On the Origin and Centrality of the Christian Hope for the Last Day and Jesus’ Second Coming
—An Answer to E. Berkovits

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1 Objection to Christianity for its slight (?) of this world.

Eliezer Berkovits, contrasting Judaism and Christianity, says,

Whereas Jesus spoke of the kingdom of God that was not of this world, arraying the spirit against the flesh, whereas atheistic humanism aims at establishing this earth as the exclusive kingdom of man by setting the flesh against the spirit, Judaism strives for a time when this earth is established as God’s kingdom, through the harmonious integration between the flesh and the spirit, in the act of sanctification in which the name of God and the life of man are hallowed together.¹

He also says,

Implied in the basic Christian position, in the Christian concept of redemption and the Kingdom of God, is a denial of history. Within Christianity there is no room for history.²

He agrees with Mircea Eliade, who severely criticizes Christianity, saying “... it must not be lost sight of that Christianity entered into History in order to abolish it: the greatest hope of the Christian is the second coming of Christ, which is to put an end to all History.”³

Here, Berkovits sees Christian hope to be other-worldly, as “the greatest hope of the Christian is second coming of Christ,” as if this present world were something of secondary importance to Christians. Yet, is it true that while Judaism strives for a time when this earth is established as God’s kingdom, Jesus was only looking forward to the other world to come, neglecting this present world?

2 Apostles’ Creed

It is true that in the Apostles’ Creed, which goes back to the time before 390 CE, when St. Ambrose mentioned its title in his letter,⁴ the belief in the second coming of Christ is one of the important factors. The confession goes:
I believe in Jesus Christ, God’s only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried; he descended to the dead.

On the third day he rose again: he ascended into heaven, he is seated at the right hand of the Father, and he will come to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen

This creed is one of the most widely used Christian creeds throughout the world both liturgically and catechistically. It is used in the rite of baptism, too, as the key belief that the applicant is to confess before getting baptized. The belief in Jesus’ second coming is stated: “he will come to judge the living and the dead.” Being thus included in the total of 16 lines of the concise creed of the essence of Christian faith, this is obviously regarded as a central belief. In this, Jesus is identified as God’s only Son, the Lord, and this Jesus is thought to come at the Last Day of Judgement, and in Christian tradition, the Day of Judgement is identified with the day of general resurrection when the believers will get their eternal life.

In the Nicene Creed (CE325), this anticipation for Christ’s second coming and for the day of general resurrection of the believers is more vividly stated thus:

He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end […] We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come.

Yet, in this article, we shall reassess the centrality of this apocalyptic hope, to see how essential or not essential it is to the Christian belief so that we may counter Berkovitz’s assessment and criticism.

In the following, we shall first of all consider the origin and background of this apocalyptic hope, to see this hope was developed after Jesus’ death, and was closely related to the first
church’s belief that Jesus was Messiah, and to their identification of him with the Son of Man figure in Daniel 7. This will show that the apocalyptic hope and belief of Jesus’ second coming as the Savior and Judge was the early Church’s creation, rather than conceived by Jesus himself. This shall lead us to reconsider the centrality of this belief for Jesus himself. We shall make our conclusion on the basis of these considerations.

3 The origin of belief in Parousia.

In the New Testament, the expectation of Jesus’ second coming is most clearly expressed in Paul’s letters. He expressly states his belief that the raised Jesus will come back on the Last Day as the judge, which he calls the day of our Lord Jesus Christ, when the final salvation is to be fulfilled. He says Christians “wait for [God’s] Son from heaven, whom [God] raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath that is coming” (Thessalonians 1:10). Also in the first letter to the Thessalonians, he mentions, “what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming?” (2:19) and prays that the Christ Jesus may so strengthen the Thessalonians’ hearts in holiness that they “may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints (3:13; cf. also 5:23 and 1 Corinthians 1:7-8). He expects the day of Jesus’ coming from heaven in the immediate future:

4:15 For this we declare to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will by no means precede those who have died. 16 For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel’s call and with the sound of God’s trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first. 17 Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord forever. (1 Thessalonians 4:15-17)

