

“THE TIME IS AT HAND”: REVISITING THE *NEW TESTAMENT* LANGUAGE OF “NEARNESS” IN REFERENCE TO THE SECOND COMING OF JESUS *

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Rezumat: Articolul analizează limbajul epistolar din *Noul Testament* cu privire la apropierea revenirii lui Iisus. Argumentul principal este că cele mai multe dintre (dacă nu chiar toate) textele care par a se referi la o Parusie apropiată trebuie analizate dintr-o perspectivă lingvistică, și nu una teologică. Neținându-se cont de acest principiu, au apărut și apar interpretări alternative care nu sunt susținute de cele mai bune argumente. Aceste alternative, deși îi apără pe scriitorii *Noului Testament* de eventuale acuzații că au greșit în predicțiile lor cu privire la apropierea sfârșitului, reinterpretează vocabularul cu privire la apropierea Parusiei. Studiul nostru arată că limbajul folosit în *Noul Testament* nu justifică astfel de afirmații și nici nu învață întârzierea sfârșitului, acesta din urmă fiind așteptat în perioada bisericii primare. Acest lucru este vizibil atât la nivelul limbajului explicit, cât și la nivelul celui implicit.

Cuvinte-cheie: *Noul Testament*, Parusie, a doua venire, apropiere.

1. Introduction

The timing of the second coming of Christ has generated huge interest throughout the Christian era. Looking at the *New Testament* (NT), which is replete with statements about the soon return of Christ, and looking after the fact that He did not come as yet, early and modern interpreters searched for an explanation. This endeavour is often influenced by our modern, post-clock perspective. Therefore, the biblical language ends up being interpreted as if “soon,” “near,” and the like adverbs mean something else than they mean in the original context. But does this make justice to the biblical language?

The difference between ancient and modern views on time is well taken notice of by Malina (1989, 4, 5, 7, 12-17). According to him, mainstream and middle-class America is future-oriented, achievement-directed and focused on distant goals. When a person like this reads NT statements of nearness, the perception will be that the writers had a distant future in mind. The peasant, Mediterranean society, on the other hand, had the present as the primary temporal orientation, followed by the past and the future. The focus on the present can be seen in texts such as Lev. 19:13, Matt. 6:11, 34, 20:8, and Luke 11:3. Interestingly, NT writers speak about the

* „Vremea este aproape”: revizuirea limbajului *Noului Testament* referitor la apropierea celei de-a doua veniri a lui Iisus

present age and the age to come, but never of a future generation of the present age. Malina shows that societies that have a future orientation need to be bound to conditionality and future goals. In the rest of the article, Malina discriminates between experienced (human) and imaginary (divine) time. The first is ours, the second pertains exclusively to God and, by inspiration, to the prophets to whom He decides to reveal Himself. When Jesus did not come, the experienced time of the Parousia gave way to the imaginary or prophetic time. One of the results is that there is no delay of Parousia from the NT perspective. I turn this into a claim of the present study and in the following I will take it as a hypothesis to be tested.

As mentioned, the NT seems to be using plenty of nearness terms or expressions that appear to be associated with Christ's return. Depending on the scholars one asks, however, it is not altogether clear whether all this vocabulary points to the personal second coming of Christ, to Jesus' non-personal coming (either in judgment or spiritually), or it refers to an entirely different event. It is the purpose of the present study to explore virtually all occurrences in the NT epistles where words of nearness are used in association with phrases which seem to refer to Parousia. Such an endeavour is motivated by the fact that terms of nearness have sometimes been interpreted and explained from a theological perspective. For fear that the promises of a soon end had failed, some researchers re-interpret the terms involved in a non-eschatological fashion. But theology should never preclude the study of language.

The methodology draws on modern linguistics, as it tackles the semantic, syntactic, verbal aspect, and discourse features of the key terms involved. Therefore, the claim of the article is that if not all, then most of the texts to be reviewed represent either explicit or implicit statements affirming the soon return of Christ. The alternative explanations, offered in literature, are based on theological motivations.

At the outset, three features are to be mentioned with regards to nearness. First, virtually, all NT writers affirm the idea that Jesus is soon to return. Second, only very few of these writers provide the reasons why they believe in the soon coming of Christ. Third, nearness is affirmed many times within a time span of about four decades.

2. Implicit statements on “nearness”

In the NT, there are statements, which seem to implicitly suggest that the second coming of Christ was near by the time of the writing. This means they are not straightforward affirmations that the Parousia was soon to happen, but the texts imply it. This will be seen within two corpora: the Pauline and non-Pauline letters.

2.1. Pauline¹ letters

Within the first corpus, that Christ would come soon seems implied in certain verses in *Philippians*, the Thessalonian correspondence, and the Pastoral epistles. The first is the idea that God will finish the work He began in the believers “until the day of Christ Jesus”² (ἄχρι ἡμέρας Χριστοῦ Ἰησοῦ, Phil. 1:6)³ or “at the coming of our Lord Jesus” (ἐν τῇ παρουσίᾳ τοῦ Κυρίου ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ, 1Thess. 3:13; 5:23).⁴ The second is the inference that Paul included himself and the addressees among the ones to be alive when Christ returns (1Thess. 4:15-17).⁵ The third is the urge that the eschatological prototype of the human being (self-centred, money lover, etc., 2Tim. 3:1-5) must be avoided in the present (τούτους ἀποτρέπου, 2Tim. 3:5).⁶ Now we turn to the texts themselves in order to see whether evidences support that the nearness of the second coming is inferred in these texts.

2.1.1. Until the day of Christ Jesus (Phil. 1:6, 10)

Paul writes to the Philippians that a work of spiritual reformation has begun and needs to be carried on “until the day of Christ Jesus” (Phil. 1:6). The meaning of “the day of Christ” seems to be taken from the *Old Testament* (OT) Day of the Lord imagery. Paul, as other NT writers, applies this phrase to the second coming of Christ. Paul does not only borrow language, but also the concept behind the “Day of the Lord” phrase. Fee (1995, 86) estimates that the aspect of judgment, which was bound to the OT phrase and concept, is, at times, present, but “much more often the emphasis in Paul is on the eschatological consummation that has Christ’s coming [...] as its central focus.” In practical terms, the day of Christ would then refer to His glorification at the end of times. It is the time when salvation is received in its full form, the day when Christ comes to earth to fulfil His promise and save those who believed and underwent the work of preparation for that day.

Now, Paul links the fulfilment of that work to a timetable – “until the day of Christ.” The use of “until” seems strange for modern languages, as Silva (2005, 56) remarks. The English would better have “at”, in the sense that the Christian is found prepared on/at the occasion, not until the occasion. But the Greek emphasizes continuity and that the process of preparation ends with (and in this sense before) the Parousia.

¹ I call “Pauline” whatever bears the name of “Paul,” whether critical scholarship views the works as Pauline or deuterio-Pauline.

² Unless otherwise stated, the translations from Greek are mine.

³ Cf. Phil. 1:9-10.

⁴ Cf. 1Cor. 1:8.

⁵ The language that includes contemporary addressees among the witnesses of the Parousia is also found in Mark 14:62, Matt. 26:64, John 21:22.

⁶ Cf. Matt. 24:12, Jude 1:16-18.

