

**THIS BOOK WILL  
CHANGE YOUR WORLD**

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**How All Things Become New**



**Kevin A. Beck**

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Book cover design by Will Nagel

Printed in the United States of America.

12 11 10 09 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Beck, Kevin A., 1967-

This book will change your world: how all things become new / Kevin A. Beck.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-934049-04-4 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Eschatology--Biblical teaching. 2. Bible--Prophecies. 3. Bible--Criticism, interpretation, etc. I. Title.

BS680.E8B43 2009

236--dc22

2008030730

ISBN 978-1-934049-04-4

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# Dedication



To Alisa. You have helped me see, understand, and  
appreciate divine love every day. Song 8:7.

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# Acknowledgments



I especially thank Max King for his pioneering theological work. Tim King has always been a great friend, ready with a good laugh and a pertinent insight. I appreciate all of the pointed questions and comments offered by Mike Morrell and Graham Old. The past and current members of the Presence International Board of Directors—Robert Costa, John Trapp, Jan O'Brien, Rob Hunter, Les Lamoureux, Doug King—have always provided tremendous wisdom and encouragement.

Most of all, I thank my wife Alisa for her patience and support.

Finally, thank you for reading these few pages. I hope this experience contributes to your life, your reading of the Bible, and your part in shaping the New Heaven and Earth. I pray that you will have a deeper awakening of the God whose presence makes all things new.

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# The Beginning of the End



God is not great. Well, at least Christopher Hitchens thinks so. God is a delusion. So says Richard Dawkins. Both Hitchens and Dawkins have journalistic integrity, academic credentials, and best-seller status. That's all pretty impressive to me.

I'm a little amused at the outrage these guys inspire. Vocal professing God-believers dismiss them as pompous cranks. But Hitchens, Dawkins, and others like them are simply responding to popular and traditional readings of Scripture. *God is big. God is bad. God is mad.*

Frankly, I tend to agree that *this* god isn't great. This god is a delusion—and could be delusional. But that's not to say we have to reject God—or that God has rejected us. As I see it, the problem isn't with God. It's not even with Scripture. Instead, the issue stems from our *reading* of Scripture.

The way we read the Bible informs everything from our view of God to our understanding of ourselves and our place in the world. And this holds true because of the Bible's place in our culture and our world regardless of whether we're fundamentalists, atheists, evangelicals, or of any (or no) religious persuasion.

This isn't to argue whether our reading of the Bible should or shouldn't influence culture, politics, and policy. It's just to

admit that our reading of the Bible plays a significant role in shaping our global society. Best-selling author and Professor Marcus Borg notes, “Conflict about the Bible is the single most divisive issue among Christians in North America today.”<sup>1</sup> I dare say that not only North American Christians have a stake in the way the Bible is read. All of us do, regardless of where we live and what faith we practice.

I’m writing this from my local café. Besides me, three tables are occupied—all of them with people doing Bible studies. The first is a young lady in private meditation. The second is a group of two men planning “strategic outreach.” The third has a gaggle of men discussing how we’re witnessing the unfolding of Biblical end-times events. I don’t know what the woman is thinking about, but the men are preparing the way for world domination or destruction based on their reading of the Bible. I can’t help but think that if similar conversations were taking place over an open Qur’an someone might call Homeland Security.

Because of the prevalence of catastrophic readings of the Bible, I’m convinced we could benefit from a new evaluation of it. Or, as the late Anglican Bishop John A.T. Robinson describes it, we’re overdue for “recasting the mould.”<sup>2</sup>

We live in amazing times. Education and communication have given people ready access to information. Today we can see that no one holds a monopoly on Scripture or the way it is read. Five hundred years ago you might have been tortured if you dared to propose an alternative to the accepted view. Three hundred years ago you might have been banished to Rhode Island. A generation ago, you might have been sent a letter of disfellowship.

But today we live in a pluralistic world. You have freedom of conscience to read the Biblical story in ways that resonate

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<sup>1</sup> Borg, *Reading the Bible Again for the First Time*, ix.

<sup>2</sup> Robinson. *Honest to God*.

with your inner self. In fact, as someone who believes in loving God with heart, mind, soul, and strength I'm convinced that we're at our best (even our most faithful) when we exercise our God-given gifts of questioning, thinking, and searching. We don't do God or ourselves any favors when we let someone else think on our behalf.

It's even more than that. The truths revealed in and through Scripture and not independent objects. They're not artifacts outside Plato's cave waiting for us to climb to the surface. Instead, the truths emerge as we tell the story. Truth is narratively experienced and always contextual. Let me explain.

*The Wizard of Oz* is one of the most beloved stories of the past hundred years. As much as I enjoy the classic movie, I must confess that the flying monkeys freaked me out when I was a child. They still make me feel a little nervous.

Besides the fanciful and loveable characters, it seems to me that the appeal of *The Wizard of Oz* comes from the most famous line in the story. You know the magic words. So click your heels and say, "There's no place like home." The sentiment of *home* suggests belonging, welcome, and warmth. Feeling at home carries an ethos of safety, security, and sanctuary. Home offers you a sense of place. At least, that's the archetype of home. Even if our actual homes are less than idyllic, the mental image of the model home resonates deep within our hearts.

As adored and familiar as *The Wizard of Oz* is, it may be difficult to revise the way we tell the story. But can you flex your imagination and envision an alternative reading of the story? Keeping the entire narrative exactly as it is, a retelling of *The Wizard of Oz* will thoroughly alter our perception of Dorothy, Oz, and the message of the story. Let's try it, shall we?

*Dorothy was an impetuous child. She disrespected her elders, visited a strange man in a wagon, and trained her ferocious dog to attack an old lady. As a result, God sent a tornado to punish*

*her. The whirlwind swept her away to a bizarre world where she killed two of the residents and celebrated their deaths with freakish elves and demonic soldiers. In this realm, Dorothy cavorted with witches, weird talking beasts, and evil flying monkeys.*

*After stealing a pair of priceless ruby slippers, Dorothy sought a way to return to Kansas. She seduced a human-like scarecrow, a metallic lumberjack, and beastly lion into accompanying her to a bejeweled city in order to rendezvous with a wizard who could send her home. She finagled her way into this city that was held under the despotic sway of the deceptive warlock. After berating her, he made her an offer she couldn't refuse. He would send her home if she would perform an act of thievery. Steal a magic broom, and he would help her. Dorothy consented.*

*In the course of the robbery, Dorothy murdered the broom's rightful owner. Upon returning to the city, she double-crossed the wizard, and banished him when she discovered that he was from Kansas, too. (He has not been heard from until this day.) The wizard's absence freed Dorothy to install her minions as puppet rulers of the city. Discovering from her spirit guide that she wielded magical powers herself, Dorothy returned home to Kansas where she waited to exact revenge on her unsuspecting family and neighbors.*

That way of telling the story sounds more like a horror show under the threat of boycott from religious activist organizations than a cherished children's tale. These are the same facts but told with a different tone, an unusual emphasis, and some suggestive wording. One way warms the heart. The other makes you want to take a hot shower and sleep with the lights on.

We have the God-given power to tell stories, any story, including the Biblical story. And the way we tell stories matters because stories form and shape us—*always*, one way or another. For centuries, people have told the Biblical story in terms of humanity's rebellion and God's intense yearning to make us pay. That way of telling the story portrays an irate

God who resolves to whack all humanity in a genocidal act of revenge because the first couple took a piece of fruit. He decided to give us a second chance by taking out his frustrations on Jesus. People who believe these facts will escape never-ending torture. Moreover, these believers need to think the right thoughts about the metaphysical make-up of the Lord God—sputtering doctrinal, traditional, and creedal shibboleths. Then they need to agree to a certain cosmology, regardless of what the visible evidence suggests, and they need to behave according to preset dictates; otherwise, they're going to regret it for a long, long time.

Those lucky enough to believe, think, and act in harmony with God's revealed and hidden purposes call their good fortune *grace*. To them, God in his infinite mercy is waiting patiently for all people to come to their senses. Yet, the vast majority of them won't. One day God's patience will run out and he'll get so fed up that he'll send Jesus back to earth. Upon his arrival, zombies will come forth from the ground and the planet will miraculously flourish and/or explode.

This is the good news?

No wonder there is so much anxiety surrounding religion. This way of telling the story portrays God as a petty, neurotic, and secretive tyrant. It puts humanity in the position of seeking to appease this God by the performance of enigmatic rituals and adherence to arbitrary moral standards. It gives us all one chance to get it right. Our fate is sealed by death, and even God is bound by death's decision. Most disturbingly, it places God at enmity with humans and our world.

