

Rational Christian Eschatology

(A General Case for an Amillennial Perspective on the Future)

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General Introduction

Like the problem of evil, the question of eschatology,¹ properly conceived, is an almost uniquely monotheistic issue. To see why, consider first the polytheistic worldview from which Judaism originally emerged. There is nothing very mysterious about the presence of both good and evil in the world from the standpoint of a system in which the gods themselves are a mixture of good and evil. This also means there is no eschatology, no expectation or hope that this situation will ever fundamentally change, because the natural assumption is that the relatively good gods and the relatively evil gods will be forever engaged in their petty struggles, so that all we can do is try to entice the good ones to favor us and the evil ones to leave us alone. The same is true for Zoroastrian- or Manichean-style dualism, the special case of polytheism with two equal and opposite gods, one good and the other evil. The other main religious alternative to monotheism is pantheism, which views everything as god and therefore denies that there is really any such thing as evil to begin with. The things that appear to us as evil are really good, and so once again there can be no expectation for a better future, no hope that what we think of as good will eventually triumph over what we think of as evil. But in the worldview of monotheism, we legitimately ponder why the one true God should have created a world in which evil really does exist. And while we may not be able to give a complete answer to that question, one thing is clear: If God is truly all-good and all-powerful, then He must not yet be done with His plan for creation. It cannot be His purpose for this present world with all its evil to be the final picture. History is therefore neither basically constant nor fundamentally cyclic in nature, but must be going somewhere—or rather God is taking it somewhere, somewhere that aligns with His ultimate, good purpose.

This idea accords quite reasonably with nature itself, which teaches us that this physical universe cannot last forever in its current condition.² Belief in God adds that it will not just end in the extermination of all life, but rather must ultimately give way to something better, some new “world” (however we might conceive that term) in which everything will be set right. Another way of saying this is that if a good and caring God is in control over all things, as is most properly posited by monotheism, then His sovereign yet currently invisible reign must result in His absolute triumph over evil in the end. At that point we could say His kingdom will have fully arrived; His reign will be clearly evident to all. This will be the *eschaton*—the last day, the end of the current age and the inauguration of a new one. This expectation that after evil has eventually run its prescribed course, God will abolish it forever, bringing about a new age characterized by perfect righteousness, is what forms the rational basis for Christian eschatology. The rest of this paper is really only an elaboration on this fundamental hope in view of what God has already done and said to bring the subject to further light—most importantly (though not exclusively) through the pivotal activity of Jesus Christ.

My purpose here is not to focus on specific theological arguments for the amillennial³ framework that my view of eschatology falls into, nor to provide detailed exegetical commentary for why I read various passages of Scripture the way I do, since entire books could be and have been written on such topics. I see more need for setting forth a general case, taking a step back from the details and trying to take in the overall message of the Old and New Testament writings in their proper contexts. I contend that this “big picture” approach will not only equip us better than any other for dealing with the more intricate debates over specific passages should we choose to get into them, but will also illustrate more clearly than any other how an amillennial framework built on the basic monotheistic hope of the ultimate reign of God is the most straightforward, sensible, comprehensive, and consistent interpretation of Christian eschatology as developed through the history of revelation recorded in the Bible. To this task, therefore, we now turn.

¹Eschatology: The doctrine of last things, or end times.

²At least not as a closed system under the current laws of thermodynamics.

³Amillennialism: A view of eschatology named for its rejection of the idea of a millennium, or future thousand-year physical reign of Christ. (Amillennialism sees the thousand-year reign of Revelation 20:1-6 as a symbol for the entire “church age” inaugurated by Jesus.)

Introduction to the Old Testament Prophets

We begin our investigation into the overall picture of Christian eschatology by exploring the world of the Old Testament prophets, particularly the so-called latter ones who wrote Old Testament books. It is perhaps primarily because of these prophets that many debates over the details of Christian eschatology arise, at least in some evangelical circles. In these circles there is a tendency to think of the prophetic books as somewhat random collections of cryptic but detailed predictions of future events, all of which can be pieced together like a jigsaw puzzle to arrive at a complete description of the last days. This disjointed, piecemeal approach is not likely to yield a true understanding of what the prophets themselves were consciously trying to say, however. It's true that their writings contain some distinct predictions, and they sometimes told of specific divine visions or other revelations from which they got those predictions, as we will see. But they also each had a message, a coherent, intelligible purpose behind their writing, and in the development of their message they incorporated far more than just their specific revelations about the future. For example, they also cried out against the sins of the people, often with wails of lament, pleading with them to repent. They warned about God's evaluation of idolatry and injustice, and of how His holiness demands that He judge such things. Sometimes they questioned or wrestled with Him over His severity and purposes in what they saw happening all around them. Yet they always put their message in the framework of their basic monotheistic hope, holding out the expectation of ultimate vindication and blessing for those who would genuinely turn to God, and ultimate destruction for those who would not.

In all these aspects of their writing, the prophets served as God's spokesmen just as much as when they were relating a direct vision or other revelation, because their purpose stemmed from a true and deep understanding of His character. They thought God's thoughts, in a very real sense. As a general hermeneutical principle, then, in order to interpret the prophets' message we must try to understand their conscious *thinking* or *purpose* behind what they chose to write. (We usually can't claim to have grasped what a person is saying if we don't get some idea at least of why he is saying it, or what his thinking is behind what he is saying.) This thinking on the part of the prophets is admittedly sometimes difficult to follow. They did not typically express their thoughts in straightforward prose, but more often in various poetic forms, as indicated by indented text in many of our English translations. This does not mean they rhymed their lines, as is often done in English-language poetry, but rather that they used different techniques typical of Hebrew poetry, such as parallelism between successive thoughts, repeated words or sounds or ideas, hyperbole, and often even very strange word pictures to express their thoughts and revelations.

Along these lines it is important to realize that even when not phrased in poetic form, many of the Old Testament prophecies are best thought of as parables:

*I have also spoken to the prophets,
And I gave numerous visions,
And through the prophets I gave parables.*

- Hos. 12:10

This should serve as a warning of how foolish it would be to take everything stated by the Old Testament prophets in a literal way, as though it were a word-for-word prediction of future events. In most cases that would not be an accurate assessment of the thinking behind their message at all, and is therefore not truly reading what they had to say. It's true that some of their writing was intended literally, as straightforward narrative, but we must also be on the lookout for word pictures and other clues to indicate a more commonly used, non-literal, strictly or loosely poetic style of writing, recognizing that it is just as erroneous to interpret a non-literal style of writing literally as it is to interpret historical narrative poetically.

A more responsible approach to the prophetic writings is therefore to try to discern the major theological themes that the prophets themselves were apparently seeking to develop through the parables and word pictures they employed. These will generally involve the current events about which they were

writing, but most importantly, we need to see how these events were taken up into the overall message in order to bring out various aspects of the fundamental monotheistic hope that we are investigating. I will therefore try to illustrate this approach with a brief survey of the prophets in roughly historical order.

Historical Survey of the Old Testament Prophets

We begin our historical survey of the prophets in the days of the divided kingdom of Israel and Judah.⁴ Although the ominous threat of the Assyrian Empire was certainly on the horizon, for a time known as the “period of stagnation” of that empire (782-745 BC), both Israel and Judah enjoyed a feeling of relative security. This was the time of Amos, probably the earliest of the writing prophets⁵ and as good an example as any to try to get a handle on their typical patterns of thought and style. Amos was apparently given a revelation from God that the season was near for the northern kingdom of Israel to come to an end:

Thus the Lord GOD showed me, and behold, there was a basket of summer fruit. He said, “What do you see, Amos?” And I said, “A basket of summer fruit.” Then the LORD said to me, “The end has come for My people Israel. I will spare them no longer.”

- Amos 8:1-2

Whether or not Amos was given any details about how this was to occur (which was at the hands of the Assyrians in 722 BC) is hard to say, but if so, he did not choose to write much if anything about them. Rather, the subject that predominantly occupied his writing and presumably most of his thinking was the firm conviction that God would ultimately judge evil wherever it might be found. The specific case of the coming judgment on the northern kingdom of Israel could therefore be seen as a kind of first fruits or down payment on this more general expectation, a foretaste or foreshadowing of the final victory of God over evil.

This connection between what was about to happen to Israel and what was ultimately coming upon the whole world was not mere coincidence, but was the natural inference given that the same God was just as much at work in the former as He would be in the latter, bringing about His purposes for history, right up to the eschaton. Amos therefore started his book by warning that God has a case against the whole world, including both Israel and Judah, and that all nations would therefore eventually be punished for their sins (ch. 1-2). In a highly poetic structure consisting of multiple “stanzas,” each introduced by the phrase “for three transgressions and for four,” he wrote in symbolic terms of the “fire” of God’s judgment that would fall on each nation. He does not appear to have had a list of specific future incidents in mind, but rather the character of God and the truth that since all evil is to be eventually conquered for all time, then no nation will escape punishment, whether that nation lasts a long time or a little.

Although God’s judgment is ultimately to fall on the whole world, it was the apostasy of the nation of Israel in particular that Amos understandably went on to speak out against most strongly (ch. 3-8). Here, too, even though God had revealed that judgment was to come very soon, Amos wrote with the final end of history in mind. It’s not that he assumed the end of Israel would actually be the final judgment or eschaton, but again he apparently thought of the former event as at least an initial fulfillment or foretaste of the latter, something that pictured the final victory of God in a very poignant way. So he made use of amplified symbolic language and metaphors that, while poetically applicable to Israel’s

⁴Also known as the northern and southern kingdoms of Israel, respectively. The original kingdom of Israel was divided into these two kingdoms when the northern tribes rebelled against King Solomon’s son Rehoboam around 930 BC.

⁵Joel and/or Obadiah are hypothesized by many commentators to be from an earlier time, but this is very uncertain, so I will not include those prophets in this survey. (They both have a similar message that fits well with the other prophets I discuss, however, focusing particularly on the coming “day of the Lord” when God executes judgment on all evil.) I also omit Jonah and Habakkuk, whose messages are not overtly eschatological.

defeat by the Assyrians, would also really be more appropriate reminders of this ultimate end of history. For example, he said that the land would quake and rise and be tossed about like the floods of the Nile (8:8), that the sun would go down at noon (8:9), and that Israel would be bitten by the serpent (9:3). All of these word pictures suggest a note of finality or death, the end of the world order as we know it. The reader is thus drawn into the “prophetic mindset” that sees God’s justice at work behind the coming fall of Israel—the same justice that will ultimately and permanently judge the entire earth.

Thankfully, of course, the final triumph of God, or “day of the Lord,” is not only a story of ultimate judgment on evil, but also of salvation. So Amos finished with the assurance that the house of Jacob (Israel) would not be totally destroyed (9:8). Rather, taking his cue from the earlier covenants to Abraham and David (Gen. 12:3, 2 Sam. 6:13), he promised his readers that a Davidic king would eventually be raised up in glory over the whole earth (9:11-12). He beautifully pictured the resulting ultimate blessing of the age to come in terms of the mountains dripping with wine that runs down on the hills and dissolves them in sweetness (9:13). It is obviously the symbolic language of a parable, not to be taken literally, but the point is clear: When God’s final reign is realized, the blessing will be complete and will last forever. It will be like the exalted reign of David two centuries past, only better. Never again will His people be uprooted and judged (9:15).

Shortly after Amos, probably about the time that Assyria began to appear more threatening, Hosea wrote his book on a similar theme. Unlike Amos, he spelled out very poignantly how the soon-coming judgment would consummate the old, painful breach between the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah, with the former being given up by God to the enemy but the latter delivered (Hosea 1:4-7). The sense of betrayal God felt at having to give Israel up like this is positively palpable in Hosea, with the prophet himself having to endure similar feelings in his own marriage. Nevertheless, he, too, concentrated on the end of the story, and in particular how in the “last days” both Israel and Judah *together* would wonderfully inherit the ultimate blessing under the Davidic king (1:10-11, 3:5). Israel had played the harlot, but God loved her still. Hosea was not prophesying of a temporal restoration of the glory days of the united kingdom, but was rather picturing the age to come which will last forever, with no more evil or judgment ever to arise again (14:4). God will then be like the dew to His people, causing them to blossom like a lily (14:5). As is always the case in portrayals of this ultimate reign of God, it is described in beautiful symbolism rather than literal detail, since God has apparently not chosen to reveal those things which eye has not seen and ear has not heard, and which have not entered the heart of man (1 Cor. 2:9, based loosely on Is. 64:4). The point is that God has not forsaken His people; the end will reveal the existence of a blessed remnant not only of Judah, but even of the (now lost) tribes of Israel. The painful breach will finally be healed.