The adverb “until” suggests that the preparation has a deadline, but it means more than that. Second O’Brien (1991, 65), “the expression refers to a definite point of time when Christ will appear, and some anticipation of its near approach seems to underlie ἄχρι here (cf. 1Thess. 4:17, 1Cor. 15:51).” The apostle, then, states two things: that his recipients would reach the final day and that they might be presenting themselves before God as fit and pleasing (O’Brien 1991, 79). The two are linked. The readiness of the Philippians makes sense only in the perspective of a soon return of Christ (Loh/Nida 1995, 13). Reumann (2008, 114) sees that the meaning of “until” also implies “not later than,” as he states that Christians in the city of Philippi were to continue preparing until the Parousia, but not at that day.

Not all scholars believe that in Phil. 1:6 Paul affirms that the return of Christ is near. In light of 2Thess. 2 and the context of *Philippians*, Melick (2001, 59) sees the nearness of the end as out of place. According to him, Paul was more aware of a delay when he writes to the Philippians than earlier in his ministry to the Thessalonians. Therefore, the Pauline phrase until the day must be a general representation of the end of the present age, whether they would be part of it or not.

Other scholars, nonetheless, cannot imagine a “de-eschatologized” Paul:

The day of Christ is a Christianized version of the day of the Lord in the Old Testament (Amos 5:20, Zeph. 1:14) and refers to the Parousia, the coming of Christ. The image is here unadorned with the end of time descriptions: afflictions, struggle of good and evil, cosmic turmoil, resurrection and judgment. However, the simplicity of the reference is no ground for saying Paul had by this time lost interest in the eschaton. All his discussions, theological, ecclesiological, and ethical, were bordered by an eschatological reservation. God began the work and God will bring it to conclusion (Craddock 1985, 20-21).

There seems to be no delay in the Pauline thought. For fear that the hope of Christ’s return did not fulfil in the generation of the apostle, various solutions have been put forward. Some interpreted “the day of Christ Jesus” as the day of death and others saw the advance toward perfection as continuing after death. But, as Vincent (1897, 8) comments, these attempts to avoid a theological difficulty “are forced and shaped by dogmatic preconceptions of the nature of inspiration”. Indeed, the apostle had neither of these in mind. The near context resumes the same thought in Phil. 1:10, where it is hoped that the addressees “may be pure and blameless *for the day of Christ* (εἰς ἡμέραν Χριστοῦ).” Likewise, in the historical context of the epistle, “Paul was certain that the Philippians would never waiver in their generosity, would never cease sharing their good gifts to help spread the gospel until the Parousia, the return of Christ, took place – that final event of history, which he believed was near at hand (Phil. 4:5)” (Hawthorne 2004, 25).

I would conclude this section with the main arguments which favour the idea that Paul’s statement in Phil. 1:6 reflects his belief that Parousia was near. First, the good work that was to be accomplished before the day of Christ was to be done “in you” (ἐν ὑμῖν). The addressees were the object of transformation. Since this

transformation involves faith, personal decision, and awareness, the work had to be done during their lifetime. Second, the adverb “until” involves continuity, as the imperfective aspect of ἐπιτελέσει also suggests. The work is to continue alongside their life, until the day of Christ. Third, the expression “the day of Christ” (ἡμέρα Χριστοῦ) is a reference to Jesus’ second coming. It is true that the expression appears exclusively in *Philippians*, but by no means is it to be given a non-eschatological tenor. Therefore, in light of the above, in Phil. 1:6 and context Paul implies that the day of Christ, the end of all things, will not extend beyond the lifetime of his addressees. It was his hope that the church’s preparation for that day will be fulfilled on time, before the Parousia, which was near.

2.1.2. Alive at the Parousia (1 Thessalonians)

When the author of *1 Thessalonians* expresses the hope that his readers be spiritually ready “at the coming of our Lord Jesus” (ἐν τῇ παρουσίᾳ τοῦ Κυρίου ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ, 1Thess. 3:13, 5:23), he “clearly refers to the coming judgment by God at Christ’s parousia” (Wanamaker 1990, 145). This is not to say, however, that he also meant that none of the addressees would die until Christ would come back. Being ready at the Parousia may imply that some of them may experience death meanwhile. The Parousia is simply used as “an incentive to holy living and faithful service” (Bruce 2002, 73), which at the same time suggests that it is not far off in history.

In 1Thess. 4:15, 17, on the other hand, it seems that Paul includes himself and his readers (ἡμεῖς οἱ ζῶντες οἱ περιλειπόμενοι) possibly among the ones who will not die before Christ will return. But this is not viewed in the same terms by every scholar.

To begin with, Church Fathers already write defensively towards Paul. Thus, CHRYSOSTOM (436), OECUMENIUS (92), THEOPHYLACT (1313) and others (e.g., THEODORET, 648) contended that Paul was speaking of those to be alive at the Parousia and not of himself. In modern times, Fee (2009, 175) contends that “Paul is *not* stating that he expects to be alive at the Parousia.” In support of this claim, this commentator interprets the participle “the living” technically, as by the time of writing Paul had been part of the ones alive, set in contrast to “the sleeping” (i.e., the dead). The apostle seemed to have been in total disinterest with regards to who will be among the living at the Parousia. Rather, he seems concerned with the fact that the living has no advantage over the dead at the Parousia. Fee (ibid.) shows that, elsewhere, Paul takes into account both possibilities when he writes “whether we are awake [lit. “watching,” i.e. alive] or sleeping” (1Thess. 5:10) or “whether we are at home in the body [or] away from the body and at home with the Lord” (2Cor. 5:6-9). Fee concludes that whether Paul/they or we is/are among the living or the dead at Christ’s Parousia is irrelevant. The main point is that there is no advantage either way. Now, while this is a correct conclusion as far as Paul’s general thought is concerned, the arguments put forward are not so convincing. For

example, the statement in 1Thess. 5:10 is soteriological and has little or nothing to do with eschatology. Paul simply states that Christ's death is equally effective for the living as for the dead. The former receive life in the spiritual sense, whereas the latter receive life in a physical sense, at the resurrection. Also, a careful reading of 2Cor. 5:6-9 and context highlights that to be away from the body and with the Lord does not refer to death, but to living with Christ after He comes (2Cor. 5:10), presumably in a spiritual body (cf. 1Cor. 15:51-54).

Other scholars, nonetheless, argue that Paul thought that he and some of his fellow church members might be alive at the Parousia: "He believed that he and many of his contemporaries would still be alive at the time of the Lord's coming, as the phrase ἡμεῖς οἱ ζῶντες οἱ περιλειπόμενοι εἰς τὴν παρουσίαν τοῦ Κυρίου («we who are living, who remain until the coming of the Lord») demonstrates" (Wanamaker 1990, 171-172). The main arguments for this position are three. First, it is a discourse marker, which tells the reader that by using the first-person plural (we), while he could have used the indefinite third person plural (they), Paul intended to include himself among those to make it to the second coming of Jesus. It is not the indefinite "we," that is, whoever is alive at the Parousia (Frame 1912, 172). In support of this is also the use of the pronoun which is emphatic as the Greek shows (ἡμεῖς [...] οὐ μὴ φθάσωμεν). Moreover, the writing habits of the author show consistency with this thought. Whether Paul is part of ἡμεῖς οἱ ζῶντες should be decided based on the use of formula personal pronoun + participle elsewhere in Paul. He writes "we who are strong" (ἡμεῖς οἱ δυνατοί, Rom. 15:1) and "we who are living" (ἡμεῖς οἱ ζῶντες, 2Cor. 4:11).⁷ The first case is a good case since Paul is usually siding with those who are strong from a theological standpoint.

