

**COURSE SYLLABUS: Eschatology**

<b><u>WEEK</u></b>	<b><u>TOPIC</u></b>
1	<b>The Meaning of Time</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ Definitions &amp; Clarifications</li><li>▪ Time and the Purpose of God</li></ul>
2	<b>The Biblical Timeline</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ The Endpoints</li><li>▪ The Milestones</li></ul>
3	<b>The Fullness of Time</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Prophetic History</li><li>• The <i>Pleroma</i> of Time</li></ul>
4	<b>The Kingdom of God</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• The Heart of the Message of Hope</li><li>• Kingdom Now...and Not Yet</li></ul>
5	<b>The Language of Eschatology</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• A Breakable Code</li><li>• Speaking of the Future as the Past</li></ul>
6	<b>There Remains a Sabbath Rest</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• An Overlooked Eschatological Event</li><li>• The Meaning of the Sabbath</li></ul>
7	<b>The Kingdom Now and Not Yet</b>
8	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Schweitzer &amp; Larkin</li><li>• The Kingdom Parables</li></ul>
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**Week 1: The Meaning of Time**

**Key Biblical Texts:** I Corinthians 15:20-28; Daniel 12:1-13

*“The past and the future are two poles that define the present and dictate its direction.”  
(Eliezer Schweid; “The Jewish Experience of Time”)*

Eschatology is the study of the *eschaton*, the Greek word loosely translated ‘last things.’ The cognate *eschatos* bears the connotation of ‘the extreme end, the final’ and in its application to time the word has come to signify entirely the end of all things. Vine’s Expository Dictionary offers this under the heading of *eschatos*; “last, utmost, extreme,”<sup>1</sup> This ‘end,’ as it is applied to time, has been variously interpreted throughout the ages, but in general the prevailing view among modern evangelicals is that the *eschaton* is the end of the space/time universe as we know it. It is the end of the current world order, however one defines that malleable term. Some would go so far as to call it the end of *time* and the beginning of *eternity*.

The impact of the word itself upon the study denominated by that word – *eschaton* and *eschatology* – has been to narrow the focus of inquiry to the very end of what we might call the timeline of the universe. *Eschatology* becomes exclusively the *study of end things*, as Augustus Strong defines it in his *Systematic Theology*, “Eschatology deals with the precursors of Christ’s second coming, as well as with the second coming itself.”<sup>2</sup> Strong’s perspective on Eschatology is broadly representative of Reformed theologians: spend less time trying to figure out what is going to happen and more time determining how the



**Augustus Strong (1836-1921)**

believer ought to live today in light of the fact that ‘eschatology’ is going to happen. He writes immediately after the definition quoted above, “We are to labor for the coming of the kingdom of God in society as well as in the individual and in the church, in the present

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.studydrive.org/dictionaries/ved/e/end-ending.html>; accessed 29 July 2019.

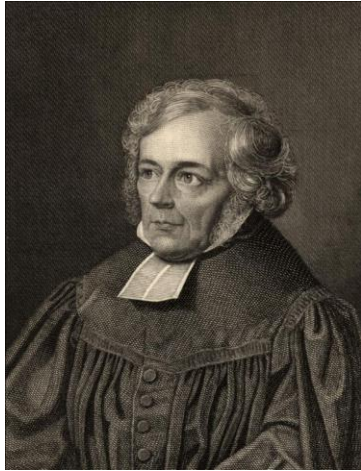
<sup>2</sup> Strong, Augustus Hopkins, *Systematic Theology* (Valley Forge, PA: The Judson Press; 1969); 981.

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life as well as in the life to come.<sup>3</sup> Of course, Strong is in good company in this view, as the Apostle Peter says essentially the same thing in his second epistle,

*Therefore, since all these things will be dissolved, what manner of persons ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness, looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be dissolved, being on fire, and the elements will melt with fervent heat?<sup>4</sup>*

It has been charged against Reformed theology that it is afraid of Eschatology, and



**Schleiermacher (1768-1834)**

in some measure the indictment rings true. The topic is prophetic and therefore subject to wide variation in interpretation. Date-setting has always been a problem for the Church, in spite of the admonition of our Lord that *"it is not given to you to know the times and the seasons determined by the Father."*<sup>5</sup> Strong himself quotes Friedrich Schleiermacher, hardly a Reformed theologian, with approbation, "Eschatology is essentially prophetic; and is therefore vague and indefinite, like all unfulfilled prophecy."<sup>6</sup> The vagueness

of prophecy, the excesses of prophetic interpretation by so many others, and the almost absolute lack of any certainty that one's interpretation is, in fact, *correct*, all conspire to put the Reformed theologian off from the study of the 'end times.' Lewis Sperry Chafer, a leading light in the Dispensational School, quotes the attitude of Princeton theologian Charles Hodge as representative of the Reformed treatment of Eschatology,

The subject cannot be adequately discussed without taking a survey of all the prophetic teachings of the Scriptures both of the Old Testament and of the New. This task cannot be satisfactorily accomplished by any one who has not made the study of the prophecies a specialty. The author, knowing that he has no such qualifications for the work, purposes to confine himself in a great measure to a historical survey of the different schemes of interpreting the Scriptural prophecies relating to the subject.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>4</sup> II Peter 3:11-12

<sup>5</sup> Acts 1:7

<sup>6</sup> Quoted in Strong; p. 981.

<sup>7</sup> Quoted in Chafer, *Systematic Theology: Volume IV* (Dallas: Dallas Seminary Press; 1948); 255.

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Chafer, as equally representative of Dispensational theologians as Hodge is of Reformed, has no such qualms regarding his own ability to interpret biblical prophecy in the whole. He states that “The language [of prophecy] is no more complex, nor is the truth any more veiled” than in the historical sections of the Bible.<sup>8</sup> Chafer believes that the student of biblical prophecy faces no insurmountable obstacles to correct interpretation. “It is not a matter of impossible barriers; it is simply and only a matter of giving attention to the things God has said, and said in understandable terms. The Bible terminology is always the simplest of any literature.”<sup>9</sup> Indeed, so confident is Chafer



Lewis Sperry Chafer (1871-1952)

of the ease and simplicity of the interpretation of biblical prophecy, that he states, “the student who does not have as clear a grasp of prophecy as he has of other features of revelation is, by so much, disqualified to interpret the Word of God.”<sup>10</sup>

Bold assurance on the one hand, fear and trepidation on the other. Such has characterized the Church’s treatment of Eschatology for two millennia. While we might hold back from Chafer’s equating the ease of interpreting prophecy with that of the historical narratives of Scripture, it still remains that the prophetic word is part of the Word of God, and therefore cannot be quite so out of reach as Hodge intimates. Certainly Paul did not consider his teachings regarding the ‘end times’ to be too esoteric for the believers in Thessalonica, “Do you not remember that when I was still with you I told you these things?”<sup>11</sup> Of course he then proceeds to talk about the ‘one who restrains,’ and all readers since that day have wished that Paul might have trusted less to the Thessalonians’ memory and had written again what he had told them. Therein lies the problem: the modern student of biblical prophecy does not have all of the data. And lacking the full data set available to the apostles Peter and Paul means that conclusions arrived at today must be provisional and approximate. But that does not mean they have to be incorrect.

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*; 258.

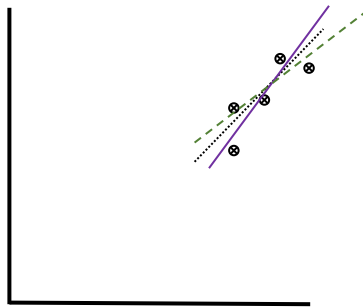
<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*; 259.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*; 260-261.

<sup>11</sup> II Thessalonians 2:5

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This is because what we lack in specificity regarding the ‘end times’ – things that Paul *taught* the believers in Thessalonica, for instance, but were never *written down* – is more than made up for in the vast set of points stretching from the earliest chapters of Genesis on through both the Old Testament and the New. The prevalent emphasis within Eschatology upon the *eschaton* has been to the detriment of the path that has led and leads to that *eschaton* – the full revelation of the divine purpose in Creation and Redemption. If we stick with the data set metaphor, we may liken the interpretation of biblical prophecy to the determination of a linear formula to describe a set of points on a graph. Much of modern eschatological teaching treats the data as if the only available data points *began* in the New Testament era, and perhaps even *later* than the earthly ministry of Jesus Christ. As the following conceptual graph shows, a late scattering of data points will provide only a very rough approximation of a line, with numerous equally-acceptable regressions. In order for an extrapolation of the data set to be valid – and in a sense Eschatology is an extrapolation of the biblical data – a great deal *more* data is needed. Unfortunately modern

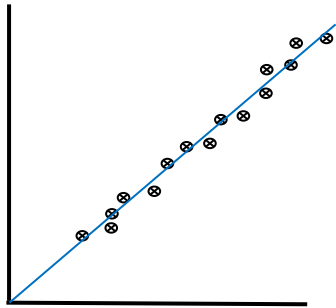


students of Eschatology try to improve their linear regression analysis by adding data from later history – the Fall of Jerusalem in AD 70, for instance, or the turn of the first millennia, or the second, or the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948. But these are not *biblical* data points, and their placement on the graph always tends to be on a line already determined by the interpreter. What is needed is *earlier* data – not earlier than the Bible, but earlier *in* the Bible. And of that there is a great deal.

What is needed here in the analysis is another Greek word which is also interpreted ‘end,’ the word *telos*. But rather than signifying the extreme limit of something, as *eschatos* does, *telos* signifies the end as in *goal* or *purpose*. In light of the graphing metaphor, it is the *telos* of time that provides the intercept and the slope of the prophetic line, for it is the

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purpose of God in time that gives us the slope of the line, and it is the creation of all things that provides the y-intercept. The graph cannot be populated with post-biblical data points but must be properly built from the biblical data itself. The data points never sit on a perfectly straight line, for now “we see as in a mirror dimly” and consequently do not always get our interpretation and application of biblical prophecy quite right. Still, by populating the field with the *telos* of Scripture the student of Eschatology has a better chance of more accurately extrapolating the line toward a reasonable approximation of what is to come.



### The Meaning of Time:

It will be the effort of this study to at least partially fill in the graphic field, in order to better approximate what the Scripture has to say about the ‘end times.’ But before we can determine what is meant by *biblical* time, we need to study what is meant by *time* itself. By this is not meant a definition of time, but rather how it is that time happens, which has



**Eliezer Schweid (b. 1929)**

been a topic of philosophical thought for millennia and forms the foundation of religious thought for both pagans and believers in the one true God. But the foundations are, of course, both different and irreconcilable. Pagan thought is founded upon one view of the progression, and hence meaning, of time; true belief flows from a different view. This latter view is that which is presented in divine revelation – the Scriptures, primarily of the Old Testament – and was the source and inspiration not only for the Jewish religion, but also the Jewish calendar. Eliezer Schweid, professor emeritus of Jewish Philosophy at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, investigates this concept in *The Jewish Experience of Time*, in which

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he studies the significance not only of the Jewish calendar as opposed to pagan views of time, but also the meaning of the Jewish feasts. Schweid, of course, is not a Christian and his book has nothing directly to do with the study of Eschatology, even from a Jewish perspective. Nonetheless, his analysis of the meaning of time as it is manifest in the Jewish reckoning of the calendar is powerfully helpful in uncovering the *telos* of time as purposed by the Creator of time, Jehovah.

In his book, Schweid points out that the pagan view of time is entirely ‘natural’ in that time is interpreted and tracked in terms of the cycles of the natural world surrounding pagan man. In philosophical terminology, pagan time is *cyclical* because it is *celestial*; pagan thought is most clearly represented by the centrality of the *zodiac* within its worldview. Schweid enumerates three structural principles of time, the first of which being the all-encompassing perspective of the pagan, the second and third becoming the province of a people to whom the will and purpose of the Creator God has been revealed: the Jewish nation. Schweid writes,

There are three structural principles of the calendar and annual cycles as units of time: the **cosmic principle** sets the measured units of day and night, month, year, and season; the **biological principle** determines a course for individuals as they develop and change, and marks communal times in the tempo of the generations; and the **historic principle** marks events that symbolize the goals and aspirations of the people, events that express the value judgments that determine a way of life.<sup>12</sup>

Essentially Schweid is here classifying the passage of time into the celestial, the personal, and the societal. The pagan mind rests almost entirely upon the celestial, with the ‘circle’ being the predominant geometric metaphor for the pagan view of time. The individual life, and even the generational life, within a pagan society has few notable markers – all that is significant is the cycle of the seasons as measured by the movement of the celestial world. Pagan holidays tend, therefore, to be based entirely in the celestial events of solstices and equinoxes, of eclipses and comets. The human element is missing, including the societal and historical, and the divine is absorbed into the movements of Nature. In the history of human society it was the advent of the Jewish nation, and the

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<sup>12</sup> Schweid, Eliezer *The Jewish Experience of Time: Philosophical Dimensions of the Jewish Holy Days* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, Inc.; 2000); 5.



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establishment of the Jewish calendar through the revelation of the Torah, that first moved man beyond this cyclical and celestial perspective of time.

Yet even in the Torah, in the opening chapter of the first book, it is the celestial calendar that governs. The days, of course, are denominated by ‘evening and morning,’ and the light itself is gathered into the sun and the moon to rule the day and the night respectively.

*Then God said, “Let there be lights in the firmament of the heavens to divide the day from the night; and let them be for signs and seasons, and for days and years; and let them be for lights in the firmament of the heavens to give light on the earth”; and it was so. Then God made two great lights: the greater light to rule the day, and the lesser light to rule the night. He made the stars also. God set them in the firmament of the heavens to give light on the earth, and to rule over the day and over the night, and to divide the light from the darkness.* (Genesis 1:14-18a)

“...for signs and seasons, and for days and years.” Thus the cyclical, ever-repeating celestial events are programmed into Creation from the start. It is no wonder that the cyclical perspective of time is prevalent within human philosophy; it is the ‘natural’ order of things. It is the characteristic of a cycle that it does not change – it repeats, but remains otherwise essentially the same with each repeating cycle. This is the experience of countless generations of mankind since Creation, the day follows the night, the seasons do not alter their order but follow one another in faithful pattern, even the longer duration cycles – the revolution of the Earth around the Sun or the orbits of the comets – are unchanging in their repetitive consistency. This perspective of time underlies the scoffer recorded in Peter’s second epistle,

*...knowing this first: that scoffers will come in the last days, walking according to their own lusts, and saying, “Where is the promise of His coming? For since the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as they were from the beginning of creation.”* (II Peter 3:3-4)

However, in prelude to a different view of time, we find in Genesis 1 that the light that was created at the beginning of Day 1 is not gathered into the Sun and the Moon until Day 4. This does not hinder the narrative from describing the first three days with the same formula, “and there was evening, and there was morning, Day One.” The Night and the Day were set apart on the first day of Creation, but the celestial objects that would forever define and rule these divisions of the Light from the Darkness did not appear for another

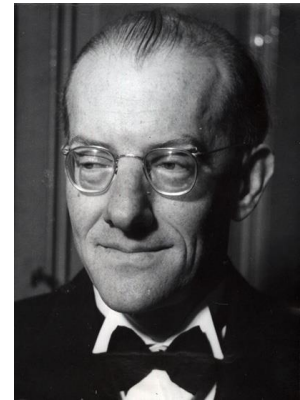


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three days. This is, at the very least, an indication that the celestial/cyclical perspective of time is not exhaustive. Peter responds to the scoffers in a similar vein, in a passage that has often been misused in an effort to predict the ‘millennium.’<sup>13</sup>

*But, beloved, do not forget this one thing, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day.*  
(II Peter 3:9)

Whatever this verse may say in regard to the advent of the millennium, it must at least mean that the reckoning of time for God is not the same as it is for man. Thus even from the earliest creation of ‘time’ we find reason to expect a more nuanced interpretation of it than ‘the ever-circling spheres.’ And a deeper, more nuanced perspective on time is crucial, for another characteristic of a circle or cycle is that one cannot get out. As Oscar Cullmann points out in *Christ and Time*, historical societies governed by the cyclical perspective of time are generally those that also view the human soul as *trapped* in this temporal realm. “Because in Greek thought time is not conceived as an upward sloping line with beginning and end, but rather as a circle, the fact that man is bound to time must here be experienced as an enslavement, as a curse.”<sup>14</sup> Resulting from such thought are the doctrines of reincarnation and soul reabsorption, but never the doctrine of resurrection. Again focusing on the Greek view, Cullman writes,



Oscar Cullman (1902-99)

For the Greeks, the idea that redemption is to take place through divine action in the course of events in time is impossible. Redemption in Hellenism can consist only in the fact that we are transferred from existence in this world, and existence bound to the circular course of time, into that Beyond which is removed from time and is already and always available. The Greek conception of blessedness is thus spatial; it is determined by the contrast between this world and the timeless Beyond.<sup>15</sup>

It bears noting here at the beginning of our study that *this* is the world into which the Christian doctrine of resurrection and of Eschatology first entered. This helps explain

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<sup>13</sup> The use of quotation marks around the term *millennium* is by no means an indication of any doubt of its biblical validity, but rather a recognition that there are various interpretations of the term within conservative, evangelical Christianity, the sorting out of which must wait until a later lesson.

<sup>14</sup> Cullman, Oscar *Christ and Time* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press; 1950); 52.

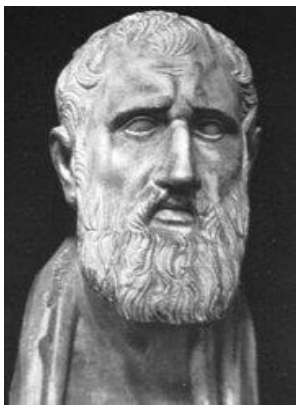
<sup>15</sup> *Idem*.

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the reaction that Paul received on the Aræopagus in Athens when he mentions the resurrection. “And when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, **some mocked**, while others said, “We will hear you again on this matter.” So Paul departed from among them.”<sup>16</sup> The Gospel did not go out into a world ready, willing, or even able to accept the concept of a bodily resurrection after death; before this message of hope could penetrate the minds of the pagan world, a new temporal paradigm had to be instilled. The cycle had to be broken and a goal – a *telos* – perceived.

All of this is not to say that no philosophers of the ancient world viewed time in any way other than cyclical and celestial. While this was by far the majority report, there were some who saw the overall chronology of history in a *linear* and *sequential* perspective, which itself implies both a beginning and an end. A linear view of time introduces such concepts as *fate* and *destiny* and was a primary constituent of the philosophy of Stoicism, often and erroneously considered to be compatible with biblical Christianity. Nonetheless, if a powerful element of meaninglessness adheres to the cyclical concept of time, the linear view speaks just as powerfully of *purpose*. “But the belief in one supra-cosmic Creator of the world banishes sovereignty from the zodiac and from natural forces, and linear historic time is superimposed on cyclical deterministic time.”<sup>17</sup>

The introduction of a sovereign entity in control of linear and teleological time does



**Zeno of Citium (334-262 BC)**

not, however, necessarily lead to the Providence of the Bible. *Fate* and *Destiny* are the pagan response to the linearizing of time. Marcus Aurelius, the modern world’s paragon of ancient Stoic philosophy, seemingly found Fate



**Marcus Aurelius (AD 121-180)**

to be overwhelming and ultimately belittling. In his *Meditations* he writes, “Remember: Matter: how tiny your share of it. Time: how brief and fleeting your allotment of it. Fate: how small a role you play in it.” Fate, however, did not obliterate the Stoic doctrine of human free will, though it

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<sup>16</sup> Acts 17:32

<sup>17</sup> Schweid; 6.

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circumscribed it entirely. Again Marcus, “Adapt yourself to the things among which your lot has been cast and love sincerely the fellow creatures with whom destiny has ordained that you shall live.” Many of his Meditations, as well as much of the writings of Zeno and other Stoics, are so close in tone to the biblical doctrine of divine Providence that it was common in the ancient world, and remains common today, to consider Christianity a close cousin of this pagan philosophy. Such a conclusion misunderstands both Stoicism and Christianity.

In the first place, Stoicism was still entirely in line with the Greek dualism of spirit and body, the former being good and the latter evil. While there may be a linear progression of time toward an end already determined by Fate, there will be no return to the flesh, no should man desire it. The Stoic’s future, if he maintained the righteousness of wisdom and submission to Fate during his life, was the rest of Elysium, not the resurrection of the body. Second, the determiner of Fate or Destiny was an impersonal force, not a personal, benevolent, and holy God. Stoicism made an advance on earlier Greek philosophy in that whatever force controlled Fate was a *just* force, though neither Zeno or Marcus (or any other Stoic philosopher) was able to explain how an impersonal force could be Just. Justice, in Stoic philosophy, was little more than the social convention of ‘doing good to your fellow man, and doing no harm.’<sup>18</sup> The absence of a reward system in the afterlife, however, renders the motivation for justice in this life hard to comprehend, and even Aurelius’ own history – of brutal war against the Germanic tribes and ruthless suppression of political opponents in Rome – undermines his own philosophical system. If one distills Christianity down into a strictly this-worldly system of societal ethics, there does remain a similarity with Stoicism (as well as with Confucianism, for that matter), but there is much more to the Judaic and Christian concepts of time than merely the linearity shared with Stoicism.

The manner in which divine revelation invests linear time with meaning and purpose was through the commemoration of historical events that in themselves both recollected and foreshadowed divine activity in the life of society. The presence of historical events within the intimate calendar of a people or society is not, in itself, unique to the Jewish nation – all cultures have a history, and all histories are composed of

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significant events. What makes the Jewish concept of historical time so unique is the *future prophetic* significance of *past historic* events. What *has been* foretells what *will be*, because the personal and covenanting God who is sovereign over all Time has intervened *in time* in a manner intended to foreshadow what He will do *in future time*.

As an example: when Americans celebrate July 4<sup>th</sup> as the anniversary of their declaration of independence from Great Britain, they are not foretelling in any way what will occur in the future of this country, nor of the ongoing relationship between the United States and the United Kingdom. However, when Jews celebrated the feast of Passover, much more was intended than simply a recollection of the time the destroying angel passed over the firstborn of Israel while taking the lives of the firstborn of all Egypt. The feasts of Israel, as well as the weekly Sabbaths, the sabbatical years, and the Year of Jubilee, all looked ahead just as much as they looked back. In this manner linear time was invested with *teleological* purpose – trajectory, we might say – rather than the aimless and meaningless journey of the Stoic. The cyclical repetition of these markers also joined the redemptive calendar with the cosmic/celestial one, reminding the believer that the same God is Lord of both Creation and Redemption. Schweid writes,

But it is also possible to invest the delineators of cosmic time with historic content and utilize natural phenomena as a means that will invoke cultural/historical memory. This method does not break the cyclicity, on the contrary, cyclicity has to be maintained. It is only that from year to year a linear progression becomes intertwined within cyclicity, the result is a special dimension of ‘newness.’ This quality of novelty is superimposed on the progression of the past toward a future, which is both an end and a goal.<sup>19</sup>

The combination of recurring historically-oriented event markers – Sabbaths, Feasts, Jubilees, etc. – with the solar and lunar cycles unites the cyclical & celestial calendar with the linear & progressive calendar, creating what may reasonably termed a *helical* concept of time. Thus “the Jewish calendar is linear shaped time, the shape progressing from past to future in a straight (or spiraling by progressing) line that stands out in contrast against the background of the cyclical time of the zodiac.”<sup>20</sup> This cyclical and recurring aspects of this linear time provide the whole with *rhythm*, a recurring ‘beat’ as it

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<sup>18</sup> Cp. *Meditations* 9.1

<sup>19</sup> Schweid; 8.

<sup>20</sup> Schweid; 7.

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were, marking time across the generations and continually reminding the people of God of the divine involvement and purpose in the realm of Time. And this combination of cyclical and linear time hints at the teleological message of biblical prophecy: that the *end* will be a return to the *beginning*, only better. Thus we find at the *telos* a ‘New Heaven and a New Earth,’ but one “*in which righteousness dwells.*”<sup>21</sup>

The biblical meaning of time, therefore, consists in neither the pagan perspective of endless inescapable cycles nor in the pagan concept of fatalistic linearity without progress. Rather it is a cyclical time *line*, marked at recurring points with historical events that recall the intervention of God in time past, foreshadowing the ultimate and consummate intervention of God in time future. The biblical content of this cyclical line, this helix, thus provides the necessary data points to fill out the graph and more accurately extrapolate the *eschaton*. However, determining the proper method is only one step of the process, and does not in itself make the work easier. This is because the *language* of biblical prophecy is not always clear and straightforward, in spite of the claims made to the contrary among modern scholars like Chafer. Recognizing the biblical perspective of Time is indispensable for properly understanding the events of Scripture and, hopefully, placing them in their correct relationship to each other. But recognizing the language of predictive prophecy – and, even more problematic, the language of *apocalyptic* prophecy – is the next step along the way.

### **Week 2: The Biblical Timeline**

**Key Biblical Texts:** Genesis 1:31; Isaiah 65:17-25; Revelation 22:1-5

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<sup>21</sup> II Peter 3:13

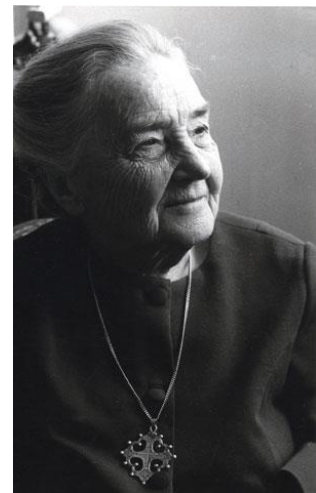
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*“The history of redemption unfolds a progression in the outworking of God’s plan of redemption that will unfold completely in the restoration of all things.”*

(Willem Van Gemeren; *“The Progress of Redemption”*)

One of the recurring debates within Christian theology and hermeneutics is that of the ‘Continuity versus Discontinuity’ of biblical revelation. In particular this concept and apparent conflict is in reference to God’s redemptive plan, but it also applies to the practical outworking of divine grace in the life of God’s people. The Presbyterian sees *continuity* in the Abrahamic Covenant and therefore believes infant baptism to be the proper New Covenant answer to the circumcision of the Old. The Dispensationalist sees *discontinuity* between the Church and Israel, and therefore reserves the fulfillment of all Old Testament prophecies concerning Israel literally to a reconstituted Israel and in no way to the Christian Church. In reality the biblical revelation is more nuanced – there are elements of continuity and elements of discontinuity – but the nature of God as *Immutable* and *Omnipotent*, as applied to His purposes, must shift the balance toward *Continuity* and away from *Discontinuity*. In other words, He who is the Alpha and Omega has not missed all of the letters in between, but has instead formulated in eternity and executed in time a *continuous* purpose and plan leading from one point at the beginning to one point at the end.

