THROUGH A GLASS DARKLY

THE ESCHATOLOGICAL VISION OF JOHN WESLEY

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*ABBREVIATIONS*

In order to facilitate further research all references in the present work to the Wesley corpus are given by their full title and section. Where minor discrepancies exist, the title appears as it is in the source cited. Where major discrepancies exist, clarification is appended. Where possible, citations are taken from the fourteen volumes thus far released of the new Oxford / Abingdon "Works of John Wesley" series (vols: 1, 2, 3, 4, 7, 9, 11, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 25, 26). Materials not included in these volumes are cited from the older but still definitive editions of the letters edited by Telford, the journals and diaries edited by Curnock, the current standard editions of the New and Old Testament *Explanatory Notes*, the *Arminian Magazine*, etc. Remaining materials are cited from the traditional, though less desirable, edition of the works edited by Thomas Jackson. Consistent with the trend in Wesley studies, major editions are referred to by abbreviations. The present scheme attempts to reflect the titles as they appear on the spines of the various editions.

*AM* *The Arminian Magazine*.

Ans. An answer (as in a catechism).

*CL* *The Christian Library* (Wesley's abridgments in 30 vols.)

*JJW* Curnock's edition of Wesley's journals (8 vols.).

*Jrn*. An entry in Wesley's journal followed by its date.

*LJW* Telford's edition of Wesley's letters (8 vols.).

*NNT* Wesley's *Explanatory Notes on the New Testament* (2 vols.).

*NOT* Wesley's *Explanatory Notes on the Old Testament* (3 vols.).

Que. A question (as in a catechism).

*PW* Osborn's edition of *The Poetical Works of John and Charles Wesley* (13 vols.).

Sec. A section of a document.

Ser. A sermon.

"To (followed by name and date) a letter by Wesley.

*SWG* *A Survey of the Wisdom of God in the Creation, or A Compendium of Natural Theology* (3 vols.).

*WJW* The Oxford / Abingdon *Works of John Wesley* (14 vols.).

*WW* The Jackson edition of *Wesley's Works* (14 vols.).

INTRODUCTION

Many aspects of John Wesley's his life, sources, theology, influence, etc; have received considerable scholarly attention in the nearly two-hundred years since his death. Interestingly, however, his eschatological views have rarely been the subject of detailed investigation. When they have been so considered they have often misunderstood or undervalued. The purpose of the present study is to contribute to a more systematic understanding of this aspect of Wesley and hopefully encourage additional research in this neglected area. The major conclusions are: (1) Wesley had a detailed and comprehensive system of general and personal eschatology. (2) That system was similar to many of his contemporaries. (3) His major innovations were in the areas of the philosophical underpinnings and theodicy. (4) His system was extremely well-integrated not only with the rest of theology as a necessary element but was also a fully functioning part of a coherent world view. (5) His search for assurance of salvation not only motivated his eschatological researches but may have been partially satisfied by them.

*The Need for Research on Wesley's Eschatology*

Why another work on Wesley, and why one which is on such an obscure area? These are valid questions in a time when the production of Wesley research has reached overwhelming proportion.[[1]](#footnote-0) The answers are also valid. Despite the avalanche of scholarly investigation into the Father of Methodism, very little has been done by way of examining his views concerning both personal and general eschatology. What comment there is is often only tangential.[[2]](#footnote-1) Of this, the two best studies, a doctoral dissertation by J. Cyril Downes at Edinburgh University and a BA honors thesis by Martha Pierce at Drew University, have never been published.[[3]](#footnote-2) Yet, even these works have lacunae within their descriptions. Nor has there been any significant investigation which seeks to integrate the eschatological thought into the fairly comprehensive world-view of its author. Given this dearth of information and analysis, it is not surprising then that a number of misconceptions exist about his eschatology. For instance, Harris Franklin Rall rejected premillennialism in Wesley[[4]](#footnote-3) while C. A. Thompson affirmed that the father of Methodism was a postmillennialist.[[5]](#footnote-4) Luke Tyerman and Nathaniel West, however, wrote affirmingly about his premillennial leanings.[[6]](#footnote-5) On the other hand, Downes and Colin Williams have argued for a realized eschatology in Wesley.[[7]](#footnote-6) And Howard A. Snyder understood "premillennial" as inconsistent with the founder of Methodism and "apocalypticism" as "foreign to the sense of growth and process one finds in Wesley."[[8]](#footnote-7) Yet, the position presented in the *Expository Notes upon the New Testament* displays in detail a system which fits none of these standard positions and, as demonstrated later in this dissertation, is itself in tension with other contemporaneous writings of Wesley.[[9]](#footnote-8)