I simply must believe that there's a truer way of telling the story. One that pictures God as someone kinder and gentler than the godfather. One that honors God for walking with us through the hurts, sorrows, and wounds of life. One that depicts God as love incarnate. One that sees Christ on the

cross as the ultimate expression of divinity and humanity. One that blesses all families of the earth. One that finds God to be infinitely immanent rather than completely separate. One that recognizes humanity's comprehensive connection in the ultimate all-in-all. One in which God decrees, "There's no place like home," and so God has already made his home with us—not as an abusive despot, but as a tender and understanding presence (Revelation 21:3).

You have the power to tell the story. This is not only your God-given gift; it is your inescapable blessing. No one owns the copyright on *that* Story. It's in the ultimate Public Domain.

In the pages that follow, you'll find an introduction to a new way of reading the Story, one that has helped me to embrace it as the Greatest Story Ever Told. It doesn't leave anyone behind, doesn't demand that you send love offerings, and doesn't require you to go through membership training. For shorthand, I'm calling it *Transmillennial*. You'll see why as you read through.

As you do, I invite you to keep a couple of things in mind. First, this is just an introduction. It provides a narrative framework that explains the way I read the Biblical story.

Second, you may have questions or new ideas as you read. That's great. I hope you'll ask questions and explore further. Your spiritual journey is *yours*. Don't let anyone short circuit your path.

Third, I have a point of view. Shocking, I know. I read the Story in a way that reflects my life experience. So if you're going to read further I owe it to you to let you know at least a little about myself.

I'm a white Gen-X American. I don't apologize for any of that, nor can I change it. I'm married with children and go through all of the stress and joy associated with family life. After college and graduate school (I'm a history major), I ministered

in fundamentalist churches for nearly two decades. I don't use the f-word as a pejorative or a badge of honor. It's just a descriptive. For most of the time, though, we took out the "fun" and the "mental" and were left with nothing but "duh."

In the early 1990s, I began studying eschatology (that's "end-times" stuff...but we have the whole book to get into this) with some friends, and we came to Luke 21:20-22.

With a lot of conversation and prayer, we became convinced that whatever else Jesus meant here, he believed that Biblical prophecy would be fulfilled by the time Jerusalem would fall—which actually happened in 70 CE.<sup>3</sup> Eerie.

This was a revolutionary idea, but I didn't immediately know how revolutionary. Meanwhile I began seeing the New Testament authors quoting Hebrew prophets like Isaiah, Jeremiah, Hosea, and Zechariah when they wrote about resurrection, the last judgment, and the second coming. For me, this transformed everything.

It affected more than just the way I read the Bible. It changed the way I read myself, others, and our world. It caused me to undergo a personal transformation revealing that God actively makes all things new. To me, it unveiled nothing short of a New Heaven and Earth emerging in the midst of our social worlds.

Along the way, I've found people around the world with similar experiences. I'm very thankful for their friendship. Many people are adding their voices to the emerging conversation as they read the ancient story afresh and translate it into a language for today's world. I believe in the "iron sharpens iron" principle. Together, we all help refine our understanding and incarnation of the greatest story ever told.

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<sup>3</sup> I tend to use CE over AD, not to be provocative or politically correct. The idea of "common era" seems very egalitarian to me, adhering to the ideals of all humanity being one. Obviously, when I quote from various authors, I'll retain any use of AD.

## Crystal Ball Theology



I'm tired of people reading the Bible like a crystal ball. Often, the Good Book is portrayed as little more than a fortune telling carnival game. Just insert your token (be that church attendance, doctrinal adherence, or love offering), and presto! Out pops a card predicting what will occur next.

Unlike the Zoltar in the movie *Big*, the predictions spewed from our modern-day Scriptural Soothsayers usually envision doom and destruction. *Humans are unfaithful*, we're told. *And God is not happy*. As a result, the End is Near—after all, aren't the signs everywhere? To remedy this menacing situation, God will order up disease and disaster, followed up by World War III on the plains of Armageddon. The only hope—so say the prognosticators of pain—is for God to send Jesus cloud-surfing back to earth to put the cosmos out of its misery.

And so it continues, like a B-grade horror flick that we're encouraged to buy into as fact. If you've been smart enough or lucky enough to believe correctly and behave properly, maybe you'll be fortunate enough to escape the any-day-now tribulation. If so, God will allow you to party it up for all eternity while everyone else—including many people you love—suffer torments that'd make the residents of Auschwitz and Abu Ghraib blush.



Now am I the only crazy one around here? Because that doesn't sound like very "good news" to me.

But suppose this isn't the only way to tell the story of divine revelation. Humor me for a moment. *What if* there could be another way of reading the Biblical story—one that didn't end with the destruction of the planet, thermo-nuclear war, and the condemnation of the majority of humanity?

What if:

- There could be a way to read the Biblical story that revealed God's all-consuming motivation as love, instead of God being driven by wrath, revenge, and violence?
- You could cut through all of the wild speculation about antichrists, 666, and doomsday?
- You were to see that you're living in a New Heaven and Earth *already* instead of those eternally lingering last days?
- You could find the Biblical message turning religious hierarchies inside out, empowering us all to relate to God face-to-face and walk with God as a friend?
- Reading the Bible didn't leave you stuck in the past, but instead opened to you the possibility of translating the story into creatively consequential meaning for your life and today's world?
- This way to understand Scripture could give you the theological rudders to navigate rivers that you already sensed intuitively?
- This reading of the Biblical story allowed you to embrace the love of God in a way that truly did cast out all fear?

I've wondered all of this through the years, and so have others. For the past few decades, there's been a network of

people with backgrounds in various theological traditions who have been asking these questions and hashing out responses. They found that when they prayed, studied, and questioned together, something amazing happened: They discovered life-giving responses to all of the above questions hiding in plain sight in pages of the Bible.

These insights were new to me, but they were there all along. Good scholarship, worshipping communities, and courageous individuals have brought these truths to light. Together, people are discovering a kind of “open source spirituality”—a renaissance, a way of looking at God, the universe, and everything in a way that confirms our deepest longings and challenges many of our long-held assumptions. This ever-growing set of ideas and rudders is described as “Transmillennial.”

Transmillennial is a fresh way of reading the Biblical story and its significance for us today. With decades of theological research and practical application behind it, the Transmillennial view reveals a vision of God, Scripture, and creation unlike anything else.

Transmillennial is not a set of dogmatic statements chiseled in stone—I think we’ve had quite enough of those. It is a growing and evolving understanding of God, the Bible, and humanity’s place in the world. It is a transforming conversation interacting with the latest scholarship. It is also a transformative approach to help people experience and practice God’s kingdom right here in our midst.

### **Where did all this begin?**

Emerging from the original theological work of Max King, the Transmillennial view transcends popular “end times” notions predicting the destruction of the planet. In 1971, Max published his groundbreaking book *The Spirit of Prophecy*. He

presented the novel idea that the Bible never predicts the obliteration of the beautiful planet that God had created. Furthermore, “the end” of the space-time universe is not the intent of the Biblical message.

*The Spirit of Prophecy* is a pretty heavy tome. So let me give you the Cliff’s Notes version here: *The Spirit of Prophecy* details how all Biblical prophecy was fulfilled in the first century—that is, within the generation of Jesus’ contemporaries. This includes major Biblical events like the Second Coming (or “Parousia”) of Christ, the resurrection, the millennium, and the New Creation.

Instead of dealing with the end of the physical cosmos, Transmillennialism demonstrates that Biblical prophecy relates to the transformation of the ages within a forty-year transition period between the cross and the fall of the Jerusalem temple in 70 CE thereby fulfilling the Old Covenant and consummating the New Covenant. Each age represents a phase in God fulfilling his promise (or covenant) to Abraham to bless all families of the earth (See Genesis 12:3).

Paul of Tarsus, who was sent to share the good news of God to communities in the first century, depicts these ages in a letter he wrote, which we have as “Galatians.” In Galatians 4, he characterizes each age by a covenant God made with people. We see eschatology—a five-dollar word meaning “last things”—through the covenant lens that Paul framed it in. This leads us to nickname our approach to last things *Covenant Eschatology*. By our reading, the “last things” spoken of in the New Testament had in view the end of one covenant age and the dawn of a new one, a new creation, a new world-order.

Reading the Biblical story this way paints a beautiful picture: God is intimately involved in the cosmos. And God’s fulfillment of his covenant promises to humanity and creation empower us to live boldly and creatively. As Max wrote, “Once you leave the sphere of the covenant, you cut loose from the

real story of the Bible. Covenant is to eschatology what gravity is to the earth and humanity—once you remove it, there's no telling where you're going to end up.”<sup>4</sup>

*The Spirit of Prophecy* stirred up intense discussion and soul searching in the Christian family and beyond. A decade and a half later, Max published *The Cross and the Parousia of Christ*. This book deals with the meaning of resurrection, placing the Transmillennial view in the exciting conversation of contemporary New Testament scholarship.