In the Gospels, the origin and ground of Christian anticipation for Jesus’ second coming is generally regarded to be found in Mark 8:38 where Jesus says, “ος γὰρ ἔλεγε· οὐκ ἐπισκοπῆς με ἔχετε καὶ τοὺς ἐμοὺς λόγους ἐν τῇ γενεᾷ ταύτῃ τῇ μοιχαλίδι καὶ ἀμαρτωλῷ, καὶ οὐ καὶ ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου ἐπισκοπῆσαι αὐτῶν, ὅταν ἔλθῃ ἐν τῇ δόξῃ τοῦ πατρὸς αὐτοῦ μετὰ τῶν ἄγγελων τῶν ἁγίων (Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels). It is pointed out that Mark’s concept of Jesus’ second coming “corresponds exactly to that found in Paul. He, too, speaks about Jesus as the ruler and judge who descends from heaven on the Last Day”. On the other hand, there is a conspicuous difference between Mark and Paul, which is the use of “the Son of Man” in Mark for the ruler and judge figure to arrive on the Last Day. Paul does not use this designation. Mark’s concept of The Son of Man in the context here is interpreted as coming from the Son of Man figure in Daniel 7:13:
As I watched in the night visions, I saw one like a Son of Man coming with the clouds of heaven. And he came to the Ancient One and was presented before him. To him was given dominion and glory and kingship, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not pass away, and his kingship is one that shall never be destroyed. (Daniel 7:13-14)

The title “the Son of Man” in Mark 8:38 is naturally interpreted as a designation of Jesus, largely because in the Gospel of Mark, Jesus often refers to himself as “the Son of Man.” Although this expression can in Aramaic mean simply “I” (as in Mark 2:10, 28: 3:28: 8:31, 9:9, 12, 31, 36: 10:33, 34, 45: 14:21, 41), this “Son of Man” is easily identified with “the Son of Man” who is to come on the Last Day (8:38, 13:26, 27, 29). Especially, Jesus’ answer to the high priest’s question at the trial, “Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?” (14:61), “I am; and you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of the Power,’ and ‘coming with the clouds of heaven’(14:62) is obviously identifying him with the messiah figure. I do not here discuss the authenticity of these words, but obviously Mark intentionally shows Jesus as the messianic Son of Man.

In Q, too, in the parallel passages in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, we find the Son of Man sayings referring to the eschatological figure in 5 places, counting the parallel texts of Matthew and Luke as one:

1. Matthew 10:32 “Πᾶς οὖν ὁ ὅστις ὁμολογήσει ἐν ἑμοί ἐμπροσθεν τῶν ἀνθρώπων, ὁμολογήσει κάγω ἐν αὐτῷ ἐμπροσθεν τοῦ πατρὸς μου τοῦ ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς” (Everyone therefore who acknowledges me before others, I also will acknowledge before my Father in heaven).

2. Matthew 24:44 “διὰ τούτο καὶ ὑμεῖς γίνεσθε ἑτοιμοὶ, ὅτι ἐὰν δοκείτε ὃ ὑδί τοῦ ἀνθρώπου ἔρχεται” (Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour).

3. Matthew 23:39 “λέγω γὰρ ὑμῖν, οὐ μὴ με ἴδητε ἀπ’ ἀρτι ἔως ἐν εἰσηγήσει εὐλογημένος ὁ ἐρχόμενος ἐν ὀνόματι κυρίου” (For I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord”).

4. Matthew 24:27, 37, 39 “οὐσπερ γὰρ ἡ ἀστραπὴ ἐξέρχεται ἀπὸ ἀνατολῶν καὶ...
Within the contexts of these passages, the Son of Man is, as in Mark 8:38, identified with Jesus himself who is expected to come back from heaven. However, these passages, even if they rooted back to the historical Jesus' words, do not exactly say anything about Jesus' coming, much less about his second coming. For, first of all, in no place in the Gospels, or in Paul's letters, the coming of the Son of Man, or of Jesus, is referred to with such words as 'return,' "coming back," or "coming a second time." In the Gospels, it is spoken about as the Son of Man coming for the first time. If Jesus had by these words predicted his return, he would have said "will come back," or "return." Secondly, the sayings about his coming are all put in the mouth of Jesus, who refers to the Son of Man in the third person singular, as "he." Thus, as J. Hollwman notes, "the Son of Man sayings suggest that the person Jesus expected to come was someone other than himself. Only in the context of the Gospels, owning to the Christological thrust of these documents, is the identification of the Son of man with Jesus clear."111

Rather than understanding the future coming of the Son of Man in Jesus' sayings to be
conceived as his future return, it would be much more reasonable to see this Son of Man as an eschatological figure like the one like a Son of Man in Daniel 7, who is different from Jesus. It is rather likely that Jesus expected some sort of such an eschatological figure to appear at the end of time to bring in the final fulfillment of God’s kingdom, or God’s reign.