Isaiah is the prophet of this pre-exilic period who perhaps elaborated on the blessings of this ultimate reign of God most beautifully. He emphasized more clearly than Amos and Hosea that the blessing would not only involve the remnant of Judah and Israel, but even of the Gentiles, portraying it as a lavish banquet prepared for all peoples (25:6). In similarly symbolic language, the nations would stream to the mountain of the house of the Lord, which would rise up above all other mountains (2:2).⁶ There would never more be any war (2:4), but everyone would be holy (4:3). The glory of the Lord Himself would be a shelter and a cloud by day and a fiery light by night (4:5-6). Isaiah was also the first prophet to hint strongly at the idea that this final blessing would involve a resurrection, saying that God would swallow up death for all time, permanently wiping away all the tears of His people (25:7-8).

Isaiah also prophesied of the immediate events to come in greater detail than his predecessors had, not only giving a fairly definite time frame for Assyria’s captivity of the northern kingdom (8:4), but also warning of their later attack on Judah as well (7:17-20, 8:5-8). He assured the people of Judah that this

⁶Symbolism involving mountains was evidently quite common in Jewish thought. We have already noted Amos’ portrayal of the mountains dripping with sweet wine in the future (Amos 9:13). Similarly, God’s activity predominantly in the exodus from Egypt was portrayed as involving the mountains melting like wax (Ps. 97:5) and skipping like rams (Ps. 114:4). In view of this, the few commentators (mostly dispensationalists) who still take the language of Isaiah 2:2 literally instead of symbolically are very unconvincing indeed.

attack would be unsuccessful (ch. 36-37). But the protection of Judah would only be for a time; he also warned that they would eventually be conquered by the up-and-coming Babylonians (39:6-7; cf. 2 Kings 20:12-15). Like Amos before him, Isaiah always seemed to think of these prophecies in light of the eschaton. Assyria was God's instrument for now, but they would ultimately be judged for their evil (10:5), as would all the other pagan nations (ch. 14-23). There are occasional specific details given in these oracles against the nations (for example, that Moab was to be degraded "within three years" in 16:14), but for the most part the language is primarily suggestive of God's ultimate judgment on all evil rather than of any particular incident shortly to come. For example, the destruction of Assyria is explicitly said to be a pattern for what would ultimately befall all nations:

*This is the plan devised against the whole earth;
and this is the hand that is stretched out against all the nations.
- Isaiah 14:26*

This pattern is further emphasized when the entire section wraps up with the highly symbolic description of the entire earth being laid bare (24:1-4), the host of heaven judged (24:21), the sea-monster Leviathan punished (27:1), and the Lord Himself coming to reign forever (24:23, 32:1), pouring out His Spirit (32:15, a theme also emphasized by Joel), and causing the desert to blossom like a crocus (35:1). In that day not only will the remnant of Israel be blessed and worship, but so will the remnant of the surrounding nations (27:13). In light of such symbolism, the fact that these things are prophesied to happen "in the holy mountain at Jerusalem" (27:13) should not be taken to imply that the literal, earthly city of Jerusalem will be the site of God's eternal reign. Rather, just as the earthly Jerusalem was the site where God first established His royal reign through His chosen king, David, so Isaiah could very appropriately portray the site of His eternal reign through the exalted Messianic king as a new Jerusalem, a theme which is further developed in the New Testament (e.g., Gal. 4:26, Heb. 12:22, Rev. 3:12, 20:10ff.).

Similar ideas are found in Micah, who prophesied about the same time as Isaiah,⁷ but we need not cover him in any more detail. After the defeat of the northern kingdom by the Assyrians, Nahum warned most specifically of the particular judgment to come on Assyria, which was fulfilled when they were conquered by Babylon in 612 BC. Zephaniah broadened the theme, much like Amos and Isaiah had done before him, to speak not only of judgment on Assyria, but on the entire earth (Zeph. 1:2-3). When read in light of their intent to remind their readers of the ultimate triumph of God, and to illustrate how He is even now putting His purposes into action in a partial fulfillment or down payment on what is finally to come, all of these so-called pre-exilic prophets make reasonable sense. Their writing comes alive in a way that we would miss if we tried to take everything as a specific prediction to be fulfilled in a literal sense.

This brings us to the exilic prophets, those whose careers lasted into the exile of Judah into Babylon starting around 598 BC.⁸ Their style varied somewhat from their former models, especially in the case of Ezekiel, who made far more extensive use of visions and sometimes very allegorical parables. Both Jeremiah and Ezekiel were highly focused on the immediate future, giving repetitive and extremely severe warnings that Jerusalem would not be able to resist the Babylonians. Jerusalem was indeed eventually sacked in 587 BC. To all appearances, God had completely forsaken His covenant with His people. Yet these prophets declared that this was not so, and in so doing they kept the background of God's final faithfulness in mind. So when Jeremiah spoke of the return from the captivity to Babylon after 70 years⁹ (25:12, 29:10), he intentionally used language clearly appropriate to the eschaton: It would involve the remnant of Israel as well as of Judah, and they would be restored with not only a new heart

⁷Interestingly, one of these two prophets even borrowed some of his text directly from the other, or possibly from a common source; compare Micah 4:1-3 with Isaiah 2:2-4.

⁸Possibly there was a prior deportation to Babylon in 605 BC, according to the chronology of the book of Daniel, although this is disputed.

⁹This 70-year figure was evidently either symbolic or an approximation, since the return starting in 538 BC was not exactly 70 years later.

(24:7) but also a new covenant (31:31-34), as well as a righteous Davidic king (23:5, 33:15). All of this was fulfilled in a partial sense with the end of the exile in 538 BC, for that momentous event involved many from all twelve tribes being restored to the Lord, experiencing personal forgiveness, and internalizing His laws in their minds and hearts as the promise of a new covenant had said. But it also clearly foreshadowed something much greater, the final redemption of God's people and His reign at the end of the age.

Ezekiel's visions also included the thought of a remnant finally being given a new heart and spirit (11:14-25) and a covenant that would last forever (16:1-63). God Himself would be their king (20:33-49), shepherding His people in the person of a Davidic ruler (ch. 34, 36-37). As a priest himself, Ezekiel no doubt felt the loss of the temple quite keenly, so he portrayed this final reign as taking place in the context of an extremely grand, idealized temple, one which becomes the source of living water (Ch. 40-48, esp. 47:1-12) and other blessings.¹⁰ Though the details of this description are admittedly curious, most of them were probably not intended in a strictly allegorical sense, but only to help paint a spectacular symbolic picture in the imagination. The picture is not of a merely temporal, earthly situation, but rather of the eternal reign of God, centering on the glorious truth of His dwelling with His people in a whole new way, and forever.

The end of the exile marked the most significant deliverance, or redemption, of the people of Israel since the original exodus from Egypt. And so at this time the themes of God's power and grace in redemption continued most strikingly, particularly in the unnamed prophet or prophets who wrote the second portion of Isaiah, beginning at chapter 40, often called Deutero-Isaiah or Second Isaiah. Although the most conservative commentators continue to believe Isaiah himself penned the whole book,¹¹ this is almost certainly not the case. Second Isaiah is almost impossible to make sense of under the assumption of the earlier context of Isaiah himself. But the meaning practically leaps off the page under the realization that it was written from the perspective of the end of the exile,¹² urging the Jews to take advantage of the permission of the Persian king Cyrus to return to their own land and rebuild their capital city and temple:

*It is I who says of Cyrus, "He is My shepherd!
And he will perform all My desire."
And he declares of Jerusalem, "She will be built,"
And of the temple, "Your foundation will be laid."
- Isaiah 44:28*

*Go forth from Babylon! Flee from the land of the Chaldeans!
Declare with the sound of joyful shouting, proclaim this,
Send it out to the end of the earth;
Say, "The LORD has redeemed His servant Jacob."
- Isaiah 48:20*

Again, this concept of redemption is perhaps more richly developed in Second Isaiah than anywhere else in the whole Bible. Israel had been sent into exile for her sins (42:24), but now she has been

¹⁰This imagery may well be intended to recall to mind the Edenic scene from Genesis, in which God was pictured as fashioning His earth as a temple of sorts, a place where He could dwell with His creatures, and from which a river flowed out and divided into four rivers to bless the whole land (Gen. 2:10). The description in Revelation 21 and 22 of the church as the new Jerusalem with the Lord as its temple certainly seems to pick up on the Edenic imagery in many respects.

¹¹Usually on the basis of John 12:38 and a prior commitment to the doctrine of absolute inerrancy, which I reject.

¹²In fact, it may very well have been amended or significantly edited even later than this context in which the basic framework seems to have been laid out, and many commentators even further divide the book to contain a Third Isaiah beginning at chapter 56, but we need not go into details or arguments for this.

redeemed (43:1). Her iniquity is removed (40:2), her transgressions wiped out (43:25, 44:22). She, or at least a faithful, representative remnant among her, has been a model of the patient, suffering servant of the Lord in a beautiful picture that ultimately foreshadows the work of Christ Himself (49:3-7, 50:4-9, 52:13-53:12). The foreshadowing is not arbitrary or accidental, for the underlying theme is the salvation of God which will reach to the end of the earth and be forever (49:6, 51:6). It is a partial fulfillment of what God will ultimately accomplish.

It is important to realize that the true picture of Second Isaiah is not of a temporal blessing in an earthly Jerusalem, for:

*Heaven is My throne and the earth is My footstool.
Where then is the house you could build for Me?
- Isaiah 66:1*

Nevertheless, in this same chapter the city of Jerusalem to which the exiles returned is made to signify the final blessing, in an indication of the symbolic type of word picture being used. The language is clearly figurative, with the people of God nursing at Jerusalem's breasts (66:11), and the glory of the nations streaming into her (66:12, 18-20). Significantly, this site of the final, glorious reign of God is also pictured as being in the context of a new heaven and new earth which will endure forever (65:17-18, 66:22). Whether this new world has a different physical constitution from the current one is not specified, nor is it the point. The point is that it is the complete fulfillment of the basic eschatological hope of the people of God.

In addition to Second Isaiah, Haggai and Zechariah also prophesied around the time of the end of the exile or shortly afterward, encouraging the returning Jews in their effort to rebuild the temple. We will return to Zechariah shortly. Meanwhile, some years later, perhaps leading up to the reforms of Ezra and Nehemiah,¹³ Malachi dealt with the relative faithlessness that the restored Israel had apparently returned to in his day. His style is therefore somewhat reminiscent of the earlier prophets, with a strong warning of God's ultimate judgment on evil (3:5). The temple having been recently rebuilt, but not yet with anything like its former glory, nor, presumably, with any visible indication that God had taken up residence there, he framed the warning with the imagery of God suddenly coming to His temple, judging but also refining His people (3:1-3). The judgment will fall on every evildoer (4:1), but for those who fear His name, it will be a deliverance: The sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings (4:2). In light of this symbolic metaphor, the coming of Elijah to restore hearts (4:5-6) should not be taken literally, but rather as a recognition that God's character is such that He will not let the light of truth be completely extinguished by evil before the final judgment. He will see to it that hearts are prepared. It is therefore no surprise that Jesus saw this as having a fulfillment in John the Baptist (Matt. 17:12, Mark 9:13), whose message we will cover later.

This concludes our admittedly cursory tour through the majority of the Old Testament prophets. My purpose, again, has not been to provide a detailed commentary on every passage but rather to illustrate in general terms what these prophets were talking about, and in so doing to provide hints at how we should interpret specific details within the context of the overall message they were developing. The eschatological teaching we get from these books is fairly limited but entirely consistent with the fundamental hope of monotheism. Things will not continue in their present state forever. There is coming a day when evil will finally be judged and abolished, and the redemption of God's people will be complete. They will be purified from sin and will live by His Spirit. The problem of evil will finally be solved, not just in theory but in practice. The righteous dead will be raised, for as Jesus argued (Mark 12:26, Luke 20:37), a good God is the God of the living, not of the dead—He does not just let His people die and be no more. Though God has always reigned as king over all creation in a sense (e.g., Ps. 47:8, 97:1, etc.), His reign will eventually be manifest in a fuller way, forever, in what can only be described as a totally new world.

¹³The exact time of Malachi is debatable.

Daniel and Zechariah

In light of the general historical pattern of Old Testament prophecy just considered, we turn now to the more difficult prophets to interpret, who happen to be among the most recent chronologically. These prophets are quite significant to our study in that they may appear at first glance to contain fantastic deviations from the overall eschatological message we have noticed so far. We start with Daniel, whose style is obviously very different from all the others. His prophecies are in the form of vividly detailed visions, which is a feature shared to some extent by Ezekiel, but whereas Ezekiel's visions consisted mostly in fairly simple object lessons about the destruction soon to fall on Judah and Jerusalem, Daniel's contain extended verbal teaching and appear to be much more directly predictive of long-range world events. The most extreme example is chapter 11, which details the history of the conflicts between the Seleucid and Ptolemaic kingdoms,¹⁴ culminating in the atrocities of Antiochus IV Epiphanes around 167 BC. This is related as a lengthy speech by an angel, given to Daniel in a fantastic vision.

