader base.

The major vocabulary of divine omnipotence - the word *hesed* - communicate that the meaning of the event of Christ, as God's steadfast commitment to save a sinful world, provides a hermeneutic for understanding the character of the eschatological event. A definition of eschatology formulated in relation to the idea of divine sovereignty is expected to bear the marks by which that sovereignty is exercised in creation and in history. Accordingly, in all the texts presented, the aim was always to understand how God exercises lordship by dealing with anti-life forces in nature and in history. Although the New Testament inherited the Old Testament eschatological ideas of final judgment, reward of the righteous, punishment or

damnation of the wicked and consummation, the New Testament represents the essential modification to the Old Testament idea by introducing the universal scope of God's work in Christ. In it, one encounters a number of significant vocabularies that explain the nature of God's action in the Christ event and which seems would predominantly determine the character of God's final action in history. Through Christ, God demonstrates his sovereignty over all and underscores his Lordship. The event of Christ was meant to turn all people from their wicked ways and to usher in a period of conversion and repentance, as we await his final coming in glory.

Lastly, it must be admitted that faith in God's sovereign mastery over the world is an article of faith. This is so because the language of divine omnipotence belongs to a sphere reserved only to God's freedom. It has proved that creation and humanity subsist, neither thanks to human obedience nor to human repentance but due to God's sovereign and gracious decision to preserve it. The God to whom this theology of grace bears witness is the one whose acts have the character of liberation, whose liberating acts brought the world into being, sustains it and will bring it to full communion with himself. To him be glory forever and ever, Amen!