In addition, Paul argues for a near end in other writings. One should consider for example the exhortation of the apostle in 1Cor. 7:25-31, seemingly grounded in his belief that his contemporaries were the generation of the end. It is true, at the same time, that with the passing of time, Paul seemed to consider the possibility of passing away before the Parousia of the Lord (cf. 2Cor. 1:8f, 5:8, Phil. 1:21-24), but this does not invalidate the claim that by the time when *1 Thessalonians* was written, the author believed he might survive to witness the return of Christ.

To conclude, though, like Fee (2009), some scholars (e.g., Witherington 1992, 10, 23-35; Martin 2001, 148-149) are reluctant to admit that in 1Thess. 4:15, 17, Paul includes himself with those being alive at the Parousia,⁸ others are in favour of it. For example, "by using the first-person pronoun, Paul includes himself with

⁷ Cf. "we who turn away" (ἡμεῖς οἱ [...] ἀποστρεφόμενοι, Heb. 12:25).

⁸ Martin (2001, 148-149) states: "When speaking of the end and envisioning himself in relation to it, Paul normally cast himself in the category of the living since he was alive at the time he wrote, but this was a convention, not a prediction."

those who will still be living at the Parousia, as he does in 1Cor. 15:52,” Malherbe (2008, 270) states.⁹ In summary, the arguments are three.

The first is the pragmatic use of the personal pronoun “we,” used not in a typological sense (those who will be alive at the Parousia), but in a pragmatic sense (you and I). The second argument is intertextual. In 1Cor. 15:51-52, Paul states: “we will not all fall asleep [i.e. die]” (πάντες οὐ κοιμηθησόμεθα).

It is to be admitted, notwithstanding, that later Paul does include himself with those who will die before the end. For example, in 2Cor. 4:14, the same Paul affirms: “he who raised the Lord Jesus will also raise us with Jesus and present us with you [presumably, who will still be alive].” Whether this represents an evolution in Paul’s eschatological expectations is not a question to be answered here. As far as *1 Thessalonians* is concerned, Paul expresses the hope to be alive at the Parousia. So, he is not necessarily prophetic, but rather proleptic.

The third argument regards the expression “at the coming of the Lord” (εἰς τὴν παρουσίαν τοῦ Κυρίου, 1Thess. 4:15). To say that Paul identifies with the living just because he was part of the living when he wrote, does not do justice to the expression “at the coming of the Lord.” The preposition is used here in a temporal manner expressing the limit: “until the coming of the Lord” – and this suggests continuity. As Malherbe (2008, 271) reflects, “the dogmatic interest that drives this line of interpretation obscures the consolatory function of Paul’s words.” If he is to be understood, Paul needs no defence. He thought he would be alive at the Parousia and this is a fact. As explained above, this is not to mean that he predicted this. It was a statement of hope.

2.1.3. “Turn away from such people” (2Tim. 3:5b)

In one of the exhortations regarding the end times, Paul writes to Timothy that “in the last days there will be difficult times” (ἐν ἐσχάταις ἡμέραις ἐνοστήσονται καιροὶ χαλεποί, 2Tim. 3:1). The future tense of the verb “to be” seems to point out to later, remote, times when the eschatological profile of the humankind will take definitive shape. However, the passage ends with the warning “turn away from such people” (τούτους ἀποτρέπου, 2Tim. 3:5b). The imperative present appears to draw attention to the then current state of affairs.

⁹ Likewise, “the writers rank themselves with those who will live to see the Parousia, referring to them in the first person plural, whereas «those who have fallen asleep» are referred to in the third person, cf. 1Cor. 15:52, where Paul says that at the last trump «the dead will be raised incorruptible and we (καὶ ἡμεῖς, i.e. the living) shall be changed.» In 1Cor. 6:14 («God [...] will raise us also»), those who are to be raised are spoken of in the first person plural, but no distinction is drawn there between those who have died and those who will still be alive: «us» means «us Christians» generally” (Bruce 2002, 99). “At this point in his ministry, it appears that Paul believed that he was going to remain alive until the coming of the Lord (cf. 1Cor. 15:51-52), although he admits that he did not know exactly when the day of the Lord would come (1Thess. 5:1-2)” (Green 2002, 222).

Some scholars explain this riddle by acknowledging a certain amount of evil which was already at work in Paul's time. But this evil was not complete. Things were to worsen until the cup is filled to the full. Jesus' Olivet discourse is perceived to teach about seasons of developing wickedness. These will escalate until the climax of all evil, which is the revelation of the man of lawlessness in 2Thess. 2:3-12 (Hendriksen/Kistemaker 1953-2001, 282-283). Beside the intertextual arguments, the conjunction γάρ, argues Ellicott (2008, 145), favours the same evolutionary view of evil, as it "serves clearly and distinctly to connect the future and the present." However, there is no evidence in favour of this claim.¹⁰ Needless to say, this line of argumentation derives from considerations after the fact. The question is: did Paul have a long development of wickedness in mind? Apparently not. He viewed the eschatological times as already unfolding. Below, I will delineate the main arguments.

First, the same conjunction mentioned above is to other scholars an evidence opposite to Ellicott's view: "the connective *gar* establishes a strong link to the *toutous* whom Timothy is to avoid and who have all the characteristics listed in the vice-catalogue. Notice further that this connection also makes their practices the sign that the 'hard seasons' of the last days are truly approaching and perhaps even present" (Johnson 2008a, 406). Second, the imperative present whereby the writer commands Timothy to have nothing to do with such people "reflects the actual situation" (Towner 2006, 206, 561).¹¹ Third, "these also" (καὶ τούτους) implies that the arguments and quarrels described in 2:23 were already active in the church (Marshall/Towner 2004, 776). Fourth, the conjunction καί links the succeeding imperative clause to the preceding vv. 1-5 and, by implication, to the imperative of v. 1. Thus, Paul simultaneously instructs Timothy to be knowledgeable about the difficulty of the last times, which results from the evil characteristics of people living in it, "and" exhorts him continually to "avoid" or "turn (himself) away from"

¹⁰ The sequence ἐκ τούτων in v. 6 may suggest this, albeit the partitive meaning of the preposition does not speak in itself about eschatological prototype germinating in the present, which will reach an extended scale later.

¹¹ The verb ἀποτρέπομαι is a NT *hapax legomenon*. The reference to "them" (τούτους) connects the profile set out in vv. 2-5 to "those" beginning in v. 6 (ἐκ τούτων) who reflect this eschatological reality in Ephesus. See also: "The present linear aspect describes Timothy's ongoing behavior, confirming that the prophecies about the end times (vv. 1-4) have now come true in Timothy's time" (Mounce 2002, 548). The nature of the separation needs to be qualified. According to Lea/Griffin (2001, 226), "Timothy had to turn his back constantly on such people. [Yet] The command did not demand a termination of all personal relations (Paul had called for kindness to all in 2:24), but it does suggest that he had to practice a separation in spirit from the actions and attitudes of the errorists." In the Pastorals, Paul asked for separation from the false teachers (1Tim. 4:7, 6:20, Titus 3:9-11), while teaching everybody (including the deceived) was urged and worth it (see 2Tim. 2:24-26).

those who hold to an outward form of Christianity (the antecedent of τούτους) (Knight 1992, 433).

2.2. Other NT epistles

2.2.1. “Until the coming of the Lord” (James 5:7)

In the beginning of James 5, the author addresses the rich and condemn their unrighteous behaviour. Then, the writer turns towards the oppressed and prompts them to be patient “until the coming of the Lord” (5:7). This advice would make little sense if the promise that the Lord will intervene in the lifetime of the recipients were not to be taken in a literal manner. Based on this rationale, the overarching meaning of the technical term παρουσία,¹² other clear-cut expressions in the near context (especially in v. 8-9), and the Christian¹³ character of the epistle, there is quite a consensus among scholars (Braumann 1986, 901; Oepke 1964, 868)¹⁴ that in James 5:7 the author speaks about the coming of Christ.

