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Calling the Parousia into Question: Doubters and Skeptics in Some Early Christian Texts

O schönes Kopfschütteln
über der unbestreitbaren Wahrheit!
(B. Brecht, *Lob des Zweifels*)

1 The Problem and its Relevance

Key tenets of Christianity are that a crucified Jew under Pontius Pilate was born of a virgin, performed many signs (as walking on water, feeding thousands of people with just a few loaves and fish, casting out demons, and healing the sick), rose from the dead on the third day, sits on the right hand of God, and that thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead. This tale about a savior god is indeed a fascinating account, embedded in the Creed(s), which has nurtured the hopes of many human beings through the centuries, but it is, admittedly, also bizarre stuff which, on reflection, might be hard to accept. The difficulty of lending credibility to some (or all) aspects of such a narrative is recognized in the Christian Scriptures themselves, for instance in the references to lack of faith in stories of Jesus appearing to the Twelve disciples, and particularly in the episode of the doubting Thomas contained in the Fourth Gospel.¹

As is well known, the doubting Thomas motif refers *lato sensu* to skeptics who refuse to believe without direct personal experience, and in this sense can become a symbol for any doubter within Christian communities.² But *stricto sensu* it regards unbelief in an event which has allegedly taken place, namely, Jesus' bodily resurrection –resurrection in the flesh–, which, as such, could be experienced (and which, according to the Christian tradition, was indeed experienced by several disciples to whom the risen Jesus appeared).³

A different problem faced by Christian theologians from early on is that the original expectations of Jesus and his first disciples remained unfulfilled. There is every indication that Jesus announced the impending arrival of the “kingdom of God”,⁴ but this kingdom did not arrive; Roman soldiers arrived instead, and crucified Jesus (and

1 See Mark 16:14; Matt 28:17; Luke 24:36–37; John 20:24–29. According to the mainstream view, these works were written around the last third of the 1st century CE.

2 One could also speak, perhaps more precisely, of “Nazorean” communities; the movement around Jesus was called “the sect of the Nazoreans (ἀῤρεῖς τῶν Ναζοραίων)” (Acts 24:5).

3 For a detailed treatment of the doubting Thomas motif, see Most (2009).

4 See e.g. Weiss (1892); Allison (2010) 31–220.

perhaps some of his companions, too⁵). Later, Jesus' followers announced that he would come back very soon on the clouds of heaven to judge the world; but presumably he did not accomplish such a wonderful task then, or even later. This unfulfillment is the euphemistically so-called "Delay of the Parousia" (*Parousieverzögerung*), a way of attacking theodicy.

Such non-fulfilment gave rise to real puzzlement and disappointment. It has been argued that the problem of eschatological delay was less acute for Christianity because there was an element of so-called "realized eschatology" in Christian thinking: in Jesus' death and in his alleged resurrection God had already accomplished the decisive eschatological act.⁶ This reasoning contains a grain of truth, but the tension of "already" and "not yet" in early Christian thought could also heighten the sense of eschatological imminence. After all, with the assumption that a victory over evil has already been won through Jesus' death (and resurrection), for some Christ adherents the need of perceiving an actual eradication of evil from the world might become even more pressing. For instance, in the Book of Revelation, at the opening of the fifth seal by the Lamb (Christ), the following cry of the martyrs is heard: "O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth? (Ἔως πότε, ὁ δεσπότης ὁ ἅγιος καὶ ἀληθινός, οὐ κρίνεις καὶ ἐκδικεῖς τὸ αἷμα ἡμῶν ἐκ τῶν κατοικούντων ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς;)" (Rev 6:10).

The problem of eschatological delay is conspicuous in the Second Letter of Peter, a pseudonymous/pseudepigraphal epistle,⁷ possibly written at the end of the first century or in the first half of the second century.⁸ More specifically, 2 Peter 3:3–4 is a *locus classicus* in which doubts regarding the traditional Christian promises come to the fore. It contains the most explicit treatment of the delay of the Parousia in the New Testament:⁹

5 See Bermejo-Rubio (2013); Bermejo-Rubio (2021⁴) 151–158.

6 See, for instance, 1 John 3:8 (εἰς τοῦτο ἐφανερώθη ὁ Υἱὸς τοῦ Θεοῦ, ἵνα λύσῃ τὰ ἔργα τοῦ διαβόλου). "The belief that salvation already happened and that the Second Coming of Christ will confirm the division of mankind between saved and damned made the weakening of eschatological hopes in the Church easier": Flusser (1969) 154. This scholar also argued that "Where there was no date or when it was not central, no decisive disappointment could arise when the prophecy failed" (ibid., 143); "In antiquity the disillusion at the failure of a prophecy was not as strong as in medieval and modern times, because precise date of salvation was then not a rule as in later times. Thus, Christianity could exist at least for a long time without changing its content because of the so-called 'Parousieverzögerung'" (ibid., 151–152).

7 The author designates himself as Peter (2 Pet 1:1.16–18), the disciple of Jesus. Although this claim has been accepted over the centuries, internal evidence makes it highly unlikely –not to say impossible– that Simon Peter was the author of the letter.