This, as we saw in the previous lesson, is the linearity of biblical time as opposed to the cyclical, and essentially purposeless, perspective of time found predominant in the pagan world. Suzanne de Dietrich, a French Protestant theologian of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, compares the biblical revelation of time to the perspectives of Hindu and Greek thought. “In Hindu thought, and in some forms of Greek of Greek thought, the world is endless repetition: the wheel of history keeps going round and round in just the same way as



**Suzanne de Dietrich (1891-1981)**

The wheel of the seasons keeps going round and round, and in this cycle civilizations are born and die. The Biblical revelation, on the other hand, tells us that this world has a

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meaning and goal and destiny, namely, that it is created by God for his glorification.”<sup>22</sup> Summarizing the Jewish holy days and years, Schweid emphasizes the progressive, forward-looking nature of the commemorative days and feasts,

In order to know who it is and what its goal is, the Jewish people need to preserve specific historic events in its memory: the journeys of the Patriarchs, the enslavement in Egypt, the Exodus, the presence at Mt. Sinai, the wanderings in the desert, conquests and settlement in Eretz Israel, the kingdoms of David and Solomon, the establishment of the Temple in Jerusalem, its destruction, Exile, the return to Zion, and once again, destruction and exile. This procession of events was set in the consciousness of the people by a constant effort to renew memory – repeatedly instilling it with immediate relevancy, interpreting contemporary occurrences in its light. Jewish holidays are *appointed days*; appointed in the sense of occasions for assembly, times for encountering historic memories and expectations...The people remember what has been and anticipate a longed-for future, thereby stretching the present as a midway station on the ongoing journey.<sup>23</sup>

Of course this perspective was written by a Jew, not a Christian, and therefore does not speak to the place that the Church may or may not have in this ‘ongoing journey.’ Therein lies the question, again, of continuity versus discontinuity. The answer, as it applies at least to the ‘big picture’ of God’s redemptive calendar, must be found not in this prophecy or that statement, but in the biblical self-disclosure of both God and His purpose. In other words, the nature and attributes of God, as well as the revealed outworking and revelation of His will for Creation and for His people, must *first* establish a hermeneutical foundation and framework *before* individual prophecies and predictions can be approached. It remains for a future (but near) lesson to describe and discuss the various perspectives held in regard to the interpretation of prophecy (i.e., literal versus allegorical), a discussion that cannot be properly resolved until the nature of God in relation to Time is established from the Scriptures.

If Schweid is correct in his assessment of the nature of the divine purpose concerning Israel as ‘an ongoing journey,’ then the relationship of the Church to God’s purpose must either be completely separate from this journey – a *discontinuity* of purposes in the divine plan – or somehow the Church must be incorporated *into* this journey. The first view is that of Dispensationalism; the second is the view of this study. In this lesson

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<sup>22</sup> De Dietrich, Suzanne *God’s Unfolding Purpose* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press; 1940); 31.

<sup>23</sup> Schweid; 3.



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we will investigate what the Bible has to say about the overall scope of time – the Biblical Timeline – in order to determine which of these two views has the predominant support of Scripture.<sup>24</sup> In somewhat of a summary of the conclusion anticipated, it is important to note that the authors of the New Testament made use of the *same historical events* and the *same prophetic terminology* as the Old Testament prophets in describing what was yet future in their day. This fact is a strong argument in favor of continuity with regard to the overall redemptive plan of God, and the conclusion that the Church has been brought into that plan, rather than that she is now moving on a completely separate journey and path. Cullmann writes,

The expectation thus continues to exist just as in Judaism. What the Jews expected of the future is still expected of the future; but the future event is no longer the center of the redemptive history; rather, that center lies now in a historical event. The center has been reached but the end is still to come.<sup>25</sup>

The language of New Testament apocalyptic and prophetic writings is the same as that of the Old Testament, and the ‘translation’ of that language is itself a subject of study and debate within the field of Eschatology. At this point, however, it is important to recognize the continuity of the language, and to realize (and accept) that this common language of metaphor and symbols was intended to mark continuity between the purpose of God as revealed in the Old Testament and the continuing purpose of God as developed in the New. Only in this manner can the biblical timeline be perceived and extrapolated with any accuracy at all. The undeniable nature of this continuity is, it would seem, the consistent *endpoints* found in both the Old Testament and the New Testament with regard to the overall divine calendar for Creation: the *Beginning* and the *New Heaven and New Earth*. Once we establish these endpoints – temporally the Alpha and the Omega of the Biblical Timeline – we may then see equally common milestones between them, from both the Old Testament and the New.

### **The Alpha & Omega of Time:**

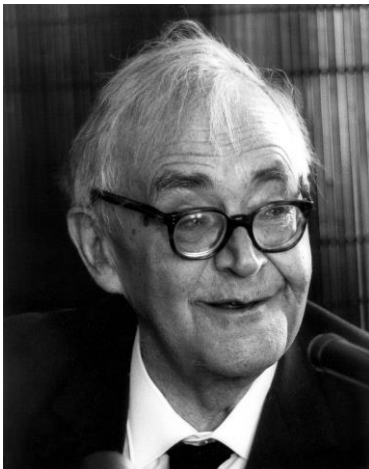
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<sup>24</sup> Note: within the second view there is still significant disagreement as to *how* the Church is incorporated into the ‘ongoing journey,’ i.e., whether the Church *replaces* Israel in God’s overarching plan & purpose, or whether the Church is *grafted in* to the continuing work that God began with Israel. A full development of this topic is the purview of Ecclesiology, but it is sufficient to say at this stage that the second view is held in this study.

<sup>25</sup> Cullmann, *Christ & Time*; 84.

One can hardly miss the emphasis of the Apostle John upon the continuity of the divine calendar if one compares the opening phrase of his gospel with the opening phrase of Moses' first book, Genesis; "*In the beginning...*" The Greek of John's gospel is identical to that of the Septuagint in Genesis 1:1, and there can be no mistake that both authors refer to the same 'point' in time, the point at which Time itself began. True, John's emphasis is on the pre-existence of Jesus Christ, the Logos who was the divine agent of Creation. That, however, does not diminish the connection and continuity between the book that begins the history of Creation and the one that begins the earthly history of the God-Man. Indeed, as far as any believing Jew was concerned, at any point in the history of the world, it all runs back to the Beginning, to the Creation *ex nihilo* of the heavens and the earth.

It was God's purpose to create; that much is obvious from the fact that He *did* create. As we are told subsequently that God does all things for the glory of His excellent



**Karl Barth (1886-1968)**

Name and Being, we conclude that, however it is all going to work out, He *created* for the purpose of His own glory, as de Dietrich wrote (see above, page 15). What is perhaps little appreciated among modern scholars is the insight perceived most significantly in recent time by Karl Barth, that when God *created*, He at the same time *invested himself* with Creation, and especially *with Man*. It is well beyond the scope of this study to parse Barth's analysis of how God became 'God for Man' when He created Man in His image (nor has anyone yet fully parsed Barth on this matter...or perhaps any other on which he wrote). However, it is enough to recognize that Creation, and Man, was by no means a passing fancy or a disposable hobby for God; He bound himself to Creation and to Man, eternally committing to take upon himself the very same flesh that He created *in the beginning*. What God has to say regarding His Creation is actually quite pertinent to the study of 'the end times,' since it establishes a baseline relationship between the Creator and His Creation that cannot be altered.

*Then God saw everything that He had made, and indeed it was very good. So the evening and the morning were the sixth day.*  
(Genesis 1:31)

In considering the overall trajectory of the Biblical Timeline we cannot lose sight of this fact: that God considered all the works of His hands to be *very good*. This fact establishes the principle that God was *well pleased* with Creation, and in no mind to do away with it and start over. This also invests Creation – and Man as the centerpiece of Creation – with a quality or value that cannot be wholly removed in spite of the advent of sin and the horrible, marring effects that sin has had upon Creation. It was good as it came from the Creator’s hand; its fundamental goodness – as an innate quality of creation and not an ongoing moral virtue – remains. N. T. Wright relates a perspective on the six days of Creation in relationship to the seventh day rest, the Sabbath; a view that emphasizes God’s *pleasure* in His Creation, a concept often overlooked by modern scholarship.

One way of understanding this has been proposed, on the basis of detailed study of comparative material in the ancient Near East, by John Walton in his remarkable book, *The Lost World of Genesis One*. Walton insists that in that ancient world anyone reading about something being built by a god in six days or stages would know that it was basically a *temple*, a dwelling for the god himself or herself. And what the god would do after six days of construction was not simply to stop working and have some time off. The god would enter the newly constructed house and ‘rest’ there – in the sense of ‘taking his ease,’ taking up residence and being at peace in his new home. This gives new perspective on the Genesis sabbath institution. If Walton is right, it has to do with the creator’s enjoyment of his world, his celebration of heaven and earth as a dwelling for himself.<sup>26</sup>

The thoughts presented in this quote are, of course, in relation to the Sabbath, which is itself a biblical motif for the time to come, a harbinger of the future promise.

*There remains therefore a rest for the people of God. For he who has entered His rest has himself also ceased from his works as God did from His. Let us therefore be diligent to enter that rest...*  
(Hebrews 4:9-11a)

Creation, even marred by the Fall, remains an ideal in Scripture, a standard of God’s perfect work and the hope of a future restoration of that perfect work. Creation continues to proclaim the nature of God, leaving mankind without excuse in their continued rebellion.

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<sup>26</sup> Wright, N. T., *Scripture and the Authority of God* (New York: Harper One; 2005); 148.

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*The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament shows His handiwork.*

*Day unto day utters speech, and night unto night reveals knowledge.*

*There is no speech nor language where their voice is not heard.*

*Their line has gone out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world.*

(Psalm 19:1-4)

*For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because what may be known of God is manifest in them, for God has shown it to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse...*

(Romans 1:18-20)

The intimate relationship that God the Creator has established with the work of His own hands is emphasized again in Romans by the fact that Creation is by no means left out of the divine purpose within the Biblical Timeline. In a passage full of significance for the study of Eschatology, the Apostle writes,

*For the earnest expectation of the creation eagerly waits for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it in hope; because the creation itself also will be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation groans and labors with birth pangs together until now.*

(Romans 8:19-22)

One aspect of this passage that must be kept in mind in the study of the 'end times' is that, according to Paul, it is *this creation* – the one that began "*in the beginning*" – that has both been subjected to futility on account of Man's sin, and will be delivered from the bondage of corruption. This creation is that which groans, not another creation still to come. Paul's words signify that this same creation of which we read in Genesis 1, that is was '*very good,*' is the same that has been subjected to frustration and now groans and labors with birth pangs. This is not mere figurative speech or hyperbole; Creation is here personified to show that intimate relationship that God established *in the beginning* with that which He created. It is not the plan or purpose of God that His work should end in frustration or vanity, but rather that it be redeemed and restored to His glory.

That fact of the divine purpose, therefore, leads us to the Omega of the Biblical Timeline: *The New Heavens and the New Earth*. This is the consistent vision held by both Old

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and New Testament writers concerning the endpoint of the timeline, though the phrase and concept does develop as progressive revelation unfolds. For instance, there is no mention of a “new heavens and a new earth” in the books of Moses, though there is a very significant covenant formed between God and His Creation, reinforcing the intimacy between the two already mentioned, and foreshadowing a purpose even for the created world,

*Then God spoke to Noah and to his sons with him, saying: “And as for Me, behold, I establish My covenant with you and with your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you: the birds, the cattle, and every beast of the earth with you, of all that go out of the ark, every beast of the earth. Thus I establish My covenant with you: **Never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of the flood; never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.**” And God said: “This is the sign of the covenant which I make between Me and you, and every living creature that is with you, for perpetual generations: I set My rainbow in the cloud, and it shall be for the sign of the covenant between Me and the earth. It shall be, when I bring a cloud over the earth, that the rainbow shall be seen in the cloud; and I will remember My covenant which is between Me and you and every living creature of all flesh; the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. The rainbow shall be in the cloud, and I will look on it to remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth.”* (Genesis 9:8-16)

Much is made within liberal theology and biblical studies concerning the *lack* of early data in the Scriptures concerning the promise of a restoration of Creation to a new existence: The New Heavens and The New Earth. But this negating perspective fails on two accounts in properly reading and interpreting the biblical eschatology. First, it consistently fails to recognize the progressive nature of revelation (*cp.* Heb. 1:1-2). This is a matter more for Hermeneutics or Biblical Theology than for Eschatology, but it still represents a serious error in methodology in the liberal theologian. It is the second error that pertains more to our current study: the failure to recognize the character of Israel as an embedded “Creation” and an embedded “Man” within the wider context of the world. There are a great many similarities between the creation of Israel as a people for God’s own possession, and concerning the conquest and possession of the Promised Land, and the terminology found in the earliest chapters of Genesis. Israel became a microcosm of the whole of Creation, and uniquely God’s Temple as He dwelt among His people, not unlike His walking with Adam in the Garden of Eden. Prior to the establishment of Israel the biblical narrative was ‘world-focused’; afterward it was ‘Israel-focused.’ But in being

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Israel-focused the prophetic word never ceased to be concerned with the broader context of the world.

Thus we expect, or at least are not surprised, to find the fuller development of the concept of the New Heavens and the New Earth *later* in the prophetic writings of Israel. The early writings, particularly those of Moses, pertained to the call and establishment of a unique people *among* the nations, though the Abrahamic Covenant itself has an undeniable component of *worldwide* application that will permeate later Old Testament writings. Once Israel is established, however, and most powerfully when it has been torn into two kingdoms by civil war, the prophetic spirit begins to move beyond the Judeo-centric perspective and to once again move out into the world. This movement, it must be continually borne in mind, was *from God through Israel to the world* and not from God independently to the world. Still, in the prophets of the divided kingdom era we begin to hear about what God has planned ultimately not just for Israel, but for all His ‘very good’ Creation.

It is in Isaiah that we meet with the explicit phrase, *New Heavens and New Earth*, and there, twice.

*For behold, I create new heavens and a new earth;  
And the former shall not be remembered or come to mind.* (Isaiah 65:17)

*For as the new heavens and the new earth which I will make shall remain before Me,” says the LORD, So shall your descendants and your name remain.  
And it shall come to pass that from one New Moon to another, and from one Sabbath to another,  
All flesh shall come to worship before Me,” says the LORD.* (Isaiah 66:22-23)

This language is explicit, but biblical prophetic language also includes the implicit and the synonymous. In other words, we must not simply ‘google’ our online Bible program for “New Heaven and New Earth,” but rather recognize when the Scriptures are speaking of the same thing under a different metaphor or terminology. For instance, in Daniel the same concept is found under the rubric of *a kingdom*, a kingdom over which *One like the Son of Man* is the undisputed sovereign.

*I was watching in the night visions, and behold, One like the Son of Man,  
Coming with the clouds of heaven!*

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*He came to the Ancient of Days, and they brought Him near before Him.  
Then to Him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom,  
That all peoples, nations, and languages should serve Him.  
His dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away,  
And His kingdom the one which shall not be destroyed.*

(Daniel 7:13-14)

The connection between the two concepts – the ‘New Heavens and the New Earth’ on the one hand, and the universal dominion of the Son of Man invested with divine authority on the other, should be evident. Can we envision a New Heavens and a New Earth that did not consist primarily of the unopposed and exalted reign of God over all and everywhere? Thus we can include all prophetic passages that speak of *universality* of divine sovereignty and grace – the gathering of the Gentiles into Israel, the universal Shepherd David, etc. – as being essentially one with the more explicit prediction of the New Heavens and the New Earth in the two Isaianic passages quoted. The terminology may differ, but the essential feature is the restoration of Creation to the complete and unhindered sovereignty of God and obedience of Man, as it was in the beginning.

In the New Testament the concept of the New Heavens and the New Earth is treated similarly to what we find in the Old. The actual phraseology is found only in two places, though the concept is itself found several other places.

*But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night, in which the heavens will pass away with a great noise, and the elements will melt with fervent heat; both the earth and the works that are in it will be burned up. Therefore, since all these things will be dissolved, what manner of persons ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness, looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be dissolved, being on fire, and the elements will melt with fervent heat? Nevertheless we, according to His promise, look for **new heavens and a new earth** in which righteousness dwells.*

(II Peter 3:10-13)

*Now I saw a **new heaven and a new earth**, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away. Also there was no more sea. Then I, [a]John, saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from heaven saying, “Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people. God Himself will be with them and be their God.*

(Revelation 21:1-3)

The latter passage speaks of God dwelling in the midst of His people, which is the same temple-language noted above regarding the Sabbath. But, significantly, there is no Temple in the New Jerusalem of the New Earth, “for the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are



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*its temple.*"<sup>27</sup> One cannot envision a state of Creation beyond or better than the biblical description of the New Heavens and the New Earth. This is the *beatific vision*, when the redeemed of all nations dwell with God and God with them, with no need of the Sun or the Moon and no need of a physical Temple. Whatever we may conclude as to the *events* surrounding the advent of this phenomenon – the New Heavens and the New Earth – it cannot be denied that this is the endpoint of the Biblical Timeline. There can be nothing afterward; indeed, there can be no *afterward* at all.

Generally within the history of Christian Eschatology there is broad agreement on these two endpoints. It is hard to argue with 'the Beginning,' and hard to come up with anything after 'the New Heavens and the New Earth.' The challenge for the student of biblical prophecy is to determine what the Scriptures teach concerning the path between these two points on the timeline. How many 'ages' are there? Was there one 'mountain peak' visible to the Old Testament prophets and then another 'peak' that only became visible when the first one was reached? Clearly the resurrection plays a central and critical role in the overall scheme, but just how many resurrections will there be? Thus much of Eschatology becomes the attempt to lay out the intermediate points along the timeline between the alpha and the omega at each end.

### **The Time Between:**

In this regard there are several other terms that do yeoman's duty within biblical eschatology and need to be carefully reviewed. Such phrases as 'the latter days,' 'the age to come,' and 'the day of the Lord' are peppered throughout both the biblical writings and the rabbinic interpretations of the Scripture in the Second Temple period. The terms themselves, unfortunately, seem to have a wider range of meaning than we would hope and so interpreting them cannot follow a strictly literal or point-equivalent method. For instance, the phrase 'latter days' need not refer to the final consummation of the age but can refer to a future point in time beyond the present, but well within the overall timeline itself. An example of this is Balaam's prophecy concerning Israel, given on commission to Balak, king of Moab,

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<sup>27</sup> Revelation 21:22

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*Then Balak's anger was aroused against Balaam, and he struck his hands together; and Balak said to Balaam, "I called you to curse my enemies, and look, you have bountifully blessed them these three times! Now therefore, flee to your place. I said I would greatly honor you, but in fact, the LORD has kept you back from honor." So Balaam said to Balak, "Did I not also speak to your messengers whom you sent to me, saying, 'If Balak were to give me his house full of silver and gold, I could not go beyond the word of the LORD, to do good or bad of my own will. What the LORD says, that I must speak'? And now, indeed, I am going to my people. Come, I will advise you what this people will do to your people **in the latter days.**"* (Numbers 24:10-14)

The gist of the subsequent prophecy most immediately concerns the advent of King David, who would be the Israelite ruler who would fully avenge his nation upon the Moabites, defeating them and bringing them into complete subjection to Israel. Yet the language even of this prophecy sets one's eyes even farther into the future than the time of David:

*The utterance of Balaam the son of Beor, and the utterance of the man whose eyes are opened;  
The utterance of him who hears the words of God, and has the knowledge of the Most High,  
Who sees the vision of the Almighty, who falls down, with eyes wide open:  
I see Him, but not now; I behold Him, but not near;  
A Star shall come out of Jacob; a Scepter shall rise out of Israel,  
And batter the brow of Moab, and destroy all the sons of tumult.* (Numbers 24:15-17)

The phrase "A Star shall come out of Jacob; a Scepter shall rise out of Israel" bears the marking of double meaning typical in biblical prophecy. The *Scepter* clearly indicates a royal personage, which in the days of Moses would not only have meant the rising of this exalted person, but also of the throne, for there was at that time no king over Israel. The *Star* - Hebrew *kochba* - quickly became messianic in Jewish interpretation and would later (much later, in the second century AD) be the honorific title given to the rebel Simon ben Kosevah, renamed Simon bar Kochba - *son of the Star* - during the Second Jewish Revolt by followers who considered him to be the Messiah. Thus it was widely recognized within Judaism that even the 'latter days' of Balaam's prophecy in Numbers 24 served a fuller purpose than simply predicting the eventual triumph of Israel over Moab under King David. This is, again, a common feature of Old Testament prophecy and one that must constantly be kept in mind.

This characteristic of 'the latter days' being a somewhat generic term used for the prophetic future (and sometimes the *eschatological* future as well) means that its use tended to push that future out relative to the timeframe of the prophet using it. Thus if the

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prophet was Moses, the *'latter days'* would come to pass usually during the time of Israel's time in the Promised Land. But if the prophet was Isaiah, the same phrase could often be pushed out *beyond* the time of Israel in the land. Two examples illustrate this point:

*For I know that after my death you will become utterly corrupt, and turn aside from the way which I have commanded you. And evil will befall you **in the latter days**, because you will do evil in the sight of the LORD, to provoke Him to anger through the work of your hands.*

(Deuteronomy 31:29)

Here Moses is referring to a time either immediately after his own passing from the scene, or at least a time not long afterward. Israel remained relatively faithful to the LORD during the tenure of Joshua, Moses' lieutenant and successor, but fell away almost entirely after Joshua's death, the era of the Judges when *"every man did what was right in his own eyes."*

*Now it shall come to pass **in the latter days** that the mountain of the LORD's house  
Shall be established on the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills;  
And all nations shall flow to it.  
Many people shall come and say, "Come, and let us go up to the mountain of the LORD,  
To the house of the God of Jacob;  
He will teach us His ways, and we shall walk in His paths."  
For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.  
He shall judge between the nations, and rebuke many people;  
They shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks;  
Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore.*

(Isaiah 2:2-4)

Isaiah prophesied during the reign of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of the Davidic Dynasty in Judah many generations after the reign of David. The tenor of this prophecy does not pertain to an exalted king – that king was, for Isaiah, a person of history. Furthermore, this use of the *'latter days'* moves not only in time but also in space: the geographical extent of the blessings of Israel here expands to include the entire world, *"For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem."* The result of this blessing *in the latter days* is also more universal than at any period in Israel's subsequent history or, indeed, the history of the world from Isaiah's day to now, *"Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore."* The only

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eschatological phrase that could adequately describe the point on the timeline to which this Isaianic prophecy refers is *the New Heavens and the New Earth*.

Hosea brings together the peace and security of *the later days* with the messianic promise of Balaam's early prophecy,

*For the children of Israel shall abide many days without king or prince, without sacrifice or sacred pillar, without ephod or teraphim. Afterward the children of Israel shall return and seek the LORD their God and David their king. They shall fear the LORD and His goodness **in the latter days**.*

(Hosea 3:4-5)

Just as in Balaam's prophecy the central character is David. Only in Balaam's day David remains unnamed except for the descriptive *Star* and *Scepter*. Here, in Hosea, with David having already lived and died, it is evident that the David who will be sought by Israel is the Messiah, the Son of David – who, of course, is also the *Star* and the *Scepter* of Balaam's prophecy.

A more thorough analysis of the phrase, "*the latter days*," would be material for an entire book. We will have occasion to revisit the phrase later in this study as we compare it to what appears to be its New Testament equivalent, "*these last days*." The connection between the two phrase is, again, the Messiah – promised and delivered.

*God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, has **in these last days** spoken to us by His Son...*

(Hebrews 1:1-2a)

The second phrase noted earlier, "*the age to come*," became a common rabbinic term in the Intertestamental Period and was in common use by the time of Jesus' earthly ministry. Hence the Lord Himself utilizes it fairly frequently in His own teaching. In doing so, Jesus seems to indicate His own understanding of how many ages are to be reckoned: *this age...and the age to come*. For instance,

*Therefore I say to you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven men. Anyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man, it will be forgiven him; but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit, it will not be forgiven him, either **in this age or in the age to come**.*

(Matthew 12:31-32)

In the following passage Jesus indicates what comprises *the age to come*, eternal life.

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*So Jesus answered and said, "Assuredly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or lands, for My sake and the gospel's, who shall not receive a hundredfold now **in this time** – houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions – and **in the age to come**, eternal life.* (Mark 10:29-30)

The author of the letter to the Hebrews takes the matter a step farther, intimating that at least one characteristic of *the age to come* has entered into this present age. In a very difficult passage (or at least a passage that has troubled many sensitive believing souls), he writes,

*For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted the heavenly gift, and have become partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the good word of God and **the powers of the age to come**, if they fall away, to renew them again to repentance, since they crucify again for themselves the Son of God, and put Him to an open shame.* (Hebrews 6:4-6)

We see between the prophecies of the Old Testament and the teaching of the New Testament a twofold division of the Biblical Timeline: the first testament has a more fluid, dynamic concept between the present time – pertaining to the time of the prophet himself – and *the latter days*. This was a sliding scale, so to speak, that moved along the timeline always looking forward. Often it looked forward to at least *two* events: the immediate contextual fulfillment of the prophecy and a later, messianic implication of the same. It is probably not possible to force the phrase *the latter days* into any specific prophetic meaning. Rather we should view the phrase as a more methodological terminology indicating a time in the future – perhaps near or perhaps far into the future – and also at times pointing even beyond that, to the deeper meaning of the phrase as it relates to the ultimate plan and purpose of God for the whole world.