This is not to overlook the fact that there have been proposals to read the phrase “the coming of the Lord” as the coming of God in judgement. This vein of argumentation builds on the assumption that *James* is a Jewish document, on Jewish literature, and on the fact that since God is presented as coming to judge in James 4

¹² “The term *parousia* can be used in a straightforward sense of the ‘arrival’ or ‘presence’ of persons (1Cor. 16:17, 2Cor. 7:6-7, 10:10, Phil. 1:26, 2:12) and of Satan (2Thess. 2:9) and once of God (2Pet. 3:12). But the predominant use is with reference to the future coming of Jesus (1Cor. 15:23, 2Pet. 3:4, 12, 1John 2:28) as Son of Man (Matt. 24:3, 27, 37, 39) or, above all, as “Lord” (*kyrios*): 1Thess. 2:19, 3:13, 4:15, 5:23, 2Thess. 2:1, 2Pet. 1:16. It is certainly the case, then, that James’ double use of *parousia tou kyriou* in 5:7-8 reflects a virtually technical Christian usage (Mussner, 201; Chaine, 120; Cantinat, 232; Mayor, 161; Ropes, 293; Marty, 192; Laws, 208; Martin, 190) and, in all likelihood, refers to the coming of Jesus as judge (Davids, 182; Dibelius, 242-243; Mussner, 201; Laws, 208-289)” (Johnson 2008b, 314).

¹³ “The majority of commentators note the strongly Christian tone throughout James, the doubtfulness of references to the *parousia* of God, and the common technical sense of *parousia* in the NT, and therefore argue that the event referred to here is the coming of Christ [...]. This seems to be the most reasonable position, for James is not a thinly Christianized Jewish document, but a thoroughly Christian one; it is hard to see how a Christian writer could mean anything else by this term, and it is easy to understand how James, like most NT writers, could refer to God as judge in one breath and Christ in the next (e.g. Revelation). The Christian hope, then, is the coming of Christ when all the wrongs suffered will be set right” (Davids 1982, 182-183).

¹⁴ See also Dibelius/Greeven (1976, 242): “This saying urges the audience to await patiently the great change of fortune which will take place at the *parousia*”; Adamson (1976, 190): “As an incentive to patience James appeals to the prospect of God’s speedy intervention and bids his readers to look for the coming of Christ.”

and 5:1-6, He must be the “Lord” in 5:7, too (Davids 1982, 182).¹⁵ However, these proposals have received strong criticisms in literature and, therefore, been denied as viable explanations.

To summarize, James 5:7 urges the Christians who were exploited by the rich to endure until the coming of Jesus, which was not far. The link between the present and the future is realized by the preposition ἕως, which expresses continuity. The context shows that for James, he and his contemporary, alongside the wicked rich, were living “in the last days” (ἐν ἐσχάταις ἡμέραις, v. 3) when “the coming of the Lord is near” (ἡ παρουσία τοῦ Κυρίου ἤγγικεν, v. 8) and “the Judge is standing at the door” (ὁ κριτῆς πρὸ τῶν θυρῶν ἕστηκεν, v. 9). Above all, the commandment to be patient, which is spelled out in the imperative-aorist combination, suggests that the necessity to take quick action allows for no delay. The semantic force of the perfective aorist conveys urgency.

2.2.2. “Salvation is ready to be revealed at the last time” (1Pet. 1:5)

In the introductory statements of the epistle, Peter writes to those forming his audience that they are shielded by God’s power “for the salvation ready to be revealed at the last time” (εἰς σωτηρίαν ἐτοιμὴν ἀποκαλυφθῆναι ἐν καιρῷ ἐσχάτῳ, 1Pet. 1:5). What Peter is saying here depends on the meaning the reader ascribes to the noun “salvation,” to the adjective “ready,” and to the expression “at the last time.” I will now approach these three notions, one by one.

The salvation Peter speaks of in 1Pet. 1:5 must be the future salvation, as he explains in other parts of his book. Thus, the passage of 1:9-11 reads:

[...] receiving the goal of your faith – the salvation of your souls. The prophets, who were prophesying about the gift meant for you, searched for and inquired about this salvation. They were trying to look for the time and circumstances the Spirit of Christ, who was in them, was predicting the sufferings for Christ and the glory following after them.

The salvation here is the glorious salvation at the end of times, not the spiritual salvation acquired by Christ’s death (Schreiner 2007, 63-64).¹⁶ Likewise, in 2:2, Peter exhorts Christians to long for “the pure spiritual (λογικόν) milk” so that they

¹⁵ Cf. TEST. JUD., 22:2; TEST. LEVI., 8:11; ASS. MOS., 10:12; ETH. ENOCH, 92-105; TEST. ABR., 13; SYR. BAR., 55:6; HERMAS, 5.5.3; 2 CLEMENT, 7:1; some of these passages use παρουσία.

¹⁶ Schreiner (2007) also states: “Salvation can be defined as being rescued from God’s judgment or wrath on the last day (1Pet. 4:17; cf. Rom. 5:9, 1Thess. 5:9). In popular circles salvation is usually conceived of as a past or present possession, and both of these notions are found in the New Testament (cf. Eph. 2:8-9, 1Cor. 1:18). In the majority of cases, however, salvation refers to the future glory believers will enjoy, and it is clear that Peter conceived of salvation in future terms here.”

may grow “towards salvation” (εἰς σωτηρίαν). Since the salvation is not presented as a state (spiritual salvation), but rather as a destination (eschatological salvation), it means that the author has in view that final salvific, vindicative, intervention of God on account of His people.¹⁷ Salvation is therefore a present reality, but not yet fully revealed. However, “the moment of its revelation is very near” (Michaels 2002, 23). This nearness is mainly grounded in the use of the adjective ἔτοιμος, which we are now turning to.

According to some scholars, the adjective “ready” qualifies the noun “salvation” and therefore tells nothing about the readiness of that salvation to be revealed. The moment of revelation seems to these scholars a matter of divine decision (Kistemaker/Hendriksen 1953-2001, 45). From a syntactical point of view, the adjective is clearly in agreement with the noun “salvation.” But to exclude the time-element from the equation altogether seems unwarranted. The infinitive ἀποκαλυφθῆναι, which follows the collocation σωτηρίαν ἑτοιμίην, is telic. The salvation spoken of is not just prepared, but it is ready to be revealed, “a theme sounded frequently in this letter and a theme that adds urgency to its message” (Achtemeier/Epp 1996, 97-98). The time-element is then ingrained in the whole syntactical combination. As J. Ramsey Michaels points out:

The terminology varies, but Peter clearly awaits a sudden, supernatural intervention of God in history, both for salvation (vv. 5, 9, 13) and judgment (1:17, 4:5, 17), and this expectation powerfully shapes much of what he writes. Although he does not try to fix the exact time, Peter regards the salvation as ready (ἑτοιμίην) to be revealed (cf. God as τῷ ἑτοιμῶς ἔχοντι κρίναι, “the One who stands ready,” in 4:5; also the references to what God has “prepared” in Matt. 25:34 and in 1Cor. 2:9). ἑτοιμίην reinforces and intensifies the phrase “reserved in heaven.” The “chosen people” stand on the threshold of their inheritance; its unveiling is both imminent and certain. (Michaels 2002, 23).