8 When and where it was written, and to whom, remains impossible to determine; several data seem to indicate a date later in the first century, although it is not possible to preclude a second-century setting. See e.g. Gilmour (2002) 3–4.

9 The word *παρουσία* occurs in the New Testament twenty-four times, four times in Matthew 24 and the others in the Epistles: eleven are in the authentic Pauline letters; it occurs three times in 2 Thessalonians 2, and six times in the Catholic Epistles. In the genuine Pauline letters, except in 2 Cor

Scoffers will come in the last days with scoffing, following their own passions and saying: “Where is the promise of his coming? For since the fathers fell asleep [scil. died], all things remain just as they were from the beginning of creation” (ἐλεύσονται ἐμπαϊκταὶ ἐπ’ ἐσχάτων τῶν ἡμερῶν ἐν ἐμπαυμονῇ κατὰ τὰς ἰδίας ἐπιθυμίας αὐτῶν πορευόμενοι καὶ λέγοντες, Ποῦ ἐστὶν ἡ ἐπαγγελία τῆς παρουσίας αὐτοῦ; ἀφ’ ἧς γὰρ οἱ πατέρες ἐκοιμήθησαν, πάντα οὕτως διαμένει ἀπ’ ἀρχῆς κτίσεως) (2 Pet 3:3–4).

This is, of course, a very terse statement, which summarizes the view of the author’s opponents in just a couple of lines. We have just fleeting remarks embedded in the canonical writings, but no independent and detailed source coming from dissenters has been preserved. Besides, from the start the author tries to morally disqualify his adversaries describing them (in the second chapter) as “false teachers” and (in the third chapter) as “scoffers”, and attributing a biased and mean behavior to them: they are not led by reason or will for truth, but by their own passions.¹⁰ With his polemic the author outlines his position and what he conceives to be unacceptable for that. We should be accordingly skeptical towards this attack, since much of what the author says about his adversaries involves stock polemic and stereotypes:¹¹ the charges of denying Jesus, secretly bringing in heresies or being licentious and greedy cannot contribute significantly to any firm identification.¹² This is not very promising, but, of course, Christian writings, as apologetic literature, show little interest in dispassionate quest for truth; they instead characterize (real or imagined) opponents in ways that resort to various fallacies to discredit them, such as *ad hominem* arguments and presumably straw men as well. At least, however, it seems that 2 Peter 3:3–4 does not seriously misrepresent the views of the opponents, but reproduces and reports the language used and the arguments set forth by them. Although we should mistrust the charges of immorality brought here and in the second chapter

10:10, it is always part of a prepositional phrase. Παρουσία (from the verb πάρεμι, “be present,” which can also take on the sense of “come, approach”; see e.g. Judges 19:3 LXX) was derived from Hellenistic usage, e.g. of the ceremonial arrival of a king or ruler with honours, or of a god to help people in need. When Christians speak of the παρουσία of the Lord, they probably think of the pomp and circumstance attending those imperial visits as parodies of the true glory to be revealed. Παρουσία frequently means “arrival as the onset of presence”.

10 The second chapter contains a whole invective: “But there were also false prophets among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you. They will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the sovereign Lord who bought them – bringing swift destruction on themselves. Many will follow their depraved conduct and will bring the way of truth into disrepute. In their greed these teachers will exploit you with fabricated stories [...] They are like unreasoning animals, creatures of instinct, born only to be caught and destroyed, and like animals they too will perish” (2 Peter 2:1–3.12). *Odium theologicum* and rhetorical freedom have undoubtedly had an important part to play in the portrait of adversaries as morally degenerate.

11 “It is also likely that the infractions which are described and attacked are quite out of proportion with the actual behaviour of the dissidents, and that the distance separating these dissidents from the leaders is not as great as the letters lead us to suppose”: Desjardins (1987) 96–97.

12 Some scholars have claimed that the opponents were Gnostics. See e.g. Talbert (1966) 141–143; Balz and Schrage (1973) 121–122 and 142–143. For a convincing rebuttal, see Desjardins (1987) 93–95.

of this Letter, where the author mounts a vitriolic attack and provides a polemical portrait of his opponents, the fact that he presents the position of his adversaries in the form of direct speech, and that he carefully does his best to reply by using argumentation, suggest that what we have in 3:4 faithfully and reliably (although admittedly summarily) conveys his adversaries' claims.¹³

The opponents doubt that the expectation of the Parousia is meaningful.¹⁴ Since several sayings attributed to Jesus in the Gospels convey the expectation of the arrival of the kingdom of God within the lifetime of his disciples or the promise to come back very soon,¹⁵ with the death of the apostles the cutoff point for the fulfilment of Jesus' prediction had come and gone.¹⁶ The allegation of the opponents is that the delay in fulfilment shows that the promise is ineffectual and life will pass uneventfully; put otherwise, the delay of the Parousia in this early stage disproves that the Parousia itself will ever happen. The objection does not only consist in the statement that the promise is unfulfilled at the time of writing, but also in that it is surely going to remain so. The doubters are saying that their expectations have been frustrated, but they are implying that any other believer, now and in the future, will be disap-

13 After all, had the author blatantly distorted the problem with which he was dealing, his goal would have been misdirected and would have disappointed his own readers.