Upon the close of the prophetic word roughly four hundred years before the birth of Jesus Christ, the rabbis, the scribes, and the Pharisees thought much and wrote much (more?) on the future hope contained in the Hebrew Scriptures. The phrase *the age to come* or, as it is sometimes found, *the world to come*, became synonymous with the Jewish hope of ultimate redemption from Jehovah, Israel's God. One modern Jewish writer explains the general use of the phrase within rabbinic writings from the Second Temple period to the present,

The World to Come usually refers to one of three things: the way the world will be in the End of Days when the righteous are resurrected; a world of immortal souls that will follow the age of resurrection; or a heavenly world enjoyed by righteous souls immediately after

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death (i.e. prior to the End of Days). However, believing that the World to Come refers to one of these does not necessarily entail a negative belief in the others.<sup>28</sup>

The following passage from the Mishnah is illustrative of the general rabbinic view of *the Age (World) to Come* in the time of Christ.

All Israel [even those who were executed by the court for their transgressions] have a portion in the World to Come, for it is written: “Your people are all righteous; they shall inherit the land forever, the branch of my planting, the work of my hands, that I be glorified” (Isaiah 60:21). But the following have no portion in the World to Come: He who says that resurrection is not a Torah doctrine, the Torah is not from Heaven, and an apikoros [who denigrates Torah and Torah scholars]. Rabbi Akiva adds: One who reads from heretical books. And one who whispers [a charm] over a wound and says: Any of the diseases that I have inflicted upon the Egyptians, I will not inflict upon you. For I, the Lord, heal you” (Exodus 15:26). Abba Shaul says: Also, one who pronounces the [four letter] Divine Name as it is spelled.<sup>29</sup>

A belief in the resurrection became integrally tied to the concept of the age or world to come, and this general structure of belief was validated in large measure by incorporation by Jesus into His own teachings. As the above quote indicates, there was no uniform and universally-accepted definition among the rabbis concerning the meaning or the characteristics of *the age to come*, but that is true of all eschatological views. The fact that Jesus adopted the phrase brings into the Christian study of Eschatology and makes it another component of the Biblical Timeline. *The age to come* will thus be a phrase and concept revisited, probably frequently, as this study progresses.

There are two other phrases that deserve close attention in regard to the Biblical Timeline. One, mentioned earlier in this lesson, requires a session of its own: *the Day of the Lord*. Another, mentioned only once in the Bible yet pregnant with meaning with reference to the overall timeline, is *the Fullness of Time*. This latter phrase indicates a significant point *within* the Biblical Timeline, the point, of course, at which the promised Messiah entered history and the world through the incarnation of the Son of God.

*But when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, that we might receive the adoption as sons.*

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<sup>28</sup> Rabbi Louis Jacobs, “The World to Come” <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/the-world-to-come/>. Accessed 14August2019.

<sup>29</sup> Mishnah Sanhedrin 10.1; <http://emishnah.com/PDFs/Sanhedrin%2010.pdf>. Accessed 14August2019.

This event is undeniably the most important event in the entire scope of the Biblical Timeline. Thus it stands to reason that the Incarnation, *in the Fullness of Time*, is also the most important event in the entire scope of biblical eschatology. Thus it is to this event that we turn our attention in the next lesson.



**Week 3: The Fullness of Time**

**Key Biblical Texts:** Galatians 4:4; Mark 1:15

*“In the Greek and Roman mythologies, the past is re-presented as an everlasting foundation. in the Hebrew and Christian view of history the past is a promise to the future; consequently, the interpretation of the past becomes a prophecy in reverse.”*  
(Jürgen Moltmann; *“Theology of Hope”*)

Luke 2 presents a person representative of the hope of Israel in Second Temple Judea: Simeon.

*And behold, there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon, and this man was just and devout, waiting for the Consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Christ.*  
(Luke 2:25-26)

Simeon was by no means the only Jew *“looking for the consolation of Israel,”* but he is mentioned here as representative of the believing remnant of Israel who were paying attention to the ‘signs of the times’ and were thus anticipating a new revelation of the God of Israel in respect to the deliverance of His people. ‘Consolation’ – the bringing of comfort and sense to life after generations of frustration, disappointment, and grief – was the hope of all Israelites who held fast to the promised of Yahweh, Israel’s God. To Simeon the Lord has condescended to grant a personal promise, that the aged and devout Jew would not die before he saw Israel’s Comfort with his own eyes. This comfort was, of course, *the Messiah*. Simeon’s encounter with the baby Jesus prompted the *Nunc Dimitis*, a hymn of praise to faithfulness of God in regard to the divine promise of ultimate redemption.

*Lord, now You are letting Your servant depart in peace, according to Your word;  
For my eyes have seen Your salvation which You have prepared before the face of all peoples,  
A light to bring revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of Your people Israel.* (Luke 2:29-32)

Simeon’s hope and expectation, as recounted in this hymn of praise, came from Isaiah 49, where God speaks to His Servant about his redemptive mission to Israel,

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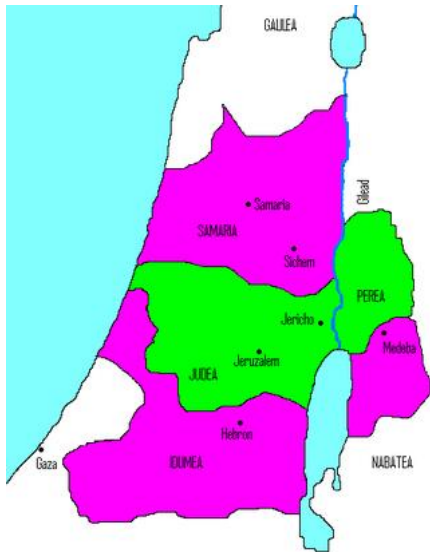
*And now the LORD says,  
Who formed Me from the womb to be His Servant, to bring Jacob back to Him,  
So that Israel is gathered to Him (For I shall be glorious in the eyes of the LORD,  
And My God shall be My strength),  
Indeed He says,  
'It is too small a thing that You should be My Servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob,  
And to restore the preserved ones of Israel;  
I will also give You as a light to the Gentiles, that You should be My salvation to the ends of the  
earth.'* (Isaiah 49:5-6)

Simeon's expectation was the same for all faithful Israel in his day; there was a strong sense that something momentous was due to happen. This something, of course, was the advent of the Messiah, though there was far from universal agreement about what that meant. The ruling elite of Second Temple Israel, the Sadducees, strengthened in their political and economic position by the successive kings of the Hasmonean Dynasty and, afterward, the Romans, did their best to disconnect the messianic hope of the people from the notion of a revived Davidic kingdom. There was good political justification for this attempt: the House of David had fallen into such an inglorious state that the thought of it ever reviving did indeed stretch credulity. The intertestamental period – between the last prophet Malachi and the coming of John the Baptist, a period of roughly 400 years – the Israelite nation dwelt uneasily in the land. The righteous governor Zerubbabel, who helped establish the Israelites back in their ancestral homeland after the Babylonian Exile, was not a king in any sense of the term, and after him the house of David continued its decline into oblivion.

Judea was ruled by successive foreign empires – the Babylonians, the Medo-Persians, the Greeks, and finally, the Romans. By God's grace the people of Israel were granted a higher degree of autonomy than most of the people groups comprising these imperial dominions, though never to the degree of sovereignty that any Israelite would consider his birthright. The closest the society would come to this state was under the Hasmoneans, the descendants of Judas Maccabeus, the deliverer of Israel from the Greek overlord. Judas and his brothers rid the land of the Greeks and established a political system that would keep Israel relatively free of foreign influence for about a century, but as one article on the Hasmonean Dynasty puts it in the subtitle, "Their rule falls short of expectations." The Maccabeans were Levites, and though they were not descended from

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the family of Aaron, had themselves appointed High Priest in the newly cleansed Jerusalem and Temple. Political power came with the religious, and before long the successive High Priests accrued royal power to themselves. This trend culminated in John



Hasmonean Kingdom under John Hyrcanus  
■ situation in 134 BC  
■ area conquered

Hyrcanus, High Priest and Ethnarch of Judea from 134 – 104 BC. During Hyrcanus' reign the conquests of Jewish armies began to redraw the boundaries of Judea in lines increasingly approaching the extent of Israelite territory under King David. Hyrcanus fell short in this effort, but his reign was nonetheless a high point in Jewish fortunes for the previous five hundred years, and a point to which the nation never returned. Still wanting to ascertain the divine purpose in what was happening, the religious leaders and biblical scholars of the day sought to read into

current events the fulfillment of prophecy, a tendency no less powerful in ancient Israel as it remains today. F. F. Bruce comments on the dilemma presented to Second Temple Judea by the rise of the Levitical Hasmoneans compared to the complete absence of any vestige of Davidic power.

Some of the Hasmonaeans' supporters had remained content with their regime for the great part of its duration. Under John Hyrcanus many of his subjects, believing that they discerned in him a rare combination of the three offices of prophet, priest and king, were disposed to think that with him the messianic age had dawned. True, the great prophets of Israel had foreseen the embodiment of the national hope in a prince of the house of David, but in the earlier years of Hasmonean rule there was little sign that the house of David had any further part to play in the life of Israel, whereas freedom from the Gentile yoke had been secured under the leadership of a priestly dynasty. Might it not be God's will that the expected Messiah or 'anointed one' of the end-time should be a priest of the tribe of Levi rather than a king of the tribe of Judah?<sup>30</sup>

The purpose of this brief recapitulation of Hasmonean rule is twofold. First, to illustrate the timeless habit of attempting to interpret biblical prophecy in light of current

<sup>30</sup> Bruce, F. F. *Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company; 1999); 53. Bruce notes that the apocryphal book *The Testament of Reuben* assigns the royal sovereignty to Levi.

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events. Second, to describe the political and social conditions of the Israelite nation in Palestine prior to the advent of Jesus Christ. In the first the interpreters of current events were completely off base, as some even at that time steadfastly noted; the promises of God are not contingent upon political events, and the promised Messiah was, and continued to be, expected from the tribe of Judah, and the lineage of David. John Hyrcanus died, and his successor, Alexander Jannaeus (103 – 76 BC) gave no one the impression of messianic pretention. “But the military ambition and barbarity of Alexander Jannaeus alienated the best part of the nation from the Hasmonean cause, and when, after the death of his widow and successor, Salome Alexandra, in 67 BC, civil strife broke out between their two sons, Hyrcanus and Aristobulus, even the Hasmonean cause was divided. It was this civil strife that provided the Romans with the opportunity to occupy Judaea.”<sup>31</sup>



**F. F. Bruce (1910-90)**

Throughout this political tumult not only did the Jews fail to regain true and lasting sovereignty over their land, the long-decrepit house of David remained so. Indeed, matters went from bad to worse after the Roman general Pompey arrived on the scene. He refused to honor the prohibition against anyone other than the High Priest – and certainly against any *Gentile* – entering into the Holy of Holies, and stormed through the veil, thereby desecrating the holiest place in Judaism.<sup>32</sup> From the Levitical Hasmoneans rule would eventually pass the Edomite half-Jew Herod. “When, in 40 BC, the Romans decided to govern Judaea through a Jewish king, it would have taken exceptional powers of mental penetration to discern messianic traits in Herod.”<sup>33</sup> The condition of the land and its people were as low as possibly could be while still living in the land of Promise. Yet Simeon grew to old age *in hope*, having been promised by God that he would not die until he beheld Israel’s Hope and Glory with his own eyes. What sustained this hope against hope? The simple yet profound answer is Faith. Faith in the promises of God and in the faithfulness of the God who promised. Simeon was living in *the fullness of time*, and

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<sup>31</sup> *Idem*.

<sup>32</sup> Pompey was astounded to find the room completely empty; the Babylonians had removed all of the sacred furniture from the Holy of Holies and the returned exiles considered it sacrilege to attempt replacements. Pompey, of course, expected to find some idol there, the ‘form’ of the Jewish god.

<sup>33</sup> Bruce; 55.

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held fast the confession of his faith firm until its manifestation, in spite of the impossibility of the situation around him.

What does all of this have to do with eschatology? Several things, at least. It shows that the Jewish people also had an eschatological perspective; indeed, Old Covenant Judaism was a powerfully eschatological religion and cannot be remotely understood apart from this fact. The *eschaton* of the Jewish calendar was the appearance of the Deliverer from Yahweh, and markers pointing to this *telos* are found throughout the Old Testament Scriptures. These are not just ‘messianic prophecies’ as are now so often noted in modern Bible translations, but consist in the whole movement of biblical prophecy from the earliest time to the time of Simeon. The result of this coalescing of the prophetic word was a tangible and powerful sense of expectation illustrated by Simeon, but felt by countless other Jews of the first century AD. One of the main tasks of a Christian Eschatology is to ask whether this expectation was met, frustrated, or delayed.

If either of the latter two options, then both the faithfulness and the omnipotence of Israel’s God is called into question and doubt. We shall see that the overwhelming testimony of the New Testament is in favor of the *first* option, that the expectation was *fully met*. Indeed, the only reason any subsequent scholar would entertain either of the other two options (and the only reason anyone ever *has*) is because the political situation in Judaea after the resurrection of Jesus Christ failed to meet the *political* expectation of those who are interpreting the prophecies. But hopefully the example of the Hasmonean era will suffice to show that political circumstances are no indication of what God can and will do.

A powerful example may be seen in the prophecies concerning the condition of the tribe of Judah associated with the rise of the Promised Deliverer from that tribe. The terminology is quite bleak. Amos speaks of the tabernacle of David, in a prophecy later quoted by James, at the so-called Counsel of Jerusalem, in unashamed reference to Jesus Christ. The tabernacle of David has fallen into complete disrepair and is, by the tone of Amos’ prophecy, uninhabited and uninhabitable. In any event, it has certainly lost all of its former glory.

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*On that day I will raise up the tabernacle of David, which has fallen down,  
And repair its damages;  
I will raise up its ruins, and rebuild it as in the days of old;  
That they may possess the remnant of Edom, and all the Gentiles who are called by My name,  
Says the LORD who does this thing.* (Amos 9:11-12)

The reference here is not to the palace of King David, but to the tabernacle that David erected for the ark of testimony, thus linking the priestly house of the Temple with the royal house of David in a completely opposite manner than was done in the Hasmonean period.

*So they brought the ark of the LORD, and set it in its place in the midst of the tabernacle that David had erected for it. Then David offered burnt offerings and peace offerings before the LORD. And when David had finished offering burnt offerings and peace offerings, he blessed the people in the name of the LORD of hosts.* (II Samuel 6:17-18)

The Temple was still standing at the time of Jesus' advent, but many Jews in that day – like the Essenes and the Jews of Qumran - had proclaimed the bankruptcy of its leadership and had abandoned it altogether. The Second Temple had become an empty shell, with *Ichabod* written over its door, fit only to be torn down (*cp.* John 2:19). But the condition of the house of Judah and the house of David was even worse than the condition of the Temple. The prophetic promise of the Anointed One remains consistently within the lineage of David, but by the time of Isaiah – which is still relatively early – He is referred to as a Branch, and His springing forth is as a sapling from an otherwise barren stump.

*There shall come forth a Rod from the stem of Jesse, and a Branch shall grow out of his roots.  
The Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon Him,  
The Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might,  
The Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the LORD.* (Isaiah 11:1-2)

The Lord's promise of a Messiah is in unmistakable Davidic terms, even though the house of David would be essentially barren and impotent at the time of its fulfillment. Again using the Branch metaphor, the Lord speaks through the prophet Jeremiah of the true 'Once and Future King,' David.

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*Behold, the days are coming, says the LORD, that I will raise to David a Branch of righteousness;  
A King shall reign and prosper, and execute judgment and righteousness in the earth.  
In His days Judah will be saved, and Israel will dwell safely;  
Now this is His name by which He will be called: The Lord our Righteousness.*

(Jeremiah 23:5-6)

The expectation among pious Jews of the Second Temple era for a Messiah of Davidic lineage was set against the political reality of the Hasmonean, and later Herodian, power structure. The temple was thus viewed by many as having been defiled by the High Priests who, while descended from Levi, were not of the family lineage of Aaron. The usurpation of royal authority by these kings – and, of course, by Herod and his successors – added insult to injury. This is the historical background to the rise of such Jewish sects as the Essenes and the members of the Qumran community – Jews who removed themselves from both the body politic and the body religious in Judea, seeing it as hopelessly corrupt. In some respects the Romans were less odious to these Jews than were the Hasmonaeans and the Herodians, for the Romans were foreigners and made no pretense of fulfilling any prophetic office within the Jewish religion and society; they were overlords, plain and simple. “The day of their expulsion would come – and come by divine action. There were varying views about the identity of the divine agent or agents in their expulsion, but one substantial body of opinion expected the Messiah of David’s line to be raised up quite soon for this very purpose.”<sup>34</sup>

### **The Fullness of Time:**

By why did these Jews think the advent of the Messiah and of deliverance was near? It may be that they merely gave expression in their hope to the saying, “It is always darkest before the dawn.” Things were indeed dark for Israel in terms of her messianic hope of deliverance and freedom. But other periods in Israel’s history were as dark, and yet the time of Messiah had not yet come. No, Simeon and others recognized their own day as possessing what Paul would later call “*the fullness of time.*”

*But when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law.*

(Galatians 4:4)

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<sup>34</sup> Bruce; 54.



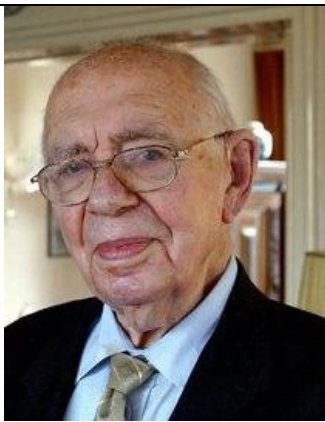
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This comment is made in the midst of a discussion concerning, as it were, ‘coming of age’ in God’s redemptive plan. This, in turn, is set within the larger context of Law versus Grace – and of the centrality of faith in the reality of justification.

*Now I say that the heir, as long as he is a child, does not differ at all from a slave, though he is master of all, but is under guardians and stewards until the time appointed by the father. Even so we, when we were children, were in bondage under the elements of the world. But when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son, born<sup>[a]</sup> of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, that we might receive the adoption as sons.*

(Galatians 4:1-4)

The metaphor of growing from minority to majority is somewhat loose, as Paul seems to be referring to the Jews as the ‘minority’ children but then seamlessly incorporates the Gentiles in the mature child. That part of the metaphor probably ought not be pressed too hard. What is emphasized here is the continuing argument by the apostle regarding the movement from being ‘under Law’ to being ‘under Grace.’ To our current purposes, however, the phrase ‘*fullness of time*’ indicates the reaching of a point in



Herman Ridderbos (1909-2007)

the biblical timeline when all was ready for the advent of the Messiah, Jesus Christ. This line of reasoning is in keeping with the general expectation of Second Temple Judaism as manifested by the example of Simeon. “This period of time is now spoken of as *the fulness of the time*, that is to say, the moment in which the previously determined time limit was reached.”<sup>35</sup> The word translated ‘fulness’ is the Greek *pleroma*, which signifies “that which has been completed.”<sup>36</sup> This fits in

with the general metaphor that Paul is developing here in Galatians, and also speaks to the movement of God’s redemptive purpose through history as it approached such a time as this, the *pleroma* of time. “This does not mean only that a particular time has expired, or that an appointed human time has come. Rather, it means that in the divine economy of salvation human time has reached its full measure.”<sup>37</sup> This is an important point for

<sup>35</sup> Ridderbos, Herman *NICNT: The Epistle of Paul to the Churches of Galatia* (Grand Rapids: W<sup>m</sup> B. Eerdmans Publishing Co: 1984); 154.

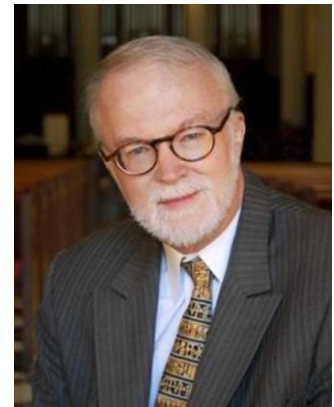
<sup>36</sup> Brown, Colin, ed. *The International Dictionary of New Testament Theology: Volume I* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House; 1980); 738.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*; 738.

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Christian eschatology, as it indicates very clearly that the redemptive work of God during the Old Testament era had come to an end – a *fulfillment* – and that the time forecast had finally been fully reached.

What made what we now call the first century AD the ‘*Fulness of Time*’? Since the advent of the Church there have been standing theories focusing on the social and political conditions of the time, as Timothy George recounts in his commentary on the passage. “What did Paul mean by the ‘fullness’ of time? Early Christian apologists pointed to the fact that the birth of the Messiah occurred during the *Pax Romana*, a period of relative peace and stability. Others have pointed to the development of a common language, favorable means of travel, the emergence of an urban civilization that made possible the rapid spread of the Christian message.”<sup>38</sup> Such explanations continue to the present day and are popular sermon fodder on Galatians 4:4. But the current *Pax Americana* is far more peaceful and stable than was the Roman version, and English is a more universal language in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century than Greek ever was in the 1<sup>st</sup> Century. Travel is far more convenient and powerful, and even more unnecessary now that the Internet allows messages to be sent all over the world in a fraction of a second. If such human conditions were the necessary concomitants to “*the fullness of time*,” then one might argue that Jesus came two thousand years too soon. It is rather that “[Paul] wishes to stress that the Christ-event does not lie in the realm of human factors and possibilities but in the counsel of God.”<sup>39</sup>



**Timothy George (b. 1950)**

For the purpose of Christian eschatology we may summarize our findings from Galatians 4:4 by saying that the redemptive plan that God initiated in Genesis 3:15, “*you will bruise His heel and He shall bruise your head*,” moves and develops through the ages as it pursues a ‘fullness, a completion of time previously set by God alone. This is the *telos* of the divine purpose, and Paul maintains that it has been reached with the incarnation of the Son of God, so that the apostle may now refer to all who live in this time are living in the end times.

*Now all these things happened to them as examples, and they were written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the ages have come.* (I Corinthians 10:11)

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<sup>38</sup> George, Timothy *The New American Commentary: Galatians* (Broadman & Holman Publishers; 1994); 301. George does not agree with these theories, he simply summarizes them as having held sway within the Church for many years.

<sup>39</sup> DNTT; 738.

One final comment may be made in light of this passage and the metaphor in which it is couched. It is popular to view the current age as being separate from that which went before, the ‘Church Age’ in which God is doing something different than He had revealed under the Old Covenant. While we cannot press Paul’s metaphor too far, it is safe to say that his consideration of the transition between minority and majority is sufficient to refute this common but erroneous view. Minority and Majority are *two phases of one life*, not two different lives. Indeed, and here we may be in danger of pressing the metaphor too far (so get out the grain of salt), one typically expects the years of majority to be *greater* than those of minority, which might presage the troubling delay of the Parousia that has caused so much angst within the Church these past two thousand years. Be that as it may, for Paul the transition from minority to majority was a divinely ordained, yet humanly natural, movement from one phase of redemptive history to the next. It is *new* in the same sense as the newness of life for a child who has reached full age; yet it is *old* in the sense that the mature son is still the very same person as the immature child.

#### **The Basis of Expectation:**

Setting all rationalistic and human reasons aside regarding the ‘fullness’ of the time of Christ’s birth, was there anything more tangible than a vision for Simeon to be ‘*looking for the consolation of Israel*’ in his own lifetime? This is not to say that the vision granted Simeon was insufficient evidence, but only that the same vision was probably not given to each of the Jews of Simeon’s day who were also eagerly anticipating the advent of the Messiah, the Consolation of Israel. Even Jews who eventually rejected Jesus as the Christ were nonetheless filled with the same expectation, thinking that perhaps John the Baptist was the Promised One, a theory that John quickly disavowed.

*Now while the people were in a state of expectation and all were wondering in their hearts about John, as to whether he might be the Christ, John answered and said to them all, ‘As for me, I baptize you with water; but One is coming who is mightier than I, and I am not fit to untie the thong of His sandals; He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.’* (Luke 3:15-16)<sup>40</sup>

Paul’s metaphor of life’s transition from minority to majority parallels the movement of redemptive history from the Old Covenant to the New, and emphasizes the

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<sup>40</sup> Cp. John 1:19-27



**George Eldon Ladd (1911-82)**

continuity between the revelation of the New Testament with that of the Old. George Eldon Ladd notes that “The bond that unites the Old and the New Testaments is this sense of the divine activity in history...What God reveals is not only information about himself and human destiny; he reveals *himself*, and this revelation has occurred in a series of historical events.”<sup>41</sup> Within Reformed theological circles this phenomenon is called ‘redemptive history,’ and the general

Emphasis lies upon the continuity of God’s redemptive plan from the Old into the New, rather than the discontinuity of those who would posit a different dispensation for the Church in this era. If it can be shown that the expectation characterizes so poignantly by Simeon had its foundation in the Old Testament and its fulfillment in the Incarnation of Christ, then it stands to reason that the continuity of God’s intervention in history is well established. Paul’s statement in Galatians 4 seems to presuppose that this connection can be made, as he himself clearly makes it in that passage and in numerous other portions of his letters.

There are a number of Old Testament prophecies to which reference may be made in establishing the Jewish expectation of a Messiah, a Deliverer. But the ones that most powerfully sets the *calendar* of that expectation are found in the book of Daniel. The key passages for this purpose are in Chapter 2 and Chapter 7, parallel prophecies that “together sketch out the future until the arrival of the kingdom of God.”<sup>42</sup> In Chapter 2 Daniel interprets King Nebuchadnezzar’s dream consisting of the statue made of various disparate materials – gold, silver, bronze, and iron mixed with clay. The statue represents suc-

cessive world kingdoms, with Nebuchadnezzar’s Babylon represented by the head of gold.



**Thomas Schreiner (b. 1954)**

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<sup>41</sup> Ladd, George Eldon *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company; 1974); 26-27.

<sup>42</sup> Schreiner, Thomas *The King in His Beauty: A Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic; 2013); 390.

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Daniel's interpretation moves through the four kingdoms represented in the statue until he comes to the real significance of the vision and its interpretation: the establishment of a *divine* kingdom in the days of the fourth worldly kingdom.