In 1989, the first annual covenant eschatology seminar followed by the publication of *The Living Presence* journal opened Transmillennialism to a broader audience. By the late 1990s, a growing movement of friends sought to translate the theology of fulfilled covenant eschatology to the streets, villages, and neighborhoods of our planet. So what if the divine restoration of all things is a reality? What now?

### **What does it Mean?**

With this question ringing in his ears, Max's son, Tim King, began Presence International in 1997. Presence is a friendship, a relational network for people and organizations of all stripes to explore the theology and praxis of covenant eschatology. One of the first things we did, in this present incarnation, was to describe this paradigm shift as *Transmillennial*.

Why Transmillennial? Because in the United States (and in certain pockets abroad), end-times *millennialism* of one variety or another dominates the way church folks (and others seized by the popular religious imagination) think. The three major millennial views are *pre-*, *post-*, and *a-* millennial. They talk about when Jesus is going to snatch up some people and fry the rest. You may be familiar with one or all of them. If not,

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<sup>4</sup> King, *The Spirit of Prophecy*, 421.

don't worry. For each of their own unique features, they share a common denominator: *The end of the world is upon us, and that's bad news for almost everyone.*

The newly-minted phrase *Trans-millennial* is meant to be a breath of fresh air amidst the sulfur-and-sweat-ridden stagnation of these dominion-oriented millennial views. Where the others await the who-knows-when arrival of God's kingdom, Transmillennial recognizes the kingdom of God as a present reality. Transmillennial cuts across and transcends the millennial landscape marred by terror and abandonment to display the creative vision of God with humanity—and humanity as co-creators with God. Instead of holding to a closed system of assured destruction, Transmillennialism pictures an open future of limitless possibilities.

“Transmillennialism sees Christ's millennial reign in its first-century context, from the Old to the New Covenant, bringing about the transformation of the ages.”<sup>5</sup> As a result, humanity now lives in the light of God's fulfilled promise to Abraham: All families of the earth are blessed, and we get to walk in the empowerment of this blessing!

The Transmillennial view suggests that humanity and the world it inhabits have been fundamentally transformed—not in terms of our biology or physical matter, but in terms of our potential for relationships. As a result of the work of God in Christ, we've moved through the age characterized by sin and its death. We now inhabit a New Heaven and Earth—a new epoch of grace, a divine ecosystem—indwelt by God's righteousness. The Tree of Life blossoms year 'round, and its perennial leaves are for the healing of all. So let's bind up some wounds and eat from that tree for a change.

Instead of wrenching Jesus and the Bible from their contextual setting in order to manufacture a contrived

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 424.

“relevance” to us here and now, Transmillennialism seeks to let Scripture speak in its native habitat. We lend a keen-but-discerning ear to the latest insights from mainstream scholars, who largely agree that Jesus and the New Testament authors expected the “end” and the kingdom of God to come in their generation, not in ours some 2,000 years later.

However, this does not leave us stuck in the past. Transmillennialism focuses on what the first century arrival of the kingdom of God means today. Eschatology leads to Archonology; the fulfillment of the *last things* of the old age brings us to the *first things* of the new. God invites us to explore these as we ask: *What are the first things of living a meaningful and authentic life in our global community?*

At the core of what we do, the Transmillennial perspective is centered in a specific understanding of God. Namely, *God is love*. Everything else emerges from this principle that I like to call *Agapetheism*.

## All Things New

We’re going to explore all of these ideas in this thin volume, but I want to pause for a moment and say something up front: *If the Transmillennial reading of God and life and the Bible seems radically different than what you’re accustomed to—that’s good.*

This is precisely the point. Someone once said, “If nothing ever changes, then nothing ever changes.” God put it like this, “Behold, I make all things new.”<sup>6</sup> God’s creative newness is the essence of integral transformative change. As you read on, I hope you’ll discover an alternative way of reading Scripture and daily life that transforms these narratives from ones of destruction to creation. In the process, I hope you’ll discover

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<sup>6</sup> Rev. 21:5

that God has transformed you. This reframing can refresh your spirit—it certainly has refreshed mine.

When we change the way we read the Story, everything changes. That's why Transmillennial hope transforms *everything* as we awaken to the possibility that God has made good on his promises, that God has made all things new, and that God is with us all—now and forever more.

## Colorful Language



I received a revelation. My eleventh grade writing instructor decided on reemphasizing the basics of grammar. He wanted to make sure that we could command the fundamentals of composition before turning us loose with paper and pen. This preceded the days of accessible computers with word processing programs and spelling and grammar checkers. Yep, I'm that old.<sup>7</sup>

Mr. Viencek asked our class, "Can a single word be used as more than one part of speech?" We all sat silently. Maybe some of us didn't understand the question, but my read on the situation was that no one wanted to risk giving the wrong answer. Looking foolish might be the end of the world for a high schooler.<sup>8</sup> So he rephrased the question, "Let's put it like this. Can the same word be used as a noun and as an adjective?"

I watched *Schoolhouse Rock* as a kid, so I knew: A noun is a person, place, or thing. But an adjective describes a person, place or thing. Deducing that the two were mutually exclusive, I raised my hand and volunteered a response. "No. A noun is a noun, and an adjective is an adjective."

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<sup>7</sup> This story about my English class originally appeared in my weekly e-column *Parousia* on February 18, 2008 under the title "When a Dog is Not a Dog."

<sup>8</sup> Not *literally* of course.



Mr. V followed up. "What about the word 'dog'? What part of speech is it?"

"It's a noun," I said confidently. After all, a dog is a thing.

"Ok, what if we were talking about a dog house? What part of speech would 'dog' be then?"

Then and there, I had the epiphany. 'Dog' in that case would be an adjective. It was as if the heavens opened and beams of light shone upon me from above. A dog can be a noun or an adjective depending on the context. Dog doesn't have some ethereal, platonic existence untethered from a concrete setting. Usage and performative functionality determines what a dog is in any given setting.

My mind started making connections. A dog can be an unattractive person or the inferior team in a sporting event. We eat hot dogs, golf courses have dog legs, and World War I flying aces battled in dog fights. It may feel like you're living a dog's life during the dog days of summer. If you work too long, you'll end up dog tired. While every dog has his day, it's best to let a sleeping dog lie, especially if he is a sea dog. I'd better stop before this goes to the dogs.

In every case, the context determines what dog actually is, and it may have nothing to do with a four-legged furry canine. A dog may not be a dog.

What else may not be what it seems? Beyond an academic exercise, this moment of insight helped me see that the ability to understand anything—from written texts to relationships—requires a working understanding of the context. Without having a sense of the wider setting, we can easily and unintentionally misread, misunderstand, and miscommunicate.

Oxford scholar George Caird put it like this, "Current usage determines public meaning. But current usage changes, either by gradual development, or suddenly when Humpty

Dumpty pays a word extra to work overtime.”<sup>9</sup> *Current usage changes*. Words don’t exist “out there” somewhere in the fixed linguistic heavens, independent of human creativity. They are always evolving depending on how they’re employed on any specific day. Lexicographer Sol Steinmetz notes, “Changes in meanings make language flexible and malleable. But how do words take on new meanings?”<sup>10</sup> He provides six separate ways words can evolve. Plus he lists five main reasons why words develop new meanings. Steinmetz points out that meanings change “through generalization, specialization, pejoration, amelioration, and so on.”<sup>11</sup>

To understand what someone is talking (or writing or painting or filming) about, you must have a working knowledge of the *situatedness* of the communication at hand. When contexts change, so does meaning. The Germans have a great phrase for this. They refer to it as *sitz im leben*—meaning one’s life setting.

Most of us know this intuitively. I spent nearly twenty years preaching in churches, and one of my favorite sermons came from Acts 7. Stephen is called before the religious court and found guilty of heresy. As I described his execution, I said, “Stephen got stoned.” In a flash, I felt compelled to remind my straight-laced congregation that “getting stoned” meant something different in the first century than it does today.<sup>12</sup>

Language has always been this fluid, even for the ancient Hebrews. The author of 1 Samuel instructs his readers on the changing use of language. “Formerly in Israel, anyone who went to inquire of God would say, ‘Come, let us go to the seer’; for the one who is now called a prophet was formerly called a seer.”<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Caird, *Language and Imagery of the Bible*, 62.

<sup>10</sup> Steinmetz, *Semantic Antics*, vii.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, x.

<sup>12</sup> In case you’re wondering, getting stoned still connotes becoming intoxicated on drugs.

<sup>13</sup> 1 Sam. 9:9.

We've seen language develop before our eyes. It all depends on the context, the intent of the speaker (or author), and possibly even what "is" is.

### More Cowbell

Language can be cruel sometimes, tying you up in knots that Houdini or David Blaine would struggle to get out of. One of the (least) favorite questions I get asked by well-meaning skeptics and true-blue believers alike is, "Do you take the Bible literally?" Lovely question, thank you very much. For me it ranks right up there with "Have you stopped beating your wife?"