A little thoughtful reflection on how this could have worked may well make us wonder if we are intended to take the story literally, as actually coming to Daniel through an angelic speech, or if the author could perhaps have chosen this context as a literary framework or rhetorical device instead. It is not easy to imagine how Daniel could have recalled the discourse word-for-word in order to write it down after the vision was over. We could presume that he was supernaturally given an infallible recollection of the very words of the angel, of course, but there is not really any hint in the text that such a miraculous thing occurred. On the other hand, the practice of setting out legitimate teaching in the framework of a story about angelic visitations was quite widespread in the several centuries preceding Christ, and also afterward. The book of Tobit in the Apocrypha is a Jewish example, as is the book of Enoch, which is quoted in the New Testament (Jude 14-15). The Shepherd of Hermas is a Christian example that was highly esteemed by many in the early church before the canon was finalized.

In addition to this question about the literary genre of Daniel, there are numerous reasons given by critical scholars for doubting that the book was even written by the man Daniel who lived during the Babylonian captivity in the first place. The most straightforward example is that whereas history (including the Old Testament) tells us of Cyrus the Persian defeating Babylon, Daniel calls the conqueror Darius the Mede (5:31), perhaps suggesting that this was written several centuries after the event, by which time the passed-down memory of some of the historical details might have been somewhat muddled. Such reasons are not absolutely conclusive, given that we are obviously not in possession of all the relevant facts. For example, it may be possible that Darius was just another name for Cyrus.¹⁵ But even if the critics are right and the book was written much later as a literary story for theological encouragement, as seems likely to me, it will not substantially affect our overall interpretation, as we will see.

We press on, therefore, to the main message of Daniel's visions, which is simply that the kingdoms of this world are to be eventually replaced by the eternal reign of God. This was brought out first in the interpretation of Nebuchadnezzar's dream of a great statue (ch. 2, especially 2:44). This dream was later paralleled to a large extent by Daniel's own vision of four beasts and one like a son of man (ch. 7). This imagery may well have been behind Jesus' tendency to refer to Himself by the title "the Son of Man," seeing Himself as the ultimate fulfillment of this vision, the one to whom the final kingdom would be given.

Before the final kingdom was to be established, however, the book of Daniel also tells of a time when a great "abomination of desolation" would be set up in the temple (ch. 8, 11). This was fulfilled by

¹⁴The Syrian and Egyptian divisions, respectively, of the former Greek/Macedonian empire, after it was divided among Alexander the Great's generals as successors. The Syrian division (Seleucid dynasty) was basically north of Israel, and the Egyptian division (Ptolemaic dynasty) basically south, which explains the references to the kings of the North and South, respectively, in Daniel 11.

¹⁵In this case, Daniel 6:28 would be interpreted as a reference to Daniel's success in the reign of Darius *which was also* the reign of Cyrus, not in the reign of Darius *and* in the reign of Cyrus as it is usually translated.

Antiochus Epiphanes when he defiled the temple as described (and specifically called by that name) in the book of 1 Maccabees in the Apocrypha. If it was genuinely foretold centuries earlier by Daniel it is a most remarkable prophecy, for the explicit detail given in chapter 11 is completely unparalleled anywhere else in the entire Bible. If it was written after the fact as a literary portrayal of what had already happened it is still a fascinating picture, for the real emphasis of Daniel is not on these events themselves, but on how they serve as another hint or foretaste of the final reign of God at the end of history, as brought out in the following verses.

After describing the events leading up to and including the abomination of desolation, the vision of Daniel 11 becomes much more general in nature. The people of God would be refined and purged “until the end time” (11:35), and then the vision begins to take on a somewhat larger-than-life character that seems to me an indication that from this point on it is intended as a parable or symbolic picture, the significance of which had been pointed to or foreshadowed by the preceding historical narrative. Antiochus Epiphanes, the second part of whose name meant “God manifest,” had been described only sparingly in the previous part of the chapter; now “the king” is described in terms of all the blasphemous characteristics that this title foreshadowed. He exalts himself above every god and speaks monstrous things against the God of gods (11:36-37). He is, in other words, the very picture of evil. He takes action against the strongest of fortresses (11:39), engaging in a battle of epic proportions, with chariots and horsemen and ships, annihilating many nations (11:40-44), following in the pattern of the battles between the kings of the North and South already described. Yet for all this, some people are rescued from his hand (11:41). These are symbolized as the nations of Edom, Moab, and Ammon, the three ancient relatives of Israel called together “the sons of the east” (Is. 11:14), who in spite of their relationship with Israel were also her hated enemies from earliest times. Isaiah had used the image of Israel plundering these three nations to portray God’s ultimate triumph over evil. This makes Daniel’s parable picturing their rescue somewhat surprising, but perhaps that is the intent—the same nations that are used to represent evil in one prophecy can point to God’s saving grace in another.

At any rate, the picture is completed when the evil king who has by now passed on south and west through Egypt is suddenly disturbed by rumors from the east and north, perhaps referring to Israel and the three eastern nations mentioned above. Had he arrogantly assumed Israel and her sisters had been put down forever by his bloody campaign? Now he realizes with dismay that the people of God have been rescued from his hand. Incensed, he returns to the area, intent on destroying them (11:44), but instead silently meets his end at the foot of the Holy Mountain (11:45). The point of the parable is clear: Though evil may appear unassailable, it is no match for God. God will triumph over evil when the time comes, and that without even having to put up a real fight.

What, then, of God’s people during this time? The parable continues to say they will endure tremendous tribulation, but every one of them who truly belongs to Him (“who is found written in the book”) will be rescued (12:1). The dead will rise, the evil ones to be judged and the righteous ones to enter eternal life (12:2). This clearly establishes that we are no longer looking at the time of Antiochus Epiphanes, but rather at the final consummation, the ultimate reign of God that all the other prophets had similarly kept in view. Daniel’s literary genre may be different from theirs, but his message is fundamentally the same.

Before leaving the book of Daniel we must also consider its most famous prophecy of all, the vision of the 70 weeks (9:24-27). This is considered by dispensationalists¹⁶ to be the key to their whole system of eschatology. And so it is, for this is what establishes their framework of a two-phase second coming of

¹⁶Dispensationalism: A system of interpretation of Scripture in which the church is seen as a “parenthesis” in the history of Israel, so that after the church is removed from the earth by an event called “the rapture,” God will resume His program with the physical nation of Israel. Dispensationalists are also premillennialists, meaning they see the second coming of Christ as inaugurating (and therefore prior to) a thousand-year period in which He will reign while physically present in the present, earthly city of Jerusalem. Unlike conventional premillennialists (also known as historic premillennialists), dispensationalists see this future reign of Christ as involving the restoration of the theocratic nation of Israel.

Christ with a seven year tribulation for the nation of Israel in between, after the “church age” has come to an end. Without this specific framework as the context in which to interpret other prophecies, it is very difficult to see how the dispensational interpretation of these other prophecies would make any sense at all, as none of the Scriptures that specifically deal with the second coming or *parousia*¹⁷ seem to straightforwardly suggest such an approach. But given how different this framework is from the general pattern we have observed for prophecies of the end times, we might well suspect the need for a more careful consideration of the overall message of the 70 weeks.

The passage starts out very much in keeping with the theme of all the prophets, the eventual triumph of God over evil. There is coming a time when the transgression will be finished, sin will come to an end, iniquity will be atoned for, and everlasting righteousness will be brought in (Dan. 9:24). This will involve the coming of an anointed one, or Messiah, who is also called a Prince (9:25). But just as Daniel has already told of the abomination of Antiochus Epiphanes in chapter 8, so this prophecy is framed in the language of that event. The triumph of God will consist in His putting down a further, more ultimate “abomination” and associated “desolations” (9:27). It will happen in the seventieth “week” or “seven” after the end of the exile, whatever that means. This tantalizing figure is often touted as an astonishingly accurate prediction of the date of Christ’s first advent, but it is not as unambiguous as it may at first appear. The debated issues include whether each “week” was intended in the sense of a literal period of seven units of time, whether those units of time were years or rather 360-day intervals,¹⁸ whether the overall period of 70 “weeks” was intended to commence with the edict of Cyrus in 538 BC or one of the two edicts of Artaxerxes in about 458 BC or 445 BC, whether the death of Christ marked the end of the 69th week or was to occur in the middle of the 70th, and whether the “prince who is to come” (9:26) is the previously-mentioned Messiah (9:25) or someone else.

There are at least a couple of different combinations of the above options that line up surprisingly closely with the historical coming of Christ.¹⁹ Whether this is more than coincidence or not is hard to say, but in the end I must admit to not being convinced. It seems questionable, at least, that the prophecy was even intended to be taken so literally in the first place. Just as Jesus could speak of the obligation to forgive up to 70 sevens of times (Matt. 18:22), so I suggest that the 70 sevens of Daniel may well be a symbol for an indefinite interval leading up to the time of the end, rather than a literal number of years. (In other words, “70 sevens” may well have functioned in Hebrew thought much like “myriads of myriads” or “thousands of thousands” in the book of Revelation.) The main point, however, remains pretty much the same whether this prophecy involved a definite prediction of the year of Christ’s crucifixion or not. Either way, the evil foreshadowed by the original abomination of desolation would not be the end of the story. The ultimate desolator would finally be put down. Israel and her holy city would

¹⁷*Parousia*: The Greek word for presence or appearance.

¹⁸The main reason for postulating 360-day intervals is from comparison with Rev. 11:3 and 12:6. (See the discussion of Revelation 11 below.) It has nothing to do with the Jewish calendar, which was lunisolar, meaning months were based on new moons with an extra “leap month” being periodically added to stay synchronized with the solar year.

¹⁹If Jesus was crucified in 30 AD, the year deemed most plausible by the majority of historians, this would have been very near the middle of the 70th week of years starting from Artaxerxes’ first edict in 458 BC. If Jesus was crucified in 33 AD, another year well within the realm of plausibility, this could have been very near the end of the 69th week of 360-day intervals starting from Artaxerxes’ second edict, assuming this was actually in 444 BC instead of 445. This second interpretation is the chronology followed by most dispensational commentators. The basic theory was first presented in detail around the end of the 19th century in a book by Sir Robert Anderson entitled *The Coming Prince*, though using the more traditional assumptions of 445 BC for the year of Artaxerxes’ second edict and 32 AD for the year of the crucifixion. Anderson’s dates are not generally advocated by dispensationalists today, as most modern historians regard 32 AD to have much less plausibility than either 30 AD or 33 AD for the year of the crucifixion, on the basis of astronomical calculations for which years could have had Passover (the 14th of a lunar month in the springtime) falling on a Thursday, as the synoptic gospels seem to have it, or possibly on a Friday as suggested in John.

endure on earth for a long time, but would eventually give way to the eternal reign of God through his Messianic King.

The final Old Testament prophetic book to consider is Zechariah, where we encounter another conundrum about authorship. The first eight chapters of Zechariah are perhaps a little strange but not especially mysterious. They consist mainly of visions again somewhat reminiscent of Ezekiel's, but for the unambiguous purpose of declaring that God was with Zerubbabel and the returning exiles in their project of rebuilding the temple. Starting with chapter 9, however, the style changes fairly dramatically, leading many commentators to conclude that this part was written later, much like Second Isaiah had evidently been appended to Isaiah's original book. The authorship of this second half of Zechariah is not especially important for our purposes, however, but rather the interpretation of its message, which seems once again to be the final triumph of God over evil.

The portrayal of this final triumph of God over evil in Zechariah (or Second Zechariah) is admittedly unique, perhaps more graphic than anywhere else in the Bible. The details are so specific as to leave little doubt in many minds that they must have been intended literally: There will be a siege against Jerusalem (12:2), half the city will be exiled (14:2), the Lord will stand on the Mount of Olives and cause it to split in two (14:4). Yet a little reflection shows that this is probably not so. Do we really want to commit ourselves to the view that the horses will be struck with bewilderment and blindness, and the riders with madness (12:4)? This would hardly make sense in the context of modern warfare. Furthermore, the language is highly reminiscent of various metaphors that we have already seen commonly employed by other prophets in a symbolic way: The heavenly lights will be extinguished (14:6; cf. Amos 8:9, Is. 13:10, Joel 2:30-31, etc.), living waters will flow out of Jerusalem (14:7; cf. Ezek. 47:1-12), and the land of Jerusalem will rise up above all the surrounding earth (14:10; cf. Is. 2:2).