*And in the days of these kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom which shall never be destroyed; and the kingdom shall not be left to other people; it shall break in pieces and consume all these kingdoms, and it shall stand forever. Inasmuch as you saw that the stone was cut out of the mountain without hands, and that it broke in pieces the iron, the bronze, the clay, the silver, and the gold – the great God has made known to the king what will come to pass after this. The dream is certain, and its interpretation is sure.* (Daniel 2:44-45)

To the Jewish reader of Daniel's interpretation there was a mixture of discouragement and hope. The passing from one kingdom to another through four ever-increasing powers meant that the time of 'Gentile' domination would last far longer than hoped, but the assurance that "*in the days of the fourth kings*" God would act decisively against worldly empires preserved hope alive that the God of Israel would never forsake either His purpose or His people. "It is clear from Daniel's vision that history will last longer than expected, but the people of God should be full of hope, for the kingdoms of the world will not endure...God's kingdom will fill the earth, fulfilling the mandate originally given to Adam."<sup>43</sup>

The second passage in Daniel, in Chapter 7, is undeniably parallel to the first. The terrifying, but inanimate, object of Nebuchadnezzar's dream now becomes the even more terrifying, because all-too-animate, creatures of Daniel's own dream. The scene shifts from the earth, and mere worldly powers, to a more heavenly and spiritual realm where these same powers are now presented in all their rage and blasphemy against God, especially true of the fourth beast, which corresponds to the fourth element of Nebuchadnezzar's statue. The scene also deepens from a stone cut without hands that ends up crushing the statue and becoming itself a world-spanning mountain, to "*One like a Son of Man*" – again from inanimate to living. The parallelism clearly indicates that this living being is the same as the small stone, but now we realize that the underlying power behind the new kingdom is not that of human government, but of divine appointment.

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<sup>43</sup> Schreiner; 391-392.

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*I was watching in the night visions,  
And behold, One like the Son of Man, coming with the clouds of heaven!  
He came to the Ancient of Days, and they brought Him near before Him.  
Then to Him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom,  
That all peoples, nations, and languages should serve Him.  
His dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away,  
And His kingdom the one which shall not be destroyed.* (Daniel 7:13-14)

The kingdom set up by the Son of Man during the time of the fourth beast is undoubtedly the same prophetic event as the mountain that grew from the small stone that crushes the idolatrous statue. “Daniel links the son of man with the rock in chapter 2, suggesting an identity between the two.”<sup>44</sup> Chapter 7 parallels Chapter 2, but then goes deeper into the identification of the One who will be the true and immortal king of God’s Kingdom – *One like the Son of Man*, the Messiah. The identification of the four elements comprising the statue, prophetically equivalent to the four beast that terrified Daniel, is consistent as the four world empires that would have overlordship with respect to the Jewish nation from the time of the Babylonian Exile on: Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece, and finally, Rome. In the days of this fourth power Israel should expect – and indeed had come to expect – her Deliverer.

Again, we note that the pervasive sense of expectation in Second Temple Israel must not be mistakenly interpreted as anywhere near a consistent or universal interpretation of what that expectation consisted. Many looked for the immediate overthrow of the Roman power and the restoration of the Davidic monarchy in Jerusalem. Few considered that what transpired in the actual ministry of Jesus constituted the fulfillment of the prophecies. Even John the Baptist was plunged into doubt, and sent his disciples to Jesus to ask “*Are you the One, or should we look for another?*” But the authors of the New Testament, not least the compilers of the history of Jesus’ ministry and teaching in the Gospels, leave no doubt that the coming of Jesus Christ, *in the fullness of time*, answered completely to the prophetic promises. It is no coincidence that Jesus’ own favorite phrase for Himself was, *the Son of Man*.

### **The Kingdom of God:**

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<sup>44</sup> Schreiner; 393.

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Tying Paul's statement in Galatians 4 with Simeon's earnest expectation met at the presentation of Jesus in the Temple, with the parallel prophecies of Daniel – though leaving out many other passages that would only bolster the conclusion – we arrive at the proclamation of Jesus Himself at the commencement of His ministry, "*The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel.*"<sup>45</sup> It should come as no surprise that Jesus uses the same root word as Paul does in Galatians 4:4 – this time using the verbal *has been fulfilled* instead of the noun, *fullness*. Both indicate that the time of God's preparation, prophecy, and prediction has come to completion in the Incarnation, the Ministry, and the Death & Resurrection of Jesus Christ. Ladd writes, "the redemptive act of God in Jesus is but the end term in a long series of redemptive acts in Israel."<sup>46</sup> N. T. Wright adds, "in the unique and unrepeatable career of Jesus Israel's history had reached its climactic moment."<sup>47</sup>

But as with the transition of the child under tutors and guardians to the mature man of age, the story did not end at *the fullness of time*, and that is what ties all of this in with Christian eschatology. In order to come close to understanding what *will happen* in the future, we must have a firm grip on what *already happened* in the past, especially that past related to God's redemptive history and to *the fullness of time*. At this remove from the events of Jesus' earthly career, we may even call this *fullness of time* a midpoint; in years to come it may turn out to be much earlier than the midpoint. That which preceded the advent of Christ set the stage for that most critical of all historic events, the Incarnation. The 'Christ-event' consisting not only of the Incarnation, but also the life and ministry as well as the death, resurrection, and ascension of the Lord, consummates all that went before and firmly grounds all that follows within the same redemptive history. This is not a *new thing* that God is doing in the sense that it is completely disconnected from the trajectory of all that He did before the advent of Christ. Rather, in *the fullness of time*, God sent forth His Son, who would be the perfect Son of Man, and upon whose triumph over

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<sup>45</sup> Mark 1:15

<sup>46</sup> Ladd; 28.

<sup>47</sup> Wright, N. T. *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press; 1996); 227.



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death and the grave would be given “*all authority in heaven and earth.*” Willem VanGemerer reminds us that all Christian theology, including eschatology, must be rooted and grounded in the revelation that foretold and was fulfilled in the coming of the Son of Man. That which comes after Christ’s earthly career is the continuation of the same story, not the writing of a new one. Van Gemerer writes, “The history of redemption unfolds a progression in the outworking of God’s plan of redemption that will unfold completely in the restoration of all



Willem VanGemerer (b. 1943)

things...Christian interpreters of the Old Testament cannot limit their focus to one of the many themes. They cannot isolate the Old from the New. In their approach to the Old Testament, they must remember that they stand in a tradition that goes back to the midpoint of redemptive history, namely, the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Jesus, the Messiah.”<sup>48</sup>

At the heart of the connection between the old and the new, at the crux of redemptive history in *the fullness of time*, is the Kingdom of God. This takes us back to the beginning of the lesson, the brief history of the various ‘kingdoms’ that attempted a restoration of Davidic authority over Israel – the Hasmoneans and the Herodians, failures both. The kingdom of which Jesus speaks at the beginning of His preaching is the very same kingdom of Nebuchadnezzar’s dream and Daniel’s vision, and constituted the whole of Simeon’s hope. The Jews of the Second Temple era were anticipating the advent of this kingdom, though their conception of it was both varied and faulty. This, as Wright puts it, was their story, and the only framework in which Jesus’ proclamation would have made any sense. “To say ‘the kingdom of god is at hand’ makes sense only when the hearers know ‘the story so far’ and are waiting for it to be completed.”<sup>49</sup> But whether or not the kingdom of God has been completed, or has even come, is a question that lies at the center of Christian eschatology, one that we must attempt to answer.

#### **Week 4: The Kingdom of God**

**Key Biblical Texts:** Daniel 7:13-14; Mark 1:15; I Corinthians 15:20-28

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<sup>48</sup> VanGemerer, Willem *The Progress of Redemption* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House; 1988); 26

<sup>49</sup> Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*; 226.



*“We are not faced with a new story altogether,  
but with a new moment in the same story.”  
(N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*)*

The fault line on which eschatological thought within the Christian Church has broken most often into multiple views is the concept of the Kingdom of God. There can be no overstating of the importance of this concept, this promise and this reality, to the biblical redemptive message as a whole. The Kingdom of God was what faithful Jews yearned for, and it is what Christians have disagreed over as to whether it has come or is still in abeyance. Thomas Schreiner quotes Graeme Goldsworthy with approbation in the opening paragraph of his own *New Testament Theology*, “The idea of the rule of God over creation, over all creatures, over



**Graeme Goldsworthy (b. 1934)**

the kingdoms of the world, and in a unique and special way, over his chosen and redeemed people, is the very heart of the message of the Hebrew scriptures.”<sup>50</sup> The idea of a divine kingdom was deeply ingrained in the Jewish mind over centuries of reading the Law and the History, and of listening to and reading the Prophets. “The phrase ‘kingdom of god,’ therefore, carried unambiguously the *hope* that YHWH would act thus, within history, to vindicate Israel...When YHWH was king, Israel would be ruled properly, through the sort of rulers YHWH approved of, who would administer justice for Israel and judgment on the nations.”<sup>51</sup> Willem VanGemeren adds,

Even during the best years...the hearts of the pious Jews were beating hard in anticipation of the great era of deliverance and vindication. Though there was little agreement on the form of that era, their hope was fixed on the Lord, at whose command the Messiah would appear and inaugurate the kingdom of God in a more magnificent manner than the era of David and Solomon. The messianic era was also known as ‘the age to come,’ in contrast to ‘the present age.’<sup>52</sup>

The hope of Israel engendered by the prophetic vision of Daniel centers on the divine coronation of “*one like a Son of Man*” to establish “*an everlasting dominion which shall*

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<sup>50</sup> Schreiner, Thomas R. *New Testament Theology: Magnifying God in Christ* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic; 2008); 41.

<sup>51</sup> Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*; 203.

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*not pass away*” and *“a kingdom which shall not be destroyed.”* Thus when both John the Baptist and Jesus of Nazareth came into the environs of Jerusalem and Greater Judea, preaching *“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand,”* their audiences were expecting their message.

Those hearing Jesus did not ask for a definition of the kingdom. They understood him to be proclaiming the dawn of a glorious new era in which Israel would be exalted and the nations made subservient to Israel’s God. The Lord would reign over the whole earth, the son of David would serve as king, and the exile would be over. The new covenant would be fulfilled, God’s people would keep his law, and the promised new creation would become a reality. The Lord would pour out his Spirit on all flesh, and the promise to Abraham that all nations would be blessed, to the ends of the earth, would become a reality.<sup>53</sup>

Schreiner is summarizing here the entire scope of Old Testament anticipation for the future, all of which was focused in some way upon the coming kingdom. The danger of any summary, of course, is that it represents as universal and uniform a variety of thoughts and expectations that were held, often in conflict, among those whose basic premise was the same: *the Kingdom of God represented the Hope of Israel*. The fact is, however, that there was no uniform view of what the kingdom would look like, when it would come, or what it would do once it came, within the period stretching from Daniel’s vision to the beginning of John’s preaching. In the audience that first heard Jesus’ proclaim the imminence of the Kingdom, many different views were undoubtedly represented; as the sequel of Jesus’ teaching and life would show, none of these views aligned with His own. “Jesus was announcing that the long-awaited kingdom of Israel’s god was indeed coming to birth, but that it did not look like what had been imagined.”<sup>54</sup>

Even though there was a tremendous amount of diversity among Second Temple Judaism as to the nature of the kingdom, and even though much of what was considered turned out to miss the mark of what actually happened, it is nonetheless important to try to establish the *biblical expectation* of the kingdom prior to the preaching of John and Jesus. The Jewish mindset at that time was not entirely wrong; there were elements within many of the views that were firmly rooted in the Scriptures. Simeon’s hope was not unfounded

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<sup>52</sup> VanGemeren, *Progress of Redemption*; 348.

<sup>53</sup> Schreiner; *New Testament*; 45.

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nor misguided, though had he lived to witness the full ministry of Jesus he may also have sent to Him asking, “*Are You the One, or should we look for another.*” We can, however, summarize key elements in the biblical and therefore valid hope of Israel as a nation, as the people of God, anticipating God’s intervention in time through the establishment of the Kingdom.

Second Temple Israel was a time of half-measures. The Temple once destroyed by the Babylonians had been rebuilt, but it was a shadow of the former glory (Haggai 2:3). The Levitical rituals continued, but the Holy of Holies was an empty room; the ark of the covenant was lost. Adding insult to injury, the priesthood itself was no longer Aaronic, nor was it pure of political intrigue and wanton iniquity. Separatist groups like the Essenes and the inhabitants of the Qumran Community rejected the Second Temple as irredeemably defiled; these Jews looked for a restoration of the true Temple through the promised One – sometimes the Messiah, sometimes the Davidic King, sometimes the Servant of Yahweh, sometimes a combination of these and other Old Testament redemptive characters. That this dream would be fulfilled by an itinerant carpenter from Nazareth probably did not enter into any of their calculations.

In addition, the Jewish people were back in their ancestral land, the land promised to their forefathers. But they were not sovereign in that land, nor were they whole – far too many Jews still lived in the *Diaspora*, the Dispersion, and too many foreigners were abiding in Israel without being a part of the Jewish religion or community. There was no Davidic king in Jerusalem, and the life of Israel was harshly ruled by pagan Gentiles; it was slavery inside their own land. This sentiment is expressed poignantly by Nehemiah, one who was raised up by God to bring His people out of captivity and to reestablish them in the Promised Land. But Nehemiah, and those of his generation and afterward, recognized that something was clearly wrong.

*Here we are, servants today! And the land that You gave to our fathers,  
To eat its fruit and its bounty,  
Here we are, servants in it! And it yields much increase to the kings you have set over us,  
Because of our sins;  
Also they have dominion over our bodies and our cattle at their pleasure;  
And we are in great distress.* (Nehemiah 9:36-37)

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<sup>54</sup> Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*; 201.

Those separatist communities mentioned above, and others like them, removed themselves from the continuing offenses of the ‘mainline’ religious and civil parties in Jerusalem, in hope that Yahweh would bring about the true return from exile within the ‘pure’ community of the remnant. Many of these communities were led by man who bore the title “Teacher of Righteousness,” though it does not appear that any were viewed as the Messiah. N. T. Wright quotes from the Damascus Document, a fragment of the Dead Sea Scrolls representing the community aspirations of the Qumran-Essene religious communities,

For when they were unfaithful and forsook Him, He hid His face from Israel and His Sanctuary and delivered them up to the sword. But remembering the Covenant of the forefathers, He left a remnant to Israel and did not deliver it up to be destroyed. And in the age of wrath, three hundred and ninety years after He had given them into the hand of king Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, He visited them, and He caused a plant root to spring from Israel and Aaron to inherit His Land and to prosper on the good things of His earth...And God observed their deeds, that they sought Him with a whole heart, and He raised for them a Teacher of Righteousness to guide them in the way of his heart.<sup>55</sup>

Thus in addition to the rebuilding of the true Temple, or the purification of the current one, the ‘kingdom’ would also entail the true and final return of Israel from the Exile. It would represent a second Exodus, a theme recurrent in the Jewish literature of this era. “Many if not most second-Temple Jews, then, hoped for the new exodus, seen as the final return from exile.”<sup>56</sup> Of course, central to this hope was the restoration of a king of the house of David, who would not only reestablish his glorious throne in Jerusalem but would conquer all of Israel’s enemies. These aspects of the kingdom were fairly common across a broader spectrum of views as to how God would bring His kingdom to pass. If summarized in a word, the concept of the kingdom to a second-Temple Jew would entail *Victory*, the victory of Yahweh over His enemies through the victory of Israel over hers.

The idea of Israel’s god being, or becoming, king cannot therefore be understood without a sense of what I have described elsewhere: the anguished longing of Israel for her covenant god to come in his power and rule the world in the way he had always intended. A great many Jews of Jesus’ day lived, implicitly at least, under the story that ran as follows:

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<sup>55</sup> Wright, N. T. *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press; 1992.: 269.

<sup>56</sup> Wright; *Jesus and the Victory of God*; 209.

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YHWH, committed to Israel by an unbreakable covenant, was delaying his decisive act, for reasons best known to himself, though earnestly inquired after by the pious. He was holding back from putting into practice the plan that Israel knew he really had. Since he was the god of all the earth, it was clearly his will to keep his promises to Israel by vindicating her at last over her enemies, and by thus reordering the whole world...The phrase 'kingdom of god', therefore, carried unambiguously the *hope* that YHWH would act thus.<sup>57</sup>

An unlikely example of this pervasive expectation of deliverance in the days of the fourth kingdom of Daniel 7, is Herod the Great, himself hardly a paragon of faithfulness to Israel's God and covenants. Still, when he was approached by the magi from the east who were searching for the one "*who has been born king of the Jews*" (a rather impolitic way of putting matters on the part of the magi), he seems to have been well aware of what was up.

*When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. And when he had gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the people together, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. So they said to him, "In Bethlehem of Judaea, for thus it is written by the prophet:*

*But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are not the least among the rulers of Judah; For out of you shall come a **Ruler** who will shepherd My people Israel."*

(Matthew 2:3-6)

Herod is certainly on the other side of the belief spectrum from Simeon, yet both illustrate the powerful sense that *the fullness of time* had come, and that the promised deliverance had reference to the divinely-established kingdom prophesied in Daniel. Simeon welcomed this; Herod feared it. Safe to say neither fully understood it. Thus when John the Baptist and then Jesus came preaching "*Repent! For the kingdom of heaven is at hand,*" the entire nation was both anticipating the message and fractured as to what that message meant, not only prophetically, but perhaps even more so politically. Victory meant different things to different groups of Second Temple Jews: to the Sadducees it meant loss of the protection and power afforded them as essentially Roman agents in the governance of Palestine. To the Pharisees it often meant loss of their status as the 'righteous' ones, the defenders and (in their own minds) keepers of Torah. To the zealot it meant the final defeat of the Roman legions and the establishment of the Davidic

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<sup>57</sup> Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*; 203.

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monarchy once again. To the Essene it meant vindication of his separatist lifestyle, his aloofness from the Temple and its mechanisms and machinations. Old Testament prophecy was filtered in that time through the lens of the political standing of the various sects within Second Temple Judaism, much as Scripture has often been filtered through the lens of socio-political circumstances throughout Church history. Even John the Baptist apparently had his own preconceptions as to what the ‘kingdom’ would look like, and his own arrest and imminent execution by Herod Antipas did not seem to be the ‘victory’ the Baptist was anticipating. “The preaching of the kingdom presents us with the reality and the presence of the King, continuous with the Old Testament proclamation, but discontinuous with the contemporary expectations.”<sup>58</sup>

### **The “Two Peaks” Argument:**

It is common within modern evangelical scholarship to say that the Jews simply misunderstood the prophecies, or that the messianic prophecies of the Old Testament *appeared* to be just one eschatological ‘peak,’ when in fact upon closer view there were two ‘peaks.’ This is a plausible explanation of the remarkable lack of understanding on the part of the Jews with regard to Jesus’ message of the kingdom. However, it lacks the support of Scripture. For one thing, it is not correct to say that Israel rejected her Messiah; thousands (and perhaps tens of thousands) of Jews, including Pharisees and priests, did believe, and comprised the bulk of the Christian community for the first decades of its history. Beyond that, the concept of ‘two peaks’ is not to be found among the New Testament writers as a reason for why the majority of their Jewish brethren were rejecting the truth of the kingdom as having come in and through Jesus Christ. In fact, in this rejection Stephen simply sees the continuation of a long line of rebellion and disobedience within the Jewish people,

*You stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears! You always resist the Holy Spirit; as your fathers did, so do you. Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who foretold the coming of the Just One, of whom you now have become the betrayers and murderers, who have received the law by the direction of angels and have not kept it.*

(Acts 7:51-53)

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<sup>58</sup> VanGemeren, *Progress*: 349.

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Rather than positing a ‘two peaks’ theory, the apostles spoke of the prophets of the Old Testament as fully predicting exactly what transpired in the life, and death, of the Messiah. Most cogent in this regard is the statement of Peter regarding the ancient prophets who peered into the future, seeking to understand what the Spirit of God was showing them so dimly.

*Of this salvation the prophets have inquired and searched carefully, who prophesied of the grace that would come to you, searching what, or what manner of time, the Spirit of Christ who was in them was indicating when **He testified beforehand the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow**. To them it was revealed that, not to themselves, but to us they were ministering the things which now have been reported to you through those who have preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven – things which angels desire to look into. (I Peter 1:10-12)*

It is rather the case that the kingdom came in the Person of Jesus Christ *exactly* as prophesied, but that the victory that was both explicit and implicit in the promise of the kingdom needed to be reconceived in the light both of Jesus’ own teaching and His death and resurrection. The *enemy*, always perceived as the prevailing pagan overlord, was uniformly seen as the target, so to speak, of the Messianic Davidic King: if it was Greek, then the Lord would effect deliverance by defeating the Greeks; if the Romans, then the Coming One would wage victorious war against the legions. But it should be noted that the key prophecies of Daniel 2 & 7 do not actually specify that the ‘stone cut without hands’ or the ‘One like the Son of Man’ crushed or defeated any one of the world empires. In the first instance, the stone ground *the entire idolatrous statue* to dust; in the second vision the eternal kingdom was without reference to any of the beasts of the earth – it was a heavenly kingdom that would rule forever over the earth. It is the Apostle Paul who teaches us who the real enemies were, those whose utter defeat was the mission of the Messiah.

*And you, being dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He has made alive together with Him, having forgiven you all trespasses, having wiped out the handwriting of requirements that was against us, which was contrary to us. And He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross. **Having disarmed principalities and powers, He made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them in it.** (Colossians 2:13-15)*

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The ongoing battle – though victory has been ensured, the battle continues – was not intended to be against Greeks or Romans, or any other earthly power, but “*against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places.*”<sup>59</sup> Thus victory remains the essential feature of the coming of the Kingdom, only a victory against an enemy far more insidious and powerful than any worldly empire or king: Satan. It is as Jesus Himself said,

*But Jesus knew their thoughts, and said to them: “Every kingdom divided against itself is brought to desolation, and every city or house divided against itself will not stand. If Satan casts out Satan, he is divided against himself. How then will his kingdom stand? And if I cast out demons by Beelzebub, by whom do your sons cast them out? Therefore they shall be your judges. **But if I cast out demons by the Spirit of God, surely the kingdom of God has come upon you.***

(Matthew 12:25-28)

The realization of the kingdom in Jesus Christ seems to have required a paradigm shift among those Jews who believed, though it really should not have. Fifteen hundred years of Israel’s history, however, had inculcated within the Jewish mind that the political enemies of Israel were the existential enemies of God’s people, and therefore of God himself. What was lost to their understanding, and is often lost to their modern counterparts within Christianity, is that such outward enemies are and have always been mere instruments of the *real* enemy, the one who plotted Man’s downfall at the beginning: Satan. The weapons of *his* warfare are sin and death, and through these he has held mankind in bondage and fear throughout history. *This* is the battle and *this* is the victory.

*Inasmuch then as the children have partaken of flesh and blood, He Himself likewise shared in the same, that through death He might destroy him who had the power of death, that is, the devil, and release those who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage.*

(Hebrews 2:14-15)

Students of the New Testament teaching regarding the kingdom are, therefore, presented with a serious choice. If one adheres to the nationalistic view that the prophecies given to Israel must be literally fulfilled in Israel, then the kingdom either did not come with Jesus, or was taken away upon His departure. The reasoning is plausible:

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<sup>59</sup> Ephesians 6:12



If Pilate was still governing Judaea, then the kingdom had not come. If the Temple was not rebuilt, then the kingdom had not come. If the Messiah had not arrived, then the kingdom had not come. If Israel was not observing the Torah properly (however one might define that), then the kingdom had not come. If the pagans were not defeated and/or flocking to Zion for instruction, then the kingdom had not come.<sup>60</sup>

Yet both John and Jesus preached the arrival of the kingdom, for “*is at hand*” and “*has come upon you*” are terms of immanence, of immediate arrival, not of ‘drawing near’ while yet at some indefinite distance. Indeed, the passage quoted above from Matthew 12 is insuperable by anyone who wishes to deny that the kingdom had come in the person and work of Jesus Christ, “*But if I cast out demons by the Spirit of God, surely the kingdom of God has come upon you.*” It is inconceivable that Jesus did not view the kingdom of God as having come with His advent and in His person. Throughout His ministry He speaks of the kingdom as attending His teachings, His miracles, and most importantly, Himself. In His interview with Pilate He does not shrink back from owning the kingdom as a present reality in Him,

*Jesus answered, “My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, My servants would fight, so that I should not be delivered to the Jews; but now My kingdom is not from here.” Pilate therefore said to Him, “Are You a king then?” Jesus answered, “You say rightly that I am a king. For this cause I was born, and for this cause I have come into the world, that I should bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears My voice.”* (John 18:36-37)

Nor is there any indication in Jesus’ own statements that He intended to take the kingdom back to heaven with Him upon His ascension. Indeed, the kingdom was going to be taken away from the Jewish nation, but not so that it could be retracted into heaven until a future time, but rather so that it might be given to another people,

*Therefore I say to you, the kingdom of God will be taken from you and given to a nation bearing the fruits of it. And whoever falls on this stone will be broken; but on whomever it falls, it will grind him to powder.* (Matthew 21:43-44)

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<sup>60</sup> Wright, *JVG*; 223.

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Note the allusion in this passage to the ‘stone,’ upon which everyone who falls will be broken, but on whomever it falls they will be ground to powder. This is the language of Daniel 2, and undoubtedly Jesus is referring to the stone of Nebuchadnezzar’s dream.

*You watched while a stone was cut out without hands, which struck the image on its feet of iron and clay, and broke them in pieces. Then the iron, the clay, the bronze, the silver, and the gold were **crushed together, and became like chaff** from the summer threshing floors; the wind carried them away so that no trace of them was found. And the stone that struck the image became a great mountain and filled the whole earth.* (Daniel 2:34-35)

Jesus preached the immanence of the kingdom of God, and in His ministry and His teaching He consistently linked the kingdom with himself. To say that He did not is to ignore the testimony of the Gospels and the theological interpretation of Christ’s earthly ministry by the apostles, especially by Paul. To say that Jesus was unsuccessful in His bid to bring the kingdom of God to Israel is to insult His glory and His power, as well as to misunderstand the nature of the kingdom Jesus was inaugurating. It is important to remember that Jesus’ own contemporaries were not only looking for the kingdom, but *heard Jesus proclaiming the kingdom in Himself as King*. This was Herod’s fear; this was the Jews’ accusation of Jesus before Pilate; this was the (misconceived, still) hope and anticipation of Jesus’ disciples. Jesus’ orientation to the kingdom was unmistakable in His own day; it ought not to be mistaken today. “The point is the *Jesus was offering the return from the exile, the renewed covenant, the eschatological ‘forgiveness of sins’* – in other words, the kingdom of god. And he was offering this final eschatological blessing outside the official structures, to all the wrong people, and on his own authority. That was his real offense.”<sup>61</sup>

To further establish that Jesus intended the kingdom to remain upon His departure, we may consider His mandate to the disciples given either under the shadow of His death or after His resurrection and prior to His ascension. In a passage widely considered by modern texts on eschatology, the Olivet Discourse, Jesus provides the *one true marker* of the promised ‘end’ of the age: “*And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all the world as a witness to all the nations, and then the end will come.*”<sup>62</sup> Jesus’ commission to Peter upon the latter’s profession of faith in Him as the Christ, the Son of the living God, includes “the

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<sup>61</sup> Wright, *JVG*; 272. Italics original.