If you say that you take the Bible literally, you open yourself to a flat reading of scripture, rendering most of it useless—or at least ridiculous. Did Jesus really want us to picture the kingdom of heaven as being ten literal virgins waiting to trim their wicks? Did he really believe that he would speak to literal sheep and goats at the last judgment?

But if you say that you don't take the Bible literally, you open yourself to the charge of not taking it seriously. To make sense of the Bible, we need a third way, transcending crass modernistic literalism and non-contextual timelessness.

Don Everts suggests, "I have a hunch it might be helpful for folks out there to have a third palette of words and metaphors to choose from."<sup>14</sup> We can call this third palette "Critical realism."<sup>15</sup> It bridges the gap between "objective" truth and our "subjective" perceptions. Here's how it works.

Critical realism suggests that "truth is to be viewed much like a map pointing the way to a higher truth. Unlike a photograph that bears, ostensibly, a one-to-one correlation to

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<sup>14</sup> Everts, *All the Ideas Living in My Head*, 17.

<sup>15</sup> For accessible studies of critical realism, see Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections* and Wright, *New Testament and the People of God*.

reality, a map is ‘literal’—it has a concrete referent—and yet it is symbolic.”<sup>16</sup>

Ok. So what does this mean? To find the answers, we now turn to legendary music producer, Bruce Dickinson.

Maybe you love the old *Saturday Night Live* skit with Christopher Walken as much as I do. Walken plays the legendary (but fictional) music producer Bruce Dickinson. Attempting to refine the sound of Blue Öyster Cult’s song “Don’t Fear the Reaper,” Dickinson likes what he hears with one exception. The song needs “more cowbell.” Throughout the sketch, Walken repeats the phrase *ad nauseam*. “It needs more cowbell.” At his direction, Will Ferrell’s character—the fictional Gene Frenkle—gets into the cowbell groove, and the song, as we all know, becomes a classic.

Today, calling for “more cowbell” has taken linguistic flight. It has nothing to do with recording a hit song or playing a physical cowbell. Instead, it’s a map pointing to a higher truth. It’s an invitation to add oomph and pizzazz to any project—musical or otherwise.

So when we start reading the Bible, it’s important to recognize that most of the books were composed by prophets and poets—people proficient in the language business, wordsmiths who employed vivid literary images and flamboyant figures of speech. As such, they added a lot of cowbell.

Look at the famous Psalm 50:10. “For every wild animal of the forest is mine, the cattle on a thousand hills.” The cattle on a thousand hills, this Psalm asserts, belongs to God. Taken literally, we might ask, “What about the thousand and first hill? Do those cows belong to God too? What about the cattle on the flat land? Are they God’s?” The Psalmist—rolling his eyes—might answer with exasperation, “Yes. That’s the point.”

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<sup>16</sup> King, “Maps and Photographs,”  
[http://www.presence.tv/cms/maps\\_photos\\_bible.php](http://www.presence.tv/cms/maps_photos_bible.php).

A thousand hills is a beautiful way of saying that everything is God's no matter where it is.

### Cultural Images

The Hebrew poets and prophets used word pictures in ways familiar to their ancient audiences, just as we do.

In *A Dream Deferred*, Harlem Renaissance poet Langston Hughes writes:

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up  
like a raisin in the sun?  
Or fester like a sore--  
And then run?  
Does it stink like rotten meat?  
Or crust and sugar over--  
like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags  
like a heavy load.

Or does it explode?

Hughes employs cowbell—rich descriptions to convey feeling, vision, and cultural commentary. Nobody assumes he was discussing vine dressing and grape growing. As a leading voice of the Harlem Renaissance, Hughes speaks of the desire for human rights, racial integration, and equality. He utilizes evocative figures of speech to illustrate spirits withering in their lives, disdainful acquiescence, and the potential for explosive violence. To someone familiar with race relations in America during the 1920s, these themes would be unmistakable.

By now, nearly everyone's aware that the way we read any text—and especially the Bible—is shaped by our cultural setting. Tim King notes, "Whatever theological tradition we call home, our theologies are heavily influenced by the culture in which we live. Issues of modesty and propriety, for instance, are culturally determined. In Papua New Guinea today there are indigenous cultures in which women live bare-breasted. To their culture, the flap over Janet Jackson's Super Bowl performance would be perplexing indeed! The teaching of Scripture calls for modesty—but what is modest? How can we read the Bible and not have culture play a significant influence on its interpretation?"<sup>17</sup>

To do justice to the Biblical authors, we need to make a good-faith effort to understand them on their terms, which includes owning our own suppositions and settings, realizing that ours and theirs may not be the same. To be fair to them and to us, we must at least try to appreciate their figures of speech, imagery, and context.

### **Special Effects**

Biblical poetry and prophecy are replete with metaphors, similes, and wild images intended to evoke an emotional response.<sup>18</sup> After all, the Bible was written before the days of special effects and computer-generated images.

Consider the prophet Isaiah. He uses stunning imagery throughout his book. In chapter 13 he speaks about the political and cultural domination of Israel's then-current enemy, "The oracle concerning Babylon."<sup>19</sup> Like abstract expressionist artist Jackson Pollock, Isaiah paints wildly,

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Poets aren't the only people who use metaphors. Scientists use metaphors regularly. "The Big Bang" is a metaphor and so are mathematical models like  $E=MC^2$ .

<sup>19</sup> Isa. 13:1.

splashing cosmic catastrophes against the canvas, “For the stars of the heavens and their constellations will not give their light; the sun will be dark at its rising, and the moon will not shed its light.”<sup>20</sup>

Just as no one today believes that anyone will float through the sky because Keanu Reeves’ character Neo defies gravity in the stirring finale of *The Matrix*, no one in Isaiah’s day would have expected the sun, moon, and stars to suddenly black out just because of Isaiah’s poetic license. Instead, this is Isaiah’s way of speaking boldly, evoking a sense of grandeur and divine participation in the resistance against Babylonian oppression. The political and cultural context of Isaiah determines what sun, moon, and stars he was writing about. (Still, I admit it’d be cool to make an airborne exit like Neo.)

Isaiah makes use of similar images in chapter 19, “An oracle concerning Egypt. See, the Lord is riding on a swift cloud and comes to Egypt; the idols of Egypt will tremble at his presence, and the heart of the Egyptians will melt within them.”<sup>21</sup> Back then, no one would have taken Isaiah to be talking about God hooking a chariot up to a cloud. Nor should we suppose that the blood-pumping organ inside the chests of the Egyptians turned into a pool of water like the wicked witch of the west in *The Wizard of Oz*. This poetry pictures God’s judgment and the Egyptians’ presumed fear.<sup>22</sup>

When we get to Isaiah 55:12, we find the prophet vividly exclaiming praise, “The mountains and the hills before you shall burst into song, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.” Once again, there’s no reason to suppose that the prophet intended to suggest that the hills would literally be alive with the sound of music. He’s not envisioning J. R. R.

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<sup>20</sup> Isa. 13:10.

<sup>21</sup> Isa. 19:1.

<sup>22</sup> Jeremiah used this style of writing also. Beck, “Dark Heavens and Weeping Earth,” [http://www.presence.tv/cms/cov\\_dark-heavens-weeping-earth.php](http://www.presence.tv/cms/cov_dark-heavens-weeping-earth.php).

Tolkien's *Ent* tree creatures applauding and twirling around with Julie Andrews while the Almighty looks on in glee. That would be a little creepy. These are Isaiah's figures of speech, just like—are you ready—Isaiah's predictions of a “new heavens and a new earth.”<sup>23</sup>

I fully realize that it's here I might be losing you. While you know “the Lord is my Shepherd” doesn't mean a bearded Bedouin is going to appear unannounced at the foot of your bed (that would be creepy too), you might still be used to taking ideas like the physical destruction of the cosmos and the subsequent re-building of the same as wooden fact. But I'd like you to consider that the new heavens and new earth foreseen by Isaiah does not involve a reconstitution of the space-time universe. Instead, they symbolize the emergence of a new order, a new and living way to relate to God.

Look at some of the language in Isaiah's new heaven and earth prophecy. He says, “Rejoice with Jerusalem, and be glad for her, all you who love her; rejoice with her in joy, all you who mourn over her—that you may nurse and be satisfied from her consoling breast; that you may drink deeply with delight from her glorious bosom...They shall bring all your kindred from all the nations as an offering to the Lord, on horses, and in chariots, and in litters, and on mules, and on dromedaries, to my holy mountain Jerusalem, says the Lord, just as the Israelites bring a grain offering in a clean vessel to the house of the Lord.”<sup>24</sup>

Was Isaiah inviting adults to suck at the teat of Jerusalem literally? Did he envision caravans of pack animals bringing literal treasure to Zion? Professor Caird talks about Isaiah's new heaven and earth prophecy in Isaiah 66 calling it “too ludicrous to be taken literally...We are dealing with a poet

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<sup>23</sup> Isa. 65:17-19 and Isa. 66:22.