The fact is, there are ample reasons within the text of Zechariah itself to suspect that this story of a final battle at Jerusalem was intended all along as a parable and not a literal prediction. It is not saying that literally all nations will be gathered against Jerusalem (12:3); it is portraying God's ultimate triumph over evil in the picture of a great battle in which God's people are besieged, but delivered. And not only are they delivered in a physical sense, they are also forever purified from sin. This is depicted quite beautifully: God first pours out a spirit of grace and supplication on them, so that they mourn for their sins against Him (12:10-14), then a fountain is opened to cleanse them from sin and impurity (13:1). The final victory is portrayed as God's standing on the Mount of Olives and splitting it open to make a path of escape for His people (14:4-5), not meaning a literal passageway (for how likely is that to be of any real help in our day of airplanes and helicopters?), but symbolizing their ultimate deliverance. (See Zech. 4:7 for a similar metaphor.) No longer will there be any curse (14:11; cf. Rev. 22:3), meaning sin and its effects will be forever done away. Evil people will be judged, as portrayed in clearly symbolic terms by the rotting of their flesh, eyes, and tongues (14:12), and also by a plague of famine being sent on those who refuse to worship the king, the Lord Himself, at the Feast of Tabernacles, the festival corresponding to our Thanksgiving, when the crops were all gathered in and the people would thank God for the rain He had sent during the year and petition His similar blessing on the next (14:16-18).

The main point of all the Old Testament prophets therefore seems to be fairly clear and consistent. The later books, particularly Daniel and Second Zechariah (assuming critical scholarship regarding date and authorship is generally accurate), do not deviate from the former works in their overall message. They do, however, have a uniquely allegorical style as well as some characteristic emphases that we do well to notice. In particular, the eschatological images of kingdom and battle are quite graphically employed in these two books. God's triumph over evil is pictured as a great battle between His kingdom and the kingdoms of the world. This way of thinking about the fundamental monotheistic eschatological hope is monumentally important for understanding the book of Revelation, which we will cover later, and to a lesser extent also for understanding message and mission of Jesus, to which we now turn.

Jesus and the Kingdom of God

It should be clear by now that the concept of the kingdom of God, if not that precise phrase, was quite familiar in the context of Judaism long before John the Baptist or Jesus ever started talking about it. It should also be clear that the concept was quite broad. The sovereignty of God implies that He has always reigned over history, and so in one sense His kingdom can refer to that. In another sense, His reign over history had been particularly manifest in the nation of Israel, and so His kingdom can also be a way of referring to the theocratic nation. But both of these intermediate senses also pointed forward to the eschatological coming of the kingdom of God, in which His reign would be manifest through His final triumph over evil for all time. There was some diversity of opinion in Jesus' day as to what the eschaton and this ultimate, ensuing kingdom would be like. For example, the minority party of the Sadducees denied that it would involve resurrection, whereas the Pharisees and the majority of the populace apparently affirmed this, looking forward to what they termed "the resurrection on the last day" (John 11:24). They also apparently recognized it as inaugurating the "age to come" (a phrase used in Mark 10:30, Matt. 12:32, Heb. 6:5, etc.), the time of the new heavens and new earth described by the prophets, the fundamental eschatological hope we have been investigating, regardless of what exactly they held this new age to involve.

Meanwhile, however, there was the far more pressing issue of a different aspect of the kingdom of God, namely the question of what had happened to God's reign through Israel in the present age. This reign had been exercised most gloriously in the days of their great kings David and Solomon around a thousand years before, but things had gone downhill since then. In fact, by this time it had been over 600 years since the Babylonians had forcefully put an end to God's kingdom in this fashion almost altogether. True, Israel had been allowed by Cyrus to return to their land in 538 BC, but not as a fully independent, sovereign nation. Even after their return, they were still regarded as slaves to a foreign nation (Neh. 9:36), awaiting a "new exodus," or redemption from Egypt, so to speak. The Maccabean revolt against Antiochus Epiphanes undoubtedly held high hopes for just such a restoration of the kingdom of God exercised through the nation of Israel, and indeed it did lead to their partial autonomy from the Seleucids in 142 BC and eventually full autonomy in 110 BC, but not with anything like the kind of power or glory they dreamed of from the days of David. Nor did it bring about the "proper" form of leadership, for the Hasmonean²⁰ dynasty of priest-kings was not in the line of David, and was therefore considered illegitimate by many.²¹ In any case, this period of self-rule was not to last very long: Jerusalem was seized by Pompey for the Romans less than fifty years later, in 63 BC.

As the Romans tightened their rule over Judea in the following decades, Jewish sentiment against them generally grew more and more fervent, eventually resulting in "The Great Revolt" which was put down by the Romans with the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD. The majority of the Jews in Jesus' day were not nearly so radical, however. There were some zealots, to be sure, who occasionally formed raiding bands and mounted futile campaigns against the Roman government. But most of the people were apparently more-or-less content to wait for God to deliver them from Roman rule. This is the context in which the messianic expectation of the Jews in New Testament times is to be understood.

The word *messiah*, or christ, simply means an "anointed one," a concept reminiscent of Samuel's anointing David with oil to point him out as the next king (1 Sam. 16:12-13). What the people hoped for was a new messiah, a new leader sent by God Himself to mightily deliver them from the oppression of the Romans and "restore the kingdom to Israel" (cf. Acts 1:6). It is debatable whether or how many of them may have thought of this new messiah as the final Davidic king who would usher in the resurrection and

²⁰The Hasmoneans were the priestly family from which came Judas Maccabeus, the leader of the revolt against the Seleucids. ("Maccabeus" was probably a nickname derived from a word meaning "the hammer.")

²¹For example, the pseudepigraphal book *Psalms of Solomon* castigated the Hasmoneans because they "laid waste the throne of David" (17:8). The Qumran community, at least, known primarily for the Dead Sea Scrolls, also considered them illegitimate as priests, since they had usurped that position from the Zadokites. (E.g., Their judgment is announced in *Peshar Habakkuk*, 1QpHab 9:4-7.)

final kingdom of God at the eschaton. That there would indeed be such a figure in the end times was probably not much disputed.²² But first there was the business of defeating the Romans so that Israel could once again be an independent nation, in a kind of initial fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies that looked forward to God's ultimate blessing on His people. After that, perhaps God would immediately usher in the new age that the prophets really pointed to, or perhaps that would not come until later.

There was nothing strange or mysterious about this dual expectation concerning the coming reign of God. The Old Testament prophets had established the pattern for viewing major events in this present age as a kind of down payment that foreshadowed and confirmed the ultimate reign of God in the age to come. It was entirely natural, therefore, to hope for an initial fulfillment of the hope of Israel in the form of a messiah who would reestablish God's mediatorial reign through the nation of Israel in the current age, prior to the ultimate fulfillment involving the resurrection age to come with its whole new world order, whatever that might involve.

It is no wonder, then, that when John came announcing the good news ("gospel") that the kingdom of God was at hand (Matt. 3:2), he was generally very well received, not only by the crowds but also at least initially even by some of the religious pundits, both Pharisees and Sadducees. This was the news they had been hoping for. There is no indication that they understood his announcement to be claiming that the final eschaton, complete with resurrection and a whole new world, was about to arrive. But a dramatic initial fulfillment of that eschatological hope was still something very big, something everyone who believed John would naturally want to get in on. Unexpectedly to some, no doubt, John put a damper on some of that enthusiasm by calling the religious leaders who wanted to associate with him a "brood of vipers" (Matt. 3:7, Luke 3:7). He made it clear that he was not inviting people to join a political or military cause to bring about this initial fulfillment, but rather a spiritual reformation. His announcement was intended to produce repentance. God's kingdom could only be exercised in a God-fearing people. In spite of this clarification, it is not difficult to see why the Romans, or more particularly Herod and the chief priests and other Jews who were entrusted with official authority by the Romans to keep the people in line, would be inclined to view anyone who proclaimed such a message with suspicion, especially if they seemed to be attracting any kind of a following.

Upon His baptism by John, Jesus took up the same potentially dangerous message, preaching the good news of the coming of the kingdom (Matt. 4:17, Mark 1:15). He evidently saw Himself as not only announcing the kingdom, but actually bringing it about in some way: It was not only "at hand," it had positively "come upon" the people in and through His actions (Matt. 12:28, Luke 11:20). At the same time, it was also about to come in a further, new way, "with power," within the lifetime of his contemporaries (Mark 9:1). Like John before Him, Jesus stressed the spiritual nature of this kingdom, using memorable parables to illustrate its character. While the Jewish leaders would not understand what He was really saying through these parables (Matt. 13:10-15), there is no mistaking that His teaching was quite the opposite of anything they would have expected to hear from any would-be messiah, or from any other teacher for that matter. He pronounced woes on these Jewish leaders (Matt. 23) and blessings on various Gentiles (e.g., Mark 7:26-29, Matt. 8:5-12). He not only refused to take up arms against the Roman occupation, He even legitimized it to some degree, pointing out that if the people were under Roman rule, as shown by the fact that they had to use Roman money for some purposes at least, then they owed taxes to Rome (Mark 12:13-17). Whatever Jesus meant by the coming of the kingdom of God, He clearly did not intend it in the sense that most of his hearers imagined, the restoration of the political independence of Israel.

Nevertheless, the fact that Jesus persisted in using the provocative language of the kingdom of God shows that He was not legitimizing the rule of Rome in the sense that the Romans demanded, either. Caesar proclaimed himself god; Jesus would have none of that. If the kingdom of God was coming, the kingdom of Rome was not sovereign; it had only limited power (cf. John 19:11). Just because Jesus was not about to revolt against the power of the Roman empire militarily did not mean that He thought "the

²²In fact, the Dead Sea Scrolls of the Qumran community reveal that some Jews at least held that there would be two Messianic figures at the end of the age, one kingly and the other a priestly and/or prophetic teacher.

kingdoms of this world” were not in ultimate conflict with God. What He was announcing was in fact a challenge to all other claims to authority and power imaginable. God’s kingdom is supreme, and Rome was not its ally. The good news of the kingdom involved the truth that Rome would ultimately be judged for her sins just like every other nation, and that there is an appropriate way, demonstrated by Jesus, to live in the light of that truth even now.

The riddle we are touching on but not fully answering here, of what exactly Jesus meant by His announcement of the kingdom of God, is one of the most fascinating puzzles in Christianity. To do the subject justice we must at least address the theory advanced by Albert Schweitzer in the early part of the 20th century that Jesus erroneously expected that the final end of the world was right around the corner, that the kingdom in its ultimate form would arrive within the time frame of His own generation. This does not appear to me to have been the thrust of His teaching, as apparent in several of His great parables of the kingdom, especially the one about the wheat and the tares (Matt. 13:24-30, 36-42). Here He made it very clear that by the kingdom of God He was not referring to the final reign of God involving His ultimate triumph over evil, for there would be false believers, “sons of the evil one,” present along with the true who were planted by the Messiah, “the Son of Man” (v. 38). It was not till later, at the “end of the age,” that the evil ones would be “gathered out of His kingdom” (vv. 39-42). This later “end of the age” would be the time when the righteous would finally “shine forth as the sun” (v. 43), a metaphor from Daniel 12:3 that is connected with the resurrection and therefore the eschaton.

Even more clearly, “to those who supposed the kingdom of God was going to appear immediately” Jesus told a parable involving a nobleman who went off to a distant country to receive a kingdom for himself (Luke 19:11-27). The nobleman was eventually to return, and at that time render rewards and judgment on his servants, but meanwhile they were to spend their time working with the talents he had given them. The implication is clear: Jesus is the nobleman who receives the kingdom for Himself, but He did not mean that the final end of the world was just around the corner. Rather, He warned that after His departure from this earth He expected His servants to use their gifts for Him, even if it might well be a long time before they saw Him again.

Apparently, then, Jesus’ announcement of the soon coming of the kingdom of God was intended at least primarily in a different sense than the ultimate one involving the eschaton. This does not mean He never used the phrase in its ultimate sense; He could also talk about the final coming of the kingdom of God, when “many will come from east and west and recline at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob” (Matt. 8:11) and when “the King will say to those on His right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world’” (Matt. 25:34). Similarly, Jesus could also talk about the general sense in which God has always been the sovereign ruler of the universe, so that His kingdom was already a present reality, “in your midst” (Luke 17:21). But we should not be surprised to see that there was a third sense in which Jesus most frequently talked about the kingdom of God as about to come in a new and powerful way, referring neither to the eschaton nor to the military reestablishment of the nation of Israel, but rather to an entirely new manifestation of God’s reign that His contemporaries did not quite comprehend or anticipate, even though it would be an initial fulfillment or foretaste of what the prophets had announced all along.