The readiness of the soteriological revelation is associated with the last time. In other words, it is ready because it is “the last time.” This wording is unique to Peter,¹⁸ but the concept is well represented in the NT. The time called “last” is the *terminus ad quem* of the present age, a period which was inaugurated in the life of Jesus and with the birth of the Christian church (e.g., Acts 2:17, Heb. 1:2).¹⁹ Davids

¹⁷ Cf. “The end of all things drew near” (Πάντων δὲ τὸ τέλος ἤγγικεν, 1Pet. 4:7); “in order to rejoice in the revelation of His glory” (ἵνα καὶ ἐν τῇ ἀποκλύψει τῆς δόξης αὐτοῦ χαρῆτε ἀγαλλιώμενοι, 4:13); “it is the time for the judgment from the house of God to begin” (ὁ καιρὸς τοῦ ἄρξασθαι τὸ κρίμα ἀπὸ τοῦ οἴκου τοῦ Θεοῦ, 4:17); “the sharer in the glory about to be revealed” (ὁ καὶ μελλούσης ἀποκαλύπτεσθαι δόξης κοινωνός, 5:1).

¹⁸ The NT writers generally prefer to use other terminology, such as “day of judgment,” “last day(s),” and “that time.”

¹⁹ “Here and elsewhere in the letter it is evident that *1 Peter* expresses the common eschatological conviction of the early Church (Bowman 1962; Aune 1992) that with the revelation of

(1990, 53-54) contends that 1Pet. 1:5 does not focus on the end as such (either as a whole or the closing stages), “but on the final scene of the age, when Christ will return to judge the godless and resurrect and reward those who believe (e.g., John 6:39-44, 12:48)” (cf. Jobes 2005, 87).²⁰

Accordingly, Peter speaks in 1Pet. 1:5 about the eschatological salvation, which was already prepared and ready to be revealed. In his estimation, they were yet living in the last time, that is, in the end of the period called “end of time.”

3. Explicit statements on “nearness”

Another group of propositions regarding the nearness of Christ’s return consists of explicit statements. I call “explicit” the statements wherein the closeness or imminence of the Parousia is straightforwardly affirmed. Some of these are clothed in metaphorical language, some are not. The references will once more be divided into Pauline and non-Pauline.

3.1. Pauline epistles

3.1.1. The day of salvation is nearer (Rom. 13:11-12)

Rom. 13 begins with admonitions on good behaviour and healthy attitudes with regards to authorities (vv. 1-10). Love is by far the best motivation of these, but Paul adds one more – the present time or hour (τὸν καιρὸν, ὥρα ἤδη, v. 11). The adverb ἤδη is then replaced by νῦν in order to make it clear that the time Paul speaks of is already here, is now. Thus, he states: “our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed” (Rom. 13:11). Being a comparative of ἐγγύς, ἐγγύτερον can be both spatial and temporal, but here is temporal due to its association with adverbs of time in the same sentence. The salvation spoken of is the same like the one in 1Pet. 1:5 – the eschatological one (Dunn 2002, 786). If it were the individual or spiritual salvation in view, it would make no sense to describe it as “nearer” (either in time

Jesus as Messiah (1:10-12, 20) the last of the ages is at hand (1:20, 4:7), that the final judgment of God is commencing (4:17-18; cf. 1:17, 4:5), and that therefore Christians are to entrust themselves in confidence and obedience to a faithful Creator (1:21, 4:19). In this letter, with the sole exception of 1:12, the verb *apokalypō* (1:5, 5:1) and its related noun *apokalypsis* (1:7, 13, 4:13) refer to the future and final revelation (of Jesus Christ, salvation, or glory)” (Elliott 2008, 338).

²⁰ In the same vein, “the Last Day is the Day of Judgment; the Last Days, Time, Hour are either the age of the Christian dispensation or that portion of it which lies nearest to the End, when the signs of the Parousia are beginning to show themselves. Either the first or the last of these meanings must be that of St. Peter. [...]. Many commentators, however, regard the phrase as meaning “in the last days,” in the time of darkness and suffering. The Parousia puts an end to the suffering, but, coming suddenly, may be said to come in the midst of it all. Upon the whole this appears to be the best explanation” (Bigg 1901, 102).

or space). What Jesus accomplished for the sinner is always and to the same degree present with the sinner as long as grace is available. Therefore, the salvation offered when Christ comes back is what Paul envisions here.²¹ The end was nearer at the time of writing when compared with the time when they first embraced Christian faith. To be sure the audience gets the point, Paul uses also metaphorical language in the next verse: “the night has advanced and the day drew near” (v. 12). Though the noun “night” (νύξ) is found only here in *Romans*, its meaning is to be drawn from the noun “day” (ἡμέρα), with which it stands in contrast. The eschatological meaning of “day” is well established in Paul (e.g., Rom. 2:5, 16, 1Cor. 1:8, 3:13, 5:5, 2Cor. 1:14, etc.; cf. Heb. 10:25). If the noun “day” stands for the future age, the “night” must refer to the present age (cf. also Cranfield 2004, 682). This present age is said to have advanced as the future age came close.

3.1.2. “The time is shortened” (1Cor. 7:29)

In 1Cor. 7, Paul tackles the issues of marital relationships, religious adherence, and slavery and his primary orientation is that everyone should remain in the situation or condition he or she was when they were called in the church (vv. 17, 20, 24, 26). At the same time, if someone, as a concession, marries this is not a sin, but the two partners should behave as if they are not married. This unusual advice is grounded in two realities: 1) “the time has been shortened” (ὁ καιρὸς συνεσταλμένος ἐστίν, v. 29a) and 2) “the shape of this world passes away” (παράγει γὰρ τὸ σχῆμα τοῦ κόσμου τούτου, v. 31b). The relation between the two phrases makes it quite clear that the time Paul had in view was the historical time of this earth. History was coming to its conclusion. This impression was probably based on what Paul calls “the present distress/crisis” (διὰ τὴν ἐνεστῶσαν ἀνάγκην, v. 26). He does not explain what makes this crisis but its relation to the coming of the end seems obvious. Below, I will delve in some depth into the meaning of the words the author uses to convey the approaching end.

When it expresses time proper, the noun καιρὸς in the canonical Hellenistic Greek, as well as in the non-canonical Hellenistic Papyri, means ‘a season’, ‘a fixed time’, and ‘a stage or period’ (Friberg et al. 2000, 212; Dellings 1964, 461; Moulton/Milligan 1930, 315). Its association with the participle συνεσταλμένος suggests that in 1Cor. 7:29 καιρὸς means ‘a period of time’, since it is described as “having been shortened.” Specifically, it stands for ‘the time before the Parousia’. This idea is based on Paul’s semantic habits and the confirmation of the usage in similar literature. Καιρὸς was used by Paul in the same letter and in others to refer to Christ’s return (e.g., 1Cor. 4:5, Rom. 13:11, 1Thess. 5:1, 1Tim. 4:1, 2Tim. 3:1, 1Pet. 4:17; cf. Rev. 1:3, 22:10). Also, both BDAG and EDNT perceive these two words as eschatological vocabulary (Arndt et al. 2000, 498; Baumgartner 1990,

²¹ The two aspects blend at the end: “Every day brings us closer to that final day when all that we have anticipated in Christ will become a reality” (Mounce 2001, 247).