14 It has been argued that in 2 Pet 3:4 the object of ridicule is not the Parousia of Jesus, but the Old Testament promises; see e.g. Adams (2005). But, as Adams himself admits, in 1:16 the Parousia is explicitly identified with Jesus, so "the αὐτοῦ in 3.4 must have Christ partially in view... the lack of clarification would suit an expectation which originally referred to God but was subsequently applied to Christ" (ibid., 111). Irrespective of whether the doubters referred to the Parousia of Jesus as it is depicted in the Christian sources, or to the coming of the day of God as it is portrayed in the Hebrew Bible (and forming the basis of the Christian eschatological hopes: τὴν παρουσίαν τῆς τοῦ θεοῦ ἡμέρας, 2 Pet 3:12), the main objection to the promise concerns the problem of non-fulfilment.

15 Three sayings have been interpreted to mean that Jesus expected his (or the Son of Man's) return in the immediate future. In Matthew 10:23, when Jesus is reported to send out the disciples on their preaching mission in Galilee, one of the instructions was: "You will not finish going through all the cities of Israel before the Son of Man comes". A second saying appears in Mark 9:1: "There are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God come with power"; Matthew renders it "before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom" (Matt 16:28), and Luke simply puts it "before they see the kingdom" (Luke 9:27). The third saying, recorded in all the Synoptics, appears in the context of the Olivet discourse: "This generation will not pass away before all these things have happened (Mark 13:30 and parallels: Matt 24:34; Luke 21:32–33). These sayings speak of a Parousia within the lifetime of the disciples. This accounts for the fact that this was Paul's early expectation (1 Thes. 4:15–17). Although these sayings are usually dismissed as the product of some unknown Christian prophet(s), it is plausible that they go back to Jesus; see e.g. Allison (1998) 149–151, and also Luke 19:11 and John 16:16–24. Besides, if Mark 14:25 reflects something that Jesus said, then perhaps he hoped that the end would arrive in the next few days. The hope in Jesus' new Parousia seems to be the substitute for the unfulfilled arrival of the kingdom of God.

16 John 21:20–23 betrays that some Christians took at least one saying of Jesus to mean that the Parousia would happen before all the disciples were dead. And according 1 Thes 4–5, Paul's converts are troubled because the end has not yet come and some of their fellow believers have died in the meantime.

pointed. The steady passage of time has a corrosive effect, insofar as it has falsified the promises made to the believers.¹⁷ In the past they believed in the promises, but now they can no longer do it. “Where is the promise of his coming?” amounts to: “When has taken place the promise of his coming?” or “Where has the promise of his coming been fulfilled?”. And the implicit answer is “Never, nowhere”. This is why, according to the opponents, those preaching the so-called proto-orthodox church teaching follow “cleverly devised myths” (σεσοφισμένοις μύθοις ἐξακολουθήσαντες; 2 Peter 1:16).

The interest of these doubts seems to be at least fourfold, with the four aspects closely intertwined. First, they concern a central hope of the primitive preaching of Christian communities, the next Parousia or the coming of a triumphant Christ in his quality as a judge and/or heavenly warrior (in *Revelation*). Second, those doubts reverberate with the message of the historical Jesus himself; although many biblical exegetes and theologians have tried to downplay this aspect, as has been already remarked, Jesus himself expected an impending arrival of God in the world, and eschatological imminence was part and parcel of his creed. Third, 2 Peter 3:3–4 is not an isolated passage: other early Christian texts refer to doubters who called into question the reliability of the transmitted doctrine.¹⁸ Fourth, the doubts displayed by the so-called “scoffers” are not limited to Christian beliefs, but touch on a transcultural and trans-religious phenomenon, the ever-repeated hopes of millenarian movements throughout the ages and all over the world, in which expectations of a near reversal frequently surface.¹⁹ In the light of these remarks, a closer survey of our passage might be rewarding.

17 “The point the opponents seem to be making is that the expectation of Jesus’ parousia is the re-expression of a longstanding prophecy of God’s awesome coming [...] The scoffers no doubt exploited contemporary concerns about the delay of Jesus’ return, but, if my interpretation is correct, they connected these more recent frustrations with the many centuries of disappointment the underlying expectation had generated”: Adams (2005) 114.