It is all the more reasonable to think so because in the Jewish literature around the time of Jesus’ days, from the second century BCE to the first centuries CE, we see much the similar kind of anticipation for an eschatological ruler and/or judge coming at the end of time, which can be seen as having the same root with Jesus’ Son of Man sayings.

For instance, in the Sibylline Books,

5:108 And then a king sent from God […] 109 shall destroy all the mighty kings and the best of the men. 110 And so shall the judgement come from the Immortal upon men. (5:108-110)

5:414 For there has come from the plains of heaven a blessed man 415 with the scepter in his hand which God has committed to his clasp: 416 and he has won fair dominion over all, and has restored to all 417 the good the wealth which the former men took. 418 And he has destroyed every city from its foundations with sheets of fire, 419 and burnt up the families of the men who before wrought evil, 420 and the city which God loved he made 421 more radiant than the stars and the sun and the moon; 422 and he set it as the jewel of the world, and made a temple 423 exceeding fair in its fair sanctuary, and fashioned it 424 so that all the faithful and all the righteous may see 227 the glory of the invisible God, the vision of delight. (5:414-427)

In 1 Enoch Chapters 37-71, we see “the Righteous One,” who is God’s “Elect One,” coming to judge people at the end of time. He is even called “Son of Man.”

38:1 When the congregation of the righteous shall appear,
And sinners shall be judged for their sins,
And shall be driven from the face of the earth:
2 And when the Righteous One shall appear before the eyes of the righteous,
Whose elect works hang upon the Lord of Spirits,
And light shall appear to the righteous and the elect who dwell on the earth,
Where then will be the dwelling of the sinners,
And where the resting-place of those who have denied the Lord of Spirits?
It had been good for them if they had not been born. 33

45:3 On that day Mine [i.e. God’s] Elect One shall sit on the throne of glory
And shall try their works,
And their places of rest shall be innumerable.
And their souls shall grow strong within them when they see Mine Elect Ones,
And those who have called upon My glorious name:
4. Then will I cause Mine Elect One to dwell among them.
And I will transform the heaven and make it an eternal blessing and light
5. And I will transform the earth and make it a blessing:
And I will cause Mine elect ones to dwell upon it:

46:1 And there I [Enoch] saw One who had a head of days,
And His head was white like wool,
And with Him was another being whose countenance had the appearance of a man,
And his face was full of graciousness, like one of the holy angels.
2. And I asked the angel who went with me and showed me all the hidden things,
concerning that Son of Man, who he was, and whence he was, […]
3. This is the Son of Man who hath righteousness,
With whom dwelleth righteousness,
And who revealeth all the treasures of that which is hidden,
Because the Lord of Spirits hath chosen him,
And whose lot hath the pre-eminence before the Lord of Spirits in uprightness for ever.
4. And this Son of Man whom thou hast seen
Shall raise up the kings and the mighty from their seats,
[And the strong from their thrones]
And shall loosen the reins of the strong,
And break the teeth of the sinners.

47:3 In those days I saw the Head of Days when He seated himself upon the throne of His glory,
And the books of the living were opened before Him:
And all His host which is in heaven above and His counselors stood before Him,
4. And the hearts of the holy were filled with joy:
Because the number of the righteous had been offered,
And the prayer of the righteous had been heard,
And the blood of the righteous been required before the Lord of Spirits.

69:29 And from henceforth there shall be nothing corruptible;
For that Son of Man has appeared,
And has seated himself on the throne of his glory,
And all evil shall pass away before his face,
And the word of that Son of Man shall go forth
And be strong before the Lord of Spirits.
In 4 Ezra, too, we see an eschatological judge figure:

13:1 After seven days I dreamed a dream in the night. 2 And lo, a wind arose from the sea and stirred up all its waves. 3 As I kept looking the wind made something like the figure of a man come up out of the heart of the sea. And I saw that this man flew with the clouds of heaven; and wherever he turned his face to look, everything under his gaze trembled,

In 4 Ezra, this eschatological judge figure is identified with the king Messiah who is a descendant of David.

12:31 And as for the lion whom you saw rousing up out of the forest and roaring and speaking to the eagle and reproving him for his unrighteousness, and as for all his words that you have heard, 32 this is the Messiah whom the Most High has kept until the end of days, who will arise from the offspring of David, and will come and speak with them. He will denounce them for their ungodliness and for their wickedness, and will display before them their contemptuous dealings. 33 For first he will bring them alive before his judgment seat, and when he has reproved them, then he will destroy them. 34 But in mercy he will set free the remnant of my people, those who have been saved throughout my borders, and he will make them joyful until the end comes, the day of judgment, of which I spoke to you at the beginning.