233).²² BARNABAS, 4.3b.1-3 quotes Enoch saying: Εἰς τοῦτο γὰρ ὁ δεσπότης συντέμηκεν τοὺς καιροὺς καὶ τὰς ἡμέρας, ἵνα ταχύνη ὁ ἠγαπημένος αὐτοῦ, καὶ ἐπὶ τὴν κληρονομίαν ἦξει (Kraft 1971, 72-218) (“For this reason, the Master cut short the times and the days so that His beloved might hurry and come for the inheritance.”).²³ The perfect passive of συστέλλω seems to be reflective of divine causation. It was God who shortened the time before the Parousia.

Τὸ λοιπόν refers to the remaining time before the Parousia. This time is depicted in 2Esd. 16:40-48 in a language similar to Paul’s.²⁴ One may wonder what significance τὸ λοιπόν may have as these words precede the conjunction ἵνα. It seems that Paul “rather frequently puts words in front of ἵνα for emphasis; 2Cor. 2:4, Gal. 2:10, Rom. 7:13, Col. 4:16” (Robertson/Plummer 1911, 155). So the time that remained before the Parousia is important for the reasons enumerated after ἵνα. Moulton (2006, 178) considers that Hellenistic Greek innovates upon the combination of ἵνα with the subjunctive mood, ascribing to the conjunction the role of introducing a command, a role held in the Classical Greek by ὅπως in combination with the future indicative.²⁵ However, the commands in the subjunctive are less strong than in the imperative, all the more because they are rendered in the third person plural: “Let those who have wives be as if they do not have, etc.”

The fashion of this world refers to the world as we know it. This form of the world, says Paul, is passing away (παράγει). The present indicative has a twofold aspect: it expresses progress and denotes a reality which is specifically present by the time of the writing (Fanning 1990, 199-200). Because the world was currently and progressively passing away, Paul could say that the time had been shortened.

²² As Fee (1987, 338-339) puts it, “more likely the noun ‘time’ refers to the eschatological event of salvation, which has been set in motion by Christ’s death and resurrection and the gift of the Spirit.”

²³ The idea of the eschatological times being shortened is also present in Matt. 24:22.

²⁴ This is a the Jewish Apocalypse, which reads: “Hear my words, O my people; prepare for battle, and in the midst of the calamities be like strangers on the earth. ⁴¹ Let the one who sells be like one who will flee; let the one who buys be like one who will lose; ⁴² let the one who does business be like one who will not make a profit; and let the one who builds a house be like one who will not live in it; ⁴³ let the one who sows be like one who will not reap; so also the one who prunes the vines, like one who will not gather the grapes; ⁴⁴ those who marry, like those who will have no children; and those who do not marry, like those who are widowed. ⁴⁵ Because of this, those who labor, labor in vain; ⁴⁶ for strangers shall gather their fruits, and plunder their goods, overthrow their houses, and take their children captive; for in captivity and famine they will produce their children. ⁴⁷ Those who conduct business, do so only to have it plundered; the more they adorn their cities, their houses and possessions, and their persons, ⁴⁸ the more angry I will be with them for their sins, says the Lord” (NRSV).

²⁵ Porter (1999, 235) seems to ascribe a resultative meaning of ἵνα in 1Cor. 7:29, “the time stands shortened, with the result that those having wives might be as those not having [wives].”

From an exegetical point of view, the fact that the present tense replaces a future suggests that Paul expected the end of the world to be at hand (Lange et al. 2008a, 161). Kistemaker/Hendriksen (1953-2001, 244) argues that Paul “is not advocating celibacy, separation, or divorce”, but that he urges Christians to be ready to leave the things of the world at any moment. Since marriage is part of the fashion of this world and this form is passing, Paul can prompt Christians metaphorically to be married as if they are not, that is, to be ready to leave it any time soon. Not even marital relationships should avert someone from serving God at the end of earth’s history.

The context of the passage compels us to see marriage, weeping, rejoicing, buying, and using or dealing with the world, as features of the present world.²⁶ When Paul warns about these activities, he has in mind those dimensions which are subject to the law of entropy, since “the life situation of the Christian community is transitory” (Orr/Walther 2008, 221).

The apostle may have come to this conclusion by interpreting the then current state of affairs (ἡ ἐνεστῶσα ἀνάγκη, 1Cor. 7:26) in light of the eschatological tribulation spoken of by Jesus (ἀνάγκη μεγάλη, Luke 21:23; cf. θλίψις μεγάλη, Matt. 24:21). With escalating fatalities in mind, the end of time seemed to have come nearer.

3.1.3. “The Lord is near” (Phil. 4:5)

The expression used by Paul in Phil. 4:5 is somewhat incomplete. Is he referring to the coming of the Lord or His presence? In other words, is the adverb “near” to be understood as a spatial or a temporal reference? A few commentators see here the first dimension (Keener 1993, electronic ed.; Calvin 1998, electronic ed.; Victorinus 1999, 281). They usually affirm that “the Lord is near” (ὁ Κύριος ἐγγύς) in an existential sense, joining His people in His providence. This interpretation is usually based on the premises of the near context (especially the following verses which have no eschatological tinge) and the *Septuagint* where the Lord is seen to be close to His people (e.g., Deut. 4:7, Ps. 145:18). However, for this to be true, the noun Κύριος must refer to God, the adverb ἐγγύς has to denote spatial nearness, and the context should contain no eschatological construct. Notwithstanding, these conditions seem not fulfilled. In the Gospels, the Lord stands usually for God. In Paul, however, it mostly points to Christ, all the more so when the noun is articular. It is true that in the OT God is pictured as close (ἐγγύς) to His people (e.g., Ps. 33:19, 119:151, 145:18), but this usage is foreign to the NT. In the NT, when ἐγγύς has Christ as the subject of the verb it modifies, then the adverb is temporal (Matt.

²⁶ “What does Paul really say? Marriage, tears, joys, purchases, the whole world of earthly things – we Christians may have all of them, use all of them, experience all of them – how? for what they are, as belonging to the σχῆμα or form of this present world” (Lenski 1963, 319).

24:33, 26:18; cf. Rom. 13:11, Rev. 1:3, 22:10). The prior context confirms these thoughts. Phil. 3:20-21 speaks about Christians who were awaiting for the Lord Jesus Christ to come from heaven.

The truth is that to the majority of specialists the adverb ἐγγύς “is a temporal reference to the nearness of Christ’s return” (Greenlee 1992, electronic ed.; Vincent 1897, 133-134; Hendriksen/Kistemaker 1953-2001, 194; Fee 1999, 175). It seems that the statement in Phil. 4:5b reflects the prayer, the expectation, and the longing of the early church for the Lord’s early return (e.g., 1Cor. 7:29-31, 16:22, Heb. 10:37, James 5:8-9) (Loh/Nida 1995, 128). Yet, some scholars argue for a twofold meaning: the temporal-eschatological one, alongside the spatial-providential one. The latter is understood as a perpetual nearness, akin to the one promised in Matt. 28:20. Bruce (1989, 142-143), for instance, states that “if time alone were in view, then it might be thought that the assurance is more valid for those living only a short time before the unknown date of his advent than for those living a longer time before it; but in the sense that Paul’s words probably bear here the Lord is always equally near his people, continually “at hand” (KJV).”²⁷ I take issue with the assumption that a word can be and is used at the same time with two (heavily) different meanings. Paul must have had one primary focus and that seem to have been the temporal. To him, the Lord’s coming was at hand.

3.2. Other NT epistles

In this last section I will deal with four more letters: *Hebrews*, *James*, *1 Peter*, and *1 John*. All use self-evident propositions about the soon coming of Christ. The review, therefore, is meant to complete the picture about the expectation of the early church, more than to decide whether the Parousia is in view or not.