The question of what Jesus meant by the kingdom of God is also obviously related to the question of how He saw Himself as the Messiah or King. In view of what we have already discussed, it is not difficult to understand why, for the majority of His ministry, Jesus was so reticent to give any impression to the public that He might be a (or the) messiah (Matt. 16:20, Mark 8:30, Luke 9:21). The truth is, though He was the Messiah in the sense that God intended all along, He was *not* the messiah in any sense by which they would have understood the term. Here we should also point out that it is not that the Jews of that time were unintelligent or that their expectation of a military messiah was completely without reason. After all, wasn’t it natural to expect a messiah to follow in the footsteps of his father David, the great warrior who had originally conquered Jerusalem for the nation of Israel? Yet as plausible as this idea may have seemed, Jesus apparently saw things differently, and it is instructive to explore why this might have been.

Though the gospels are mostly silent on the enigma of Jesus' thought life, they do make it reasonably clear when His public ministry began, with the divine announcement at His baptism that He was God's beloved Son, the one in whom He was well-pleased (Matt. 3:17, Mark 1:11, Luke 3:22). This paralleled God's designation of the nation of Israel as His firstborn son (Ex. 4:22; cf. Hos. 1:11, etc.), as well as the servant figure of Second Isaiah as the one in whom His soul delighted (Is. 42:1). It is no great reach, therefore, to imagine Jesus as seeing His role along the lines of the "true Israel," the suffering but ultimately vindicated servant of the Lord portrayed in Isaiah, who would be a light to the nations, spreading news of God's salvation not only to the Jewish people but even to the ends of the earth (Is. 42:1-9, 49:1-13, 50:4-11, 52:13-53:12). And Jesus was prepared to follow that model of a gentle, suffering, servant Messiah all the way to the cross. He had no intention of being an earthly ruler come to take up arms against Rome and reestablish the Jewish nation. Even if some of them wanted to make Him king by force, He would have none of it (John 6:15). The desire for this kind of military king had been a faithless rejection of God in the days of Samuel (1 Sam. 8), and it was not likely to be God's ideal in the days of Jesus, either.

Yet Jesus apparently realized that He truly was the anointed King of Israel in a far greater sense than anyone had imagined. It was indeed through Him that God was shortly going to reign in a whole new way. Jesus trusted His Father that this was so, and He showed no signs of ever shirking His vocation. When the time was right, therefore, after He had by His teaching and actions shown very clearly that His announcement of the kingdom of God was not to involve the kind of military revolt against Rome that His contemporaries were looking for, He would have to show just what kind of King or Messiah He in fact was. And so when Jesus came to Jerusalem for the final time, just days before His crucifixion, He began the process, again through both word and action, of publicly claiming for Himself the role of the kingly Messiah, and at the same time clarifying what that meant, in contrast to the common Jewish misunderstandings. He did this knowing full well that it would mean death for Himself, as the chief priests and other Jewish leaders would not tolerate such a challenge to their authority and religion.

Jesus' first great action in this regard was His choice to ride into the city on the colt of a donkey (Matt. 21:1-11), in accordance with the prophecy of Zechariah 9:9. This would have been clearly understood as a messianic claim, to the delight of the crowds and consternation of the leaders. Yet it was a provocative way for Jesus to make this claim, a way that called to mind the King's gentleness and humility as that original prophecy had emphasized. (A donkey was not a majestic war-horse, after all.) Following this action, Jesus did not court the favor of the Jewish leadership as though he had come to establish a political presence which they might have considered joining, but rather challenged their spiritual authority by cleansing the temple and welcoming others in (Matt. 21:12-16). He also both acted out and told a number of parables against them, including the cursing of the fig tree (Matt. 21:18-22), the parable of the two sons (Matt. 21:28-32), and most significantly of all, the parable of the landowner and wicked vinedressers, in which He asserted in no uncertain terms that "the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing the fruit of it" (Matt. 21:43). No restoration of the theocratic nation of Israel was in view here! Challenging the assumption that went along with that hope, that the messiah would follow in the pattern of David, He asked if they really understood in what sense this would be so (i.e., in what sense he would be David's son), given that the ultimate Messiah would also be David's Lord (Matt. 22:45). He then issued a litany of woes against the scribes and Pharisees for their hypocritical ways (Matt. 23:1-35), while at the same time extolling a humble, servant form of leadership instead (v. 11). Finally,²³ he wept over the city for her sins and proclaimed her desolate (Matt. 23:37).

What does all this have to do with eschatology? The answer is that it is in this context that we get Jesus' most explicit teaching on the subject, namely what is sometimes called the Olivet discourse (Matt. 24, Mark 13, Luke 21). Keeping this context in mind will help us immensely to understand what Jesus was talking about here, and it is to this subject that we now turn.

²³At least finally in Matthew's account, though Matthew may have arranged this event thematically rather than chronologically, given the different context of the event in Luke 13:34-35. (Though even in Luke it occurs in the course of His final trip to Jerusalem.)

The Olivet Discourse

Immediately following the various actions and object lessons Jesus used to announce Himself as the Messiah or King of Israel in the true sense of the concept, His disciples pointed out the magnificent buildings of the temple, almost as if to encourage Jesus not to be so down on the state of the Jewish religion. Perhaps their leaders needed to be corrected on certain ideas they had about the messiah, but wouldn't it also be appropriate for Israel's true Messiah to glory at least a little bit in what Israel had and in what He would inherit as her King? The temple was a truly magnificent complex of buildings, a huge structure that would undoubtedly strike us with a sense of awe even today, and all the more incredible for its time. It had taken 46 years to construct (John 2:20) and was still in progress even after that, no doubt at tremendous taxpayer burden, but the Jewish people had patriotically paid for it and even grudgingly tolerated the hated original Herod and his successors in order to see it completed. In short, the temple was their chief pride and joy, the symbol of all they believed in and all they hoped for in terms of one day being a glorious, powerful, self-governing nation once again.

Jesus' response, however, could not have been more clear. "Do you see these great buildings?" He asked. "Not one stone will be left upon another which will not be torn down." The kingdom of God does not consist in glorious buildings—it is not even of this world at all, but is of a different realm (John 18:36). This emphasis on the eternal rather than the temporal was entirely in keeping with His warning not to put your hopes in the things of this world, "where moth and rust destroy" (Matt. 6:19), where the most valuable of possessions is but temporal and will come to an end. Even these great temple buildings will not last forever. Set your heart instead on things above. But Jesus' response was not just a restatement of the ethical priorities that would characterize the kingdom He was announcing; it also had clear implications about the nature of that kingdom. Firstly, Jesus' kingdom was not going to be about the physical temple and a reestablishment of all the earthly glory associated with the temple system. Secondly, His kingdom was not going to be a temporal reign, but an eternal one, since it would last even through the destruction of these earthly things.

It is debatable how much of this the disciples understood at the time, but they seemed to grasp the basic point. They knew Jesus believed in a future resurrection and the final triumph of God over evil in the eschaton, and they presumably realized that in whatever sense the kingdom of God was soon coming, it would be a foretaste or down payment on this ultimate fulfillment. What they hadn't expected was that this foretaste would involve the destruction of the temple instead of its glorification. That presumably would have been a shock to anyone raised in the Jewish religion. So their follow-up question to Jesus was very natural: "Tell us, when will these things happen? And what will be the sign that they are all about to be fulfilled?" (Mark 13:4). Matthew adds, "and what will be the sign of Your coming and of the end of the age?" (Matt. 24:3). As Matthew is probably based on Mark here,²⁴ it is quite possible that this is his own elaboration and not literally what the disciples originally asked. But either way it does seem to be a helpful clarification of what the disciples were after. If Jesus was talking about establishing a kingdom that would last right through the destruction of the temple and into the final victory of God and the age to come, then their minds would naturally be called to the issue of eschatology and the question of when God would bring about this final end. There is little reason to think they would be asking about a specific, detailed prediction of the events and time line surrounding the destruction of Jerusalem, for Jesus had never before even hinted at having either the ability or inclination to provide such a historical prediction. Rather, they understood his remarks about the coming destruction of the temple to be a foreshadowing of the final triumph of God at the eschaton, much as the Old Testament prophets before them had described temporal events in this light, and they wondered whether they should be expecting this ultimate conclusion to arrive any time soon.

²⁴I am assuming here the usual theory of Markan priority, which holds that both Matthew and Luke used Mark as one source, while adding additional material (mostly non-overlapping with Mark) from other sources as well. I cite "Matthew" as the author merely for convenience, without claiming any resolution to the debate over whether or not the traditional theory on the authorship of the gospel called "Matthew" is correct.

Jesus' answer to His disciples' questions was altogether consistent with what he had been teaching all along. The kingdom will come "with power" within the very lifetimes of His disciples (Mark 9:1²⁵). But this is not to be equated with the resurrection at end of the age which will indeed eventually occur; it is only an initial fulfillment or foretaste of that final form of the kingdom. Therefore, Jesus said in effect, don't think that this final eschaton I'm calling your attention to by pointing out the temporal nature of the temple is the next scene in the play. My kingdom will first involve the continuation of history, with evil still apparently undefeated. There will be "wars and rumors of wars," natural disasters of various kinds, false christs and deceivers, persecutions and betrayals and various forms of lawlessness, none of which should be viewed as cause for alarm (Mark 13:5-12, Matt. 24:4-13, Luke 21:8-16). But at the same time, the gospel will be spreading to all the nations (Mark 13:10, Matt. 24:13), meaning not necessarily to every individual person, but all around the world nonetheless.

We, of course, are indeed living in these times, and have been for almost the last 2000 years. We have seen the kingdom of God coming with power in exactly this way. The "gospel of the kingdom" is in full force. The idea put forth by some dispensationalists that the gospel of the kingdom is a fundamentally different message and for a different time than the gospel of the grace of God is entirely without merit. Jesus was not speaking in coded language here that his disciples could not have understood. When He talked about the gospel of the kingdom, He meant the exact same good news that He Himself had been sent to proclaim, which was also the same good news that the apostles later announced. When Philip preached "the good news about the kingdom of God" (Acts 8:12), that is a synonym for "the gospel of the kingdom." It is the good news that God has glorified Christ as Lord and King over all creation, and that those of us who believe are therefore "transferred into the kingdom of His beloved Son" (Col. 1:13). The most significant down payment of all on the basic eschatological hope of monotheism has been made. God is reigning in a whole new way now, through His Messiah, Jesus, and what He has done.

This brings us back to the parable of the landowner and wicked vinedressers that Jesus had told almost immediately before this incident. The basic point was that the kingdom of God would be taken away from the nation of Israel and given to others (Matt. 21:43), a truth that was portrayed in very dramatic fashion on the following Pentecost, when the Spirit came upon the disciples, not the nation of Israel, and enabled them to speak in the languages of the nations, not of the Jews. But it also held very sad portent for the physical nation of Israel. Jesus not only shed tears for the city of Jerusalem over this, he also gave a very clear warning as He continued His answer to the disciples' questions about the destruction of the temple and the end of the age, as we will see.

Jesus' next words in the Olivet discourse about the abomination of desolation and ensuing tribulation (Mark 13:14-23, Matt. 24:15-22, Luke 21:20-23) have been some of the most debated in the whole passage. Some people think of them as a detailed prophecy of the events surrounding the destruction of the temple in 70 AD. Others hold them to have a future fulfillment, perhaps in a rebuilt temple after the end of the church age, in accordance with the dispensational scheme. Sadly, in concentrating so much on the supposed exact details of their fulfillment, many seem to have missed the main point, as suggested by the parable of the landowner and vinedressers.

The fact that the kingdom of God had belonged to the nation of Israel in some sense up to that point had been fairly obvious to the Jewish people, of course. What other nation had God rescued time and time again against impossible odds, first from Egypt, then throughout their history from many other nations,

²⁵Confusingly, the parallel passage of Matthew 16:28 actually says that the Son of Man would come in His kingdom in the lifetime of the disciples, rather than just that the kingdom itself would come with power. As Matthew is probably based on Mark, this may represent his editorial explanation rather than the original words of Jesus. Even so, it was probably not intended as a reference to the second coming of Christ, but rather to His vindication and coming to the Ancient of Days to receive the kingdom, in accordance with the picture in Daniel 7:13-14, an event which can be seen as a significant foretaste of the eschaton rather than as the eschaton itself. Alternatively, Matthew's version is also understandable in the sense that Matthew emphasizes Jesus' own personal presence with His church in the coming kingdom, right up to the end of the age (Matt. 28:20). So when the kingdom of God came with power after Jesus' resurrection, it involved the coming of Jesus to His own through the Holy Spirit.

then from Babylon? Nor did the story end with the restoration from Babylon; the Jews also fondly remembered their improbable providential deliverance from Haman and his sympathizers in the days of Esther (celebrated by the festival of Purim), and the even more dramatic deliverance from Antiochus Epiphanes under the leadership of the Maccabees (celebrated by the festival of Hanukkah). It was this most recent dramatic deliverance that had involved the event known as the abomination of desolation, as we have already discussed.