In 2 Baruch, too, the expected one is called the “Messiah” to be revealed at the end of time.

39:7 And it will come to pass when the time of its consummation that it should fall has approached, then the principate of My Messiah will be revealed, which is like the fountain 8 and the vine, and when it is revealed it will root out the multitude of its host. And as touching that which thou hast seen, the lofty cedar, which was left of that forest, and the fact, that the vine spoke those words with it which thou didst hear, this is the word.

40:1 ‘The last leader of that time will be left alive, when the multitude of his hosts will be put to the sword, and he will be bound, and they will take him up to Mount Xion, and My Messiah will convict 2 him of all his impieties, and will gather and set before him all the works of his hosts. And afterwards he will put him to death, and protect the rest of My people which shall be found in the place which 3 I have chosen. And his principate will stand for ever, until the world of corruption is at an end, 4 and until the times aforesaid are fulfilled. This is thy vision, and this is its interpretation.’
These anticipations were regarded to have developed by the second century BCE, largely in response to the historic situation of the days of the persecution of Judaism by the Seleucid King Antiochus IV Epiphanes when Judea was under the reign of the Seleucid Empire. Despite the Deuteronomic promise to Israel that if Israel obeys God’s commands, they will enjoy prosperity, the most pious ones were killed martyrs under the persecution. To deal with that situation, the book of Daniel encourages the people, promising that “the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that shall never be destroyed, nor shall this kingdom be left to another people. It shall crush all these kingdoms and bring them to an end, and it shall stand forever” (2:44). And it was in this context that “the Son of Man” figure was conceived as the eschatological sovereign figure.\(^\text{16}\)

**Jesus’ prediction of his Resurrection—possible, but not in the context of second coming**

Yet, if the historical Jesus did not identify himself with the coming Son of Man figure, why did the first Christians, including Paul and the gospel writers, come to expect his second coming and apocalyptic fulfillment of salvation? Neither their experience of Jesus’ resurrection nor the prediction of his death and resurrection are enough as an explanation. For, in the Jewish thought around that time, as expressed most clearly in 2 Macabees Chapter 7 (cf. especially 7:9, 11, 23, 29) there were expectation and belief that the righteous martyrs would be resurrected by God, to be vindicated for their faithfulness.\(^\text{17}\) Therefore, although being raised from death may have been taken as a proof of the person’s righteousness, it would by itself not have been taken to prove that the person was the messiah.

Rather, the process of development of belief in Jesus’ second coming must have been connected with the already existing anticipation.

Jesus’ ministry and proclamation of the kingdom were eschatological. His central message was that the kingdom of God, that is God’s reign, was imminent. On the other hand, with the general expectation and anticipation for a messianic eschatological figure such as expressed in the contemporary Jewish literature, and from the Gospel records, it is also reasonable to assume that Jesus’ disciples regarded him as the Messiah in that eschatological sense. When Jesus was arrested and executed on the cross, most of them got disappointed and scattered away, being afraid of keeping involved with the one who had been sentenced guilty and executed violently. Yet, when they have experienced Jesus’ resurrection event, they resumed their belief that the kingdom of God whose nearness Jesus had proclaimed would be fulfilled very soon. They regained the belief that Jesus would be a central figure in the eschatological kingdom of God. But as Holland suggests, their expectation about Jesus was adjusted. “The adjustment took place spontaneously and smoothly. Before his death, Jesus’ followers believed that Jesus would play a central role in the future kingdom of God. After his death, they still maintained the same belief, but they fashioned it in a different way. When the kingdom would come in full, Jesus would come as well and then complete the task which he had left unfinished as a result of his death. The one who had announced and inaugurated the kingdom would be there when the kingdom would become full reality. He would be present by descending from
heaven, his residence since his resurrection."\(^{18}\)

In other words, the expectation that Jesus would come at the end of time to bring God’s salvation was the natural result of two convictions: (a) the conviction that the full realization of God’s kingdom was still imminent, and (b) the persuasion that the one who had inaugurated this kingdom would be present at this completion. The latter conviction was put into words with the aid of the existing tradition of the coming Son of man, except that the Son of man was now identified with Jesus.\(^{19}\)

The identification of Son of Man with Jesus was not originally intended by Jesus himself.

Reconsideration of centrality of parousia in Jesus’ thought.