<sup>62</sup> Matthew 24:14

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keys of the kingdom,” evidently to be used by Peter and the other apostles to either lock or unlock, to grant or deny entry into the kingdom *after* Jesus’ departure. “*And I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.*”<sup>63</sup> The actions of Peter and the others with reference to these keys will be ratified by a corresponding action in heaven, undoubtedly by the risen Lord himself, seated at the right hand of the Father. But perhaps most convincing among many such passages is the one known as the Great Commission, in Matthew 28.

*And Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”*

(Matthew 28:18-20)

As Jesus’ reference to the ‘stone’ that will both break and crush was an allusion to Daniel 2, His claiming of ‘all authority in heaven and on earth’ would have drawn His disciples’ attention immediately to Daniel 7,

*I was watching in the night visions,  
And behold, One like the Son of Man, coming with the clouds of heaven!  
He came to the Ancient of Days, and they brought Him near before Him.  
Then to Him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom,  
That all peoples, nations, and languages should serve Him.  
His dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away,  
And His kingdom the one which shall not be destroyed.*

(Daniel 7:13-14)

The unmistakable message of Nebuchadnezzar’s dream and Daniel’s vision, coupled with Jesus’ own self-attestation of royal stature, should leave us in no doubt that the kingdom of God has indeed come, the stone cut without hands is progressively growing into a world-filling mountain, and the Son of Man, with the authority of the Ancient of Days behind Him, has inaugurated a kingdom whose dominion will never end. Since it was prophesied of this king that “*all peoples, nations, and languages should serve Him,*” it should come as no surprise that, using the instrumentality of “*this gospel of the kingdom,*” God is calling forth a people “*from every tongue, tribe, and nation.*”

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<sup>63</sup> Matthew 16:19. Cp John 20:23 where a very similar commission is given by the risen Jesus to all of the disciples.

### Jesus Must Reign Until...

To the question of whether or not the kingdom of God has come in the Person and Work of Jesus Christ, we answer with another question: “Is Jesus reigning now?” His own words in Matthew 28 echo the prophecy of Daniel 7, indicating that that He is, indeed, reigning now. To this we add the most frequently quoted Old Testament passage in the New Testament, Psalm 110, which clearly speaks of royal dominion and of the Messiah, David’s greater son.

*The LORD said to my Lord,  
“Sit at My right hand, till I make Your enemies Your footstool.”  
The LORD shall send the rod of Your strength out of Zion. Rule in the midst of Your enemies!*  
(Psalm 110:1-2)

It is, of course, common today to assign this prophecy to the future Millennial Kingdom, but Jesus did not do so in His own usage of the passage, nor did the apostles in theirs. Jesus uses this psalm to both teach the people concerning the true identity of the Messiah and to confound the Pharisees who were trying to trip Him up.

*While the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them, saying, “What do you think about the Christ? Whose Son is He?” They said to Him, “The Son of David.” He said to them, “How then does David in the Spirit call Him ‘Lord,’ saying:  
The LORD said to my Lord,  
“Sit at My right hand, till I make Your enemies Your footstool”?  
If David then calls Him ‘Lord,’ how is He his Son? And no one was able to answer Him a word, nor from that day on did anyone dare question Him anymore.* (Matthew 22:41-46)

The significance of Psalm 110 to the understanding of the identity and mission of Israel’s Messiah, “*the Christ*,” as Jesus puts it – cannot be overstated. Jesus definitively associates the Messiah with the son of David, something that was fairly common within Second Temple messianic thought. But He also associates the Messiah, David’s Son, with the everlasting priesthood of Melchizedek (110:4) as well as with the universal and unending reign of the Messiah (110:2, 5-7), a theme that ties Psalm 110 with Daniel 7. The verses quoted by Jesus in Matthew, however, emphasize the mission of the Messianic reign, “*until I make Your enemies a footstool for Your feet.*” The implication in this phrase is

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that the subjugation of the enemies of Christ – who are also the enemies of God’s people – would not be sudden and immediate but would take time, a period in which the Messiah would be seated at the right hand of God. This is, of course, where the New Testament writers uniformly place Jesus Christ.

*God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us by His Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the <sup>1</sup>worlds; who being the brightness of His glory and the express image of His person, and upholding all things by the word of His power, when He had by Himself purged our sins, **sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high...** (Hebrews 1:1-3)*

The same author echoes Peter’s first sermon (*cp.* Acts 2:34-35) in attesting that Jesus Christ, having risen from the dead, ascended into heaven in order to take up His throne at the right hand of the Father, to rule “*until His enemies are made a footstool.*”

*But this Man, after He had offered one sacrifice for sins forever, sat down at the right hand of God, from that time waiting till His enemies are made His footstool. (Hebrews 10:12-13)*

To say that Jesus’ current reign from heaven cannot be the ‘kingdom of God’ because it is not on earth is to misunderstand the scope of His rule from heaven. His throne may be in heaven, but the realm of His power and authority is the earth, “*All authority has been given to Me in heaven **and on earth.***” To say that because this rule is not being administered from a restored Davidic throne in Jerusalem is to force an unreasoning and unreasonable literalism upon both Old and New Testament texts that are clearly being associated together regarding the advent of the kingdom of God and that of Jesus Christ. To deny that the kingdom of God has come in the Person of Jesus Christ is either to deny that He is currently enthroned – a denial that no Christian can make and maintain any connections with the New Testament – or to posit a ‘different’ kingdom over which Jesus now reigns – this is the ‘solution’ of Dispensationalism.

Traditional Dispensationalist teaching concerning the kingdom makes a distinction between the kingdom of ‘heaven’ and the kingdom of ‘God.’ The former is the current Age of Grace in which Jesus rules from heaven through the Holy Spirit, bringing the grace of salvation apart from the Law to the gentile nations. The latter is the rule of the returned Messiah over the nation of Israel during the Millennium. It is Matthew that tends to use

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the phrase ‘kingdom of heaven’ almost exclusively, though he does also use the phrase ‘kingdom of God’ as well (Matthew uses ‘heaven’ 32 times, while using ‘God’ only four times). Mark and Luke use the phrase ‘kingdom of God’ exclusively. “Older dispensational thought distinguished between the ‘kingdom of God’ and the ‘kingdom of heaven,’ but today very few argue for such a distinction.”<sup>64</sup> This change in view has come about simply as scholars have noticed that the very same aspects of the kingdom – for instance, the Parables of the Kingdom – are posited by Matthew in regard to the ‘kingdom of heaven’ and by Mark and/or Luke with reference to the ‘kingdom of God.’ A harmony of passages concerning the ‘kingdom’ proves the two phrases to be essentially synonymous. Schreiner concludes, “the expression ‘kingdom of heaven’ focuses on the truth that God’s kingdom is from above. His kingdom is not an earthly one but rather represents his sovereignty and rule over all other kingdoms and all other so-called gods. In particular, Matthew emphasizes the inbreaking of God’s heavenly kingdom in Jesus.”<sup>65</sup>

Psalm 110 and its frequent usage in the New Testament informs us that the manner of Christ’s reign from heaven over the earth was what God had intended all along – it is not a Plan B, an expedience necessitated by the rejection of the Messiah by Israel. Rather we understand that the Danielic kingdom is inaugurated in Jesus Christ: the ‘*stone cut without hands*’ progressively advances into a great mountain, and the empires of this world are inexorably crushed by its advance. This advance – if we compare Scripture with Scripture – is nothing less than the preaching of ‘*this gospel of the kingdom*’ predicated by Jesus as the true harbinger of the end time. Jesus is the ‘firstfruits’ of this world-wide spread of the salvation of God through faith in Him. “The point of the present kingdom is that it is the first-fruits of the future kingdom; and the future kingdom involves the abolition, not of space, time, or the cosmos itself, but rather of that which threatens space, time, and creation, namely, sin and death.”<sup>66</sup> This is the fact of the matter of the kingdom of God, as summarized so powerfully by Paul in I Corinthians 15, perhaps the least appreciated of the eschatological texts of the New Testament. Here the apostle, as it were, both summarizes and interprets all of the previous prophecies and parables concerning the kingdom, showing without doubt that Jesus is currently reigning and that His reign has a

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<sup>64</sup> Schreiner, *New Testament Theology*; 46.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*; 47.

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purpose that will ultimately be fulfilled in the consummation of all things. As is the custom within the New Testament, Paul also makes use of Psalm 110,

*But now Christ is risen from the dead, and has become the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For since by man came death, by Man also came the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ all shall be made alive. But each one in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, afterward those who are Christ's at His coming. Then comes the end, when He delivers the kingdom to God the Father, when He puts an end to all rule and all authority and power. **For He must reign till He has put all enemies under His feet.** The last enemy that will be destroyed is death. For "He has put all things under His feet." But when He says "all things are put under Him," it is evident that He who put all things under Him is excepted. Now when all things are made subject to Him, then the Son Himself will also be subject to Him who put all things under Him, that God may be all in all.* (I Corinthians 15:20-28)



Just as the small stone gradually crushes the world empires and itself grows into a worldwide mountain, and as the kingdom given to the Son of Man by the Ancient of Days extends to the entire earth, so also the current reign of Christ as King from heaven will continue until "He has put an end to all rule and all authority and power." The progression of the kingdom's expanse is in line with the Kingdom Parables, and gives us understanding as to what is happening now, in the age between the ages, 'these last days.' "Plainly there is affirmed in these words a progressive subjugation of enemies leading up to the consummation."<sup>67</sup> This progression of dominion will not be followed by another 'kingdom,' but by the consummation, when Christ delivers the kingdom to His Father, and God is all in all.

<sup>66</sup> Wright, *JVG*; 218.

<sup>67</sup> Vos, Geerhardus *The Pauline Eschatology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co.; 1991); 91.

**Week 5: The Language of Eschatology**

**Key Biblical Texts:** Numbers 12:6-8; II Peter 3:14-16

*“Apocalyptic language is simultaneously literal and figurative. Apocalyptic metaphors do relate to real places, creatures, and events, but not always in a simple one-to-one, referential way.”*  
(Frederick J. Murphy, *Apocalypticism in the Bible and Its World*)

Often, when attempting to render a difficult topic simple to the average reader, scholars end up rendering it simplistic, instead. The Oxford Dictionary defines ‘simplistic’ as “treating complex issues and problems as if they were much simpler than they really are.” and the Cambridge English Dictionary expands upon this by stating that this mistaken simplicity is arrived at “by ignoring important parts” of the matter.<sup>68</sup> It is our contention that this is exactly what Lewis Sperry Chafer does with the biblical language of prophecy, and especially that of eschatological prophecy, when he concludes that understanding biblical prophecy is “simply and only a matter of giving attention to the things God has said, and said in understandable terms. The Bible terminology is always the simplest of any literature.”<sup>69</sup> This is simply (pun intended) not true. Closer to both the truth regarding the biblical text and regarding the honest reader’s struggles with certain parts of that text, is the testimony of the Westminster Confession of Faith in its article on the Holy Scriptures,

All things in Scripture are not alike plain in themselves, nor alike clear unto all: yet those things which are necessary to be known, believed, and observed for salvation are so clearly propounded, and opened in some place of Scripture or other, that not only the learned, but the unlearned, in a due use of the ordinary means, may attain unto a sufficient understanding of them.<sup>70</sup>

Certainly the Apostle Peter would have agreed with this sentiment as he considered the writings of his brother apostle, Paul, concerning the very topic that Chafer considers so amazingly simple,

*Therefore, beloved, looking forward to these things, be diligent to be found by Him in peace, without spot and blameless; and consider that the longsuffering of our Lord is salvation – as also our beloved*

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<sup>68</sup> <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/simplistic>. Accessed 02Sept2019.

<sup>69</sup> Chafer, *Systematic Theology: Volume IV*; 259.

<sup>70</sup> Westminster Confession of Faith; I.VII. [http://files1.wts.edu/uploads/pdf/about/WCF\\_30.pdf](http://files1.wts.edu/uploads/pdf/about/WCF_30.pdf). Accessed 02Sept2019.



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*brother Paul, according to the wisdom given to him, has written to you, as also in all his epistles, speaking in them of these things, in which are some things hard to understand, which untaught and unstable people twist to their own destruction, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures.*

(II Peter 3:14-16)

Chafer's error is in the service of his eschatology – a simplistic reading of Scripture is absolutely necessary for the Dispensational eschatology, and even with that there are a vast quantity of holes and loose ends that need mending. Chafer leans upon the principle that language is intended to communicate, rather than the biblical evidence that language was introduced to confuse. "Whatever the prophetic message may be, it is dependent upon language – simple terms known to all – for its conveyance."<sup>71</sup> Human history has confirmed the power of language to communicate, to be sure; but it has equally (if not more) shown its ability to confuse and misdirect. "Simple terms known to all" is just not the experience of language, and certainly not the language of biblical prophecy. It is not that Chafer is wrong in asserting that God set forth His revelation in *language*, but rather that he is wrong in asserting that language is 'simple and known to all.' Language, even within one linguistic societal group, is full of nuances, dialects, figures of speech, and a myriad of other features that can render it deeper and more meaningful than its bare surface, but at the same time more complex and confusing. To say that any language is 'simple' is analogous to the evolutionist's claim that some forms of life are 'simple' because they are not as complex as other forms. *No* life is 'simple'; nor is any language.

Even a cursory reading of the Bible will inform the reader that the same literary 'language' is not used throughout. Most of the Old Testament was written in Hebrew, and most of the New in Greek; but there are obvious variations in style and genre throughout both, regardless of the common language in each. We call these different styles 'genres,' and it is simplistic to deny their presence in the Bible, and dangerous to imply that their interpretation follows the same approach. Biblical prophecy is one genre of Scripture and it has its own 'language.' Within this genre we also find the 'apocalypse,' a graphic and highly visual form of writing that also possesses its own linguistic forms and devices and its own rules of interpretation. To be sure, there has never been uniform agreement as to these rules – whether in Jewish studies or Christian – but there has been a broad consensus

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<sup>71</sup> Chafer; 259.

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that the biblical ‘languages’ of prophecy and of apocalyptic do exist and must be viewed as distinct – though by no means separated from – historical narrative or wisdom poetry. “An understanding of the nature of prophecy is the foundation for its interpretation.”<sup>72</sup>

Chafer’s view of the simplicity of biblical prophetic language flies in the face of countless millions who have read the same prophecies and have left baffled as to what is



**Bernard Ramm (1916-92)**

being said. Included among these millions is the great German Reformer Martin Luther, who said of the prophets, “They have a queer way of talking, like people who, instead of proceeding in an orderly manner, ramble off from one thing to the next, so that you cannot make head or tail of them or see what they are getting at.”<sup>73</sup> This admission did not, of course, stop Luther from interpreting the prophets, but it does show an honest assessment of the difficulties incumbent upon such an effort. Bernard Ramm

speaks of the core of the issue when he refers to the ‘language of the prophetic passage.’ Ramm comments, “We must, to begin with, *give careful attention to the language of the prophetic passage*. We must determine the meaning and significance of all proper names, events, references to geography, references to customs, references to material culture, references to flora and fauna, and references to climate.”<sup>74</sup> Added to the inherent difficulty in the prophetic *language* we also recognize different *themes* within the prophetic writings. Ramm points out that there are *figurative, poetic, and symbolic* elements in the prophecies.<sup>75</sup> Along with these elemental variations in the prophetic language, we find prophecies of *disaster, of salvation, and of woe*; there are prophetic *dirges, hymns, liturgies, lamentations, disputations, and lawsuits*.<sup>76</sup>

Perhaps the most significant element of prophetic language is the manner by which the prophets employ the past as symbolic of the future. “Much of the prophetic description of the future is in the language of past, historical events.”<sup>77</sup> Ramm continues,

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<sup>72</sup> Klein, William W., Craig L. Blomberg, & Robert L. Hubbard, Jr. *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Dallas: Word Publishing; 1993); 303.

<sup>73</sup> Luther, Martin *Works*, XIX.350; quoted by Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology: Volume 2*; 33n1.

<sup>74</sup> Ramm, Bernard *Protestant Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House; 1970); 246.

<sup>75</sup> *Idem*.

<sup>76</sup> *Cp. Klein et. al.*; 292-299.

<sup>77</sup> Ramm; 247.

The new creation is the analogue of original creation; the blessedness to come is in terms of paradise past; future judgment is likened to the flood of the past; destructive judgment finds its type in the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah; great deliverance is paralleled after the deliverance of the exodus...The strict literalist would *ex hypothesi* have to call for not only the restitution of Israel, but all the nations which surrounded Israel.<sup>78</sup>

This latter interpretive route has been followed by many Dispensationalists: the restoration not only of the theocracy of Israel but also the nations of Moab and Ammon, of Edom and of ancient pharaonic Egypt, of the long-lost empires of Babylon, Assyria, and Medo-Persia. To be sure, many Dispensationalists substitute the current national occupants of the lands once inhabited by these ancient tribes, but it must be recognized that to the extent such substitution takes place, to the same extent literalism is abandoned. In the same way, modern literalists substitute nuclear weapons for the ‘fire and brimstone’ of biblical prophecy, a practice that is hardly literal. Ramm quotes the 19<sup>th</sup> Century Scottish theologian, Andrew Bruce Davidson, with approbation: “Davidson says that to call for the complete restoration of all these ancient peoples on the basis of strict literal interpretation ‘*may not unjustly be called the insanity of literalism.*’”<sup>79</sup>

The argument returned by literalists is that ‘nothing is impossible with God.’ In other words, He is perfectly capable of restoring the scene of the ultimate prophetic fulfillment to exactly the same political and ethnic parameters as existed when the prophecies were first uttered. There is no arguing against divine omnipotence, but there is room to argue divine intent. But to consider a literalistic restoration one must also ask ‘to what particular set of political geography will the restoration attain?’ The prophets span centuries of Israel’s history, in which time empires rose and fell and nations surrounding Israel disappeared into oblivion to be replaced by different ethnic groups imported by the current imperial overlord. In other words, the geopolitical situation both inside and outside of Israel was not static but was ever-changing from generation to generation. It must also be admitted that some prophetic passage deal with situations, people, and nations of which we have little or no knowledge; yet a strict literalism would demand that these, too, be restored in order for the prophecy to be fully and ultimately fulfilled.

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<sup>78</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>79</sup> Ramm; 244; italics added by Ramm.

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Literalism, in a word, does not work. Still, if literalism *had to work* we might readily agree with the literalist that *God is able to make it work*. But it is this necessity that is the product of literalist interpretation and not of biblical prophecy itself. Literalism has never been demanded of any language, and most certainly not of prophetic and poetical forms of language. To demand it in regard to biblical prophecy is a *presupposition* that is not required by the text itself; it is a *framework* predetermined by scholars, to which the biblical prophetic texts are force-fit. A caveat is in order here, to mitigate against a common response of the literalist to any view that differs: to not adhere to a strict literal interpretation of biblical prophecy is not *ipso facto* to adopt an allegorical methodology. In other words, to deny that all prophecy must be fulfilled in a strict literal sense is not to say that no prophecy may be fulfilled that way.

Indeed, the *literal* fulfillment of a prophecy is the biblical litmus test as to whether a prophet has been sent from God or not,

*...and if you say in your heart, 'How shall we know the word which the LORD has not spoken?' – when a prophet speaks in the name of the LORD, if the thing does not happen or come to pass, that is the thing which the LORD has not spoken; the prophet has spoken it presumptuously; you shall not be afraid of him.*  
(Deuteronomy 18:21-22)

Implicit in this rule, however, is the condition that the literal fulfillment of a prophecy must occur in a relatively short period of time in order to either validate or invalidate the 'prophet.' This principle gives rise to the 'multiple horizons' of biblical prophecy: the first horizon being the immanent and (usually) literal fulfillment of the prophecy which validates the prophet as from God, the longer horizon being the ultimate (and usually redemptive) fulfillment of that same prophecy. An excellent example is the famous prophecy in Isaiah 7, commonly regarded by Christians as the prediction of Jesus' birth from the virgin Mary, the 'Immanuel Prophecy.'

*Then he said, "Hear now, O house of David! Is it a small thing for you to weary men, but will you weary my God also? Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call His name Immanuel. Curds and honey He shall eat, that He may know to refuse the evil and choose the good. For before the Child shall know to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land that you dread will be forsaken by both her kings. The LORD will bring the king of Assyria upon you and your people and your father's house – days that have not come since the day that Ephraim departed from Judah."*  
(Isaiah 7:13-17)

The long horizon of this prophecy is, of course, the virgin birth of ‘Immanuel,’ the Messiah Jesus Christ. Yet “*before the child shall know to refuse the evil and choose the good,*” the immanent horizon would be reached, and the lands of the Syrian and the Samaritan foes will both be conquered by Assyria. The near horizon was truly not far off,

*Then I went to the prophetess, and she conceived and bore a son. Then the LORD said to me, “Call his name Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz; for before the child shall have knowledge to cry ‘My father’ and ‘My mother,’ the riches of Damascus and the spoil of Samaria will be taken away before the king of Assyria.”* (Isaiah 8:3-4)

This immanent fulfillment of the prophecy would have validated Isaiah’s role as a prophet from Jehovah (if that role had any need of validation at this point in his career), but the language of the Child continues to grow within this same body of prophecy, indicating that the near-term fulfillment – the *literal* fulfillment of the birth of a child and the destruction of the kings of Samaria and Syria – did not exhaust the meaning of the prophecy, hence pointing the reader to another horizon and another Child,

*For unto us a Child is born, Unto us a Son is given;  
And the government will be upon His shoulder.  
And His name will be called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God,  
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.  
Of the increase of His government and peace there will be no end,  
Upon the throne of David and over His kingdom,  
To order it and establish it with judgment and justice  
From that time forward, even forever.  
The zeal of the LORD of hosts will perform this.* (Isaiah 9:6-7)

Perhaps the most telling indictment against a strictly literal interpretation of biblical prophecy and of its anticipated fulfillment, is the fact that the New Testament writers did not employ this method. The clearest example of this fact is the usage Matthew makes of Hosea 11:1,

**Hosea 11:1**

*When Israel was a child, I loved him,  
And out of Egypt I called My son.*

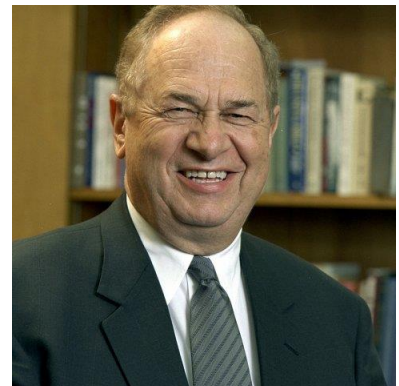
**Matthew 2:15**

*...that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by  
the Lord through the prophet, saying, “Out of  
Egypt I called My Son.”*

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It cannot be said that Matthew was simply allegorizing, or using the passage from Hosea as an illustration, for he himself says, “*that it might be fulfilled...*”, clearly indicating that, for him anyway, the return of Jesus with His parents from their self-imposed exile in Egypt was the *fulfillment* of the prophetic word in Hosea. This does not mean that Matthew failed to recognize the context of Hosea 1 – the *Exodus of Israel from Egypt* – but rather that he saw in this Old Testament passage (which, by the way, is not overtly prophetic in and of itself) an ultimate fulfillment in Jesus Christ. If we object to this usage of Old Testament prophecy on the basis of adherence to a strict literalism, then we find ourselves in conflict with our own doctrine of the inspiration of Scripture. Perhaps it is safer to abandon the hermeneutic of strict literalism, to recognize literal fulfillment when Scripture presents it, and to consider the long-term horizon of biblical prophecy within the *language and terminology* of prophecy.

Again, these comments regarding the limitations of a literalist interpretive approach are by no means to be taken as an abandonment of the ‘literal’ word in favor of a spiritualized or allegorical interpretation. This is the path wrongly and disastrously taken by liberal scholars over the past two hundred years. What has been said so far is a plea to interpret the ‘literal’ prophecy in a biblically relevant manner, meaning in a manner consonant with the way the later biblical writers interpreted prophecy. The literalism that may be affirmed in all cases, beyond the near-term literal fulfillments of individual prophecies, is the belief among all biblical prophets in the *literal events of God’s creative and redemptive history*. The prophets did not use Creation, or the Flood, or the Exodus as ‘metaphors’ illustrating moral principles; rather they believed these events to be *literal history*, while at the same time possessing deep and abiding *prophetic future* significance. Walter Kaiser properly points out that “prophecy is not prewritten history,” in the sense that when we read a prophetic passage we are not reading, as it were, a news report of the future event by an eyewitness. We are, however, frequently reading the predictive prophecy in the language of past events, the historical reality of which the prophets were firmly convinced. Kaiser writes, “Few features in prophecy are more common than the expression of the



**Walter Kaiser (b. 1933)**

at the same time possessing deep and abiding *prophetic future* significance. Walter Kaiser properly points out that “prophecy is not prewritten history,” in the sense that when we read a prophetic passage we are not reading, as it were, a news report of the future event by an eyewitness. We are, however, frequently reading the predictive prophecy in the language of past events, the historical reality of which the prophets were firmly convinced. Kaiser writes, “Few features in prophecy are more common than the expression of the

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future in terms that have been borrowed from Israel's historic past."<sup>80</sup> We have already seen that Israel's past was incorporated by divine fiat into her recurring present: the calendar itself was oriented around God's great acts of deliverance on behalf of His people Israel. History, for Israel, was a way of thinking of Today; it should come as no surprise that it also became the manner by which Israel also thought about Tomorrow. Indeed, in apocalyptic prophecy like the Book of Daniel, the history of Israel becomes the platform by which the future of the entire world is more clearly understood. Understanding, then, the role of history in the prophetic message becomes indispensable to understanding of prophecy itself. Gerhard von Rad summarizes this in a chapter titled "Time, History, Prophetic Eschatology" within his *Old Testament Theology*.