It is for these reasons that a fuller understanding of Wesley's eschatology needs to be developed. It is hoped that the present project may address some of these weaknesses and spur further investigations producing a more complete picture of how the "man of one book" felt about his primary text's ultimate outcomes.

*Research Methodology*

The research methodology for the present study may be conveniently described under three headings: the research paradigm, the research difficulties, and the research procedures.

The Research Paradigm

In his 1989 monograph, *Mirror and Memory, Reflections on Early Methodism*, Richard P. Heitzenrater suggested a paradigm for Wesley studies.[[10]](#footnote-9) His model consists of four levels: (1) "*primary studies*" intended to result in "*reliable texts* of primary resources," (2) "*specialist studies* that analyze and interpret particular topics," (3) "comprehensive studies that summarize and synthesize the studies done at the second level," and (4) "*popular studies* . . . written for the general public."[[11]](#footnote-10) The present study fits is on the second level of "specialist studies." In addition to these levels, Heitzenrater also specified the criteria which such specialist studies should meet. Somewhat modified in light of the present topic and the state of secondary research, these criteria may be stated as the following questions:

(1) What did Wesley actually say, publicly and privately, on eschatology and related issues? How much material is there? In what strata of the Wesley corpus is it found? Does it when collected suggest an integrated belief or is it merely random responses to practical situations?

(2) How did Wesley's thought develop over time? Is there an emergence of new ideas or syntheses which enlarge or redirect his understanding or is his eschatological formation relatively stable over time?

(3) Who and what were his immediate sources and who or what were their origins? What were his criteria for incorporating other's material into his structure?

(4) What were the controversies, if any, which influenced him in the formulation of his eschatology, and what, if any, were the patterns of such influence?

(5) What is the place and relevance of Wesley's eschatology in terms of the larger context of his life, work, and thought? What is the connection between this (at least in the popular mind) eminently practical minister of the gospel and the abstruse, theoretical speculation of eschatology?

(6) What ambiguities, tensions, and inconsistencies remained either within his eschatological formulations or between his eschatology and his person, praxis, and other areas of his thought?

(7) What impact did the general tenor of his times have on his eschatology?

(8) How does his eschatology compare and contrast with that of his contemporaries?

This adaptation of Heitzenrater's scheme provided the investigative framework for the present study. While exhaustive answers to these questions have not been determined, each of the questions has provided a lens by which to examine the dark glass of Wesley's eschatology with the result that a significantly clearer picture has come to light.

The Research Difficulties

Three major difficulties face the researcher in the area of Wesley's eschatology. First, the material is scattered throughout the Wesley corpus. Much valuable material may be found in tangential comments in the odd letter or journal entry. Simply acquiring the data is an enormous task in itself. Second, the secondary sources are limited and often contradictory as indicated above. Third, Wesley's eschatology exists within a complex world view, the key factors of which are not always evident. His eschatological insights cannot be fully understood apart from this context yet the connections are not immediately clear.