We have concluded that Jesus’ second coming was not a part of the historical Jesus’ message. Yet, still, if Jesus anticipated the Son of Man coming at the end of time decisively to bring in the kingdom of God, can’t it be said all the same that “Christianity entered into History in order to abolish it” and the greatest hope of the Christian is the end to all History? The answer should be No. It is true that according to the Gospels Jesus proclaimed “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near” (Mark, 1:15). However, according to the account of Jesus in the Gospels, he did not expect this kingdom of God as something that would come by abolishing the present world. In the Gospels, when he healed a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years, he said to her, “Daughter, your faith has made you well: go in peace, and be healed of your disease” (5:34). The phrase that is translated in NRV as “your faith has made you well” is “πίστις σου σώσει σε” which can more literally be translated as “your faith has saved you” in a perfect tense. With the words, “go in peace (ὐπάγε εἰς εἰρήνην),” Jesus’ remark here is proclamation of her salvation which has realized here and now. When John the Baptist sent his disciples to ask Jesus, “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” Jesus answered them, “Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them” (Luke 7:20-22). When Jesus was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God was coming, he answered, “The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed: \(^{21}\) nor will they say, ‘Look, here it is!’ or ‘There it is!’ For, in fact, the kingdom of God is in your reach.” (Luke 17:20-21). This means, he did not expect the kingdom of God coming by sudden and total abolishment of the present world. His ministry works that are recorded in the Gospels were to change this world into the kingdom of God. In other words, the kingdom of God should be realized in this world, transforming the world by and through Jesus.

We see at the beginning that Berkovits considers Christianity is different from Judaism in that whereas Christianity speaks of the kingdom of God that was not of this world, Judaism strives for a time when this world is established as God’s kingdom. However, striving for a
time when this earth is established as God’s kingdom was also exactly what Jesus was doing in his ministry. He may have anticipated an eschatological fulfillment of that kingdom, but such anticipation was also shared by many of his Jewish contemporaries. If he also anticipated the end time fulfillment, he definitely believed that the salvation had started here in this world, and this worldly salvation—recovery of health, plenty of meals etc.—meant a lot to him. This world is important to Christians, no less than to Jewish people. Christians and Jewish people may share a lot more common beliefs than many of both Christians and Jews conceive, and their anticipation for the kingdom of God is more of the common factor than a point of disagreement and mutual criticisms.

End Notes

10) In NRV, a Son of Man is translated as “a human being,” which is one of the meanings of בְּנֵי הָאָדָם (Benai Adam).
13) Cf. a similar expression in Mark 14:21, where Jesus prophesies his suffering and Juda’s betrayal: “For the Son of Man goes as it is written of him, but woe to that one by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been better for that one not to have been born.”
14) 4 Ezra is “4 Esdras” in New Revised Standard Version, from which we quote.

要 旨

キリスト教における終末とイエスの再臨への希望の起原と中心性
—E・ベルコヴィッツへの返答

本田峰子

ベルコヴィッツは、キリスト教の中心に終末論とイエスの再臨を見て、キリスト教は元来この世的ではなく終末に希望を見るのでこの現世を軽視する傾向があると言っている。キリスト教の希望が終末にある、現世は軽視されるというのは本当だろうか。しかし、最近の史的イエス研究では、終末におけるイエス再臨の待望は一通りのカギとなる、来たるべき「人の子」をイエスが自分のことを言っているのか否かについて様々な意見はまだあるとしても、イエスの死後に教会内で成立したものであると考えられる。確かに、イエスは神の国が近づいたとの宣教をしているが、彼の使信は、終末のこの世における実現であり、彼はこの世界に神の国が到来することを考えていた。その点では現世的である。終末におけるイエス再臨の希望は、1世紀に存在していたユダヤ教のメシア待望における、メシアの来臨の思想と根を同じくし、ユダヤ教とも共通点がある。イエスの再臨への信仰は、初代キリスト教徒にとっては、イエスへの彼らの信仰から生まれた中核的なものであった。その点からすれば、この信仰はキリスト教にとって中核的なものとも言える。しかしこれは、イエス自方が考えたものではないということだろう。イエスの宣教はもともと非常に現世的なものであった。その使信に従うキリスト教もまた得るものであり、キリスト教がこの世を軽視するという見方はイエスの姿勢とは異なる方向を示すことになる。神の国の成就への期待と希望は、ユダヤ教とキリスト教の相違はむしろ共通点と言える方がよく、ユダヤ教とキリスト教は、おそらく、両方の宗教の信徒の多くが考えるよりも多くの共通点を持つであろう。