<sup>24</sup> Isa. 66:10-20.



who has chosen this hyperbolic symbol to express his confidence in the coming of a new age."<sup>25</sup>

Isaiah is not alone in his use of imaginative speech. Ezekiel creates breathtaking pictures of bizarre beasts, radiant thrones, and iridescent rainbows. Daniel dreams of hideous creatures, human-like figures sitting on thrones, and people riding clouds not unlike Stan Lee and Jack Kirby's comic book alien Silver Surfer in *Fantastic Four*. Zechariah visualizes a stone with seven eyes, temple furniture, olive trees, a woman in a basket, two women with stork-like wings, and colorful horses. No, this isn't a Grateful Dead or Phish concert; this is the world of the Bible. It can be quite psychedelic at times, though for what it's worth I don't think that Moses imbibed mind-altering drugs on Sinai.<sup>26</sup>

### Living Parables

Besides writing (and presumably speaking) in poetic figures, the prophets often became living symbols. Like Gandhi's Salt March, the Hebrew prophets performed certain acts that carried significance to the people of their day. Jeremiah wore a linen sash and then buried it, symbolizing God ruining the pride of Judah.<sup>27</sup> Ezekiel shaved his beard. He burned some of it, chopped up some of it with a sword, and scattered some of it to the wind. This symbolized the impending disaster coming upon Jerusalem.<sup>28</sup> Hosea married a prostitute and redeemed her from the auction block thereby portraying God's redemption of Israel. Then there's the book of Daniel, where we find symbols nested within symbols. One

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<sup>25</sup> Caird, *Language and Imagery of the Bible*, 116.

<sup>26</sup> Benny Shanon, a professor of cognitive psychology at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, thinks that Moses and the early Israelites were tripped out on hallucinogenics during such pivotal moments as the receiving of the Law and the Burning Bush, according to the *Time & Mind* journal of philosophy. What a theory! See <http://abcnews.go.com/Health/story?id=4392361>.

<sup>27</sup> Jer. 13:1-11.

<sup>28</sup> Ezek. 5.

author describes it as a “*literary*” representation, whereby a figure in the story—a human figure surrounded by monsters—functions as a symbol for Israel, just as the monsters function as a literary representation of pagan nations. This symbol is obviously pregnant with the meaning of Genesis 2.”<sup>29</sup>

The use of symbolism doesn’t make the message any less true. Instead, it communicates truth in a way other than the “just the facts” flatland approach of modernism. It adds layers of meaning by evoking whole storylines with the stroke of a pen.<sup>30</sup>

### Speaking of Jesus

Jesus lived as a first-century Galilean Jew. Born of pious parents, he attended synagogue regularly, participated in its communal life, and knew the Hebrew Scriptures. He lived, worked, and breathed in the atmosphere of Second Temple Palestinian Judaism.<sup>31</sup> He was steeped in the thoughts, hopes, and dreams of his countrymen. In other words, Jesus moved in a specific social context, and his teachings and practices make sense only within this setting. If he fell from the sky into, say, modern-day Los Angeles, his language would be vastly different.

The apostle Paul felt so strongly about the significance of Jesus’ specific context to the fulfillment of God’s promises that he called it “the fullness of time.”<sup>32</sup>

Within his cultural setting, we shouldn’t be surprised to find Jesus drawing from the Hebrew prophetic tradition. Like the earlier prophets, Jesus employs the same word-pictures and demonstrates himself with similar prophetic actions. His words and actions evoked ancient imagery and translated it into a fresh life-setting (*sitz in leben*) without reducing everything to literalism.

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<sup>29</sup> Wright, *New Testament and the People of God*, 291-2.

<sup>30</sup> Richard Hays, *Echoes of Scripture*.

<sup>31</sup> Horsley, *Bandits, Prophets and Messiahs*.

<sup>32</sup> Gal. 4:4.

Take the controversy following the feeding of the five thousand.<sup>33</sup> Jesus makes some radical statements, especially if we are to take them literally. First, he claims to be the bread of life that came down from heaven. The folks standing by didn't get it because they were taking him literally.

How could he be bread, especially the manna that Moses and the Israelites ate in the wilderness? That stuff was supposed to be gathered in the morning and eaten later that day; wouldn't Jesus be some pretty moldy Wonderbread? From there, he invites them to eat his flesh and drink his blood. Was he proposing they imbibe literal sangria? Scandalous! No wonder the crowds walked away.

Looking back, we can see that Jesus was not saying that he took the pearly form of manna 1,500 years before he was born. Nor was he saying, "See messiah. See messiah's leg. Now, start eating." Jesus was pointing to something beyond physical bread. He was imparting a spiritual truth—just like he did when he called the Samaritan woman to drink of the water that quenches thirst once for all.

At this point, it might be helpful to differentiate between *literal* and *spiritual*. Oddly, claiming something as a spiritual truth often comes with a stigma of inaccessible hidden knowledge known only to the properly initiated. But truth isn't quite that easy to stereotype. There isn't necessarily a division between literal truth and spiritual truth. Take the crucifixion. It was a literal event of a Jewish man being tortured to death, but this literal event involves spiritual significance. To say something expresses a spiritual truth is not to deny its physical element.

Max King describes the interplay of literal and spiritual.

"So how does this apply to our understanding of end-time prophecy? Very simply, Jesus used figurative

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<sup>33</sup> John 6.

language (coming on the clouds, etc) to describe a temporal event (the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans) in terms of its spiritual significance (the consummation of the ages and the coming of the kingdom of God)."<sup>34</sup>

Instead of asking whether or not Jesus was communicating literal or spiritual truth, it's more appropriate to ask, "What is Jesus communicating?" This line of questioning might open up new possibilities, causing us to rethink what we know. "And this process of rethinking will include the hard and often threatening question of whether some things that our traditions have taken as 'literal' should be seen as 'metaphorical,' and perhaps also vice versa—and, if so, which ones?"<sup>35</sup> This takes us to the parables of Jesus.

Parables were extended narratives, stories that evaded easy explanation and instead were meant to take their hearer deeper into reality, ultimately to provoke action. As a master storyteller, Jesus spoke to his followers in parables.<sup>36</sup> In Matthew 13, he describes the kingdom of God in terms of a farmer, a mustard seed, a hidden treasure, and a fishing net. Did Jesus intend to say that the kingdom was actually any of those things? Of course not. His stories describe features of the kingdom. They tell what the kingdom is like.<sup>37</sup> They're not the kingdom itself.

Like the earlier prophets, Jesus enacted parables. "Jesus does not merely tell parables; he is a parable."<sup>38</sup> These were powerful actions such as his healings, exorcisms, and turning

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<sup>34</sup> King, *Spirit of Prophecy*, 17.

<sup>35</sup> Wright, *The Challenge of Jesus*, 17. Of course, Bishop Wright and I may disagree on what those things are. Nevertheless, the principle is spot on.

<sup>36</sup> A telling bit of hyperbole about the extent of his storytelling is found in Matt. 13:34.

<sup>37</sup> Anyone living since the release of *Valley Girl* has witnessed the expansion of the word "like" in our daily conversation. This one word has opened us to dozens of verbal figures of speech. It's like wow.

<sup>38</sup> Caputo, *Weakness of God*, 16.

tables in the Hebrew temple. But no symbolic action carries more weight than the cross itself. Jesus is driven outside the gate of the city, entrusts himself into the hands of the Father, and rises on the first day of the week in a garden. Let the deep architecture of this Story speak to your soul through the symbolic gesture of the cross: It communicates nothing less than the death of one world order and the birth of a new one. The new creation had begun.

### **Picturing the End**

If Jesus speaks and acts in symbolic ways that bring forth the kingdom of God—the new heavens and earth—why should we be surprised to find him using prophetically poetic imagery when he speaks about the end? Especially if the prophets before him did the same thing?

We should especially look at Jesus' discourse on the Mount of Olives in Matthew 24, Mark 13, and Luke 21. He warned his disciples about an impending day characterized by a darkened sun, a bloodied moon, and plummeting stars. Today's popular opinion assumes Jesus predicted celestial events that will occur sometime in our future. Besides turning Jesus into a quack astronomer, this theory neglects to account for the overlapping literary, cultural, and theological contexts (not to mention the astrophysical impracticalities) in which Jesus spoke and lived.

It may be difficult for us living in a Hubble satellite age to imagine references to heavenly bodies referring to anything other than literal astronomic entities. But when you think about it, we use cosmic images in several ways today. We talk about the stars of Hollywood, the music industry, and sports. Then there are the countless ways we talk about the world. How's life in your world? My world is going to pot. The world of medicine. I'll rock your world. What color is the sky in your world? Her world came crashing down. In each of these

worlds, heavenly bodies serve as a linguistic point of departure for what we're really getting at. They're signifiers pointing to so much more.