The Research Procedure

Research began by identifying key terms and Scripture references relating to eschatology. These were investigated through the various indices in the major editions of Wesley and the references in the *Expository Notes* on the Old and New Testaments.[[12]](#footnote-11) Given the scattered nature of the materials and the highly speculative nature of the subject, all sources written or abridged by Wesley were considered appropriate for investigation.[[13]](#footnote-12) The references thus acquired, extensive reading in the Wesley corpus, and additional citations from secondary sources developed through the traditional methods and computer searches contributed to the data base of primary sources. The material was then categorized and analyzed according to ideas, date, sources, and historical context. Secondary sources were also consulted and used in the analysis of the Wesley materials.

For the purposes of contemporary comparisons two figures were chosen. First was the German, Moravian theologian Augustus Gottlieb Spangenberg (1704-1792).[[14]](#footnote-13) Spangenberg was a member of the theological faculty of Halle after which did missionary work in Georgia where he met Wesley and advised him in spiritual matters. Returning to the continent in 1762, he became Zinzendorf's successor and biographer. The close connection between the early lives of Spangenberg and Wesley, their warm personal acquaintance, their passion for evangelism, and their keen interest in theology set against the backdrop of the intense and varied relationship between the Moravians and Methodists all suggested that fruitful comparisons and contrasts could be made between their eschatologies. For equally interesting, but quite opposite reasons, John Gill (1697-1771) was the other contemporary of Wesley examined.[[15]](#footnote-14) Gill was an English, Baptist pastor from an underprivileged background. By native brilliance and shear dint of self-education he was eventually presented with a doctorate by Marischal College, Aberdeen, Scotland. His hyper-Calvinism was the basis of his small amount of interaction with Wesley. Curiously, this quite different character developed an eschatological system which was remarkable similar in many of its details to Wesley.

*Wesley's Eschatology: An Overview*

The heart of this dissertation consists of four chapters. At the end of each chapter there is a discussion section which typically examines sources, contemporary comparisons, and theological reflection. The first chapter reviewed several aspects of Wesley's world-view which are particularly relevant to his eschatology. The Wesleyan quadrilateral of Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience and the great chain of being are introduced as two powerful philosophical concepts which shaped the great edifice of eschatology which Wesley constructed. The physical world which will one day be transformed by eschatology is considered next. This allows the introduction of Wesley's compelling interest in "natural philosophy" or science to be examined, an interest which appeared repeatedly in his eschatological speculations. Individual persons and the corporate reality of the Kingdom of God as the grand objects of eschatology are then briefly considered. Significant attention is also given to the supernatural aspects of Wesley's thought. This often overlooked area is a powerful window into the more real world which both controls and is the destiny of present time and space. The angels, ghosts, visions, visitations, and the like were considered with scientific seriousness by Wesley. They constituted the canvass on which he painted his eschatological vision. His ideas on the physical world, persons, and the supernatural fit well into structure provided by quadrilateral and great chain of being. They are also seen, with the quadrilateral and the chain, as integrating with the complex eschatology which is identified in the following chapters. His sources for this material were varied and eclectic. His innovations were primarily in the organizing principles of the quadrilateral and the chain. Most importantly this material revealed a foundation plan for an implicit theological system in which eschatology was an integral and essential component. Wesley's world-view required eschatology and that world-view was as fully coherent as the great chain which held it together.