18 “Let us not be double-minded (διδὸ μὴ διψυχῶμεν); neither let our soul be lifted up on account of his exceedingly great and glorious gifts. Far from us be that which is written, ‘Wretched are they who are of a double mind, and of a doubting heart; who say, “These things we have heard even in the times of our fathers; but, behold, we have grown old, and none of them has happened unto us”’ (Ταλαίπωροί εἰσιν οἱ δίψυχοι, οἱ διστάζοντες τῇ ψυχῇ, οἱ λέγοντες· Ταῦτα ἤκούσαμεν καὶ ἐπὶ τῶν πατέρων ἡμῶν, καὶ ἰδοῦ, γεγηράκαμεν, καὶ οὐδὲν ἡμῖν τούτων συνέβηκεν)” (1 Clement 23:2–3). A close parallel is found in 2 Clement 11:2, with the ending: “We have waited day after day and saw nothing of those things (ἡμεῖς δὲ ἡμέραν ἐξ ἡμέρας προσδεχόμενοι οὐδὲν τούτων ἐώρακαμεν)”. One should also consider Jude 18–19, a letter on which 2 Peter heavily depends; see e.g. Gilmour (2002) 83–91; Fornberg (1977) 33–59.

19 For a survey of these movements, see Cohn (1970); Adas (1979). For an analysis of Jesus within this approach, see Allison (1998).

2 The Nature of the Doubts

The overwhelming majority of exegetes assume that the phrase “the promise of his coming” refers to Jesus’ expected return, and that the adversaries’ temporal objection refers to Jesus’ failure to come back within a generation. This means, in turn, that the “fathers” are taken to be Jesus’ close disciples and their contemporaries (“apostles”). I basically agree with this interpretation.²⁰ Nevertheless, the sentence conveying the objection “all things remain just as they were from the beginning of creation” has been sometimes understood as an argument from the nature and structure of the universe, as if it were a cosmological assertion and the doubters were saying that God cannot get involved on principle in the world. According to several scholars, the adversaries disparage the notion of a world-ending catastrophe, considering it ridiculous because, from their philosophical perspective, the cosmos would be by nature everlasting.²¹ I will argue that this interpretation is, in all probability, unwarranted.

To start with, it neglects the fact that the intended opponents –or at least some of them– have emerged from within the Christian community,²² and therefore they must have deemed possible on principle the change of the world conditions. Otherwise, they would have never become Christians. This is confirmed by the fact that they share basic assumptions with the author of the letter, for instance, the belief that the universe was created: they refer to it as *κτίσις*. They are not Democritean or Epicurean materialists, who repudiated the notion of the divine creation of the cosmos. But neither are they philosophers of a Platonic or Aristotelian stamp. When they assert that “everything remains the same from the beginning (*ἀπ’ ἀρχῆς*)”, they do not posit in the least the immutability of the universe, neither deny mutability on principle. They just limit themselves to verify that no decisive transformation has taken place, and that the world has not changed. But what do they concretely mean?

According to biblical tradition, what takes place very soon on the stage of History is the evil activity as contrary to God’s will. Let us recall the Genesis story of the “fall

20 An alternative reading to the mainstream interpretation has been intermittently offered, both at the beginning of the twentieth and the twenty-first centuries, according to which the target of the dissenters’ criticism is not the Parousia of Jesus, but the Hebrew Bible’s expectation of the eschatological advent of God. See Bigg (1975²) 291–292; Adams (2005). Nevertheless, this reading is flawed; see e. g. Fornberg (1977) 62–63.

21 See e. g. Adams (2005) *passim*.

22 This is particularly clear in the second chapter: “They have left the straight way and wandered off to follow the way of Balaam son of Bezer, who loved the wages of wickedness [...] If they have escaped the corruption of the world by knowing our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and are again entangled in it and are overcome, they are worse off at the end than they were at the beginning. It would have been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than to have known it and then to turn their backs on the sacred command that was passed on to them” (2 Peter 2:15.20–21; see also 3:15–16). “The opponents were ‘insiders’, i. e. Christians within the church(es) involved against their leaders in a struggle of ideas”: Caulley (2008) 132.

of Adam and Eve”. Besides, according to the Fourth Gospel, the devil was a killer from the beginning (ἄνθρωποκτόνος ἦν ἀπ’ ἀρχῆς, John 8:44), and according to 1 John 3:8, “the devil has been sinning from the beginning (ἀπ’ ἀρχῆς ὁ διάβολος ἁμαρτάνει)”. The author of this epistle (1 John) adds that “the reason why the son of God appeared was to destroy the devil’s works”. In this light, what the opponents of 2 Peter seem to mean when they assert that “all things remain just as they were from the beginning of creation” is that things continue to be –from a moral point of view– as bad as ever: disorder, violence, injustice and evil prevail.²³

If this interpretation is correct, the assertion of the opponents might not be an affirmation of cosmic indestructibility. Their stance conveys rather a criticism inspired by genuinely ethical feelings, embedded in the utopian dream of a new, idyllic world with evil undone. It is the contradiction between the (presumed) righteousness of God and the obvious unrighteousness of the worldly conditions which inspires the expectation of God’s immediate coming in judgment. And this means, in turn, that the statement “everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation” is not (or not primarily) a derisive and mocking comment made by frivolous scoffers; it rather betrays an ethical pathos, conveying a longing for a different world in which peace and justice prevail. It is the perception of lack of justice after the passing of a whole generation –precisely because injustice is felt as an unbearable experience– that gives the lie to the prophecy, which is thus unveiled as a *failed prophecy*.