Likewise, when is a dog not a dog? When I'm dogging you out, dog. So it is with the world, sun, moon, and stars. Sometimes the nouns of the corporeal can be the adjectives of our liberation, if we'll but open up to the transformational grammar of the Spirit.

As a Second Temple era Jewish rabbi, Jesus thoroughly knew the linguistic stylings of Israel's prophets, guys like Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel.<sup>39</sup> And he knew the expectations of his kinsmen. In fact, he was so in tune with the prophetic impulse that some of his contemporaries actually called him Jeremiah.<sup>40</sup> Standing in the prophetic tradition, Jesus recognized that the ancient seers regularly employed language about the heavens in order to communicate complex ideas that had nothing to do with astrophysics and he followed in their steps.

Max King describes the prophetic use of language of Psalm 18, where David speaks of a quaking earth, darkened skies, and fiery hail:

“Without knowing what he is writing about, we might assume he is describing some kind of catastrophic, cosmic event—much like people understand the return of Jesus. In fact, the language of this Psalm is nearly identical to some of the language used to describe Jesus' coming. But the heading of the Psalm describes the occasion as David's defeat of Saul. This is not a

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<sup>39</sup> In *The Coming of the Son of Man*, Andrew Perriman goes so far to suggest that by the time of Jesus, dissenting groups within Second Temple Judaism were cults, emerging from the eschatological hopes found in the book of Daniel.

<sup>40</sup> Matt. 16:14.

‘cosmic’ event. The language here is exaggerated, but this is the stuff of poetry.”<sup>41</sup>

So when we get to the *Son of David*—itself a title freighted with symbolic import—we find Jesus speaking in ways that reflect his setting—ways that include using cosmic imagery, earthquakes, and floods to communicate a transformation of world orders.

Jesus’ ideas about falling stars and a blood-red moon differ from the folks today who predict an end to or transfiguration of the space-time universe because Jesus used those symbols in ways different than we’re accustomed to. Recognizing this allows us to take into account our assumptions (conscious and unconscious) and honor Jesus enough not to yank him out of his milieu.

### What’s the Difference?

Isn’t all of this talk of symbolic language and interpretation just a bunch of sophomore college English class self-indulgence? Or worse yet, postmodernism? Why do the exact words make such a difference? On another side of the critique, why assume that we can begin to understand Jesus and his use of language? Aren’t we so ensconced in our own culture that it’s simply a charade to pretend that we can know anything about Jesus? And besides, *the end of the world* is the end of the world. The Bible says what it means, and it means what it says.

Ok. Let’s take this last objection first. It encapsulates the entire issue of our ability to understand. Jesus means what he says. Fine. But what does he *mean*? That’s more than splitting rhetorical hairs. It resides at the heart of our ability to read and apply Scripture. “Before we ask what the Bible means, it is essential that we ask ourselves what we mean by the word

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<sup>41</sup> King, *Spirit of Prophecy*, 15.

‘means.’”<sup>42</sup> No, I’m not trying to be Bill Clinton or Ken Starr. This is not a way to complicate things by filibustering on what the meaning of “is” is. Instead, it’s a key ingredient to creating a legitimate two-way conversation.

There’s a great story in the book of Nehemiah. Following the rebuilding of Jerusalem’s wall, the nation gathered to hear the reading of the Law. The text is careful to say that the entire audience consisted of men and women “who could hear with understanding.” These were not a bunch of rubes. They were bright folks, and the priest Ezra reads to them all day. When he finishes the people even shout, “Amen!”

It should seem pretty simple—especially to people who could understand. After all, this is the Law. There’s not much embellishment. No graven images. Keep the Sabbath. Don’t kill. Don’t steal. Don’t covet. It means what it says and says what it means. But they needed some help figuring it all out. The ancient Hebrews understood interpretive complexity. To impart the meaning, a host of people joined with Nehemiah and Ezra, and they “helped the people to understand the law.”<sup>43</sup>

Meaning—like words—is contextual. While we create meaning, it’s simply wrong to say that we can’t know anything about the intentions and objectives of people living outside our own immediate sphere. By consciously considering their context and attempting to be aware of our own prejudices, we can create a feedback loop that will help us refine our understanding and perception.

We can study the poetry, prose, and history of the Harlem Renaissance to appreciate Langston Hughes. We can listen to Blue Öyster Cult and watch SNL to get a grasp on “more cowbell.” We can read the broad spectrum of Hebrew poetry, prophecy, and history to better appreciate Jesus.

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<sup>42</sup> Caird, *Language and Imagery of the Bible*, 37.

<sup>43</sup> Neh. 8:7-9.



Does this guarantee that we'll always come to an exact understanding of what Jesus and the rest of the New Testament authors were attempting to communicate? Not necessarily. But without making an authentic attempt to understand them on their terms, we're sure to misunderstand.<sup>44</sup> Exhibit A: *The Rapture*.<sup>45</sup> Fraught with angst over modernism's transforming effect on society, many late 19<sup>th</sup> century Christian fundamentalists gravitated toward a anxiety-shaped reading of scripture as they hoped to escape the unsettling changes. No one before that time considered the possibility that Christ's followers would drop their bodies and float to heaven. To read the modern-era assumptions back onto the New Testament distorts what the text says.

Do we have to be Greek or Hebrew scholars, ancient civilization historians, or literary experts to make any sense of Jesus? No. But we should suspend the confident assertion that Jesus thought and spoke precisely as we do. His images aren't ours. Especially when it comes to end-time prognostications, our images have been colored by two thousand years of conjecture.

It's important that we realize Jesus' life-setting—especially his use of language—differs drastically from ours twenty centuries later. I think this invites us to humble ourselves as we take seriously the fact that Jesus could weave grand, complex, and spiritual narratives by employing common, everyday, literal words. Would that we cultivate similar God-given gifts today.

Before accepting or rejecting Jesus and what he had to say, I believe that at minimum we ought to give him a fair hearing—to attempt to make sense of what he actually said and to come to grips with him on his terms instead of forcing our presumed ideas about him onto him.

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<sup>44</sup> Beck, "A Pain in the Neck." [http://www.presence.tv/cms/cov\\_pain-in-neck.php](http://www.presence.tv/cms/cov_pain-in-neck.php).

<sup>45</sup> The rapture is a key feature of Premillennial Dispensationalism. Its advocates take their Biblical cue primarily from 1 Thessalonians 4:14-17.

What difference does it make? If Jesus expected the end of one heaven and earth (world-order as foretold originally by Isaiah)<sup>46</sup> and the arrival of a new one to occur in his generation, we're doing violence to the text and to Jesus by putting words in his mouth. Just because Tim LaHaye, co-author of the *Left Behind* series, believes that the chosen few will levitate to heaven leaving billions of others to suffer miserably doesn't mean Jesus thought so.

If we project our own fears, expectations, and hopes onto Jesus without recognizing that he didn't necessarily think like us, we may end up dogged by our own misreading and hounded by unwarranted fear—especially when it comes to the end of the world.

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<sup>46</sup> Beck, "Isaiah and Jesus Weeping Over Jerusalem," [http://www.presence.tv/cms/lpj\\_vol15\\_1\\_isaiahandjesus.php#\\_edn11](http://www.presence.tv/cms/lpj_vol15_1_isaiahandjesus.php#_edn11).

## Time After Time



When I was an undergrad at the University of Akron, a street preacher saw the campus as his own personal mission field. He didn't wear a sandwich board, but it would have suited his style. He was known by different names—most of them less than flattering if not downright profane. My friends and I just called him Brother Bob.

Brother Bob had a simple message: "Repent! For the end is near." Convinced that the end of the world could happen any day now, he entered the den of iniquity (its official name was Buchtel Commons) hoping to convert us "drunkards and whores" into repenting because the world was about to end.

Wild-eyed street preachers aren't the only ones predicting the imminent end of the world. Apocalyptic warnings spring from "respectable" pulpits every week. Well-groomed evangelists display the "good news" of imminent chaos and destruction in slick multi-media presentations.

Best-selling novelists warn unwary unbelievers that unless they turn from their wicked ways, they increase their risk of being left behind. Teleprophets like Jack Van Impe and Hal Lindsey sit behind faux news desks to interpret current events in light of their reading of scripture. They boldly predict that the European Union, an Arab Alliance, the (now extinct) Soviet Union, China, or some yet-unknown but apparently

demonically-controlled despot will soon arise, amass armies, and set the planet ablaze.<sup>47</sup>

People have been foretelling the looming onset of the world's end for centuries.<sup>48</sup> I've often wondered what drives the passionate and persistent preaching about the impending end of everything.

Why are so many preachers, televangelists, and prophecy experts enamored with equating eschatology (last things) to events occurring in our day? More to the point: why do so many envision the end to be right around the corner?

Frankly, I think they're just doing what Jesus did.