The second chapter describes the overall structure of eschatology including the interpretation of Revelation with attention given to its hermeneutics, the view of prophetic history, and the timing of the end. Wesley took seriously the interpretation of Revelation. He borrowed a complex analysis of the book from John Albrecht Bengel and popularized it in his *Notes on the New Testament*. This was an historicist interpretation with a very detailed past and future chronology based on an apocalyptic view of history. "Mohametans" and especially the papacy did the Devil's bidding. The times were worked out with such care that in 1836 Satan would be bound and a first millennium was to occur upon earth during which the church would flourish. One-thousand literal years later Satan would be loosed and another one-thousand years would ensue during which sin would be multiplied upon the earth as saints would reign in heaven. Then the earth would tremble, Christ would come, the judgment would take place, and the universe would be renovated. The great strengths of this system was its allowance for future prophecies which predicted both a glorious reign of the church and a time of great falling away. Most curiously, parallel with this understanding Wesley apparently never abandoned a typical premillennial view which can be traced back to his father. These two positions were held in unresolved tension while he hinted at dates but never committed himself. Consideration is also given to the disasterous prophecies of George Bell, the reasons behind Wesley's affection for Bengel's work, the protagonists of revelation, the role of the Jews, the tribulation, the resurrections and the rapture, and the millennium. Comparisons with Spangenberg and Gill showed no great innovations which could not be attributed to Bengel. Yet, a remarkable degree of cohesiveness appears relative to the subjects of his world-view. Also significantly, it is demonstrated that Wesley put a great deal of thought into the framework of his general eschatology and while a final, firm conclusion was not arrived at; it is clear that his eschatology was an essential element in his theological formation.

The third chapter considers the experiences of eschatology as it takes a detailed look at life, death, the intermediate state, the day of the Lord, and the final state. Here the remarkable wealth of detail and substance which characterize Wesley's eschatological thought is displayed. Attention is given to the eschatological aspects of the present life. The nature and significance of death is then addressed. The incredible intricacy of the intermediate state or hades is examined with its distinct but connected chambers for the wicked and good dead. The profound events of the great day of the Lord are examined: the trauma in the natural world occasioned by Christ's return, the detailed terror of the final judgment and the triumph of final justification, the turning over of the Kingdom by Christ to God, and the renovation of the world. The final state of the good and evil dead is then examined. The deepening levels of eternal punishments in the lake of fire are contrasted to the garden-like bliss of the new earth and Jerusalem where perfection and growth continue eternally in a bilevel universe of more and less holy saints. Wesley's observations on everything from the astronomy of the new heavens, to the nature of the resurrection bodies, and the elevation of animals on the great chain of being are catalogued. The striking similarities with Spangenberg and Gill are again seen but are set in contrast to a uniquely dynamic view of heaven and a far reaching theodicy which ties much of Wesley's theology together and was realized in his eschatology.

The fourth chapter investigates the practical use and theological reflection upon the application of eschatology in the life of the church. Contrary to some of his harsher critics, Wesley is seen as having used a balance of both hell and heaven in his eschatologically oriented preaching and to have reflected on the techniques and implications of it.

A final chapter summarizes previous findings and considers several remaining questions: Does God's reign extend into hell? What is the relationship of the decree to perfection and Christ? Are contemporary adaptations of Wesley's eschatology possible? Most interestingly, what motivated the massive and extremely well-integrated eschatological formation which Wesley produced? The proposed answer to this final question suggests that Wesley's much documented need for assurance may have been one of several motivating factors in his eschatological investigations and that his eschatology might have provided some experiential assurance in his awareness of the presence of spirit's of the good dead.

In the end, Wesley's eschatology must be seen as a large and complex body of knowledge extremely well integrated with the whole of his life and thought. Sufficient data exists to construct an eschatological formation worthy of a systematic theology. Wesley's eschatology cannot be dismissed or passed off as scattered comments produced in response to the demands of an evangelical praxis. It is an essential piece of a greater and coherent whole. Final thoughts consider Wesley's eschatology in light of today's world. While the details of an 1836 to 2836 millennium followed by another may seem quaint in 1994, Wesley's willingness to integrate all aspects of a contemporary and comprehensive world-view within a biblical understanding is perhaps his lasting legacy and contribution to those who would argue for an inspired text and its final conclusion.