With this starting-point, we soon arrive at a proper understanding of the eschatological message of the prophets. Briefly, within the horizons of eschatology as elsewhere, Israel's ideas about saving history must be given back their proper place and their due weight. It is impossible to understand the eschatological message of the prophets in the light of any kind of mythological or specifically cultic complexes of ideas, or in that of disappointed hopes. It can only be understood from the point of view of the distinctive character of Israel's thought about history, a subject in which the prophets engaged with the utmost intensity...<sup>81</sup>

Thus the future of God's active involvement both within His people and within His world is presented in the language of God's actions in the past: literal, historical events that manifested God's power, His righteousness, His grace, etc., and also presaged (in many instances) the fuller plan of God to be revealed in the future. It must be said that biblical prophecy does predict events that will happen within 'future history,' while it must also be recognized that these predictions are typically presented in the language of past historical events. "*The prophecies predict literal events, though the descriptions do not portray the events literally.*"<sup>82</sup>

### **The Divine Plan as a Blueprint:**

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<sup>80</sup> Kaiser, Walter C. and Moisés Silva *An Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House; 1994); 151.

<sup>81</sup> Von Rad, Gerhard *Old Testament Theology: Volume II* (New York: Harper & Row; 1965); 116.

<sup>82</sup> Klein, *et. al.*; 369. Italics original.

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If we accept, then, the historical language of predictive prophecy, we must next address the questions of divine purpose. This is an area in which literalist scholars get hung up by placing the restoration of Israel as the central purpose of God's historic plan. This is, perhaps, justified by the frequency with which such historical events as the Exodus are utilized in biblical prophetic language. But it ignores the equally significant usage of Creation, the Flood, and Sodom and Gomorrah as prophetic terminology pointing to antitypical fulfillment in the future, both of Israel and of the world. To say that Israel has a very significant and abiding place in God's revealed purpose in history is not the same as saying that Israel has the *central* place within that divine scheme. It must be maintained that the central place belongs to Jesus Christ – not only the promised Messiah of Israel but also the promised Seed of Woman of Eden. This perspective is the critical lens through which biblical prophecy may be seen more clearly, and without which biblical prophecy cannot be properly seen at all.

This divine blueprint – the revealed plan of God through both Creation and, most importantly, the Scriptures – lays out the framework and the finishes of the overarching purpose of God in Time. The lines of biblical revelation in the history of Creation, the deliverance by God of His people time after time, His judgments on rebellious mankind as well as disobedient Israel, but most of all His seminal promise to furnish a Redeemer who would reverse the catastrophe of the Fall and set all things once more to right. Eschatology may be viewed as the 'finished house,' and as such it must follow the blueprint if it is to align with God's eternal purpose in Creation and Redemption. This particular metaphor is employed by the author of the letter to the Hebrews, to show how much greater Jesus, the promised Messiah of Israel and Seed of Woman, is even than Moses, the great Lawgiver and Ruler of Israel. The passage shows that the purpose of God's work in Creation and Redemption – from beginning to end – may be reasonably viewed as the building of a house.

*Therefore, holy brethren, partakers of the heavenly calling, consider the Apostle and High Priest of our confession, Christ Jesus, who was faithful to Him who appointed Him, as Moses also was faithful in all His house. For this One has been counted worthy of more glory than Moses, inasmuch as He who built the house has more honor than the house. For every house is built by someone, but He who built all things is God. And Moses indeed was faithful in all His house as a servant, for a*



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*testimony of those things which would be spoken afterward, but Christ as a Son over His own house, whose house we are if we hold fast the confidence and the rejoicing of the hope firm to the end.*

(Hebrews 3:1-6)

Peter elaborates on this theme by emphasizing each believer's part in the overall structure, while also alluding to the true nature of the 'temple' of God.

*Coming to Him as to a living stone, rejected indeed by men, but chosen by God and precious, you also, as living stones, are being built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.*

(I Peter 2:4-5)

The point of including these passages here, along with the metaphor of the house, is to highlight the tendency within both Jewish and Christian eschatological writing to treat the subject as if it were a completely separate building. This is not to say that prophecy scholars and writers completely ignore the Bible in their works, but rather that they often fail to follow the blueprint of the divine purpose revealed there. As the lines of the plan are so often drawn in the ink of God's past acts of intervention, the final structure cannot be discerned if these acts are not allowed to direct our study into what God has revealed concerning the future. Thus it becomes the first and foundational step in Eschatology to make oneself thoroughly acquainted with the divine blueprint of God's purpose. This purpose is not that Israel be set above all of the nations of the world in political might, nor is it to deliver the Church from human wrath on account of her testimony of Jesus Christ. This purpose is to glorify the power, the wisdom, and the grace of God through Jesus Christ. As we consider the various components of eschatological study – the well-known items such as the Rapture, the Millennium, or the Antichrist – our goal will be to analyze and interpret the biblical data *in accordance with the blueprint*.

### **The Language of Apocalypse:**

The preceding part of this lesson may have had the unintended consequence of making the interpretation of biblical prophecy sound easy, which result would be just a different path to arrive at Chafer's incorrect conclusion. The language prophecy is challenging, as it seems to have its own rules of grammar and its own exceptions to the rules. The historical elements of prophetic vocabulary are more attainable to the reader, as they are presented in simple prose. But as these events are incorporated into prophetic

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poetry, lamentation, judgment, and hymn they become more difficult to interpret within the context of predictive prophecy. These elements combine, finally, with the fact that no man can see the future clearly; as Kaiser noted, it is not simply ‘prewritten history.’ Indeed, the most forward looking portions of biblical prophecy are presented in the most graphic, vivid, and hard-to-understand language, called ‘apocalypse.’ It is true that in all things we now “*see as in a mirror, dimly,*” but it can be argued that when dealing with the language of apocalypse we are almost blind.

The word itself is Greek, meaning ‘revelation’ (thus the last book of the New Testament is often called the *Apocalypse*. This particular genre of writing – which is not unique to the Bible, by the way – goes beyond the language of the rest of the Scriptures, which are also ‘apocalypse’ in the sense that they constitute divine revelation. Apocalypse, strictly so called, almost universally deals with *the future*, and proves by its imagery and language that the future is not something that man can look at and describe



**Frederick J. Murphy (1949-2011)**

as if it were sitting on a table in front of him. Apocalypse frequently incorporates other beings – from the angelic to the monstrous – who mediate the revelation to the recipient in a manner that is usually unsettling, often terrifying. The future, to man, is supernatural in the sense that man has no experiential basis for processing it. Apocalypse, therefore, employs imagery and beings that are as supernatural as is the future itself. Frederick Murphy, a Catholic scholar on the

topic, provides one commonly accepted definition of apocalypse as:

A genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework, in which revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient, disclosing a transcendent reality which is both temporal, insofar as it envisages eschatological salvation, and spatial, insofar as it involves another, supernatural world.<sup>83</sup>

Biblical apocalyptic writings were never set apart in a context or a world separate from that of God’s people: Old Testament apocalypse centered around the current *Sitz im Leben* of Israel; New Testament apocalypse does the same with regard to the Church. Often

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<sup>83</sup> Murphy, Frederick J. *Apocalypticism in the Bible and Its World* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic: 2012); 6.

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apocalyptic revelation occurs at a time when the fortunes of God's people are at their lowest ebb. "Apocalypses are intended to interpret the present, earthly circumstances in light of the supernatural world and of the future, and to influence both the understanding and the behavior of the audience by means of divine authority."<sup>84</sup> Incorporated into apocalyptic literature are both the 'current events' surrounding Israel and/or the Church at the time of the vision, as well as the overarching struggles in the Cosmos – the divinely created order – as it "*groans and labors with birth pangs until now.*"<sup>85</sup> The result of this combination of this-worldly and other-worldly realities within one biblical style of writing proved to be too much even for Daniel, to whom quite a few apocalyptic visions were granted.

*And I, Daniel, fainted and was sick for days; afterward I arose and went about the king's business. I was astonished by the vision, but no one understood it.* (Daniel 8:27)

So much of biblical eschatology is presented in apocalyptic literature and language that it becomes almost the core of the biblical message concerning the future. Scholars and simple believers alike have always felt this, seeing in the books of Daniel and Ezekiel, parts of Zechariah, and, of course, the Book of the Revelation, the essential biblical teaching concerning the future. The error has always come in by readers pretending to understand apocalyptic writing without recognizing its very different form and function. Apocalypse, frankly, is what the future would probably look like to any one of us, if we were granted a glimpse into it. It would contain definite elements that connect with the world as we have known it in the present and the past, mixed with vivid and unsettling images of what is yet to be, what we have no perceptive capacity to comprehend. "Apocalyptic language invites us to experience the world it creates, with all its fluidity and complexity and contradictions. It appeals to our deepest emotions, fears, and desires."<sup>86</sup>

It is upon apocalyptic literature that the perennial debate regarding the 'literal' versus the 'figurative' or 'allegorical' breaks into confusion, simply because too often the wrong questions are being asked. "Apocalyptic language is simultaneously literal and figurative. Apocalyptic metaphors do relate to real places, creatures, and events, but not

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<sup>84</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>85</sup> Romans 8:22

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always in a simple one-to-one, referential way.”<sup>87</sup> Perhaps the reason apocalyptic prophecy is found in the Bible – and the reason why it is often so difficult and unnerving – is that God’s plan (blueprint) does not merely involve Man and human history; it is *cosmic* in scope and intent. The vast universe both of space and of being is entirely encompassed by the Creation of God and the Redemption of God, all of which is subsumed under the authority of the Son of God, Jesus Christ. It is the incorporation of cosmological elements into the vision of the future that renders it at time incomprehensible to human readers; it may be that its interpretation was all along intended to be retrospective.

The tendency of modern scholars – believing and unbelieving alike – has been either to render apocalyptic language too simplistic to be of any revelatory value, or to treat the entire genre as too fantastical to be anything other than myth. On the one hand, the exegete attempts to apply standard hermeneutical tools to the interpretation of apocalyptic writings, on the other hand, the scholar simply dismisses the apocalypse as unintelligible nonsense. Henry Virkler addresses both extremes, “Our unfamiliarity with a particular genre such as apocalyptic does not affect the trustworthiness of the information contained in apocalyptic passages, but only our ability to interpret them with assurance.”<sup>88</sup> In their expansive resource on Biblical Hermeneutics, William Klein, Craig Blomberg, and Robert Hubbard offer a six-step process for interpreting apocalyptic prophecy. The first step is telling: “Set a modest goal.”<sup>89</sup> We shall attempt to put that step into practice as we consider the apocalyptic writings of the Bible.

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<sup>86</sup> Murphy; 13.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*; 12.

<sup>88</sup> Virkler, Henry A. *Hermeneutics: Principles and Processes of Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books; 1981); 194.

<sup>89</sup> Klein, *et. al.*; 312.

**Week 6:      There Remains a Sabbath Rest**

**Key Biblical Texts:** Genesis 2:1-3; Hebrews 4:1-11

*“This rest is an eschatological expectation,  
A fulfillment of the prophecies of redemption,  
an entering into that rest which has always been, from the beginning, with God.”  
(A. T. Lincoln, *From Sabbath to Lord’s Day*)*

If one should ask a Christian to make a list of five or ten ‘eschatological’ terms from the Bible, the result would include some very familiar words – familiar, though not necessarily well-understood: Millennium would be on almost everyone’s list, and the Rapture would be on every Dispensationalist’s list. The ‘Day of the Lord’ would be there, and hopefully the Resurrection – though some could fill up four or five slots on the list with different resurrections. The ‘Great Tribulation,’ the ‘Lake of Fire,’ Gehenna, and, of course, Armageddon would all be enumerated. The Second Coming of Jesus Christ should be on every list, but its location might differ from list to list. So far the list has nine well-known eschatological events, and more could be added. But one event that probably would make very few, if any, of the lists is: The Sabbath. Yet, in terms of the divine blueprint for the history both of Creation and of Redemption, there might not be a more important term among all of the others.

Typically the term ‘Sabbath’ defines a particular day in the week, the meaning of which, relative to believers (and especially *Gentile* believers) has been hotly debated for the past two thousand years, without resolution. The historical reality of the early Church assembling on the first day of the week – our *Sunday* – has led many Christian scholars to view the Lord’s Day as ‘the Christian Sabbath.’ This, however, grossly limits the biblical scope of meaning of the Sabbath, as if it were simply ‘one day in seven,’ the observance of which can be changed as a matter of convenience. Reformed theologians take as settled truth that a Sabbath observance was present among the faithful antediluvians, and many modern evangelicals believe that their activity – or, better, lack of activity – on Sunday is the transfer of the earlier ordinance to the later, from the *Jewish Sabbath* to the *Lord’s Day*. Of course, most modern evangelicals are hardly so strict about the ‘Christian Sabbath,’ and would consider even a fraction of the strict observance of the Sabbath enjoined by the Pharisees to be intolerable legalism. Hence the debate continues to rage (if anything rages

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in the modern Church) about what is lawful on Sunday, or whether one even needs to view Sunday as any different from the other days of the week. Seventh Day Adventists, as we know, consider that the Christian Church erred in switching to Sunday worship, and continues to assemble on the last day of the week: Saturday.

But there is powerful indication in the Bible that the Sabbath has a much deeper meaning than that of cessation from labor, or even of assembly to worship. Stringing together the various comments made regarding the Sabbath, from the opening chapters of Genesis to Chapter 4 of the Epistle to the Hebrews, and even on into the Book of Revelation, one will conclude that the term has a definite *eschatological* meaning that has often been overlooked. Some of the allusions are implicit, as this promise from Revelation 14, which has the Sabbath of Creation underlying the hope possessed by believers,

*Then I heard a voice from heaven saying to me, "Write: 'Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on.'"*

*"Yes," says the Spirit, "that they may **rest from their labors**, and their works follow them."* (Revelation 14:13)

But other passages are far more explicit, such as this one from Hebrews 4 that will be a central focus in this lesson,

*There remains therefore a rest for the people of God. For he who has entered His rest has himself also ceased from his works as God did from His.* (Hebrews 4:9-10)

The translation of this passage above, from the New King James version, indicates how little connection is made among modern scholars between the future hope of believers and the Sabbath of Creation. The allusion in verse 10 to God resting on the seventh day should have been sufficient to see the connection, but even more powerfully, the word translated simply 'rest' in verse 9 above, is *sabbatismos* – 'Sabbath rest.' Very few books that deal either with the Sabbath or with Eschatology seem to bring these two concepts together. There is no mention of the Sabbath in Chafer's section on Eschatology, though he does mention it in his section on Ecclesiology, but only to say that it has been abolished during the Church Age and will be reinstated during the Millennium. Even Reformed writes, such as the contributor to the symposium *These Last Days: A Christian*

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*View of History*, make no mention of the Sabbath in terms of Eschatology. Cornelis Venema, in his excellent *The Promise of the Future*, devotes part of one page only to the above-referenced passage from Hebrews 4. With the overwhelming lack of published work on the connection between the Sabbath and the *eschaton*, it would certainly seem that the two are not connected at all.

Indeed, if Hebrews 4 did not make the connection so explicitly – and emphatically, as the sabbath rest is the topic of the first half of the chapter and not just a couple of verses



**Andrew T. Lincoln (b. 1944)**

– we might reasonably leave the Sabbath debate within its normal bounds: a day of the week. Fortunately, there have been a few who have recognized not only the connection between the Sabbath and the *eschaton*, but who have also recognized the importance of the Sabbath itself to the flow

of God’s entire plan and purpose for both Creation and Redemption. Andrew T. Lincoln, professor *emeritus* of New Testament at the University of Gloucestershire, furnishes an entire chapter on the subject within the compendium *From Sabbath to Lord’s Day*. Lincoln’s contribution is titled “Sabbath, Rest, and Eschatology in the New Testament,” and in it he gives full and long-overdue attention both to the meaning of the Sabbath at Creation and to the meaning of the *sabbatismos* – the Sabbath Rest – in Hebrews 4 and elsewhere in Scripture. Pending a fuller investigation of the biblical material as this particular lesson progresses, we may summarize both Lincoln’s perspective and the conclusion of this lesson in his words.

The rest is an eschatological expectation, a fulfillment of the prophecies of redemption, an entering into that rest which has always been, from the beginning, with God. In the fulfillment of this hope the whole purpose of creation and the whole purpose of redemption are reunited.<sup>90</sup>

In spite of Lincoln’s insights, and even more remarkably in spite of what the writer of Hebrews has to say, the vast majority of biblical scholars seem not to consider the

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<sup>90</sup> Andrew T. Lincoln, quoted in Carson, D. A. ed. *From Sabbath to Lord’s Day* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing

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institution of the Sabbath in Genesis 2 as prophetic. This view fails to deal fully with Genesis 2:1-3, in that it fails to pursue the question that comes naturally to any reader of the passage: ‘Why should God rest?’ All acknowledge that Creation did not fatigue the Creator. Many assume that God rested solely as an example to Man, that mankind should also rest on the seventh day of the week. However, this is not stipulated in the text of Genesis 2, which speaks only of God resting with no mention whatsoever of Man participating, or following, in that rest.

*Thus the heavens and the earth, and all the host of them, were finished. And on the seventh day God ended His work which He had done, and He rested on the seventh day from all His work which He had done. Then God blessed the seventh day and sanctified it, because in it He rested from all His work which God had created and made.* (Genesis 2:1-3)

The lack of any mention of Adam either participating in this *sabbatismos* or of any edict that mankind should follow this pattern from week to week throughout time, is quite remarkable when one considers the author of the passage – Moses. The lawgiver of Israel certainly ties the Creation account into the promulgation of the Sinaic code in which the Sabbath becomes a central feature of Israelite life:

*Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the LORD your God. In it you shall do no work: you, nor your son, nor your daughter, nor your male servant, nor your female servant, nor your cattle, nor your stranger who is within your gates. **For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day.** Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and hallowed it.* (Exodus 20:8-11)

It stands to reason – or at the very least, it is not unreasonable – that the same author of Genesis 2 as of Exodus 20 would have foreshadowed the institution of the weekly Sabbath at the time of the divine Sabbath’s original institution. But Moses does not do this; he very simply presents the divine rest on the seventh day in terms of God alone. Given this lack of any explicit ‘purpose’ for the Sabbath vis-à-vis Man – for no *explicit* purpose is given in Genesis 2 – the passage motivates the reader to ask ‘Why?’<sup>91</sup> Why did God rest when it is evident that He does not grow tired? It can only mean that the ‘rest’ of

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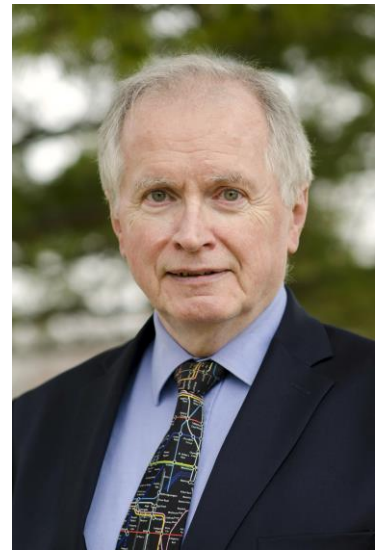
House; 1982); 209.

<sup>91</sup> Many scholars have found *implicit* human observation required by the fact that God both ‘hallowed or sanctified’ and



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God is something deeper and fuller than refreshment after exertion. Additionally, the fact that the usual formula for the passing of a Creation Day – *and there was evening, and there was morning* – is lacking in regard to the seventh day. This day stands off from the others; it does not merely follow them, but rather seems to extend them indefinitely. Or perhaps we can say that the seventh day sets the tone and trajectory for the previous six days of labor. D. A. Carson writes, “God separated the seventh day; we interpret this in terms of an eschatological, proleptic sign indicating some future rest.”<sup>92</sup>



**D. A. Carson (b. 1946)**

Carson posits from the Creation Account that, in spite of common theological consideration, it is not *Man* who is the crowning moment of Creation, but rather it is *the Sabbath*. “As we are told that God ceased from working on the seventh day to ‘rest’ and be ‘refreshed’ (although He needed neither rest nor refreshing), this can only indicate that the goal of creation is not mankind, that the crown of creation is not man, but that all creative activities of God flow into a universal rest period.”<sup>93</sup> This perspective is reasonable when we consider the way in which the seventh day is treated by God relative to the other days: it is the seventh day that is blessed and sanctified, setting it apart *in God’s estimation* if not immediately for Man’s edification. Carson goes on to say that the last act of divine creation was not Man, but rather it was a day of rest – the Sabbath.<sup>94</sup> This is undoubtedly true, for God could very well have set forth a six-day week, creating both the first six days and all that which was in each day. But God created a seventh day (we must not think that the seventh day flowed inevitably from the first six), a day in which He rested and a day that He blessed and set apart from the other days. This is significant, and its significance goes beyond the structure of the week. Gerhard von Rad also recognizes the significance of this ‘creation’ of the seventh day, “This rest is in every respect a new thing

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‘blessed’ the day, and that any faithful worshiper of God would thus also observe the seventh day in honor of what God did. This may be true, but it does not change the fact that the Genesis account offers no *explicit* requirement upon man to follow the divine example.

<sup>92</sup> Carson, *From Sabbath to Lord’s Day*; 29.

<sup>93</sup> *Idem*.

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along with the process of creation, not simply the negative sign of its end; it is anything but an appendix.”<sup>95</sup>

Hopefully we shall see that this creation – the seventh day, the Sabbath – was something that not only crowned the whole of Creation but also looked beyond the advent



**Gerhard von Rad (1901-71)**

of sin into Creation, an eventuality with which the Creator was already fully aware. That the Sabbath Day comes at the end of the six days of Creation has often been incorporated into the doctrine of chiliasm – that a seventh-thousand year period will follow six thousand years of human history. Thus the eschatological significance of the Sabbath of Creation has been tacitly admitted by many chiliasts throughout history. But this view (as will be shown) is the unnecessary and probably erroneous combination of several biblical passages and

Concepts, and misses the underlying meaning and eschatological thrust of the Sabbath: Rest. The real meaning, as we hope to develop further in this lesson, is summarized by von Rad, “Thus at creation God prepared what will benefit man in this life, what in fact will be necessary for him, yes, that which one day will receive him eschatologically in eternity.”<sup>96</sup>

Though no explicit command is given in Genesis 2 that Adam and his descendants were to observe the Sabbath rest on a weekly basis, there sample reason to believe that the faithful among the pre-Israelite nations did honor it in some form, and that even the unbelieving majority of the ancient world had some form of weekly day of rest or cessation of labor. The ancient Babylonians, for example, had fast days on the seventh, fourteenth, twenty-first, and twenty-eight days of their lunar months.<sup>97</sup> Umberto Cassuto, an



**Umberto Cassuto (1883-1951)**

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<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*; 30.

<sup>95</sup> Von Rad, Gerhard *Genesis: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press; 1972); 62.

<sup>96</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>97</sup> Kass, Leon R. *The Beginning of Wisdom* (New York: Free Press; 2003); 52.

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Italian rabbi of the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century, is quoted by Kass approvingly with regard to the universal obligation of the Sabbath upon mankind.

Every seventh day, without intermission since the days of Creation, serves as a memorial to the idea of creation of the world by the word of God, and we must refrain from work thereon so that we may follow the Creator's example and cleave to His ways. Scripture wishes to emphasize that the sanctity of the Sabbath is older than Israel, and rests upon all mankind...[T]he commandments concerning the proper *observance* of the Sabbath...devolve only upon Israel. Thus in the Ten Commandments is it said, *REMEMBER the seventh day to keep it holy.*<sup>98</sup>

Jewish observance of the Sabbath commandment subsequent to the Mt. Sinai promulgation, however, does not reflect a true understanding of the meaning of the day. This is not to say that the *commandment* failed to reflect such meaning, but only that the *observance* of adherence to that commandment, especially in the rabbinic and Pharisaic periods of Israelite history, failed to properly comprehend the meaning of the day. This is the indictment brought against the scribes and Pharisees by Jesus himself, as the meaning and observance of the Sabbath became a frequent point of conflict between Him and them.

*At that time Jesus went through the grainfields on the Sabbath. And His disciples were hungry, and began to pluck heads of grain and to eat. And when the Pharisees saw it, they said to Him, "Look, Your disciples are doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath!" But He said to them, "Have you not read what David did when he was hungry, he and those who were with him: how he entered the house of God and ate the showbread which was not lawful for him to eat, nor for those who were with him, but only for the priests? Or have you not read in the law that on the Sabbath the priests in the temple profane the Sabbath, and are blameless? Yet I say to you that in this place there is One greater than the temple. But if you had known what this means, 'I desire mercy and not sacrifice,' you would not have condemned the guiltless. For the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath."*

(Matthew 12:1-8)

Mark, in his account of the same event, adds the important clause, "*The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath.*"<sup>99</sup>

*And He entered the synagogue again, and a man was there who had a withered hand. So they watched Him closely, whether He would heal him on the Sabbath, so that they might [a]ccuse Him. And He said to the man who had the withered hand, "Step forward." Then He said to them, "Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?" But they kept silent. And*

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<sup>98</sup> Umberto Cassuto, quoted in Kass; 52-53.