In the light of this interpretation a critical remark is in order: we should not reproduce any longer the language of the author of 2 Peter and speak of “scoffers”, as if the stance of the opponents were dictated by superficial fun. Their objections do not emerge from an independent, outside regard; they surface instead as an internal criticism which arises from the dashed hope that Jesus would return to right all that is wrong in the world. The fact that no significant change (betterment) has taken place is apparently not a cause of joy or pleasure for the doubters, but rather of extremely serious disappointment and sadness.²⁴

Significantly, the author of 2 Peter does not argue that the opponents are wrong in this aspect. Admittedly, he does not refrain from using irony, insofar as he identifies the adversaries with the false prophets who, according to the Jewish and Christian tradition, will appear in the last days within the community, in order to lead

²³ Jewish polemics against Theodicy are found in a midrashic expansion in the Palestinian targums of Genesis 4:8. Before slaying his brother, Cain dialogues with Abel and he rejects the idea of divine judgment because of injustice in the world. The fact that Cain’s offering is rejected and Abel’s accepted is seen as evidence of injustice in the world: “Cain answered and said to Abel: ‘I see that the world was not created by love and is not led according to the fruits of good works and that there is acceptance of persons in judgement [...] There is no judgement and there is no judge and there is no other world; there is no giving of good reward to the just and there is no retribution (exactd) from the wicked’”: Díez Macho (1968) 506–507. This midrash has been dated to the first century CE by Isenberg (1970).

²⁴ The author does not seem to attach much importance to Jesus’ death, which for him did not mark a radical change in how things on earth had developed since the beginning of creation.

them astray; the very presence of “scoffers” in the last days would be, accordingly, proof of the coming Parousia –for the author an example of prophecy fulfilled.²⁵ But he cannot deny the core of the objection, namely, that the present state of things is deeply unsatisfactory from a moral standpoint. He claims that things will change in the future. This reading is confirmed by the answer of the author. To begin with, it refers to the event of the biblical flood, the Deluge:

But they deliberately forget that long ago by God’s word the heavens came into being and the earth was formed out of water and by water. By these waters also the world of that time was deluged and destroyed. By the same word the present heavens and earth are reserved for fire, being kept for the day of judgment and destruction of the ungodly (2 Peter 3:5–7)

Now the flood, in biblical perspective, is not primarily a cosmic cataclysm through which the world as it was then was destroyed.²⁶ Far from it, according to the Jewish tradition, only *the inhabitants* of the world perished, as the flood was a punishment to the evil prevailing on earth, where violence, oppression of fellow humans, bloodshed, and arbitrary taking of others’ life happened everywhere.²⁷ The biblical flood story is portrayed as a punishment of *human* evil, and, in this sense, as a kind of moral cleaning of the world. In fact, that narrative emphasizes the salvation of a few *righteous* human beings. This aspect had been made clearer in the second chapter, where Noah is called “a herald of righteousness (δικαιοσύνης κήρυκα)”.²⁸ Therefore, the argument used by the author of 2 Peter does not refer just to cosmic destructibility, but to the idea of divine power and justice: just as God once destroyed the wicked people as a logical consequence of human sin and then recreated the world, in the face of persistent wickedness there will be in the future another inrush of God’s sovereignty, which will rectify a world full of violence and evil.²⁹ The ration-

25 “This gives an ironic ring to the passage: The adversaries who denied the Parousia were themselves a proof of its imminence”: Fornberg (1977) 61.

26 Adams argues that the author mentions the flood story because “it is the one biblical example of God to destroy the world” (115; see also 118), but, as he himself must admit, in the Genesis narrative “the disaster is not conceived of as a total cosmic catastrophe” (115, n. 41).

27 On the ethical causes for the flood in biblical perspective, see Harland (1996) 21–44.

28 “For if God did not spare the angels when they sinned, but cast them into hell and committed them to pits of nether gloom to be kept until the judgment; if he did not spare the ancient world when he brought a flood on its ungodly people, but preserved Noah, a herald of righteousness, and seven others; if by turning the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah to ashes he condemned them to extinction and made an example to those who were to be ungodly; and if he rescued righteous Lot, greatly distressed by the licentiousness of the wicked (for by what that righteous man saw and heard as he lived among them, he was vexed in his righteous soul day after day with their lawless deeds, then the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from trial, and to keep the unrighteous under punishment until the day of judgment)” (2 Peter 2:4–9).

29 The author’s statement in 2 Pet 3:11 (“all these things will be dissolved: τούτων ...πάντων λυομένων”) aims at being a rebuttal of the dissenters’ claim that “all things endure” (πάντα... διαμένει).

ale of the author is that, through his omnipotence, God controls both nature and history.