1. Richard P. Heitzenrater, *Mirror and Memory, Reflections on Early Methodism* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1989), 205. [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
2. Among the best of these is John Deschner, *Wesley's Christology, an Introduction* (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press; 1960 reprinted 1985), esp. 127-149. See also John Lawson, *Selections from John Wesley's Notes on the New Testament, Systematically Arranged with Explanatory Comments* (London: Epworth Press, 1955), 175-191. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
3. Cyril J. Downes, J. "Eschatological Doctrines in the Writings of John and Charles Wesley" (Ph.D. diss., University of Edinburgh, 1960); Martha B. Pierce. "The Eschatology of John Wesley" (BA Honors Thesis, Drew University, 1960). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
4. Harris Franklin Rall, *Modern Premillenialism and the Christian Hope* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1920), 8-9. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
5. C. A. Thompson, *Is There a Millennium?* (New York, Exposition Press, 1960), 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
6. L[uke] Tyerman, *The Life and Times of the Rev. John Wesley, M.A., Founder of the Methodists*, 3 vols. (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1872), 2:524; Nathaniel West, *John Wesley and Premillenialism* (New York: Hunt and Eaton [also Cincinnati: "God's Revivalist Office"], 1894) 22-23. West's book is only fotry-seven pages (The first ten of which consist mainly of testimonials to the work) and of polemical tone. He cites Tyerman and then gos on to defend the general idea of premillennialism. His citations include: Middleton: 5:726-727 (11), Justin Martyr (Trypho 80, 81), Barnabas (True sabbath is ...), Clement (the Kingdom of God would come), Polycarp (shall reign with him), Hermas (elect of God shall dwell), Irenaeus (*AH* V.26, 30, 33, 35), Lactantius (*Divine Institutes*, IV.2; VII.26), contemporary authorities and even Bengel: Krklart Offenbarung: 664. On Wesley he cites Hartley using Tyerman as the source. "For a time, the prevalence of the *Whitbyan Theory*. or "*New Hypothesis*,"-even yet so common among the spiritualizers of prophecy, caused him to interpret the "*leaven*" in the parable as meaning the sanctifying grace of God" (23). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
7. Downes, "Eschatological Doctrines;" Colin Williams, *John Wesley's Theology Today* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1960), 194. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
8. Howard A. Snyder, "The Holy Reign of God," *Wesleyan Theological Journal*, 24 (1989): 74-90; 84-85. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
9. John Wesley, *Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament*, 2 vols. (London, The Wesleyan-Methodist Book-Room, preface 1754; reprint, Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc; 1986). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
10. Richard P. Heitzenrater, *Mirror and Memory, Reflections on Early Methodism* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1989), 205-218. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
11. Ibid., 206-207. Italics as in the original. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
12. *NOT*, *NNT*. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
13. As might be imagined, Ser. 137, "On the Resurrection of the Dead," is a prime source for discerning Wesley's thinking on this important matter. In considering this it is worthy of note that it was originally written by Benjamine Calamy, D.D., Vicar of St. Lawrence, Jewry, London and was published in 1704 (*WJW* 4:528-529, note the partial comparison). It was abridged and revised by Wesley in 1732. (See *WW* 7:474-485, note that his numbering of the sections is somewhat cumbersome.)

    It may be argued that as an abridgment done early in Wesley's career it is not a crucial piece of evidnce in for the construction of an eschatology. On the other hand: (1) Its thought certainly seems consistent with the later and original Wesley. (2) If Wesley thought enough to abridge the sermon he must have respected it most highly to bother with the abridgement. (3) The "Notes" on both the Old and New Testaments were also abridgements and yet they certainly reveal Wesley's thinking. (4) It appears in *CL* (23:302-326) suggesting its continuing importance. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
14. August Gottlieb Spangenberg, *An Exposition of Christian Doctrine as Taught in the Protestant Church of the United Brethren or Unitas Fratrum* (Winston-Salem, NC: Board of Christian Education of the Southern Province of the Moravian Church, 1778, reprinted 1959). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
15. John Gill, *A Complete Body of Doctrinal and Practical Divinity: Or, A System of Evangelical Truths, Deducted from the Sacred Scriptures*. New ed. (London: Matthews and Leigh, 1809 [originally 1769]; reprinted, Paris, AR: Baptist Standard Bearer, 1989). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)