### **You Can Call Him Al**

Jesus entered the towns of Galilee with a simple message. "The kingdom of God is at hand."<sup>49</sup> During a three-year period, he announced by his words and in his actions his expectation of the imminent arrival of God's Kingdom.<sup>50</sup>

Rudolf Bultmann—one of the most influential theologians of the twentieth century—observed, "Jesus expected that this would take place soon, in the immediate future."<sup>51</sup> Scot McKnight agrees: "I will support the view that Jesus expected the imminent arrival of the kingdom. Scholars have too easily moved from this observation to accuse Jesus of human error or to offer a complete reinterpretation."<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Beck, "Timing's Top Ten," <http://www.presence.tv/cms/timingtopten.php>. Bart Ehrman chronicles Hal Lindsey's ever-changing end-time villain in *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet of the New Millennium*, 7-10.

<sup>48</sup> McGinn, *Antichrist*. Other traditions, religious and secular, have their own versions of the end.

<sup>49</sup> See Mark 1, for instance.

<sup>50</sup> See Matt. 4:17; 10:23; 16:28; Mark 13:30; Luke 9:27; 17:25; and 21:30-31 for starters.

<sup>51</sup> Rudolf Bultmann, "Jesus Christ and Mythology," ed., Roger A. Johnson, *Rudolf Bultmann: Interpreting Faith for the Modern Era*, 289.

<sup>52</sup> McKnight, *A New Vision for Israel*, 128

Here's a quick rundown of how scholars have struggled to situate Jesus' end-time message in the past 100 years.<sup>53</sup>

German theologian and humanitarian Albert Schweitzer set the ball rolling.<sup>54</sup> You can call him Al. His close reading of the Gospels led him to observe that Jesus expected the kingdom of God to come with power during the lifetime of that first-century generation.

He recognized a compelling sense of imminence in the Gospels, but Schweitzer contended that Jesus was wrong. "The kingdom which Jesus expected so very soon failed to make its appearance."<sup>55</sup> Schweitzer looked out the window, so to speak, and saw that planet earth was still here. The end, therefore, "obviously" didn't come when Jesus predicted it would.

Schweitzer described this perceived crucial failure in the teachings of Jesus as the "delay of the parousia" (or "Second Coming"). Although calling it a delay takes the edge off of failure, Schweitzer recognized this delay as an abject letdown. He puts it in very stark terms. "An event of supernatural history which must take place, and must take place at that particular point in time, failed to come about."<sup>56</sup>

He noted that the so-called delay has troubled the institutional church since its inception. In fact, Schweitzer contends that the institutional church owes its very existence to dealing with the supposed delay. He wrote, "The whole of 'Christianity' down to the present day, that is to say, the real inner history of it, is based on the 'delay of the Parousia,' the non-occurrence of the Parousia."<sup>57</sup> That means that everything the institutional church engages in—such as the Eucharist and

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<sup>53</sup> For a more complete survey, see Max King, *Cross and Parousia*, 3-125. Also, Hans Schwarz, *Eschatology*. Walter P. Weaver, *The Historical Jesus in the Twentieth Century*. Heikki Raisanen, *Beyond New Testament Theology*.

<sup>54</sup> Schweitzer's two key books are *The Mystery of the Kingdom of God* and *The Quest for the Historical Jesus*.

<sup>55</sup> Schweitzer, *Mystery of the Kingdom of God*, 264.

<sup>56</sup> Schweitzer, *Quest for the Historical Jesus*, 359.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 360.

Baptism—is an attempt by the church to make sense of itself and its very existence in light of the perception that the end failed to arrive when Jesus promised it would.<sup>58</sup>

Following Schweitzer, many leading scholars concluded that Jesus was a failed apocalyptic prophet. C.S. Lewis—no raging liberal skeptic—reached a similar conclusion. “It is clear from the New Testament that they all expected the Second Coming in their own lifetime. And, worse still, they had reason. Their Master had told them so. He shared, and indeed created, their delusion. He said in so many words, ‘this generation shall not pass till all these things be done.’ And he was wrong...It is certainly the most embarrassing verse in the Bible.”<sup>59</sup>

### **Taking the Edge Off**

As you might suspect, seeing Jesus as a failure didn’t sit well with a lot of people. I’m not especially cool with it either. In an attempt to rescue Jesus from being portrayed as a failure or fraud, well-meaning authors and preachers began to suggest that Jesus didn’t really mean that the end would come in his generation. They recognized that the Gospels are replete with time statements such as *soon*, *at hand*, *near*, and *this generation*. However, they claimed that these time statements are flexible and timeless. The end could come soon at any time, and the end has been at hand for two millennia. “For whether the End comes late or soon in our human time-scale, it is always imminent, always spiritually close at hand.”<sup>60</sup>

As well-meaning as this might be, it misses the point Jesus was making. Namely, that the kingdom would come in his generation. As Bruce Chilton observes, “What is inconvenient

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<sup>58</sup> Schweitzer explores this at length in *The Mysticism of Paul the Apostle*.

<sup>59</sup> Lewis, *The World’s Last Night*, 98.

<sup>60</sup> Ware, *The Orthodox Way*, 134.

for modern purposes should not be wished away from ancient sources.”<sup>61</sup>

A variation on this approach, popularized by Rudolf Bultmann and more recently updated by Jürgen Moltmann, suggests that the end is perennially imminent on an existential level. It is always near, and it happens whenever someone accepts Christ into their lives. This approach suggests that Jesus spoke about “the present immanence rather than the coming imminence of the kingdom.”<sup>62</sup> In this way, the end is primarily about your lived reality.

This view holds some serious problems. Where Schweitzer turns Jesus into a failed prophet, this reading makes him out to be a poor communicator, a purveyor of obscure sapiential sayings, someone who misled his audience by promising something that he could not deliver, or a twentieth-century existentialist ala Sartre. More than that, it pulls Jesus out of his historical setting as a first-century Palestinian Jew who relied on the Hebrew Bible to communicate his belief that God was about to fulfill his ancient promises made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.<sup>63</sup>

So, here’s what we’re left with. Schweitzer accepts the Gospels’ sense of imminence but balks at their fulfillment. The others reject the timing and thereby push fulfillment into an indefinite or an individualized future. What in God’s name is a reflective person to make of all this?

### Kind of, But Not Exactly

To build a working compromise, many theologians have developed a new frame of reference with regard to eschatology

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<sup>61</sup> Bruce Chilton, *Pure Kingdom*, 9, quoted in Scot McKnight, *New Vision for Israel*, 128.

<sup>62</sup> McGinn, *Antichrist*, 35.

<sup>63</sup> Matt. 5:17-18 and Luke 24:44-47. See Max King, *Old Covenant Israel and New Covenant Salvation*.

and the timing of the Kingdom's arrival—the concept of *already but not yet*. This approach suggests that the end has come in a certain sense *already*, but it has *not yet* reached its completion. It was initiated at the cross, but it will be fulfilled somewhere down the line at the end of time.

This sounds nice—sort of—but there are several issues with an extended (2,000 years so far) *already but not yet*.

One, forestalling the consummation of *the end* guts Jesus' prophecies of their relevance to his original audience. It lifts Jesus out of his context—which Paul called the “fullness of time”—and renders his eschatological urgency meaningless.

Two, the Bible never—not even once—uses the phrase “the end of time.” It discusses the “time of the end,” but that is not the same thing as “the end of time.”<sup>64</sup> And frankly, that's a huge difference.

Three, the New Testament employs the *already but not yet*. However, it always sees the *not yet* as being just on their horizon. Jesus and his apostles believed that the *not yet* would materialize in their generation.

Check out his Parable of the Wheat and Tares to see how Jesus employed the *already but not yet*.<sup>65</sup> The seed is sown, but there is time until the harvest. Yet this time wouldn't take centuries. Jesus believed that the harvest would become complete during his generation. That's why he sent his twelve disciples into the world. This handful of workers would participate in bringing in the harvest. “The harvest truly is plentiful, but the laborers are few.”<sup>66</sup> It hadn't happened fully, but it had already begun with the harvest of the firstfruits.<sup>67</sup>

Then there's the famous—and famously misunderstood—Olivet Discourse in Matthew 24. Here Jesus discusses the

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<sup>64</sup> Beck, “The End of Time” <http://www.presence.tv/cms/cov-end-of-time.php>.

<sup>65</sup> Matt. 13:24-30, 36-43.

<sup>66</sup> Matt. 9:37.

<sup>67</sup> We'll explore the concept of firstfruits in chapter 5.