The reference to the flood is just the beginning of a lengthy answer, through which the author tries to further counteract the arguments set forth by the opponents. This allegation is met in verses 8 and 9, which can be taken to represent two distinct arguments:

But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. It is not that the Lord is slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance (οὐ βραδύνει Κύριος τῆς ἐπαγγελίας, ὡς τινες βραδυτῆτα ἡγοῦνται, ἀλλὰ μακροθυμεῖ εἰς ὑμᾶς, μὴ βουλόμενός τινος ἀπολέσθαι ἀλλὰ πάντας εἰς μετάνοιαν χωρῆσαι). (2 Peter 3:8–9)

The argument set forth in verse 8 is based on the formula “A day of the Lord is a thousand years”. The sentence is derived from Psalm 90:4 (“a thousand years in thy sight are but as yesterday when it is past”), and it is used in other rabbinic and second-century Christian texts. The argument is that where the text says “day” it is theological language which means, in human terms, a thousand years.³⁰ In other words, God’s apprehension of time is very different from that of human beings. Anyway, it yields the chronological information that one of God’s days, as mentioned in Scripture, is equal to a thousand of human years.³¹ Therefore, any complaint or objection is misplaced: those making it do not grasp the (presumably elementary) difference between God and human beings, more specifically, between God’s everlastingness and man’s transience. Put otherwise, they understand nothing. More positively: the delay which seems so lengthy to the author may not be so significant within God’s all-comprehensive perspective.

As to 2 Peter 3:9 (“It is not that the Lord is slow...instead he is patient with you”), it contains an explanation of the Parousia as proof that God wants to grant more time for the sinners to repent.³² Just as the Jewish author of the *Apocalypse of Baruch* (from the late first or early second century), the author of 2 Peter refers to the long-suffering patience, or forbearance, of God. In this case, God’s patience becomes an optimistic concept: the delay gains the positive aspect of a respite, since when the

30 This correspondence was applied to the creation narrative, to the extent that one can infer that the history of the world lasted six thousand years. “Six ‘days’ of a thousand years each, followed by a millennial Sabbath: this calculation lies behind the widespread millenarianism of the second century”: Bauckham (1980) 21.

31 A similar notion is held in the *Apocalypse of Baruch* (2 Baruch 48:12f): “For in a little time are we born, and in a little time do we return. But with thee the hours are as the ages, and the days are as the generations”. In 2 Baruch, the contrast between God’s endless existence and man’s brief span of life is not related to the problem of delay.

32 The same apology is found in Jewish and Greek sources (particularly, Plutarch’s polemic against Epicureans in *De Sera Numinis Vindicta* 548C–561 A, esp. 551C–552D); see Neyrey (1980a) 423–427.

final judgment comes there will no longer be any time left for repentance. God's people, who would perish if the final judgment came sooner, are graciously granted the opportunity of repentance. According to this interpretation, if one expresses doubts on the delay, he does not only make his shortsightedness plain, but also his ungratefulness, as far as he does not recognize the delay as proof of God's grace.

These objections and arguments are admittedly not novel reasoning, but familiar from Jewish responses to the problem of eschatological delay.³³ This can be seen in the remainder of the chapter (and the whole letter). On the one hand, a reminder of the unexpected and sudden arrival of the end is a well-known procedure in apocalyptic reasoning: "But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything done in it will be laid bare" (2 Peter 3:10). After all, it was just as much part of the Christian teaching that the end would come suddenly as that it would come early. Interestingly, this teaching is attributed to Jesus in the Gospels,³⁴ and is repeated by Paul in 1 Thessalonians 5:2 ("You know perfectly well that the Day of the Lord comes like a thief in the night").³⁵ On the other hand, a typical way to cope with the non-occurrence of predicted events is to issue a call to watchfulness, as is the parenetical section which ends the letter:

Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming. That day will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire, and the elements will melt in the heat.
¹³ But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, where righteousness dwells (καινούς δὲ οὐρανούς καὶ γῆν καινὴν κατὰ τὸ ἐπάγγελμα αὐτοῦ προσδοκῶμεν, ἐν οἷς δικαιοσύνη κατοικεῖ). So then, dear friends, since you are looking forward to this, make every effort to be found spotless, blameless and at peace with him.³⁶

3 To What Extent Were Doubts Dangerous?

Although other aspects should be given attention, for the sake of brevity, below I try to answer at least some of the questions which have been posed by the organizers of the conference and the volume: What intensity do the doubts about –or the disre-

³³ See Von Allmen (1966); Bauckham (1980).

³⁴ Jesus himself is represented as giving this warning: "Be alert, be wakeful. You do not know when the moment comes" (Mk 13:33–37). More importantly, the image of the thief is used: "But understand this: If the owner of the house had known at what time of night the thief was coming, he would have kept watch and would not have let his house be broken into" (Matt 24:43; see Luke 12:39; Rev 3:3; 16:15).

³⁵ 2 Peter knows the letters of Paul, as it is perceived in 3:15–16: "Bear in mind that our Lord's patience means salvation, just as our dear brother Paul also wrote you".