In light of this history, imagine the shock of hearing Jesus' unmistakable warning: When you see the abomination of desolation, flee! What kind of messiah could possibly say such a thing? It would be like a U.S. Presidential candidate saying, "When Pearl Harbor happens next time, surrender!" or, "When you see 9/11 happening again, abandon the city!" Yet this is exactly what Jesus was saying, and it was a very severe warning indeed. Up till then, God had been defending Israel, since He had been reigning through her in a sense. But from now on, the kingdom of God would no longer be exercised through Israel. So the next time you see Jerusalem desecrated or surrounded by armies, don't be a hero and stay and fight. That will only cost you your life, and for no good result whatsoever. Your hope is not to be found in Jerusalem anymore, but rather in the kingdom of God which has been taken from Israel as a physical nation and given to a different people, those who have their part in the true Israel, Jesus Christ.

To take the words of Jesus here as a specific prediction of the detailed events of 70 AD is to miss the whole point. The Christian legend that these words were fulfilled in a literal sense by the Roman soldiers tearing every stone apart may be partially true but is certainly an exaggeration, for a portion of the western wall of the temple complex is still standing today (though even that will not last forever, of course). But whether or not the specific destruction of the temple in 70 AD had been supernaturally revealed to Jesus is not the real issue here. Jesus' purpose was not to warn of a specific future incident, but rather of a larger principle, namely that God was no longer considering the nation of Israel as His own. And the events of 70 AD provided dramatic confirmation of Jesus' warning, as the Jewish Zealots foolishly incited the Jews into what the historian Josephus described as their most brutal and horrifying defeat of all time.²⁶ In that sense, Jesus' prophecy was fulfilled, even if it was not intended as a specific, detailed prediction of that exact event.²⁷

The original abomination of desolation in the days of Antiochus had brought about a temporary condition of desolation, where the Jewish people were no longer able to properly inhabit their holy city and practice their religion in its temple. Yet even in Daniel itself, as we have discussed, this temporary situation was seen to foreshadow something more. As the cleansing of the temple from the original abomination of desolation brought about the restoration of its proper practice, so the final desolations spoken of in Daniel 9 were to be seen as the precursors to the final victory of God, ushering in the resurrection and the age to come. Similarly, after warning about "the times of the Gentiles" (Luke 21:24), the desolation and tribulations to come on the nation of Israel now that God would no longer exercise His kingdom through her, Jesus turned to the subject of the final defeat of evil by God that all these events foreshadowed.

"In those days, after that tribulation" (Mark 13:24), Jesus continued, the eschatological hope spoken of by the prophets would come to pass. Borrowing from their symbolic language that spoke of the end of this present world order and the establishment of the eternal one, He spoke of the sun and moon being darkened and the stars falling from heaven, and then He added the main point, recollecting the imagery of Daniel 7: "They will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory." This will be the establishment of the final form of the kingdom, involving the exaltation of the King in the sight of all.

²⁶*Wars of the Jews*, preface.

²⁷It may well be that Luke wrote his gospel after the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD and therefore considered that event as a very poignant fulfillment of Jesus' prophecy, for he editorialized Jesus' words somewhat to explain what they meant in light of how they ended up being fulfilled at that time. In place of Jesus' warning, "when you see the abomination of desolation, let those who are in Judea flee" Luke wrote, "when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, know that her desolation is near" (Luke 21:20). The thought is the same in either case, but Luke's version is more directly descriptive of what actually took place in 70 AD.

It is important to understand that this is not a picture of Jesus appearing in the literal sky of this present earth, for that would not involve His being seen by all, and would miss the whole point of the symbolism. Jesus never said or implied that this event would involve His return to this physical earth in a resurrected body that looks substantially like our current human bodies.²⁸ This is not the meaning of His *parousia*, or second “coming” at all. It’s true that *parousia* is translated “coming” in this context (Matt. 24:3), but the sense is of His appearing or presence, not of His arrival at a particular physical place. He will come again (or appear again) to receive us to Himself, so that where He is, in His Father’s house, there we may be also (John 14:3). He will once again be present with His people, forever. So, too, in the Olivet discourse His coming is not a matter of returning to this physical earth, but of His elect at that time being gathered together to Him (Matt. 24:32, Mark 13:27). We will see this teaching further elaborated by Paul shortly.

Meanwhile, we must consider the confusing conclusion Jesus gave to His teaching, which has led some to believe He mistakenly thought all this would be completed within the current generation He was addressing (Matt. 24:34, Mark 13:24, Luke 21:32). Many alternative interpretations of this verse have been suggested to try to rescue Jesus from an embarrassing mistake, but I think the simplest and most straightforward one flows fairly naturally from the context. In the things Jesus was talking about here, He had in mind the coming of the kingdom in the form brought about by His own actions as the initial fulfillment or down payment on the ultimate form that it would take at the eschaton. The bulk of His discourse had not been about the eschaton itself, complete with the *parousia* or second coming, but about what would happen in the days to follow His death, when the kingdom of God was to come in power in a new form, not mediated through the physical nation of Israel but through His own followers. In this light, His lesson from the parable of the fig tree makes perfect sense: “Even so, you too, when you see these things happening, recognize that He²⁹ is near, right at the door” (Mark 13:29). What are “these things”? The wars and rumors of wars, spread of the gospel, and abominations and tribulations that He had been talking about as taking place in the coming kingdom and foreshadowing His coming at the end of the age, of course. Not the *parousia* and associated resurrection of the eschaton, which He had described in symbolic terms by astronomical events, for it would make no sense to say when you see the second coming of Christ itself, know that He is right at the door. He was referring to the events that pointed forward to His coming, not to His coming itself.

This, then, is the key, I suggest, to the controversial following verse:

Truly I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place.
- Mark 13:30

What are “all these things” that will take place in this generation? Again, not the second coming itself, but all those things Jesus had described which were a foretaste of that final event. The kingdom of God would indeed come in power in that very generation, as a down payment on the eschatological hope we have been considering. Because of the work of Jesus, God is now reigning in a whole new way through Him, the gospel is going out into the whole world (not just Israel), and Israel is undergoing the tribulations of no longer being under the special protection of God (though still just as much cared for by Him as any other people is, of course). And the point is that this is all according to plan, all of it was inaugurated

²⁸The Scripture that may seem to come closest to implying this mistaken view is Acts 1:11, where the angels announce that He will come “in just the same way as you have watched Him go into heaven.” But what they meant by “the same way” is very open to interpretation. Obviously it will not be in exactly the same way, a solitary descent visible only to a few disciples, at least not if we take seriously the Scriptures that describe the event as “with power and great glory” (Mark 13:26, etc.) and (symbolically) “with His mighty angels in flaming fire” (2 Thess. 1:7). It seems better to see the angels’ words simply as a promise that He will in some sense be bodily present with His people once again.

²⁹Or perhaps “it,” referring to the coming of final form of the kingdom rather than to the coming of Christ Himself. The Greek can go either way, and the distinction does not really matter in the interpretation I have been promoting.

within the generation of the original disciples, and all of it looks ahead to the ultimate consummation when God will defeat evil for all time. We are therefore to live with this final eschaton in mind: “Be on the alert!” (Mark 13:37). Jesus Himself did not know *when* the eschaton would come (Mark 13:32), but He knew how to live in the faith *that* it would come, and through His work He has enabled us to have that same faith. This new shape of faith, centered in Jesus, is a significant aspect of the initial fulfillment we have been discussing, and why we can say we have now been transferred into His kingdom, as Paul put it (Col. 1:13), to whose writing we now turn.

Overview of the Theology of Paul

Paul’s role in formulating the theology of the New Testament was without question second to none. This may seem a little surprising on reflection, since unlike the other apostles he had not known Jesus personally, but was instead converted through a dramatic appearance of the risen and glorified Christ on the road to Damascus. But perhaps it was for this very reason that he saw clearer than any of them the implications of the truth that Christ had now been exalted and was reigning as a heavenly King rather than a mere earthly messiah. This meant the old era of God’s kingdom in the form of the theocratic but earthly nation of Israel, with its Mosaic law intended at least in part to maintain that nation as a separate people, had come to a complete end. The kingdom of God has indeed now come in a whole new way. Not in its ultimate form, to be sure, but in a wonderful new form that renders the old form obsolete. The days of childhood under the tutelage of the law are past, not simply because we live in a different dispensation, but more fundamentally because the promised hope to which that old era looked forward has been realized, even if not yet in the full sense (Gal. 3:19, 23-25, 4:1-7). The eschaton is not yet here, but it has been inaugurated. We partake of it even now, in that we are united with Christ and so live in the newness of His resurrection life, the Spirit-characterized life of the eschaton. This is what the kingdom of God is all about.

But if the promised kingdom has really come in this way, and it is not exercised through the nation of Israel, has Israel then been replaced by the church? This is a loaded question for dispensationalists, who charge amillennialists like me with “replacement theology.” And in a sense they are right that we hold this, but only in a limited sense. The idea that amillennialism necessarily teaches a one-for-one replacement of Israel with the church is at the least a distortion. Neither Paul nor any other New Testament writer ever applied the specific, detailed promises given to Israel in the Old Testament to the church. The church does not inherit the physical land of Israel, for example. But what Paul and the others realized was that the ultimate promises which the specific promises were but a down payment on were intended from the start not for a physical nation as such, but for all the people of God. Thus, for example, the Abrahamic covenant that made his descendants heirs of a certain land was spoken of by Paul as a promise that Abraham, along with those who are of his faith, would be, astonishingly, heir of the whole *world* (Rom. 4:13). This is as much as to say heir of all creation, heir of everything.³⁰ In this Paul was only following His Master, who had said that the meek or gentle would inherit the earth (Matt. 5:5). The author of Hebrews (almost certainly not Paul) similarly recognized that the real promise to Abraham, the real hope for which he looked, was a heavenly city (Heb. 11:16), a new creation in which righteousness dwells (cf. 2 Pet. 3:13). The promise of a physical land was only a foretaste or down payment on that ultimate fulfillment, and while the foretaste was in a different form for the physical nation of Israel than it is for us, the underlying hope for all the true children of God is the same. And this is the underlying hope to which most of the prophetic passages symbolically pointed.

There is therefore not really a replacement in this theology, but rather an expansion. The promises were made to Abraham’s spiritual seed; with Christ it becomes clearer that this includes people from all

³⁰It should be obvious by now that the “world” or “earth” here need not be taken to mean the physical planet we now call the earth. The spirit of the promise reaches into the new heavens and new earth, whatever that might mean. (Some view it as taking place on the same physical planet we now know, though in a drastically renewed condition, but this is by no means clearly taught in Scripture and seems rather unlikely to me.)

nations, not just the righteous remnant of Israel (though even the prophets had really made the same point). The promises referred to a limited land area; with Christ it becomes clearer that this involves the whole world. Surely no one can charge God with not keeping His promises if He expands them like this.

But the greater concern for many dispensationalists is whether or not this means the physical people of Israel now have any further place in God's plan. This was a concern for Paul, too, and he gave his answer in Romans 11, using the analogy of an olive tree to represent the people of God. God in His sovereignty is free to work with some people groups more than others at different points in history. In the past He showed His saving grace primarily to those who were physically Israelites. This was natural, given His start, in a significant way, with Abraham. In Paul's day, however, fewer and fewer Israelites were part of that olive tree, and more and more Greeks were being grafted in. But that did not mean we should think God now favors Greeks over all other people groups. In fact, history shows that God has worked with various people groups in different amounts at different times. In the Reformation it was primarily western Europe. Now the influence of Christianity on western Europe seems to be in decline, and the influence of Christianity on certain Asian and African peoples seems to be on the rise. The point is that God is free to work with whomever He chooses, and Paul held out hope that one day He may work in larger numbers with the Jewish people once again. He did not at all mean that the church would give way to a Jewish religion, complete with the reestablishment of sacrifices and the theocratic nation, as dispensationalists interpret the passage. Rather, he viewed their disobedience as being the occasion for the growth of the gospel elsewhere, and therefore saw real hope that this growth of the gospel elsewhere would eventually come back round to them, for the gospel is not constrained to any one particular people.

So although God is indeed done with Israel as a theocratic nation, as the parable of the landowner and vinedressers shows, this does not mean He is done with Israel as a people. In spite of the tribulations Israel has undergone at the hands of the Gentiles, they are not under the judgment of God in such a way as to permanently harden their hearts to the gospel. God is working among Jews and Gentiles alike, bringing them both into His kingdom in which there is no distinction between the two. To imagine an end-times scenario when the church will be removed and God will resume His reign through the physical nation of Israel would be totally contrary to Paul's theology, and is certainly not to be found in any of his writings, at least not in any straightforward interpretation of them.

What Paul did write about the end times is most succinctly summed up in his great chapter on the resurrection:

For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all will be made alive. But each in his own order; Christ the first fruits, after that those who are Christ's at His coming.