<sup>99</sup> Mark 2:27

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*when He had looked around at them with anger, being grieved by the hardness of their hearts, He said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." And he stretched it out, and his hand was restored as whole as the other. Then the Pharisees went out and immediately plotted with the Herodians against Him, how they might destroy Him.* (Mark 3:1-6)

*Now He was teaching in one of the synagogues on the Sabbath. And behold, there was a woman who had a spirit of infirmity eighteen years, and was bent over and could in no way raise herself up. But when Jesus saw her, He called her to Him and said to her, "Woman, you are loosed from your infirmity." And He laid His hands on her, and immediately she was made straight, and glorified God. But the ruler of the synagogue answered with indignation, because Jesus had healed on the Sabbath; and he said to the crowd, "There are six days on which men ought to work; therefore come and be healed on them, and not on the Sabbath day." The Lord then answered him and said, "Hypocrite! Does not each one of you on the Sabbath loose his ox or donkey from the stall, and lead it away to water it? So ought not this woman, being a daughter of Abraham, whom Satan has bound – think of it – for eighteen years, be loosed from this bond on the Sabbath?" And when He said these things, all His adversaries were put to shame; and all the multitude rejoiced for all the glorious things that were done by Him.* (Luke 13:10-17)

The offense taken by the Pharisees and synagogue rulers in these circumstances were manifestations of what the Jewish religious establishment had done with the Sabbath, turning it into a burden by focusing on the minutiae of 'work' and setting forth labyrinthine rules and regulations for the 'proper' observance of the day. It is not surprising, then, that one of the longest chapters in the Mishnah is the 'Sabbath' which is immediately followed by 'Erubin,' *The Fusion of Sabbath Limits*, which is an addendum of further restrictions for the Sabbath day. Here is just one example of the intricate nature of the rabbinic code concerning what constitutes 'work' on the Sabbath, and a very good example of why Christians tend to run from such ordinances.

If a man was reading in a scroll of Scripture on the threshold and the scroll rolled out of his hand, he may roll it back to himself. If he was reading on the edge of the roof and the scroll rolled out of his hand, if it does not reach ten handbreadths [from the ground] he may roll it back to himself; but after it has reached [lower than] then handbreadths, he must turn it over on to the written side. R. Judah says: if it is distant only a needle's thickness from the ground he may roll it back to himself. R. Simeon says: Even if it touches the very ground he may roll it back to himself, since there is naught that concerns the Sabbath rest that can withstand [the honor due to] the Holy Scriptures.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> Danby, Herbert *The Mishnah* (Oxford: Oxford University Press; 1985); Erubin 10.3.

On the one hand, these strictures reflect the seriousness of the Sabbath commandment given to Israel. They manifest a reaction to the Exile, the length of which was determined by the number of sabbatical years Israel failed to observe in the land. One of the great sins of the forefathers was their profaning of the Sabbath, and so the Pharisees and rabbis went to great lengths to avoid anything that might be considered ‘work’ in the eyes of the Lord. But on the other hand, in doing this they destroyed the spirit of the Sabbath, the true spirit of Sabbath observance as revealed in Isaiah 58.

*If you turn away your foot from the Sabbath,  
From doing your pleasure on My holy day,  
**And call the Sabbath a delight**, the holy day of the LORD honorable,  
And shall honor Him, not doing your own ways, nor finding your own pleasure,  
Nor speaking your own words,  
Then you shall delight yourself in the LORD; and I will cause you to ride on the high hills of the  
earth, and feed you with the heritage of Jacob your father. The mouth of the LORD has spoken.*  
(Isaiah 58:13-14)

The meaning of the Sabbath becomes more apparent when we juxtapose the original institution of the Day with the Mosaic commandment as to its observance. As Cassuto noted (quoted above, page 79), the original pattern of the Sabbath cannot be allowed to be obliterated by the subsequent commandment, which was, at any event, to *remember* the Sabbath day. The Jews, perhaps understandably, looked rather to the punishment that was enjoined on profanation of the Sabbath and took their eyes off the original meaning of the day itself. The Day has at least two components to its meaning: the goodness of Creation as it came from the hand of God, and Rest. Creation and Rest, therefore, are the essential constituent elements of the Sabbath, not Prohibition and Punishment. Eliezer Schweid comments concerning the Sabbath that, “As a recollection of Creation, it testifies to the wholeness of Creation.”<sup>101</sup>

But on this day of remembrance regarding the pristine goodness of Creation, man is to imitate God and cease from his labors. We read this as a prohibition, *Thou Shalt do no Labor*, rather than the blessing that it really is. This perspective, of course, manifests the stubbornness of the human heart, even of believers, who kick against the goads in order to

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<sup>101</sup> Schweid; 37.

‘work’ on the Sabbath. The Sabbath is not merely a day in which no work is to be done, it is, as Schweid describes it, “a day of non-work.”

Nonetheless, the a priori abstention from work is not merely meant to free time for an alternative endeavor; rather, it is the primary and main content of the day. The Sabbath is a day of non-work, and that is the meaning of *Shabbat*: He rested from the labor of Creation; man rests with Him. It is the day on which a Jew is commanded to realize the abstention from work as an experience of inherent value. He must rest. The realization that rest is not paralysis, but a specific form of spiritual activity, is the outcome of a rigorous understanding of what is intended by Sabbath rest.<sup>102</sup>

This focus on rest as a ‘spiritual activity’ was essential for the proper observance of the Sabbath, and if this attitude was present, prohibitions against this or that form of ‘work’ would prove unnecessary. Why, then, do we find the Sabbath as the Fourth Commandment, the last of the First Table of the Law? Why, on the very eve of bringing His people into the Promised Land, did God consider it necessary to now codify as societal and religious law what should have been the delightful blessing of a day of rest for His people? Why attach such penalties as to tempt the people to consider the Sabbath a burden rather than a delight? No definitive answer can be found in either texts devoted to promulgating the Ten Commandments – Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5 – but some things can be inferred by the fact that the Sabbath law corresponds with the Exodus.

*Observe the Sabbath day, to <sup>is</sup>keep it holy, as the LORD your God commanded you. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the LORD your God. In it you shall do no work: you, nor your son, nor your daughter, nor your male servant, nor your female servant, nor your ox, nor your donkey, nor any of your cattle, nor your stranger who is within your gates, that your male servant and your female servant may rest as well as you. And remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out from there by a mighty hand and by an outstretched arm; therefore the LORD your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day.* (Deuteronomy 5:12-15)

This *second* reading of the Law of the Sabbath does not mention Creation as the first does (*cp.* Exodus 20:11). Here, rather, it is the Exodus that is referenced as the underlying reason for the Sabbath command. This, of course, supplements the earlier reading and does not supercede it – *both* Creation *and* the Exodus are now to be considered as part of

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<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*; 37-38.

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the Sabbath. If anything, it is the Exodus that now motivated the *command* to remember and observe the Sabbath; it does not underlie the Sabbath itself.

Introducing the Exodus to the equation brings Redemption alongside of Creation in the consideration of the Sabbath. This makes sense, for since the Fall the flow of biblical history has been toward Redemption – of Man, but also and importantly, of Creation. The Exodus was a Redemption for God’s people, and would become a firm part of the prophetic vocabulary signifying Redemption throughout Israel’s history. To expand an earlier citation from Eliezer Schweid,

As a recollection of Creation, it testifies to the wholeness of Creation; as a memory of the exodus from Egypt, the Sabbath is itself a departure from slavery to freedom, and from bondage to redemption.<sup>103</sup>

This characteristic of the Sabbath will inform the further development of a ‘sabbatical’ pattern of Israelite life: the *sabbatical years* and the *Year of Jubilee*. These regular occurrences (though, sadly, they did not occur with any regularity within Israel), were emphatic reminders to God’s people of *Redemption*, as the land itself was to be given rest every seven years, and all debts forgiven and patriarchal lands restored in the Jubilee. The fatigue suffered by the land, and the inevitable inequities that occur in any economic society, were to be ‘reset’ at regular intervals; the Promised Land was to revert to its original, ‘pristine’ condition, partially every seven years and more fully every fiftieth year (the year after a sabbath of sabbaths, the Year of Jubilee). But the weekly Sabbath was a reminder of why the word *pristine* is put in quotation marks above. The Promised Land *was not pristine*; it at no time and in no way constituted the ultimate Rest to which the *original Sabbath* commemorated and predicted. It would take the greatest of imaginations, and not a little dilution of the perfection of God’s Creation, to consider Canaan as a true Eden. Thus the author of Hebrews states the matter clearly,

*For if Joshua had given them rest, then He would not afterward have spoken of another day. There remains therefore a rest for the people of God. For he who has entered His rest has himself also ceased from his works as God did from His.* (Hebrews 4:8-10)

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<sup>103</sup> Schweid; 37.

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This statement would seemingly contradict what Scripture says concerning the Conquest of Canaan under Joshua,

*So the LORD gave to Israel all the land of which He had sworn to give to their fathers, and they took possession of it and dwelt in it. **The LORD gave them rest all around**, according to all that He had sworn to their fathers. And not a man of all their enemies stood against them; the LORD delivered all their enemies into their hand. Not a word failed of any good thing which the LORD had spoken to the house of Israel. All came to pass.* (Joshua 21:43-45)

*“The LORD gave them rest all around.”* This would seem to be the fulfillment of the Sabbath meaning, until one realizes that this passage does not state the fulfillment of the Sabbath Rest, but rather the covenant promise of possession of the land. *This* was fulfilled; the Sabbath Rest was not. One need only read the Book of Judges, chronologically subsequent to that of Joshua, to be fully convinced that the Sabbath Rest had not been attained; Joshua, as the writer of Hebrews states, did not lead God’s people into *that* Rest. Thus there *remained* and there *remains* a Sabbath Rest for the people of God. It is *this* Rest to which both the Sabbath ordinance in Genesis 2 and the Sabbath Commandment in Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5 point. Canaan was, therefore, a foretaste as well as a constant reminder of the Sabbath Rest available to those who have faith. Divine intervention in the Exodus and in the Conquest are steps along the path to this Rest, though many who experienced God’s redemptive power *“did not enter My rest.”* Nonetheless, as Lincoln writes, *“After the Fall, God’s original intentions for humanity’s enjoyment of the promised consummation rest are not worked out through God’s acts of redemption among His people.”*<sup>104</sup> Chief among these acts, of course, is the advent of the Messiah, Jesus Christ, who underlies completely the principles drawn out by the author of Hebrews concerning *“the Rest to come.”*

Canaan, therefore, was not meant to be the final home of God’s people but only a place where Israel might dwell in the presence of God (through the priesthood and the Temple, of course, and not directly as in Eden) and be reminded day by day, and especially week by week, that the fullness of the covenant promise could not be met in the

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<sup>104</sup> *From Sabbath to Lord’s Day*; 210.



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land. The promised earthly inheritance of the patriarchs was, indeed, called the ‘rest’ of God in Psalm 95, but it was always provisional and temporary.

*Today, if you will hear His voice: “Do not harden your hearts, as in the rebellion,  
As in the day of trial in the wilderness, when your fathers tested Me;  
They tried Me, though they saw My work. For forty years I was grieved with that generation,  
And said, ‘It is a people who go astray in their hearts, and they do not know My ways.’  
So I swore in My wrath, ‘They shall not enter My rest.’* (Psalm 95:8-11)

This is the passage exegeted by the writer to the Hebrews, in which inspired commentary he concludes that the land of Canaan was never intended to be the final ‘rest’ for the people of God – it, too, was corrupted by sin as was the rest of the world. To the author of Hebrews, unbelief kept the first generation of the Exodus from entering the promised land, and unbelief now keeps both Jew and Gentile from entering into the rest promised by God. However, in Hebrews that rest no longer consists in entering the land, but rather being in Christ, who is the fulfillment of both the Exodus and the Sabbath.

*Beware, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God; but exhort one another daily, while it is called “Today,” lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin. **For we have become partakers of Christ** if we hold the beginning of our confidence steadfast to the end... For who, having heard, rebelled? Indeed, was it not all who came out of Egypt, led by Moses? Now with whom was He angry forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose corpses fell in the wilderness? And to whom did He swear that they would not enter His rest, but to those who did not obey? So we see that they could not enter in because of unbelief.* (Hebrews 3:12-19)

The author is not simply drawing an analogy here between entering Christ and entering Canaan. He develops the idea more fully in Chapter 4, leaving no doubt as to his position that it is *in Christ* that the promised Sabbath Rest is found and not in any plot of land on earth. First, the author ties the two generations together – the generation of the wilderness and his own – by linking them with the same gospel message being preached to both.

*Therefore, since a promise remains of entering His rest, let us fear lest any of you seem to have come short of it. For indeed **the gospel was preached to us as well as to them**; but the word which they heard did not profit them, not being mixed with faith in those who heard it. For we who have believed do enter that rest, as He has said:*

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*“So I swore in My wrath, ‘They shall not enter My rest,’  
(Hebrews 4:1-3)*

At this point the author ties the ‘rest’ of peace with God – granted to those who believe the gospel, denied to those who do not – with the Sabbath rest of Genesis 2.

*For He has spoken in a certain place of the seventh day in this way: “And God rested on the seventh day from all His works”; and again in this place: “They shall not enter My rest.”*  
(Hebrews 4:4-5)

At this point the writer moves away from the children of Israel in the wilderness and returns and remains in the present – the abiding present that is denoted at all times by, ‘Today.’ He does not let go of the link between faith in the gospel and the Sabbath Rest of Creation; rather he shows the former to be the true fulfillment of the latter.

*Since therefore it remains that some must enter it, and those to whom it was first preached did not enter because of disobedience, again He designates a certain day, saying in David, “Today,” after such a long time, as it has been said:*

*“Today, if you will hear His voice,  
Do not harden your hearts.”*

*For if Joshua had given them rest, then He would not afterward have spoken of another day. There remains therefore a rest for the people of God. For he who has entered His rest has himself also ceased from his works as God did from His.*  
(Hebrews 4:6-10)

In this passage in Hebrews we find the recurring pattern of ‘Now and Not Yet’ that



C. K. Barrett (1917-2011)

is common in the eschatology of the New Testament. The writer speaks of entering the divine rest 'Today,' but also speaks of a coming "rest for the people of God." In verse 3 he has written that "we who have believed do enter that rest," but in verse 9 he speaks of that rest as yet to come. This is, of course, of the very essence of faith, especially as faith is presented in the epistle to the Hebrews. "Faith in Hebrews 'is not merely a waiting for the fulfillment of the promise; it means through the promise a present grasp upon invisible truth."<sup>105</sup>

All of this means that the true meaning of the Sabbath Rest has been revealed, and fulfilled, in Jesus Christ – not simply analogically as it was with Israel in the Promised Land, but *really* through faith in Jesus Christ; faith which is "the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen."<sup>106</sup> Lincoln writes,

'Today' brackets the period of 'already' and 'not yet' as regards God's rest for those who live during the period when the ages overlap. The time for entry into rest is 'today,' not after death or at the parousia...The 'rest,' precisely because it is God's, is both present and future; men enter it, and must strive to enter it. This is paradoxical, but it is a paradox which Hebrews shares with all primitive Christian eschatology.<sup>107</sup>

It may be objected that this line of reasoning allegorizes the Sabbath, spiritualizing what was a concrete observance in Israel – the cessation of work on the seventh day each week. However, to reason otherwise is to allegorize or spiritualize Hebrews 4 and, as the New Testament undeniably sheds light upon the Old, this would be to move in the wrong hermeneutical direction altogether. The reality is that "the coming of Jesus Christ fulfills the concept of rest tied up with the Old Testament Sabbath and that because of the situation of the church between the Resurrection and the Parousia of Christ, there is an 'already' and a 'not yet' to that fulfillment."<sup>108</sup>

This is not spiritualization in the popular sense of the word with its connotations of etherealizing concrete realities, but spiritualization in the best sense where the writer

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<sup>105</sup> C. K. Barrett quoted by A. T. Lincoln; *From Sabbath to Lord's Day*; 211.

<sup>106</sup> Hebrews 11:1

<sup>107</sup> *From Sabbath to Lord's Day*; 212.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*; 214.

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moves from earthly shadows to spiritual realities. Christ brings the spiritual reality; His work fulfills the intent of the Sabbath, and with Christ comes that for which the Sabbath existed. The reality of salvation rest supersedes the sign.<sup>109</sup>

It has been the thesis of this lesson that the Sabbath – instituted *before* the Fall and not initially enjoined upon Man – was intended by God to be eschatological from the start.

Before all other important things, therefore, the Sabbath is an expression of the eschatological principle on which the life of humanity has been constructed. There is to be to the world-process a finale, as there was an overture, and these two belong inseparably together. To give up the one means to give up the other, and to give up either means to abandon the fundamental scheme of Biblical history. Even among Jewish teachers this profound meaning of the Sabbath was not entirely unknown. One of them, being asked what the world to come would be like, answered that it would resemble the Sabbath. In the law, it is true, this thought is not developed further than is done in the primordial statement about God's resting on the seventh day and hallowing it. For the rest, the institution, after having been re-enforced in the Decalogue, is left to speak for itself, as is the case with most institutions of the law. The Epistle to the Hebrews has given us a philosophy of the Sabbath on the largest of scales, partly in dependence on Psa. 95.<sup>110</sup>

As this quotation notes, there are other 'important' things wrapped up in the meaning of the Sabbath, and the fact that its core meaning was from the beginning eschatological does not answer the question as to its ongoing observance, a question that Paul seems to leave to the individual believer (*cp.* Romans 14:5-6; Colossians 2:16). But whatever a believer does with the 'Sabbath,' the day's significance can only be deepened by the realization that the divine Rest has been attained by Jesus Christ for all who believe – *now*, and in the future.

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<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*; 215.

<sup>110</sup> [http://www.rbap.net/the-sabbath-as-transhistorical-and-eschatological-paradigm/#\\_ftn1](http://www.rbap.net/the-sabbath-as-transhistorical-and-eschatological-paradigm/#_ftn1) Accessed 10Sept2019.

**Week 7: The Kingdom Now & Not Yet**

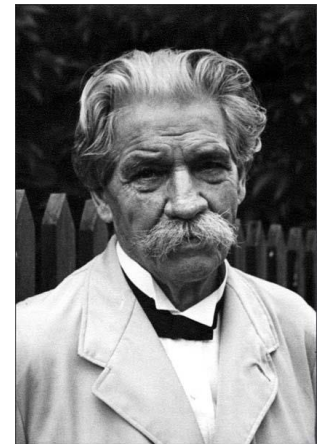
**Key Biblical Texts:** Colossians 1:24-29; Matthew 13

*“The main aim of the parables is to describe the activity of God in Jesus, more particularly so that men may trust in it and become disciples, or else be offended by it.”*

(Craig Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables*)

A remarkable amount of scholarly effort has been expended over the past 150 to 200 years in explaining why the ‘kingdom’ did not come with the First Advent of Jesus Christ. The general consensus among those who believe such an apology necessary, is that somebody got something wrong. The ‘somebody’ is either the body of Old Testament prophets who could not quite see things as they turned out to be, or Jesus himself, who mistakenly thought the consummation of the ages was to come with His own ministry. The former view is that of the Dispensationalist and is commonly associated with the ‘mountain peaks’ theory of Clarence Larkin. The latter view is that of Albert Schweitzer, representative of 19<sup>th</sup> Century Liberal exegesis. These two views are otherwise as divergent as any epistemological frameworks can be, yet they share the common perspective that the kingdom *was supposed* to come when Jesus came, *but it did not come*. Hence the need for an explanation, a justification as to why things turned out the way they did and not the way that was ‘prophesied.’

George Beasley-Murray writes of Schweitzer’s perspective, “It is doubtful that any interpretation of a saying of Jesus made such an impression upon the church as Albert Schweitzer’s exposition of Matthew 10:23.”<sup>111</sup> That passage is Jesus’ instructions to His disciples to go through the cities and villages of Israel, preaching the Gospel of the Kingdom. Jesus told them, *“assuredly, I say to you, you will not have gone through the cities of Israel before the Son of Man comes.”* Thus Schweitzer concludes that Jesus expected the *Parousia*, His own appearing in the glory of His heavenly mission, *before* the disciples had completed their task. That



**Albert Schweitzer (1875-1965)**

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<sup>111</sup> Beasley-Murray, George R. *Jesus and the Kingdom of God* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company; 1986); 286.

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this did not happen was, in Schweitzer's estimation, the turning-point for Jesus. Realizing that His expectation was mistaken – that the Kingdom was not coming during and as a result of His earthly ministry – Jesus determined to change tactics. To Schweitzer it was from this point that Jesus set himself steadfastly to the death of a martyr on the cross. Schweitzer believed the 'failure' of the Parousia to come when Jesus thought it would come, during His own lifetime, spelled the 'death of eschatology.' Beasley-Murray quotes Schweitzer at length,

The whole history of 'Christianity' down to the present day, that is to say, the real inner history of it, is based on the delay of the Parousia, the non-occurrence of the Parousia, the abandonment of eschatology, the progress and completion of the 'de-eschatologising' of religion which has been connectd [sic] therewith. It should be noted that the nonfulfillment of Matt. x. 23 is the first postponement of the Parousia. We have therefore here the first significant date in the 'history of Christianity'; it gives to the work of Jesus a new direction, otherwise inexplicable.<sup>112</sup>

Jesus' saying in Matthew 10 is indeed enigmatic; He does seem to indicate the coming of "*The Son of Man*" before the completion of their journeys through Israel. In order to interpret the passage as Schweitzer did, one must equate the Parousia with the "*coming of the Son of Man*," which is not an unreasonable connection. However, one must also limit the *coming* to one singular and eschatological event, the *Parousia*. It may be that the *coming of the Son of Man* has meaning in terms of intermediate fulfillment prior to the *Parousia*. The analysis of both terms – the *coming of the Son of Man* and the *Parousia* – must await a later lesson, but for now we must consider Schweitzer's other, and more significant, assumption: that Jesus expected the *Parousia* in His own lifetime and through His own work.

Schweitzer's conclusion that Jesus *did* anticipate the Parousia to come with His current work resulted in disillusionment on the part of Israel's Messiah, and from that disillusionment came a morbid, almost suicidal, resignation to the death of a martyr. Jesus reorganized, as it were, His own thoughts regarding both His mission and the Kingdom that He so ardently wanted to see appear in Israel. In this reorganization, Schweitzer

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<sup>112</sup> Schweitzer, quote in Beasley-Murray, 286.

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theorizes that Jesus ‘realized’ that He, as the Messiah, must suffer in order to the Kingdom to come; He must suffer as the *Ebed Yahweh* suffers in Isaiah 53. Thus Schweitzer writes,

In order to understand Jesus’ resolve to suffer, we must first recognize that the mystery of this suffering is involved in the mystery of the kingdom of god, since the kingdom cannot come until the *periasomos* [suffering] has taken place...The novelty lies in the form in which [the sufferings] are conceived. The tribulation, so far as Jesus is concerned, is now connected with an historic event: He will go to Jerusalem, there to suffer death at the hands of the authorities...In the secret of His passion which Jesus reveals to the disciples as Caesarea Philippi the pre-Messianic tribulation is for others set aside, abolished, concentrated upon Himself alone, and that in the form that they are fulfilled in His own passion and death at Jerusalem. That was the new conviction that had dawned upon Him. He must suffer for others...that the Kingdom might come.<sup>113</sup>

Schweitzer had an undeniably low view of the pre-existence and the divinity of Jesus Christ; indeed, he considered Jesus to be entirely human. Yet Schweitzer maintained a high degree of ‘respect’ for this mistaken and disillusioned Jewish rabbi that he conjures for himself in his own ‘quest’ for the historical Jesus. Thus Schweitzer continued throughout his life to ‘explain’ and to ‘justify’ Jesus in spite of the gross errors of Jesus’ judgment concerning His own purpose and ministry. To Schweitzer Jesus died essentially a failure, whose rehabilitation came through the work of the Church founded on His fondly-remembered name. Schweitzer’s is not a view that can be shared by any evangelical; really, not by any true Christian. Nonetheless, it represents one extreme form of the theological apologetic so common in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries concerning the ‘failure’ of the kingdom to come when Jesus did.

On the opposite end of the Christian theological spectrum of the late-19<sup>th</sup> and early-20<sup>th</sup> Century we find the Dispensationalist writer Clarence Larkin, an American Baptist pastor who would become the ‘chartmaker’ of the Dispensationalist movement. Being a true evangelical – a ‘fundamentalist’ – even before the word was coined = Larson could not abide by the anemic Christology of Schweitzer. Yet he, too, believed that the Kingdom was supposed to come at the



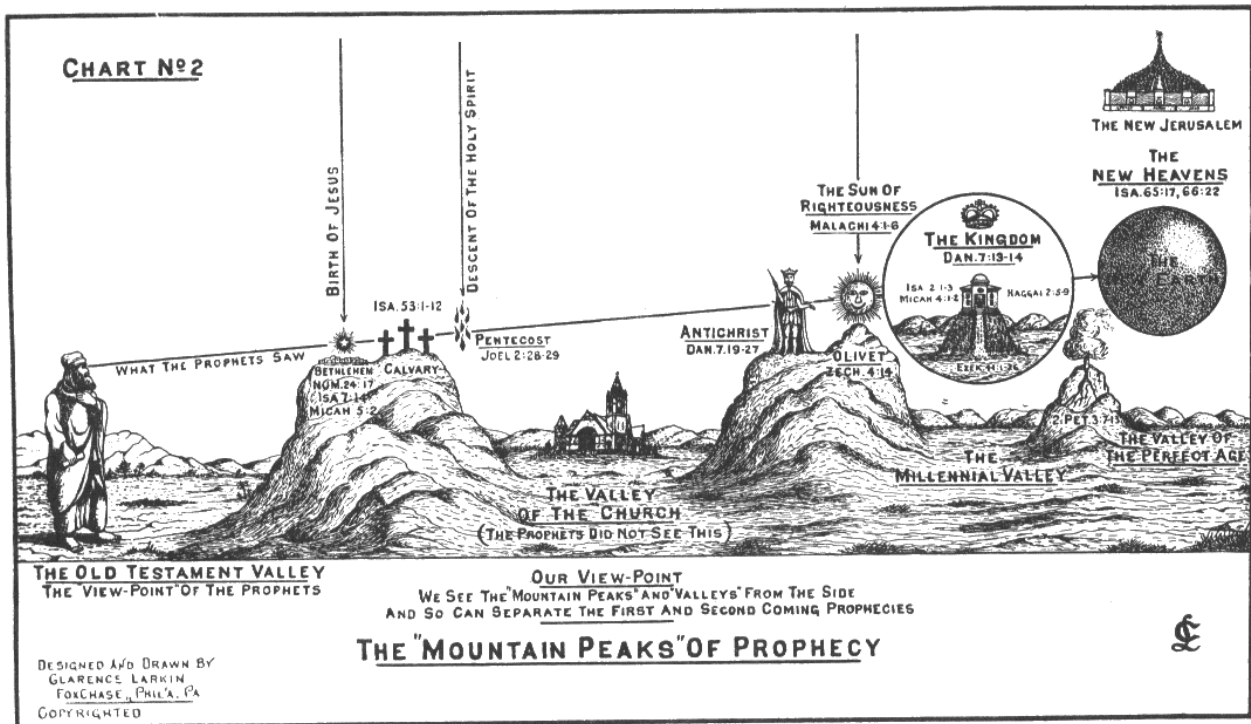
Clarence Larkin (1850-1924)

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<sup>113</sup> Schweitzer, quoted in N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press; 1996); 578.