³⁶ 2 Pet 3:11–14. Let us note that verse 12 contains an instance of the notion that men can work to hasten the Day of God (see also Acts 3:19). It implies "that what men do can have an influence on what God does in the working out of his plan": Leaney (1967) 135.

spect of— religious traditions have? Is it a one-time or an iterated action? Is it the attitude of just a single person, acting and being responsible for herself or does she try to influence others, even attempt to gain followers and start a movement? To what degree then is this disregard seen as a threat to the community?

The force and potentially dissolving nature of the doubts summarized in 2 Peter 3:4 can be envisaged in several facts. On the one hand, the author had to recur to many answers, none of them characterized by being particularly persuasive.³⁷ Let us notice that, even before presenting the objections of the opponents, the author tries to legitimize himself, claiming that he was present at Jesus' transfiguration, precisely to validate the status of his authority.³⁸ In this way, the certainty of the Parousia-judgment is allegedly guaranteed by the apostles who beheld Jesus' glory on the mountain, an experience that works as a foreshadowing of the Second Advent: the vision of a metamorphosed Christ proves his supernatural power. In 1:16 the author refers to himself as one of the "eyewitnesses to his majesty" (ἐπόπται γενηθέντες τῆς ἐκείνου μεγαλειότητος). Ironically, the fact that 2 Peter is a forgery implies that this claim itself is a fiction written by a forger who has invented the tale of the personal experience—and this assertion of factual authority is used to oppose those people described as ψευδοπροφήται and ψευδοδιδάσκαλοι!—.³⁹ On the other hand, the dangerousness of the opponents is hinted in the fact that the author did his best to morally discredit them, by associating their stance with serious moral shortcomings and flaws.

The disturbing nature of the doubts is also perceived in the fact that the expression of incredulity and skepticism has obvious sociological implications. Whilst in 2 Peter 3 criticism remains implicit, the second chapter makes a fleeting but revealing remark; the verse asserts that the opponents "despise authority" (κυριότητος καταφρονούντας).⁴⁰ They accordingly espouse destructive opinions (αἰρήσεις) and

37 Admittedly, the delay as such does not discredit or destroy the apocalyptic faith as far as the basic belief in (appeal to) the sovereignty of God is held. Faith can incorporate the problem of delay, while it is held within a religious structure which is adequate to contain it. The problem becomes overwhelming when the godly origin of the promise is called into question. But to state that the apparent delay belongs to the purpose of God can hardly be deemed an explanation: it affirms that, despite everything, one should trust in God because he is (by definition) trustworthy: in a monotheistic perspective, God's power remains in ultimate control, and therefore the only conceivable outcome is his final victory. But this answer implies that the meaning of the delay is hidden in God's mysterious sovereign purpose: "The difficulty of mere appeal to God's sovereignty is that it is in danger of evacuating the present in which we live of all meaning. The present becomes the incomprehensible time in which we can only wait": Bauckham (1980) 9–10.

38 See Neyrey (1980).

39 2 Peter is widely recognized to be forged; already Origen doubted its authenticity (see Eusebius, *H. E.* VI 25.8; see also Jerome, *Vir. Ill.* 1). See e.g. Frey (2009) 707. For a sustained argument about 2 Peter as a forgery, see Ehrman (2013) 222–229 and 259–263.

40 2 Peter 2:10. Moreover, in the Epistle of Jude the adversaries are described as people who "despise dominion, and speak evil of dignities" (κυριότητα δὲ ἄθετοῦσιν, δόξας δὲ βλασφημοῦσιν)" (Jude 8). Although these last expressions have been sometimes interpreted as referring to angels, since the dis-

entice unsteady souls (see resp. 2 Peter 2:1 and 2:14,18). This is why the author, already in the first chapter, claims to be the legitimate heir and representative of the apostolic tradition of interpretation. When basic doctrines –which are usually a stock of preaching– are called into question, doubters disregard authority and community rulers see their posts imperiled. That the issue at stake is authority already becomes clear in 1:20–21, a verse in which it is stated that prophecy “of Scripture” is not a matter of private exposition (ιδίας ἐπιλύσεως):

Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet’s own interpretation of things. For prophecy never had its origin in the human will, but prophets, though human, spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.

In this reference, the author clearly implies that the dissidents lack legitimacy and that their doctrine is irrelevant.

2 Pet 3:4 may be accordingly used as evidence for a crisis in the early church provoked by the deaths of Jesus’ apostles and their contemporaries. Of course, it would be possible to retort that there is no evidence in the available sources of massive loss of faith. But one should answer, in turn, that this fact is to be expected, since the extant sources, as apologetic products, do not necessarily contain objective descriptions of what happened. The sobering thing, however, is that, although only occasionally we find expressions of doubt and disillusionment, when we survey the whole New Testament material and early Christian literature it is not as meager as it seems at first sight.⁴¹