- 1 Corinthians 15:22-23

I pause here to point out that this is a complete thought. The following verse, since it begins with "then," is sometimes taken as another step in the order spoken of here, but that is unlikely. The order here is the sequence of the resurrection, not a time line of resurrection plus other events. The point is that the resurrection of Christ is (in similar terminology to what we have already extensively employed) a down payment or "first fruits" on the ultimate hope of resurrection at the end of the age. Christ's resurrection guarantees that ours is yet to come. The continuation of the passage explains what also happens when our resurrection is realized:

Then comes the end, when He hands over the kingdom to the God and Father, when He has abolished all rule and authority and power. For He must reign until He has put all enemies under His feet. The last enemy that will be abolished is death.

- 1 Corinthians 15:24-26

In other words, our resurrection occurs at the final victory of God, through Christ, over sin and death. God is reigning through Christ until that final consummation occurs; after that, His reign will take on its ultimate form of which we cannot speak in detail. What Paul exactly meant by Christ then "handing over"

the kingdom to God is not entirely clear, though it was possibly prompted by Jesus' own teaching in the parable of the wheat and tares, in which after the end of the age the righteous would then "shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their *Father*" (Matt. 13:43). At any rate, it seems to be Paul's way of saying that at this point there will be no more mediatorial kingdom necessary, for God will be "all in all" (1 Cor. 15:28).

Paul's basic eschatological framework, then, is consistent with that of the Old Testament prophets and of Jesus Himself. Christ has inaugurated the kingdom of God in a powerful way that is an initial fulfillment of the ultimate victory of God. God is now reigning through Him. But the time is coming when the dead will be raised, evil will be judged and done away with forever, and there will be no more sin and death in the new world. This final victory of God, to which we as Christians are most basically looking forward, will be brought about by the *parousia* or second coming of Christ, an event Paul described as occurring at "the last trumpet" (1 Cor. 15:52). As if this symbol wasn't a clear enough pointer to the eschaton, he went on to say that death would at this time be swallowed up in victory, in fulfillment of Isaiah's eschatological vision (1 Cor. 15:54, cf. Is. 25:8). Paul did not think of the second coming as bringing in a period of tribulation or an earthly millennial reign in which sin and death are still undefeated; he thought of it as part and parcel with the eschaton itself. And for further elaboration on this connection we turn to his Thessalonian epistles.

The Thessalonian Epistles on the Second Coming of Christ

Paul's most famous passage on the second coming of Christ begins with a claim that he is speaking "by the word of the Lord" (1 Thess. 4:15). There is some debate as to what he meant by this, but the most natural explanation is that he was reiterating the teaching that Jesus Himself gave while He was here. (Paul similarly said that he was reiterating the Lord's teaching when he forbade leaving one's spouse in 1 Corinthians 7:10, echoing what Jesus had said in Mark 10:9 and elsewhere.) I see this passage therefore as a kind of commentary on Jesus' teaching about His second coming in the Olivet discourse, already discussed.

In support of this interpretation, we may note the significant parallels between 1 Thessalonians 4:15-17 and the Olivet discourse. Both passages use the symbolism of the trumpet of God to announce the great event (cf. Matt. 24:31, also 1 Cor. 15:52). Both passages speak of the elect being "caught up"³¹ or "gathered" to Christ in or with the clouds, whatever that symbolizes (cf. Matt. 24:30, Mark 13:26). The only two details Paul includes that are not found in the Olivet discourse are 1) the symbolism of the archangel's voice along with the trumpet of God, and 2) the fact that the dead will rise first. These details could possibly have been mentioned by Jesus and known by Paul through oral tradition, even though abbreviated out of the evangelists' written accounts. Alternatively, the significance of the archangel's voice and the sounding of the trumpet is similar enough that the adding of one to the other probably does not really need an explanation—it is another way of saying the same thing. As for the rising of the dead first, even in the evangelists' accounts it is a natural assumption that Jesus' mention of the apocalyptic signs in heaven signified the resurrection, as the Old Testament prophets had established. So perhaps the order of resurrection immediately before the gathering of the elect is implied even in the Olivet discourse itself. At any rate, Paul's main point is not so much which event happens first, but that they both happen at more-or-less the same time so that the dead in Christ will not "miss out" on the final triumph of God.

There is nothing in this passage to suggest that this event is significantly prior to the final consummation, as dispensationalists assume. The following chapter goes into the judgment that this "day of the Lord" will involve for unbelievers, upon whom it will come unexpectedly, like a thief in the night, which is another parallel indicating Paul's teaching here was a commentary on Jesus (Matt. 24:43). But neither in Jesus' account nor in Paul's is there any hint that those who are not gathered are "left behind" on earth to endure a special judgment known as the great tribulation. The natural assumption, consistent with

³¹The English word "rapture" is derived from the Latin translation of this word in 1 Thessalonians 4:17.

everything else we have covered, is rather that the consummation involves both final deliverance for the saved and final judgment for the unsaved.

This brings us to what is considered by some commentators to be the most cryptic passage in all of Paul's epistles, namely the second chapter of 2 Thessalonians. We have mentioned the fact that in his previous letter,³² Paul had written about "the day of the Lord" coming as a thief in the night (1 Thess. 5:2). The "day of the Lord" was a common phrase from the Old Testament prophets referring to the judgment of God, with His ultimate triumph over evil in view. Presumably Paul had assumed his readers would therefore understand his terminology to refer to the final judgment at the end of the age. But apparently this was assuming too much, for it seems that the Thessalonians were soon afterward disturbed by the thought that the day of the Lord had actually come (2 Thess. 2:2).³³ What exactly they were worried about here is not entirely clear, but we can safely rule out the possibility that they thought Christ had already come and they had been "left behind" in some bizarre fashion, for even if Paul had not already taught them better than this, his response in this chapter would hardly have been appropriate for addressing that concern. A more likely explanation is just as easily suggested by the fact that they had apparently been experiencing a significant intensification of their persecutions (1:4). Perhaps they wondered if these persecutions were in fact a sign that they were in a time of God's judgment, "the day of the Lord," a time when He was pouring out His wrath on mankind prior to the final consummation. Maybe this meant there was no point in even trying to do any good in the world (cf. 3:13), or to share the good news of the kingdom of God with anyone, but only to pronounce God's cursing on them instead.

If this was the basic worry Paul was addressing in 2 Thessalonians, it certainly explains his tone and approach. Paul did not castigate the Thessalonians for deliberately adopting a false doctrine contrary to what he had taught, but rather expressed puzzlement as to how they might have gotten this idea that they were living in a day of God's judgment. He referred to the possibility of "a spirit or message [i.e., oral communication] or letter as if from us" (2:2), leading some commentators to assume he suspected they had received a forged letter. But the thought is more likely that they had gotten their false idea from his actual spoken word or previous letter "as if from us," meaning "as if the idea came from us."³⁴ In other words, they had misunderstood Paul's teaching about the day of the Lord. They had taken his teaching to heart that God's judgment was coming, but they had not realized he was specifically talking about the final judgment at the *parousia*. Now they wondered if the terrible things they saw all around them were because "the day of the Lord" he had warned about had indeed come, perhaps as another kind of foretaste or partial fulfillment of the final judgment. No wonder they were in danger of being "shaken from their composure."

What the Thessalonians needed therefore was not an argument about the timing of the *parousia*, in order to convince them that they were wrong and Paul was right. Judging from his other epistles, Paul would have been more than ready to give such a well-reasoned argument if his readers were actually in disagreement with his basic eschatology, but they apparently were not. What they needed was rather the assurance that the judgment of God would not fall until the time of the all-important eschatological event that they already understood. Sometimes Christians today need the same assurance, as a few alarmist zealots are a little too quick to proclaim various world events as signs of God's wrath falling on various nations or people-groups even now. But "let no one in any way deceive you," said Paul (2:3). The day of God's judgment is not here yet. It will not come until...when? Paul's answer to this question is what makes this chapter so cryptic.

The day of God's judgment will come, according to Paul, only at the time of the "apostasy" when "the man of lawlessness" is revealed, "whom the Lord will slay with the breath of His mouth and bring to

³²Following the usual assumption that 1 Thessalonians was written prior to 2 Thessalonians, which seems reasonable though not certain.

³³The King James version translates this as that they thought the day of the Lord was "at hand," but "has come" seems to be the more likely meaning of the text, as followed by most other translations.

³⁴This interpretation of 2 Thessalonians 2:2 is suggested by Leon Morris in the Tyndale New Testament Commentary series.

an end by the appearance of His coming” (2:3, 8). The debate rages on over who or what Paul was talking about here. The Reformers almost universally saw this as a description of the papacy, the succession of Roman Catholic popes who persecuted the Protestants. Others insist that Paul must have had a particular individual person in mind, not a succession of some kind. Against this view, it is difficult, to say the least, to make sense of the thought that a particular individual human being of the last days was already being personally restrained in the days of Paul (2:6).

A simpler explanation, I suggest, is that Paul was borrowing from the symbolic style of the Old Testament prophets when they spoke of the final victory of God over evil. As discussed previously, both Daniel and Zechariah had particularly emphasized the metaphor of battle for this purpose. Daniel 11 had even personified evil as a king who followed in the model of Antiochus Epiphanes, exalting himself above all gods, uttering horrendous blasphemies against the one true God, persecuting His people, and then ultimately coming to a sudden end at the eschaton. While it might seem strange for a New Testament epistle to use similar imagery, there is nothing in the epistolary genre that forbids such a thing. When reminding his readers of the final victory of God, perhaps Paul considered this kind of language to be uniquely well-suited for the purpose. His purpose here was apparently not to give any new information to the Thessalonians, but to remind them in a powerful and encouraging way of the implications of what he had already taught, and sometimes parabolic metaphors are the most effective way of accomplishing that.

Even if this idea that a figurative metaphor would be well-suited for this purpose is thought somewhat strange, at the very least we ought to admit that it is not impossible. It can hardly be doubted that Paul’s descriptions of the *parousia* were in general fairly symbolic. The Lord Jesus will not literally be revealed “in flaming fire” (1:7); this is a symbol of judgment. He will not literally “slay with the breath of His mouth” (2:8); this is a metaphor for how swiftly and authoritatively His judgment will be carried out. So I see no reason why he should not have similarly used “the apostasy” and “the man of lawlessness” as a graphic picture of the evil to be defeated at the eschaton.

The appropriateness of Paul’s imagery here is probably also explained in part by a notable crisis that had occurred a few years previously. Around 40 AD, an altar had been set up in Alexandria, Egypt, in honor of the Roman Emperor Gaius Caligula, which some of the Jews of the city had proceeded to destroy. Incensed at their action, Gaius then ordered a statue of himself to be erected in the Jewish temple in Jerusalem. The Jews begged him not to go through with this order, insisting they were not being rebellious against the emperor at all, but in fact had regularly sacrificed burnt offerings on his behalf. In reply, Gaius pointed out that “you sacrificed to another god and not for my sake, [so] what good did you do me? ... You did not sacrifice *to me*.”³⁵ He insisted on going through with his plan, leaving Jews all over the world in a panic, until finally his politically savvy friend Herod Agrippa managed to convince him, or at least maneuver a deal with him,³⁶ to call the thing off. Gaius was soon afterward assassinated.

Paul’s point, then, I believe, was not to instruct the Thessalonians that the day of the Lord would not come until they could identify a particular antichrist figure called the man of lawlessness, though that is admittedly one possible interpretation. I think his point was rather that the day of the Lord would not come until the final metaphorical battle when He would triumph over evil for all time. No need to worry that you are enduring the day of God’s judgment prior to this coming time of the eschaton. Yes, there is evil and apostasy all around you even now; the mystery of lawlessness is certainly already at work (2:7). But the existence of great evil is not an indication of being in the day of God’s wrath. God is now in the business of restraining this evil in some sense³⁷ (2:6), not judging it. This restraint was seen in the providential prevention of Gaius from carrying out his blasphemous plan. Why, then, would God be pouring out his wrath on the earth during this time, when He is actually preserving it in this way? The day will come when He lets the earth go, so to speak, when the mystery of lawlessness is allowed to reach its full bloom and be gloriously defeated by the coming of Christ instead of being providentially restrained.

³⁵Philo, *Embassy to Gaius*, 367 (emphasis added).

³⁶Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, 18:289ff.

³⁷Just how it is that God is now restraining evil, and what Paul meant by the restrainer eventually being removed, is another somewhat cryptic debate about this passage that we will not get into.

But now is the day of grace. Now is not the time for giving up and pronouncing curses on the world; now is the day of salvation and the announcement of the gospel.