3.2.1. The One coming does not delay (Heb. 10:37, 2Pet. 3:9)

The *Epistle to the Hebrews* contains one of the most beautiful and straightforward promise regarding the soon return of Christ: “there is just so, so little *time*, the One coming will have come and will not delay” (ἔτι γὰρ ὅσον ὅσον, ὁ ἐρχόμενος ἥξει καὶ οὐ χρονίσει, Heb. 10:37). Here, the author quotes, or rather paraphrases Hab. 2:3. While the OT prophet was waiting for a prophecy to fulfil, the NT writer has a person he awaits for. The phrase “there is just so, so little time” is not found in Habakkuk, but was probably taken from the LXX of Isa. 26:20 (“a little moment”). The identity of the one awaited is pictured in messianic terms. The coming One is

²⁷ “In both time and space, God is available to us. He is not far removed in heaven but present in our hearts to hear and relate to us. His nearness also means he knows us and what we are. In time, God is near, for he is coming again. Then we will receive our rewards for living like Christ rather than like the world” (Anders 1999, 261); see also Lange et al. (2008, 67).

the Messiah, as John the Baptist testifies (Matt. 11:3, Luke 7:19) (Bruce 1990, 272-274). The context of the chapter supports the idea that 10:37 has the Messianic coming in view. In 10:25, the reader is already invited to see that “the day is drawing near” (ἐγγίζουσιν τὴν ἡμέραν). There is no need then to discriminate between the coming divine judgment which is approaching and the end of earth’s history (against Ellingworth 1993, 555). They are one and the same.

Some authors assume that the delay of the Parousia was troubling the church (Attridge/Koester 1989, 303; Lane 2002, 305), and this is the reason why the writer appeals to Hab. 2:3 to instil hope and a state of expectedness. But this does not necessarily seem so. The author is simply eschatological in perspective (Moffatt 1924, 157). Apparently, “for Hebrews the delay of Christ’s return is part of a more basic issue: the fact that God’s promises have not been fully realized” (Koester 2008, 463). So, he speaks about the imminent return simply because the great promise was not yet fulfilled. The advice does not singlehandedly spring from a delay-crisis. *Hebrews* affirms, at the same time, that the Coming One does not delay (οὐ χρονίσει) just as Peter states in a synonymous vocabulary that “the Lord does not hesitate/delay” (οὐ βραδύνει Κύριος, 2Pet. 3:9). Unlike *Hebrews*, which provides no support in context, Peter adds some soteriological rationale for the passing of time.

3.2.2. The Parousia and Judgment are at hand (James 5:8-9)

The fifth chapter of the *Epistle of James* touches upon the unrighteous deeds of the rich and the soon divine vindication on account of the oppressed. About the wicked rich, James says they “stored up wealth in the last days” (ἐν ἐσχάταις ἡμέραις, v. 3). Living in the last days makes the advice to be patient and await for the Lord’s return (v. 7) adequate. As I argued earlier, 5:7 infers that the addressees may live to see their vindication at Christ’s coming. This is strengthened by two more statements in vv. 8-9: “the coming of the Lord is near” (ἡ παρουσία τοῦ Κυρίου ἤγγικεν, James 5:8) and “the Judge has stood at the door” (ὁ κριτὴς πρὸ τῶν θυρῶν ἔστηκεν, James 5:9). The perfect ἤγγικεν “indicates that the coming is near” (Adamson 1976, 191).²⁸ Also, the causal use of ὅτι is another argument that James argues for “the Lord’s [eschatological] proximity” (Johnson 2008, 316). Following up, in 5:9, the image of the Lord standing before the door is apocalyptic (Dibelius/Greeven 1976, 244) and also eschatological, as it “underscore[s] the imminence of judgment” (Martin 2002, 192; cf. Ropes 1916, 297). As Richardson (2001, 223) puts it: “Signs indicate the nearness of the harvest, just as the sign of the Lord’s presence at the “door” indicates the nearness of his coming. Just as the coming of the Judge is the coming of judgment, so the coming of the kingdom is also the coming of the King.”

²⁸ “While famous for its use with the kingdom of God in the synoptics, e.g. Mark 1:15, ἤγγικεν is used several times of the parousia (Rom. 13:12, Heb. 10:25, 1Pet. 4:7)” (Davids 1982, 184).

3.2.3. The eschatological judgment is about to begin (1Pet. 4:5, 7, 17)

In appealing to his audience to wholeheartedly fight against sin, in anticipation of the end, Peter underscores the importance of imitating Christ's own battle with sin (1Pet. 4:1) and the importance of living in accordance with God's will (v. 2). Then, he proceeds with a comparison between the pre-conversion life of Christians to whom he was writing as well as the current lifestyle of the Gentiles (τὰ ἔθνη) and the post-conversion life of the former. In the present, converted Christians suffer excessive insults from the Gentiles, yet the latter will have to face the divine judgment (v. 5). This judgment is presented by Peter as a process about to take place. The use of the adverb ἐτοίμως clearly suggests this (Davids 1990, 153; Elliott 2008, 729). This adverb is used a few times in the LXX and it always describes an action to take place speedily or soon (e.g., Ezra 7:17, 21, 26, Dan. 3:15). Likewise, in the NT, the adverb describes something ready to take place anytime soon (Acts 21:13, 2Cor. 12:14).

The readiness of the judgement is also bolstered by the statement “the end of all things²⁹ is near” (πάντων δὲ τὸ τέλος ἤγγικεν, v. 7a), which is why keeping alert, sober, and prayerful is mandatory (v. 7b). Achtemeier/Epp (1996, 293) states: “that the end (τέλος) mentioned is the time of the final transformation of reality is indicated by the emphatic position of «all things» (πάντων) at the beginning of the sentence.” The end times require also love for one another, hospitality, and service (vv. 8-11).³⁰ The end will also bring fierce trials (πυρώσεις),³¹ but Christians should not loose heart and neither be ashamed for being what they are (vv. 12-16), primarily because “it is the time for judgment to begin” (ὅτι ὁ καιρὸς τοῦ ἄρξασθαι τὸ κρίμα, v. 17), and this is terrible news for the ungodly (v. 18). Here is how Peter closes the circle begun in v. 5. The end (and the preceding judgment) is

²⁹ The adjective πᾶς could also be masculine (“all men” or “all people”), since it is rendered in the Genitive. Yet, it is more likely to be understood as a neuter, “all things.” See Hiebert (1982, 244).

³⁰ According to Schreiner (2007, 210-211), typical NT eschatology discourages the setting of dates or any sort of future mapping. Also, eschatological passages of the Greek Testament do not invite believers to turn away from the affairs of the world and simply gaze at the heavens. The news of the end “is invariably used to encourage believers to live in a godly way (cf. Matt. 24:36-25:46, Rom. 13:11-14, 1Cor. 15:58, Phil. 4:4-9, 1Thess. 5:1-11, 2Pet. 3:11-16). [...] The imminence of the end should function as a stimulus to action in this world. The knowledge that believers are sojourners and exiles, whose time is short, should galvanize them to make their lives count now” (ibid.).

³¹ Cf., “The fact that Peter understands the persecution of his readers to be the beginning of eschatological judgment does not necessarily mean that he thinks the return of Christ is imminent. Although he may believe that, his reference to persecution as God's judgment makes a different point intended to comfort and console his readers” (Jobes 2005, 293).

near. Indeed, the judgment mentioned occurs prior to the end (Michaels 2002, 270)³² and culminates with the salvation of the faithful (1:5) and their vindication in the eyes of the wicked (5:6).