Of course, it is not possible to ascertain in a precise way what the repercussion of those doubts was. But there are enough traces of a lasting and wide impact throughout the New Testament writings. After all, the doubters did not hold their doubts within themselves, but tried to persuade other people about their ideas: they are always referred to in plural form. The most intense near expectation (*Naherwartung*) occurs in 1 Thessalonians, Paul’s earliest extant letter –the church in Thessalonica was worried that people were dying before Jesus came–, but it is toned down in later epistles. A close comparison of the Synoptic Gospels shows similar tendencies: for instance, Mark 9:1 has “There are some standing here who will not taste death until they see that the kingdom of God has come with power”, whilst the parallel passage in Luke 9:27 drops “with power”. Several Gospel passages (e.g. Luke 19:11; John 21:20–23) had to be rewritten to blunt the embarrassing force of some original sayings implying an imminent expectation. Besides, the reworking of apocalyptic traditions in early Christian literature as an attempt to come to terms with disillusionment over eschatological hopes is an unmistakable fact. For instance, the message of a sapiential Jesus in the *Gospel of Thomas* seems to be nothing but the result of a herme-

cussion concerns authority and judgment, δόξα here likely refers to church leaders. See Desjardins (1987) 93–94.

⁴¹ See e.g. John 6:66. For a list of relevant texts, see Allison (2010) 146–148.

neutical revision which shifts the apocalypse “from an imminent cosmic event to an immanent personal mystical experience”;⁴² in other words, it is a spiritualizing, non-apocalyptic interpretation of an apocalyptic tradition. A similar strategy is seen in a crucial canonical work, the Fourth Gospel; its author rejects apocalyptic interpretations of logia and spiritualizes eschatology by speaking of Jesus’ death (and resurrection) as though it were the Second Advent: the apocalyptic judgment is moved to the crucifixion of Jesus, which would have allegedly called a halt to the malevolent reign of Satan (John 12:31–33; 16:8–11).

The fact that the doubts expressed in the Christian communities and the correlative experiences of cognitive dissonance did not entail a steadily decreasing number of converts but rather the contrary should not come as a surprise. Anthropology and History of Religions have taught us that millenarian movements sometimes not only survive but also thrive in the face of disconfirmed expectations. This phenomenon has been convincingly explained by Cognitive Dissonance Theory, which has also been fruitfully applied to the study of Christian origins, so I will not expatiate on this point.⁴³ Suffice it to say that eschatological hopes, however important, do not exist in a vacuum: despite the doubts and skepticism, other aspects of a group’s ideology, as well as cult and ritual, organization and solidarity, and the existence of charitable services count toward survival; after all, social networks usually matter for human beings far more than doctrine.⁴⁴ The theoretical, practical, psychological and emotional advantages of belonging to a community often manage to overcome the possible doubts which can arise, even if the rationalizations set forth to counteract those doubts do not come across as particularly convincing to an outsider.⁴⁵

4 Conclusion

In the light of the former reflections, I would suggest to nuance one of the questions posed by the conveners of the workshop “The Benefit of the Doubt” in the following sense: it is one thing that disregard and skepticism were seen as a serious danger by early Christian communities –to the extent that the author of 2 Peter speaks of “de-

⁴² See DeConick (2005) 213.

⁴³ Cognitive Dissonance Theory explains how, in many cases in the history of religions, and more specifically of millenarian and messianic movements (characterized by intense apocalyptic expectations), unfulfilled prophecies manage to maintain their credibility despite apparent failure, often because believers who have staked their lives on such expectations are not easily disillusioned. See e.g. Aune (2013); Bermejo-Rubio (2017).

⁴⁴ This point is also made by Flusser (1969) 152, although he does not cite Cognitive Dissonance Theory: “There is no ‘messianic’ movement which would be based exclusively upon an eschatological expectation. Such a movement is always also characterized by its faith, its ‘Weltanschauung’”.

⁴⁵ “Millenarian movements can find the resources to transform themselves into enduring institutions, especially since what typically counts for adherents is not what others may believe to be true but what the faithful experience as real”, Allison (2010) 145.

structive sects” (αἰρέσεις ἀπολείας)–, but a very different thing is the degree to which those dangers had real and wide-ranging effects. It is virtually certain that the doubts conveyed by the opponents regarding the reliability of the eschatological expectations were felt as threatening the community. Nevertheless, as it happens with other millenarian groups, the Christian communities had more resources to cope with the nonoccurrence of predicted events (first, the arrival of God’s kingdom; later, the coming of Jesus as judge) than the leaders were aware of.⁴⁶ Those resources allowed the Christian theologians to downplay the importance of some elements in the tradition which, because of their troublesome nature, were considered uncongenial, thereby making the apocalyptic tension and enthusiasm decline over the decades. In this way they allowed, despite the annoying existence of unbending doubters, the emergence and consolidation of early “believing” Christian groups.

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⁴⁶ See e.g. Dawson (1999) 72. Jewish apocalyptic had already managed to cope with the problem of delay; after all, this problem was familiar to Judaism from an early period. Habakkuk 2:3 (“The vision is yet for the appointed time. It hastens to the end and will not lie. If it tarries, wait for it, for it will surely come and will not be late”) seems to have been the *locus classicus* for reflecting on the problem of delay.

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