Paul's graphic picture is therefore of the coming time when the wheat and the tares will be separated, when the kingdom of evil and the kingdom of God will both be revealed, and when the revelation of Christ will destroy the kingdom of evil. After that there will be no more salvation (2:12). But his point is that these things will not happen until the last day, the eschaton. Don't be like the servants in the parable who wanted to rush that final judgment on the tares:

Do not go on passing judgment before the time, but wait until the Lord comes, who will both bring to light the things hidden in the darkness and disclose the motives of men's hearts.

- 1 Corinthians 4:5

Rather, in light of the truth that God is delaying His final judgment until the appointed time, stand firm and be of good comfort, ready to both work and speak for Him (2:16-17), knowing that "the Lord is faithful, and He will strengthen you and protect you from the evil" (3:3). Endure your persecutions with grace, "so that the name of our Lord Jesus will be glorified in you" (1:12). Learn to see God's grace in the events you are presently undergoing, and not think of them as a pouring out of His wrath and judgment.

Revelation

We come at last to Revelation, the book that many Christians think of first when it comes to the topic of eschatology. This is particularly true among dispensationalists, who interpret the bulk of the book as a blow-by-blow account of what will take place during the seven year "tribulation period" of their framework. If, as I have argued, the Bible does not actually teach that there is any such period, then how are we to understand the book of Revelation?

The brief answer to this question is that Revelation is a series of connected parables that portray in very graphic symbolism the triumph of God over evil—both in an intermediate way, in and through the church, and ultimately, at the eschaton. These parables are intended as encouragements to the church, particularly when she is undergoing persecution. Evil is seen as growing worse and worse on the earth, starting with the four horsemen of chapter 6, but take heart; God wins. The kingdoms of this world, which had been portrayed as four beasts in Daniel 7, are again pictured as a conglomerate beast in Rev. 13. This beast has a false prophet, just like God's kingdom has a true one, and they make war against God, but God wins. God's people are in tribulation under the kingdoms of this world, but they overcome through the blood of the Lamb (8:14, 12:11). God wins. This is the eschatology and encouragement of monotheism.

I will not say much more about the symbolism of Revelation except to give an example illustrating the absurdity of the assumption that its visions were intended literally, and the sensibility of a far better approach. Specifically, chapter 11 makes for a very clear demonstration of how Revelation builds on the style and imagery of the Old Testament prophets, especially Zechariah, so that understanding the point of Zechariah's parables helps us see the main point of Revelation's. Zechariah 2 starts with a vision of a man being given a measuring line to measure the city of Jerusalem that was about to be rebuilt with a new temple, now that the exile was over. (It's worth noting also the very similar measurement imagery in Ezekiel 40:1-3, with reference to Ezekiel's idealized temple symbolizing the final reign of God.) Zechariah 3 continues with a picture of the cleansing of the new high priest, Joshua, who would be responsible for the sacrifices to be offered there. Then comes the concluding vision in chapter 4, in which Zerubbabel is similarly encouraged that God is with him in the rebuilding project (vv. 6-9). It will not be accomplished by might or power, but by God's Spirit (v. 6). The vision applies to Joshua as well as Zerubbabel, for it contains two olive trees which apparently supply the oil for the golden lampstand in

between. These olive trees are said to represent the two anointed ones (i.e., Zerubbabel and Joshua), and the whole picture is of God using them to build the new temple by His Spirit.

Revelation 11 similarly starts with a man being given a measuring rod to measure the temple of God. This is not a literal temple in physical Jerusalem, but the spiritual temple built of individual believers as living stones (1 Pet. 2:4-5), as also suggested by the Ezekiel reference above. It is not built by might or power, but by God's Spirit. So the picture in Revelation contains the two olive trees (v. 4) that had been portrayed in Zechariah. They are also called witnesses (v. 3) and are pictured as individual persons, but the language is clearly symbolic: for example, fire flows out of their mouth to destroy their enemies (v. 5). The point is that just as Zerubbabel and Joshua were to succeed in rebuilding the temple through God's Spirit, so God's people of this present age will succeed in building His church, the temple of God, through His Spirit, in spite of all the opposition. Like Zerubbabel and Joshua, God's people exercise a kingly and priestly role before Him (cf. Rev. 1:6, 5:10), and they will overcome the opposition of the world that is mounted against them. The overcoming is not physical in nature, for in the picture they are eventually killed by the beast, representing the kingdoms of the world. But they triumph just the same, as shown by their resurrection (vv. 7-12).

The total time of the testimony of the witnesses is specified as 1260 days, which in light of the symbolism of the passage should not be taken literally, but what does it mean? It's hard to say for sure, but it could well harken back to the symbolism of Daniel. If Daniel's vision involved a Messiah coming in the middle of the 70th week, then the remaining interval between Christ's first coming and the final triumph of God could be symbolized as half a week, or more literally as half a seven. This could also be described as a time, times, and half a time (Dan. 12:7), or translated symbolically into 42 "months" of idealized duration, or 1260 days (Rev. 11:2-3).³⁸

The symbol of the two olive trees is only one of many images in Revelation that are clearly built on similar symbolism from the Old Testament, so that understanding how the symbolism was used in the Old Testament helps us explain how it is used in Revelation. We move on, however, to consider just one more passage from Revelation which is also probably the most controversial one of all. This is the only passage in the entire Bible that explicitly speaks of a time called the millennium, or thousand-year reign of Christ.

After the second coming of Christ in chapter 19, chapter 20 begins with Satan being bound for a thousand years, and the final triumph over evil does not occur until after the thousand years are over. If these two chapters were intended to be understood sequentially, it would imply the premillennial viewpoint,³⁹ in which we are not to expect the final reign of God to commence with Christ's *parousia* at all, but rather that He will first set up His kingdom in a temporal, earthly way. I do not see this sequence as being implied by the text, however. The fundamental defeat of Satan had previously been associated in the visions of Revelation with the victory of Christ on the cross at His first coming (ch. 12), which I think corresponds to the vision of chapter 20 as well. It's true that in this earlier vision he was not said to be bound, but rather enraged at his loss and very much intent on warfare. But the binding of chapter 20 is clearly a metaphor; it is not inconsistent with the picture from before. Evil still has free rein in a sense, but in another sense it is already restrained by the spread of the gospel; the "strong man" *has* been bound (Mark 3:27), and the gates of hell cannot prevail against the church of God (Matt. 16:18). The comparison to the symbolism of man of lawlessness of 2 Thessalonians being currently "restrained" is also fairly obvious.

In my view, then, the thousand-year reign of Christ in Revelation 20 is a picture of what we might call the church age, beginning with the monumental accomplishment of Christ Jesus. It is the new form of the kingdom of God that Jesus had said was about to come. We are now living in this era of the inaugural form of the kingdom, which will continue for an indefinite period of time (symbolized by a thousand

³⁸Since the months of the Jewish calendar began with the arrival of the new moon, they varied between 29 and 30 days in length. But as a symbol, a 30-day approximation or idealization makes good sense.

³⁹Premillennialism: A view of eschatology named for its expectation that the second coming of Christ will inaugurate (and therefore be prior to) a thousand-year period known as the millennium, in which He will reign on the present, physical earth.

years) until the final form is set up in the age to come. I find this amillennial interpretation of Revelation 20 much more consistent with the overall pattern of Scripture, including the Old Testament prophets, the teaching of Christ, and the New Testament epistles, as we have already covered. The prophets never looked forward to a temporal, imperfect, earthly kingdom, as the premillennial interpretation assumes, but rather to an eternal one in which evil has been entirely eradicated. It's true that some of their pictures involved judgment on evil happening at this time, but these ideas seem to me to be symbolic of the final judgment, not a picture of evil continuing into the eternal kingdom. Meanwhile, as Jesus and the apostles announced, the kingdom in another sense has already arrived. This is portrayed in Revelation 20:4-6 by those who belong to Christ actually reigning with Him by their participation in a first resurrection even before the final resurrection at the end of the age. This happens in one sense when we are raised with Christ at the moment of conversion (Eph. 2:6, Col. 2:12) and in another sense at the moment of our physical death (2 Cor 5:1, 8).

It should be obvious that this picture has been applicable since the dawn of Christianity. There is no suggestion here that it cannot be properly fulfilled until the whole world is basically "Christianized," as the postmillennial⁴⁰ view posits. I know of no reason to suspect that such a mass conversion of the world will ever happen. It's true that God's kingdom will continue to spread throughout history, but the tares continue together with the wheat all the way to the end of the age. This should not be a discouragement to us, for the message of Revelation is that we do not have to worry about this apparent limitation on the success of the gospel. The triumph of God over evil will consist in its being finally abolished in the eschaton, and that is the hope we live for. Until then, God's victory over evil in us is accomplished in a different way. We apprehend and enjoy His reign not by sight, but by faith.

Conclusion

We have now seen how the basic eschatological hope of monotheism runs like a constant thread throughout all of Scripture. Though it is the same thread throughout, it takes on further shape especially through the work of Jesus Christ. Because of what He has done, the powers of evil have already been "disarmed" (Col. 2:15). The down payment on the final victory has been made. The reign of God has come, not yet in its final form, but "with power" nonetheless. We are living in the "last days," the days in which we can understand more exactly what God's ultimate plan involves. We now look forward not just to a future resurrection when all will be set right, but to the *parousia*, when we will be united in a glorious wedding celebration with our Lord and Savior, the Messiah of God who won the victory through His suffering and death on the cross.

In apprehending and living in the light of all these things, we partake in the kingdom of God. Here we must guard against the twin dangers of under-realized and over-realized eschatology. We must affirm what is sometimes called the "already, but not yet" of the kingdom. The kingdom has already been realized in a very real sense, but it is not yet here in the final sense. To deny that Christ has already inaugurated it in any fundamental sense is to fall into the trap of under-realized eschatology, and to miss out on a large part of His basic gospel message. To assert that it is already here in its final form is to fall into the trap of over-realized eschatology, and to miss out on the fullness of our eschatological hope. What we have now is a partial fulfillment or foretaste of this eschatological hope, not the complete realization of it. As the theologian Oscar Cullmann famously put it, borrowing from the language of World War II, we are living in the interval between D-Day and V-Day. The decisive victory has already been won, but the (sometimes messy) mop-up phase continues until the formal end of the war.

This balance is seen in Peter's sermon in Acts 3, where he claimed that "the things which God announced beforehand by the mouth of all the prophets...He has thus fulfilled" (Acts 3:18), yet Jesus is the one "whom heaven must receive until the period of restoration of all things about which God spoke by

⁴⁰Postmillennialism: A view of eschatology named for its expectation that the second coming of Christ will follow, not inaugurate, a glorious period known as the millennium, which begins somewhat ambiguously when the vast majority of people are converted to Christ through the spread of the gospel.

the mouth of His holy prophets from ancient time” (Acts 3:21). In other words, the initial fulfillment of the prophecies is here, but the final fulfillment is yet to come. The New Testament writers continued to speak of “the age to come” even though we can already “taste its powers” (Heb. 6:5). We will at that time be “gathered together with Christ” (2 Thess. 2:1), but we can already experience the reality of His presence at any time (Matt. 18:20, 28:20), not physically, but meaningfully nonetheless.

When we live in the kingdom of God in this way, we experience the power in which it consists (1 Cor. 4:20). This is not an earthly type of power, but a spiritual power, a power that frees and enables us to live as God intends. The kingdom of God is “righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Rom. 14:17). It is a foretaste of what is to come, when “we will be like Him, because we will see Him just as He is” (1 John 3:2). Eschatology is therefore not only about the basic hope of monotheism that God will eventually triumph over evil, it is also about the implications of that hope for life in the here and now. God’s reign will be visible in the future, but it can be seen and lived by faith through Jesus Christ even now.

In the spirit of this truth I close this paper with a poem I wrote that picks up on these present and future aspects of the reign of God, making use of the rich images of both the Old and New Testaments. May He give us grace to live accordingly.

God's Kingdom

*Granite-solid, airy, glorious,
Rising o'er the race of time,
Reigns a kingdom all victorious,
Unperturbed by hate and crime.*

*In this paradise of Eden
Men and women walk with God
Shamelessly, His grace to sweeten
Shadows from the basal sod.*

*By His covenant they reckon
Sins expunged and stripped of charm.
While the astral mansions beckon,
Zion's children fear no harm.*

*Built around a temple showing
Where God's holiness can dwell,
Source of living water flowing:
Jesus, our Immanuel.*

*He who proved its prized perfection
Gave it form for eyes of faith
By His death and resurrection
To secure each tenant's place.*

*When God sounds the final trumpet,
His great kingdom to unveil,
Then will come the Lord triumphant,
Over evil to prevail.*

*Left outside, the foolish virgins
With no life to light their way:
Nevermore will sin's incursions
Darken on that dazzling day.*

*Fast will fade earth's former features,
Symbols of a stabler sphere.
God will consummate with creatures
Lavish love that lured us here.*