3.2.4. The antichrists and the last hour (1John 2:18)

John is one of the very few who relate the approaching of the end times with a reason. “Children,” he says, “it is the last hour [...], there are many antichrists, wherefore we know that it is the last hour” (1John 2:18). The sign of the last hour (ἐσχάτη ὥρα) is the presence of many antichrists in the world. The term ἀντίχριστος is unique to *John*. To the author, anyone who denies that Jesus is the Messiah is a liar (ψεύστης) and an antichrist (2:22). The spirit of the antichrist is already at work in the time of John,³³ denying the Messianic claims of Jesus (4:3). In his second epistle, John resumes that many deceivers had gone out in the world not confessing that Jesus Christ came in the flesh. Such a person is an antichrist (2John 1:7). The relationship between the presence of antichrists on earth and the end of time³⁴ goes back to Christ’s eschatological discourse. In the development of his argument, Jesus places the false christs (ψευδόχριστοι) as the last sign before the Parousia (Mark 13:22-26, Matt. 24:24-30). Probably³⁵ that is the reason why John links the antichrists of his age not only with the time of the end, but with “the last hour,” that is, the last portion of the time of the end.

The expression “the last hour” made some to defend John’s apparent erroneous temporal estimation. Because the expression translated “the last hour” is anarthrous in Greek, Westcott (1902, 69) argues that here it is in view “*a* last time” not “*the* last time.” It is an OT concept which was “used for the distant future” from the perspective of the prophet. But, as Blass et al. (1961, 134) affirms, there are instances, primarily in relation to time, when the article is omitted with ordinals and the

³² Cf. “The meaning appears to be that the sufferings of the Christians are the actual beginning of the final judgment” (Bigg 1901, 181).

³³ By connecting the image of the antichrist and the then current state of affairs, John “historicizes the mythical figure” (Bultmann 1973, 35-36). He sees a confirmation that, for John, the last hour had indeed come, in 2:8 “the darkness is passing away and the true light is already shining.”

³⁴ This is also visible at the structural level, as the chiasmus of 1John 2:18 shows: A. This is the last hour; B. Antichrist is coming; B’. Many antichrists have come; A’. This is the last hour.

³⁵ “Jesus taught that false Christs would appear in the last days (Matt. 24:24, Mark 13:22). In practice there is little difference between a false Christ and an antichrist, for both are opposed to the true Christ. It is very likely, then, that when the author says his readers have heard that antichrist is coming he is referring to the message they heard from the beginning (when they were first instructed in the faith), which included teaching about the coming of the antichrist(s)” (Kruse 2000, 98-99).

grammar calls the anarthrous construction in 1John 2:18 as “understandable.”³⁶ The translator has, therefore, to supply the missing article. AUGUSTINE (*Tractate in Epistulam Joan*, 3.3) also tries to save faces of John’s statement: “This same last hour is long; yet it is the last. For he has put ‘hour’ for ‘the last time’; because it is in the last times that our Lord Jesus Christ is to come” (NPNF, 476). Needless to say, “the epistolary author would scarcely need to make an urgent announcement of such a general truth. Since he has just said that the world is passing away, since the presence of the Antichrists is cited as a sign of the end, and since the coming of Christ is mentioned in 2:28, there can be little doubt that the author thought the end was coming soon” (Brown 2008, 330-332).³⁷ In a similar manner, Chaîne (1939, 167) contends that John offered an opinion, but not a teaching.³⁸ However, this is an unnecessary and weak dialectic. The difference between an opinion and a teaching is too subtle to mean anything. A more straightforward trajectory is taken by Brown (2008, 330-332), who states that “like every other Christian who stated it then or since, he was wrong.”

The NT testifies that, with His first coming, Christ inaugurated the last days. We find this in Peter’s Pentecost sermon when he applies Joel’s prophecy (Joel 2:28) about the outpouring of the Spirit in the last days to his time (Acts 2:17; cf. Heb. 1:2, 1Pet. 1:20). Based on this, time could not extend long before the end. But John had more than that in mind. Probably, “John was thinking of the final stage in the last days (cf. 1Tim. 4:1, 2Tim. 3:1, James 5:3, 1Pet. 1:5, Jude 18); time had hurried past since the beginning of the church and now it was the last hour before the end (Marshall 1978, 148; cf. Strecker/Attridge 1996, 62-63). The noun ὥρα may either stand for a period of time, or for a moment in time. The meaning in view here is the latter. The whole phrase signifies that the decisive moment of the history of humankind is here (Haas et al. 1994, 61). Smalley (2002, 94-95) is of the opinion that the noun ὥρα is flexible and, therefore, John was not mistaken as such. This is because, at times, the Johannine eschatology is more realized (e.g., 2:8, 24, 4:13, 5:20), other times more futuristic (e.g., 2:28, 3:2).³⁹ However, this is not to say that in 1John 2:18 the emphasis is unclear. In the extent of antichristic manifestations, John “finds clear indication that the process is nearing completion (ὄθεν γινώσκωμεν)”

³⁶ See also John 1:39, 4:6, 19:14.

³⁷ The intertextual evidences are plentiful: Rev. 22:20, 1Cor. 7:29, 31, Phil. 4:5, 1Pet. 4:7, James 5:8, Heb. 10:25, 37; 1 CLEMENT, 23:5; BARNABAS, 4:3, 21:3.

³⁸ The author states: “Il donne une opinion sur la dernière heure, mais pas un enseignement.”

³⁹ See also Akin (2001, 115): “John’s eschatology is flexible in that he both emphasizes the present experience of Christ that the believer has but also the promise of his return and the opposition he will encounter. Due to the fact that Jesus has inaugurated the kingdom, John can say with assurance that it is the last hour. It has been the last hour since the Son of God invaded the evil one’s domain and dealt him a death blow in the cross and resurrection. The ending of that final hour, however, is unknown.”

(Brooke 1912, 52). This is why eschatological flexibility does not account for indefinite protraction of time.

4. Conclusions

Although one can guess that not all specialists would confirm that the list of the texts reviewed in this paper supports the Parousia nearness, many of the texts successfully pass the test of exegesis and confirm the hypothesis that the first-century church’s belief was that Jesus was about to return within their time frame. As stated before, the NT epistles do not teach delay and their writers very rarely tell us why they believe in the soon return of Jesus. For example, John puts forward the presence of the antichrists as the reason to believe that they were living in the last hour (1John 2:18), Paul places the shortening of time in the context of some sort of distress and tribulation (1Cor. 7:26, 28), while in 2Tim. 3:1-5 the moral decadence of the first century human race turns into a claim that they were living in the times of the end. All these reasons have their “back-ups” in Christ’s Olivet Discourse.

Before close, I should also emphasize that the very fact that the Parousia is depicted in both impending terms and more general timing shows that the concept of nearness is more dynamic than usually assumed. The different dating of the NT books supports this claim. When the researcher sees, for example, that between the writing of *1 Corinthians* and *James* up to the *Revelation* and *1 John* we have around four decades, then this dynamic speaks of itself. If Christ’s return is at one point “at the door” and after 40 years is perceived as being “near,” then it means that the nearness of the Parousia allows for some flexibility. When after 40 years since *1 Corinthians* or *James*, *John* states the same closeness as Paul and *James* earlier, it may also suggest that from John’s time onward some more decades could pass until the consummation of history may occur, with Parousia being always near and, at the same time, indefinitely pending.

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