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Frist Advent of Jesus Christ and it did not. Larkin thus posited that that it was not Jesus who was mistaken, but rather the prophets of the Old Testament who were unable to ‘see’ things regarding the Kingdom as they actually occurred in time. Particularly, Larking proposed the ‘Mountain Peaks’ perspective on Old Testament prophecy, a view famously depicted in one of Larkin’s illustrations:



The essence of Larkin’s teaching on the ‘Mountain Peaks of Prophecy’ is that the Old Testament prophet was unable to see the two peaks of biblical, messianic, and kingdom prophecy, as well as the ‘Valley of the Church’ that lay between them. The Church, as Dispensationalism teaches in general, was a ‘mystery’ unknown to the Old Testament prophet. This is the Dispensational interpretation of what Paul writes in Colossians 1:24-28,

*I now rejoice in my sufferings for you, and fill up in my flesh what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ, for the sake of His body, which is the church, of which I became a minister according to the stewardship from God which was given to me for you, to fulfill the word of God, the **mystery which has been hidden from ages and from generations, but now has been revealed to His saints.** To them God willed to make known what are the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles: which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. Him we preach, warning every man and teaching every man in all wisdom, that we may present every man perfect in Christ Jesus.*



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However, it does not appear that Paul is referring to *the Church* as the mystery, but rather to *Christ in you, the hope of glory*. This is, at least, the closer antecedent to the term ‘mystery’ in this passage. In addition, the interpretation of a ‘mystery’ as something completely unknown is also not correct; indeed, it is the very nature of a mystery to leave clues. There are ample such clues in the Old Testament for the prophets to know that, in some manner, the salvation brought by Jehovah to Israel would also extend to the Gentiles. The mystery, therefore, was not *what* but *how*, to which Paul answers, *Christ in you, the hope of glory* – to both Jew and Gentile. If one were to press Paul’s use of the term ‘mystery’ to its limit, then even the Jews were unaware of their own hope, which of course they were not.

*Now to Him who is able to establish you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to **the revelation of the mystery kept secret since the world began** but now made manifest, and by the prophetic Scriptures made known to all nations, according to the commandment of the everlasting God, for obedience to the faith – to God, alone wise, be glory through Jesus Christ forever. Amen.*

(Romans 16:25-27)

The participation of the Gentiles in the blessings of Israel’s covenant were indeed a mystery to the Jewish prophets; the concept of the indwelling of Christ within all believers, Jew and Gentile alike, was not fully revealed to them, if at all. Thus the Dispensationalist is not mistaken in seeing Gentile salvation as in some respect a constituent part of the mystery. But, again, that the salvation of Jehovah would extend to the Gentiles was clearly propounded in the Abrahamic covenant; this could not be the mystery to which Paul again refers in Ephesians,

*For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for you Gentiles – if indeed you have heard of the dispensation of the grace of God which was given to me for you, how that **by revelation He made known to me the mystery** (as I have briefly written already, by which, when you read, you may understand my knowledge in the mystery of Christ), which in other ages was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to His holy apostles and prophets: **that the Gentiles should be fellow heirs, of the same body, and partakers of His promise in Christ through the gospel**, of which I became a minister according to the gift of the grace of God given to me by the effective working of His power.*

(Ephesians 3:1-7)

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This ‘mystery’ was obviously a central part of Paul’s teaching, and forms the core of one of the ‘faithful sayings’ found in the Apostle’s letters to the pastors, Timothy and Titus.

*And without controversy great is the **mystery of godliness**:*

*God was manifested in the flesh, Justified in the Spirit,  
Seen by angels, Preached among the Gentiles,  
Believed on in the world, Received up in glory.*

(I Timothy 3:16)

The Incarnation of Jesus Christ was a mystery, the indwelling of the Godhead within the hearts of believers – Jew and Gentile alike – through the Holy Spirit, was also a mystery – part of the same mystery, in fact. Nonetheless, Dispensationalism persists in teaching that the very salvation of the Gentiles – the ‘Church’ in their estimation, though the Church was initially almost 100% Jewish – constitutes the ‘mystery’ of which Paul speaks, of which the Old Testament prophets were completely unaware.<sup>114</sup> The impact of this view upon our current study is the development of the ‘Mountain Peaks’ view of Old Testament prophecy. In short, the Old Testament prophet was able to see the *first* Advent of Christ but not the second. Thus Chafer writes, “Nevertheless, one of the most determining factors in the right apprehension of Old Testament prophecy is the recognition of the truth that to no individual in that vast period from Adam to Christ was any intimation revealed respecting the fact that there would be two advents of Christ.”<sup>115</sup>

The net effect of this teaching concerning the mystery is that the Kingdom did not come at the time of Christ’s First Advent because it was not intended to come at that time; the prophets were myopic, short-sighted. This is not exactly the case, however, because Dispensationalism also teaches that the Kingdom did not come because Israel stubbornly rejected her Messiah, and God then turned to the Gentiles via a ‘new’ redemptive concept: the Church. The ‘Mountain Peaks’ perspective, therefore, posits that the ‘Church Age’ – or ‘The Valley of the Church,’ as Larkin has it – was always intended by God even though

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<sup>114</sup> It must be noted here that Larkin employed a common exegetical device among Dispensational theologians, that is, to view each mention of ‘mystery’ as a unique mystery which either *has been* or *will be* revealed. Thus Larkin himself counted eleven ‘mysteries’ based on the use of the term by Jesus, Paul, and the Apostle John. It is symptomatic of Dispensational hermeneutics that multiple mentions of the same term be viewed as distinct instances of that term rather than different facets of the same concept or event.

<sup>115</sup> Chafer; 303.

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His prophets could not see it, whereas the general teaching of Dispensationalism is that the Kingdom of God would have been set up by Jesus – on David's throne in Jerusalem – had Israel received Him as their Messiah. Such inconsistencies are to be expected when the underlying goal is to 'explain' why the Kingdom did not come when Jesus came. But if it did come, the expediencies of both Schweitzer and Larkin are entirely unnecessary.

Larkin's 'Mountain Peak' theory is widely accepted among modern (American) evangelicals. It has a certain plausibility to it that seems to explain why a predominantly Gentile Church arose from the work of an entirely Jewish Messiah. However, the view's most damning characteristic is that there is no support for it from the authors of the New Testament, whose views of the developing gospel mission make no reference to 'two peaks.' Nor do the writers of New Testament Scripture *anywhere* diminish the accuracy of Old Testament prophecy, or imply that the prophets of old failed to see what they, the apostles and their generation, were seeing. Rather, and consistently, the authors of the New Testament gospels and epistles saw the unfolding of the Church as the *fulfillment* of Old Testament prophecy without qualification or caveat. This is an important point, and one which reveals Larkin's theory as a misguided attempt to 'explain' something that had no need of being explained. Though much closer to the truth than Schweitzer because of his underlying faith that Jesus Christ was the Son of God as well as the Son of Man, Larkin's reasoning in explanation of why the Kingdom did not come when Jesus came is as misguided and wrong as was Schweitzer's. Both were wrong simply because the Kingdom *did come*, and both Jesus and His apostles knew this to be the reality of redemptive history in their time.

This possibility that what Jesus did during His time on earth, and through His suffering and death, was somehow based on a mistake in the prophecies or a mistake in Jesus' own self-understanding, is nowhere to be found within the writings of the New Testament. There is no hesitation either in Jesus or in His successors to assign the fullest possible Old Testament credentials for *everything* that had come to pass through Jesus' life, teaching, miracles, passion, death, and resurrection. He came preaching "*Repent! For the Kingdom of God is at hand!*" simply because the Kingdom of God *was* at hand in His Person. The notion that the failure of the kingdom to appear, or of the kingdom being retracted

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due to the unbelief of the Jews, will be fully contradicted by even a cursory look at what the New Testament has to say about Jesus, about Jesus' view of the Kingdom vis-à-vis His own Person and work, and about the nature of the Kingdom as inaugurated though not yet consummated.

It would take basically a rewriting of the Gospels here in these notes to do justice to the sense of the writers that what was transpiring in the coming of Jesus Christ was *in fulfillment of the Scriptures*. “*That what was written by the prophet...*” or “*That the Scriptures might be fulfilled...*” are frequent refrains through the gospels and into Paul's epistles. But to refute the notion that the Old Testament prophets themselves were clueless as to the nature of the coming of the promised Messiah we may summarize their position in the words of Peter,

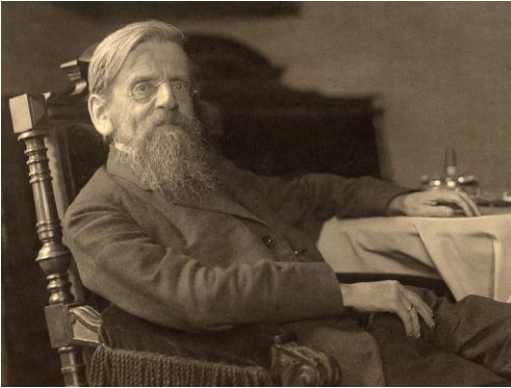
*Of this salvation the prophets have inquired and searched carefully, who prophesied of the grace that would come to you, searching what, or what manner of time, the Spirit of Christ who was in them was indicating when He testified beforehand the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow. To them it was revealed that, not to themselves, but to us they were ministering the things which now have been reported to you through those who have preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven – things which angels desire to look into.* (I Peter 1:10-12)

Contrary to Larkin's assessment regarding the relative ignorance of the Old Testament prophets, Peter asserts that they had the Spirit of Christ testifying within them. The content of this testimony was “*the sufferings of Christ and the glory to follow.*” In other words, the fact that the Kingdom was not going to be set up in an immediate, visible manner was at least somewhat apparent even to the Old Testament prophets, who knew by the Holy Spirit within them that the Promised One would suffer and die for the sins of His people. Isaiah 53 is, of course, the classic witness to this prophetic awareness.

*But He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities;  
The chastisement for our peace was upon Him, and by His stripes we are healed.  
All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned, every one, to his own way;  
And the LORD has laid on Him the iniquity of us all.  
He was oppressed and He was afflicted, yet He opened not His mouth;  
He was led as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before its shearers is silent,  
So He opened not His mouth.  
He was taken from prison and from judgment, and who will declare His generation?*

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*For He was cut off from the land of the living; for the transgressions of My people He was stricken. And they made His grave with the wicked – But with the rich at His death, Because He had done no violence, nor was any deceit in His mouth.* (Isaiah 53:5-9)



**Adolf Schlatter (1852-1938)**

Jesus himself was aware of the divine purpose that He should die for the iniquities of His people, and said to His disciples, “*Now My soul is troubled, and what shall I say? ‘Father, save Me from this hour’? But for this purpose I came to this hour.*”<sup>116</sup> Schweitzer, of course, will explain this verse away as a later evolution in Jesus’ self-awareness and mission, but the Old Testament prophecies concerning the *Suffering Servant*, not least among them the one quoted above, are sufficient to convince any reasonable student of the Bible that Jesus had good cause to interpret the messianic prophecies of the Old Testament as referring unfailingly to His sacrificial death. That He was aware of this purpose to His ministry was not, then, a sign of disillusionment but rather of obedience – the obedience “*even to death on the cross*” as Paul puts it in Philippians 2. Surely Schweitzer’s contemporary, Adolf Schlatter, was more correct regarding Jesus’ self-awareness and prophetic confidence: “It was an essential characteristic of Jesus’ way to death that he embarked on it in the certainty that he thereby showed obedience to Scripture and that he thus fulfilled what it had predicted.”<sup>117</sup>

Schweitzer’s disillusioned Messiah does not resonate among modern evangelicals, though Larkin’s ‘Mountain Peaks’ still exerts a profound impact on their eschatology. Most consider the ‘Valley of the Church’ to be a biblical concept, though nothing can be found in the New Testament in this regard. Unfortunately, few who hold the ‘Mountain Peaks’ view of Larkin – even subconsciously – recognize what this view has to say regarding the veracity of Old Testament prophecy. It is remarkable that this view should come out of a interpretive system that touts *literalism* as the essential feature of true biblical exegesis. The irony is that Larkin’s perspective renders the Old Testament prophecies *non-literal* as to their fulfillment. For instance, we have seen that the promised Kingdom of the

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<sup>116</sup> John 12:27

<sup>117</sup> Schlatter, Adolf *The History of the Christ* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books; 1997); 212.

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small stone – the kingdom of the Son of Man – was prophesied in Daniel 2 & 7 to come in the days of the fourth world empire. According to Larkin, however, this *did not happen*; a literal interpretation of the prophecies of Daniel *did not occur* during the days of the fourth empire – Rome – when the promised Messiah did come. Larkin’s explanation for this remarkable, non-literal historical occurrence is that the prophets failed to see the ‘valley’ between the mountain peaks of Christ’s two comings – the first to offer the Kingdom to Israel, the second to bring the Kingdom (theoretically, whether Israel wants it at that time or not). In any event, the prophecies of the coming kingdom in these two momentous passages of Daniel were not *literally fulfilled* as they were given, and theologians like Larkin are thus required to provide an explanation.

But this necessity arises only due to the Dispensational definition of the Kingdom: If the Kingdom has not come *literally* in Jerusalem and *literally* via the restoration of the Davidic dynasty, then it has not come at all. This view is remarkably similar to that held by Second Temple Jews – the Jews who rejected Jesus as the Messiah of Israel – who believed that the Coming One would effect literal (and even violent) deliverance of Israel from bondage to the Roman Empire. N. T. Wright summarizes the prevailing view in Jesus’ own time: “If Pilate was still governing Judea, then the kingdom had not come. If the Temple was not rebuilt, then the kingdom had not come. If the Messiah had not arrived, then the kingdom had not come. If Israel was not observing the Torah properly...then the kingdom had not come. If the pagans were not defeated and/or flocking to Zion for instruction, then the kingdom had not come.”<sup>118</sup>



N. T. Wright (b. 1948)

Dispensational logic is further coupled with the complete separation of Israel and the Church within Dispensational hermeneutics, so that the Church *cannot* in any way constituted fulfillment, partial or otherwise, of prophecies that were given to Israel. This is an example of a theological system being built and the biblical data subsequently being reinterpreted to fit the system. But it is also a form of exegetical literalism that is inconsistent within itself. The prophecies of Daniel *literally* predict the advent of the Son

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of Man and His kingdom “*during the days of this king*” – meaning, literally, during the realm of the fourth world empire, Rome. It is hard to see how the vision as interpreted by Daniel could be viewed in any other manner than historically literal,

*And in the days of these kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom which shall never be destroyed; and the kingdom shall not be left to other people; it shall break in pieces and consume all these kingdoms, and it shall stand forever. Inasmuch as you saw that the stone was cut out of the mountain without hands, and that it broke in pieces the iron, the bronze, the clay, the silver, and the gold – the great God has made known to the king what will come to pass after this. **The dream is certain, and its interpretation is sure.*** (Daniel 2:44-45)

Both John the Baptist and Jesus came *in the days of these kings* – the emperors of Rome – preaching “*Repent! For the Kingdom of God is at hand!*” Jesus further proclaimed that the Kingdom had come *among them* and *upon them*. It cannot be denied that, in Jesus’ own estimation, the Kingdom had come with Him. Nor should it be argued that Jesus took the Kingdom back with Him to heaven, for the prophecy forbids that, “*the God of heaven will set up a kingdom which shall never be destroyed...and it shall stand forever.*” A literal hermeneutic must, therefore, consider one of two options: either the kingdom did not come *literally* as the prophecy predicted, or the kingdom did come, but not in the manifestation anticipated. The very nature of the two ‘kingdom’ prophecies in Daniel would point toward the second option: the *stone cut without hands* and the *dominion granted to the Son of Man by the Ancient of Days* both speak of a Kingdom that transcends the earthly empires in the midst of which it is established.

The two theological loci in the New Testament regarding ‘kingdom’ teaching are, of course, Jesus and Paul. It is contended by liberal scholars that these two men had differing views and differing agenda regarding the purpose and work of God both within Israel and within the world. As the ‘kingdom of God’ was the central clearinghouse of all theological, soteriological, and eschatological ideas within Second Temple Judaism, it is reasonable to review what each of these men had to say about that concept, that reality. We will devote the remainder of this lesson to a review – cursory as it must be – of what Jesus had to say concerning the nature of the coming of the Kingdom, turning in the next lesson to the teaching of Paul. It is believed that such a review will prove a great deal of

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<sup>118</sup> Wright, N. T. *Jesus and the Victory of God*; 223.

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agreement and consistency between Jesus and Paul, as well as between both and the Old Testament prophets who allegedly did not know very well what they were talking about.

### **Jesus and the Kingdom of God:**

We have already seen that the Kingdom of God (or its virtual equivalent, the Kingdom of Heaven) was the central theme of Jesus' early preaching. Contrary to Schweitzer's influential opinion that Jesus' own consideration of the kingdom evolved as He came to the eventual realization that it would not be established during His lifetime, the teaching accounts recorded in the Synoptic Gospels indicate a consistency and stability in Jesus' teaching. Two key aspects of the Kingdom that flow from these sources are (1) the invisible nature of the Kingdom in the world, and (2) the invisible growth of the Kingdom from insignificance to glory. Jesus takes great pains to show that this invisibility, however, does not in any way diminish the reality of the Kingdom's presence; the effects of the Kingdom were to be clearly seen in His Person and in His works.

In regard to the first of these 'invisibility characteristics' we have already referenced the powerful indictment of the Pharisees by Jesus in Matthew 12, and only repeat the passage here as a reminder.

*But if I cast out demons by the Spirit of God, surely the kingdom of God has come upon you.*

(Matthew 12:29)

Other comments made by Jesus within the synoptics reinforce the invisible nature of the presence Kingdom.

*Whatever city you enter, and they receive you, eat such things as are set before you. And heal the sick there, and say to them, 'The kingdom of God has come near to you.' But whatever city you enter, and they do not receive you, go out into its streets and say, 'The very dust of your city which clings to us we wipe off against you. Nevertheless know this, that the kingdom of God has come near you.'*

(Luke 10:8-11)

*The law and the prophets were until John. Since that time the kingdom of God has been preached, and everyone is pressing into it.*

(Luke 16:16)



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*Now when He was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, He answered them and said, "The kingdom of God does not come with observation; nor will they say, 'See here!' or 'See there!' For indeed, the kingdom of God is within you."* (Luke 17:20-21)

Jesus' most famous testimony regarding Himself and the Kingdom, of course, is His interview with the Roman governor, Pilate,

*Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, My servants would fight, so that I should not be delivered to the Jews; but now My kingdom is not from here." Pilate therefore said to Him, "Are You a king then?" Jesus answered, "You say rightly that I am a king. For this cause I was born, and for this cause I have come into the world, that I should bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears My voice."* (John 18:36-37)

In this passage, coupled with the earlier Johannine testimony of 12:27, Jesus bears witness to two specific mandates regarding His entry into the world: to be a king, and to die. Only a cynic – or a Schweitzer – would conclude that Jesus was a disappointed and disillusioned would-be Messiah who finally concluded that a martyr's death offered His best chance of 'success' in fomenting a rebellion against Rome and thus re-establishing the 'kingdom' that he so earnestly desired. It is more reasonable, and more faithful to the text of Scripture and to the nature of Jesus Christ, to conclude from both the Old Testament prophecies and the testimony of Jesus, that Jesus considered His own death as the necessary precursor to the inauguration of the Kingdom. But He did not consider His death to be that of a martyr, rather that of an innocent sacrifice; nor did He consider that His death was the end of His ministry, for He also testified concerning His own resurrection, in accordance with Scripture,

*I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd gives His life for the sheep. But a hireling, he who is not the shepherd, one who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees; and the wolf catches the sheep and scatters them. The hireling flees because he is a hireling and does not care about the sheep. I am the good shepherd; and I know My sheep, and am known by My own. As the Father knows Me, even so I know the Father; and I lay down My life for the sheep. And other sheep I have which are not of this fold; them also I must bring, and they will hear My voice; and there will be one flock and one shepherd. Therefore My Father loves Me, because I lay down My life that I may take it again. No one takes it from Me, but I lay it down of Myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again. This command I have received from My Father.* (John 10:11-18)

Jesus' self-awareness must be said to have included His own death as a necessary precursor to the bringing in of the Kingdom of God. But what of the nature of that Kingdom? There can be no doubt as to the expectation of Second Temple Israel concerning the Coming One: He would deliver the people from the oppression of the Romans and would re-establish the throne of David and the glory of Israel. That this did not occur, even after the resurrection of the Lord, has been a cause of exegetical concern throughout the history of the Church, though it does not appear to have been such a concern to the writers of the New Testament. That Jesus always knew and intended that He should die, not the death of a martyr but the victorious death of an innocent Lamb, is sufficient to refute Schweitzer's theory. That the Kingdom did indeed come every bit as Jesus intended that it should is now necessary to show in order to refute Larkin's charts.

Was there evidence in the Old Testament prophecies that the kingdom's arrival would not be a sudden, visible setting-right of all Creation? There are numerous passages that speak of truth and salvation going forth from Zion into the nations, and of the nations coming to worship the true God in Zion. For instance, Isaiah 2 speaks of the salvific interchange between Israel and the Nations, though in a passage assigned by the Dispensationalist to the coming Millennium.

*Now it shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the LORD's house  
Shall be established on the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills;  
And all nations shall flow to it. Many people shall come and say,  
"Come, and let us go up to the mountain of the LORD,  
To the house of the God of Jacob;  
He will teach us His ways, and we shall walk in His paths."  
For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.*

(Isaiah 2:1-3)

One of the passages that have been central to our analysis of the *promised kingdom* – Daniel 2 – also seems to speak of a process, a development rather than a sudden, visible manifestation of the fullness of the kingdom, "*And the stone that struck the image became a great mountain and filled the whole earth.*"<sup>119</sup> The passage from Isaiah seems to underlie Jesus' conversation with the woman at the well in Samaria; the passage from Daniel 2 sounds a

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<sup>119</sup> Daniel 2:35b

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great deal like the many parables Jesus taught with regard to the Kingdom. A thorough exegesis of the ‘kingdom’ parables is beyond the scope of this study (and it a study unto itself), but even a cursory summary of them will illustrate the principle that the coming of the Kingdom was always intended to be a process, invisible to all but the eyes of faith, until its eventual consummation at the end of the age.

The concept of ‘kingdom’ parables, referring usually to the parables of Matthew 13 and parallel passages in Luke and Mark, is somewhat of a misnomer. Craig Blomberg, in his book *Interpreting the Parables* considers that *all* of Jesus’ parables were ‘kingdom’ parables. Blomberg writes, “all of Jesus’ parables revolve around one central theme: the kingdom of God.”<sup>120</sup> Blomberg points out that the parables were intended to have a twofold work, depending on whether they met with



**Craig Blomberg (b. 1955)**

faith or unbelief. “The main aim of the parables is to describe the activity of God in Jesus, more particularly so that men may trust in it and become disciples, or else be offended at it.”<sup>121</sup> It seems that many believers have manifested an anomaly in regard to this formula: they *believe* in the gospel and in Jesus Christ, but they *are offended* by the notion of an invisible Kingdom as it is portrayed in the parables. Herman Ridderbos comments, “...the parables indicate the special veiled way in which the kingdom has come.”<sup>122</sup>

The parables, if permitted to speak to the current age, do so of a Kingdom that remains hidden yet powerful – influencing and impacting the whole of Creation from an unseen position just beyond sensory perception and rational calculation. The metaphors are frequent: *leaven* working invisibly yet powerfully within a lump of dough; *seed* sown in the soil, invisibly and powerfully germinating to produce a greater harvest; a *dragnet* cast beneath the surface of the water, yet collecting all manner of fish in its way; a *mustard seed* beginning as the smallest and most insignificant seed in the garden, but ending as a great tree. In this mysterious and, for now, invisible process, the exalted King Jesus is also

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<sup>120</sup> Blomberg, Craig *Interpreting the Parables* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press; 1990); 291.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*; 293.

<sup>122</sup> Ridderbos, Herman *The Coming of the Kingdom* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing Company; 1962); 127.

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winnowing mankind, separating His sheep from the goats, as it were, and bringing about judgment through the preaching of the gospel of this kingdom.

This latter point will bear more investigation later, but it should be noted that in the midst of all sorts of theories of various judgments yet to come, the undeniable teaching of the New Testament is that a man's destiny in the judgment to come is entirely dependent on his response to the gospel *now*. Again Ridderbos, "For what will ultimately be received in the kingdom of God depends upon what a man *possesses* of it now."<sup>123</sup> The preaching of this gospel is established by Jesus Himself as the true marker of the coming of the end.<sup>124</sup>

The word is sent out, i.e., the authoritative word of Christ. It does not fall to the earth and return empty. The preaching of the gospel is itself the guarantee of the ultimate coming of the kingdom. It brings the latter irresistibly nearer.<sup>125</sup>

This is a fact often lost to sight in so many discussions of the *eschaton* – there will be no opportunity in the *Parousia* for an unbelieving and unrepentant sinner to 'make amends' and escape condemnation. The Kingdom of God has been inaugurated by the entire 'Christ-event,' and through the gospel is spreading through the world – to the Jew first and then to the Greek – just as the small stone in Daniel 2 grew to be an earth-covering mountain. This gospel is indeed the gospel of grace in Jesus Christ but it is also the gospel of judgement against unbelief; there will be no future 'gospel' beyond the gospel of the kingdom now preached. At the *Parousia* the door to the wedding feast will be closed and locked; the foolish virgins forever denied entry. "*Today, if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts...*"

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<sup>123</sup> Ridderbos; 135. Italics original.

<sup>124</sup> Matthew 24:14

<sup>125</sup> Ridderbos; 143-144.