*already but not yet* and fits it into his contemporary setting. He envisioned certain signs like wars and rumors of wars, “but the end is not yet.” When would the end be? Jesus unequivocally states that “this generation will by no means pass away until all these things are fulfilled.”<sup>68</sup>

Not extended over thousands of years; the kingdom would come before Jesus’ generation died off. Jesus predicted that at least some of his disciples would live to see the end. “Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.’ And he said to them, ‘Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see that the kingdom of God has come with power.’”<sup>69</sup>

Jesus lived, died, and rose again anticipating the end to come soon. “Jesus expected the dawn of the Kingdom of God and therewith the parousia in the near future, which was to be limited by the lifetime of his contemporaries, but without defining the date any further.”<sup>70</sup>

Looking back, we can see that the most significant milestone in that generation was 70 CE, the point when the Roman legions flattened Jerusalem and not one stone of the temple was left upon another.<sup>71</sup>

Nothing would have been as meaningful to pious Jews who held “the belief that God himself dwelt there...It was this most sacred place, the dwelling of God himself, that Jesus

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<sup>68</sup> Matt. 24:6, 34. Mark 13:7, 30. For a lengthier survey of the already-but-not-yet, see Beck, “Enough Already,” <http://www.presence.tv/cms/cov-enough-already.php>.

<sup>69</sup> Mark 8:38-9:1.

<sup>70</sup> W. G. Kümmel, *Promise and Fulfillment*, trans. Dorothea M. Barton, 83.

<sup>71</sup> Mark 13:2. In *The Temples that Jerusalem Forgot*, Ernest Martin proposes the theory that today’s Wailing Wall is not the remains of the temple. Instead it is the remains of the Roman Fort Antonia that overlooked the temple. Think of the sad irony.

predicted would be destroyed in the coming judgment—of this very God.”<sup>72</sup>

Every eye watching the unfolding events would have understood this historical event in stark theological terms. God had done something significant. The 70 CE episode serves as a visual sign—a chronological marker, a terminus—indicating the end of one age and the beginning of another.

### **Different, But the Same**

Schweitzer, his rivals, and the *already but not yet* synthesis share a common feature: They’re unable to reconcile the possibility that Jesus expected the end to come in his generation and that it actually came as he envisioned. “The recent research provides a powerful corrective to the de-historicizing of Jesus and Paul. However, all of the popular authors continue to pull elements of the New Testament’s eschatological imminence into our future. In other words, while they recognize a great deal of ‘already’ they continue to make room for plenty of ‘not yet.’”<sup>73</sup>

I’m always amazed when people assume Jesus and the New Testament mischaracterize the end and its timing while believing that *they* see things properly. Why does the “at hand” of today’s authors and preachers really mean soon, but the “at hand” of Jesus means “2,000 or more years into the future”? Time after time, today’s interpreters of Jesus give more credence to their sense of timing than to Jesus’.<sup>74</sup> However, unlike many of today’s would-be prophets, I tend to think that

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<sup>72</sup> Ehrman, *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet of the New Millennium*, 156.

<sup>73</sup> Beck, “Enough Already,” <http://www.presence.tv/cms/cov-enough-already.php>.

<sup>74</sup> Consider this statement from N. T. Wright, *Surprised By Hope*, 136. “But it is now high time to look at the second aspect of the appearing or coming of Jesus.” He specifies “now” as “high time.” Does this mean we should wait a few centuries before reading any further? Jesus, Paul, and the entire New Testament states their day as being “high time” for the full arrival of all of the end time events. For example, Romans 13:11. Yet Wright conflates his eschatological expectation with theirs by pushing things into the future, even though Paul said *his* time was *high* time.

Jesus knew precisely what he was talking about when he foresaw the imminent arrival of the end.

Take political activist, televangelist, and megachurch pastor John Hagee. Following the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin, he wrote that “the events of these last months draw me inexorably to the conclusion that the Messiah is coming very soon.”<sup>75</sup> Why does Hagee’s “at hand” really mean “at hand” but Jesus’ “at hand” means thousands of years?

Best-selling fictionalists Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins have created a franchise with their *Left Behind* novels. The premise in their stories is simple. “Jesus’ words could be fulfilled any day now. He could come at any time: Every prophecy concerning His return has been fulfilled...This glorious immediacy should influence the way every Christian lives...The Lord is at hand.”<sup>76</sup>

The wisdom writer observed, “Hope deferred makes the heart grow sick, but hope fulfilled is a tree of life.” Conventional understandings that postpone fulfillment indefinitely amount to little more than hope deferred, and this makes sick hearts. Langston Hughes described the social angst arising from deferring the civil rights dream. How much more anxiety and despair comes from deferring the promises of God—the promises Jesus envisioned coming to pass in his generation—by thousands of years? No wonder that in “January 1999, Israel’s Health Ministry unveiled plans to deal with what it referred to as ‘messianic madness’ among thousands of Christian pilgrims arriving in the Holy Land for the end of the millennium celebrations...Many of these more disturbed visitors were expecting to witness apocalyptic events as prophesied in the Bible.”<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Hagee, *Beginning of the End*, ix.

<sup>76</sup> LaHaye and Jenkins, *Perhaps Today*, xv. I think they said more than they intended when suggesting *every* prophecy concerning Christ’s return has been fulfilled.

<sup>77</sup> Hunt, *Christian Millenarianism*, p.1.

I can't buy into any story of Jesus that has him doling out false dreams and deferred hope, nor can I accept any theory that suggests the apostles reset Jesus' "doomsday clock." I believe Jesus knew what he was talking about, that he communicated it clearly to his audience, and that his hopes actually came into being. I believe that Jesus' message of the Kingdom's arrival gives us fulfilled hope and a tree of life because I believe that it actually happened when he said it would. To me, that sounds like a significantly better telling of the story.

And it sounded pretty good to the New Testament authors as well.

### **The Last Days in the New Testament**

Apparently Revelation got it wrong. While the final book in the New Testament depicts the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse as Conquest, War, Famine, and Death, it clearly didn't anticipate the current crop of apocalyptic equestrian contenders like John Hagee, Jack Van Impe, Rod Parsley and Tim LaHaye—a Final Consummation of All Things Fab Four.

Of course, who am I kidding? With all the others waiting in line for *their* horse, it might well be the new 144,000. Regardless of their exact numbers (and like the demon-possessed man who encountered Jesus, they seem to be legion), their message is the same: The End could come any moment because (of course) we're living in the end times or the last days. If you're not careful, you might be left to undergo the tribulation. Ooh, scary.<sup>78</sup>

The "last days" is a Biblical concept that many people associate with the final days of planet earth or the conclusion of a supposed prolonged Christian dispensation. "It is often

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<sup>78</sup> King, "Are We Living in the Last Days?,"  
<http://www.presence.tv/cms/lastdays.php>.

assumed that ‘last things’ refer to the end of the space-time universe, and that the Bible contains a great deal of arcane information about that end. This is simply not the case.”<sup>79</sup> Looking through the New Testament we find an urgency arising from the apostles’ belief that they were living in the last days 2,000 years ago.

The New Testament uses several interchangeable phrases related to the last days<sup>80</sup> such as: “end of the age;”<sup>81</sup> “the passing of this present world;”<sup>82</sup> and “the day of the Lord.”<sup>83</sup> Their multiple references to the last days create a sense that the apostles believed that their days were the last days. Just look at how the letter to the Hebrews opens. “Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son...”<sup>84</sup>

It’s apparent to me that the writers of the New Testament took Jesus seriously, believing that some of them actually would be alive when the Son of Man came again in power.<sup>85</sup>

So what on earth were these followers of Jesus talking about? Placing the last days in their first-century setting is absolutely vital for making sense of what the whole story is about. Tugging the New Testament writers from their contextual moorings will cause us to mistake not only the *timing* but also the *nature* of the end that they anticipated. It might cause you to read the newspaper or your RSS feed as a

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<sup>79</sup> King, *Spirit of Prophecy*, 129. For a thorough examination of the last days, see *Spirit of Prophecy*, 128-165.

<sup>80</sup> Matt. 24:14; 1 Cor. 15:24; 1 Pet. 4:7. For an extended list see *Spirit of Prophecy*, 130-132.

<sup>81</sup> Matt. 13:40; 24:3; Eph. 1:21.

<sup>82</sup> Rom. 12:2; 1 Cor. 7:31; Heb. 8:13

<sup>83</sup> 1 Thess. 5:2; 2 Pet. 3:10.

<sup>84</sup> Heb. 1:1.

<sup>85</sup> John 21:21-25. Also, King, “The Problem with Premillennialism,” <http://www.presence.tv/cms/premillennialism.php>.

harbinger of a God-programmed CTRL+ALT+DELETE command for planet earth.

But could it be that the New Testament story actually envisions the end in a positive light, not as a Get-Off-The-Planet-Free card but as good news for all? As the story unfolds in the New Testament, it's pretty clear that those first-century folks understood Jesus' eschatological message as reaching its high point in their day.

On the Day of Pentecost, the apostle Peter applies Joel's prediction of the last days to his time. According to him, the last days had already begun. Because of the strange behavior being exhibited by the disciples, the Jerusalem crowd thought the apostles were sloshed. But Peter begs to differ: "Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning. No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel: 'In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh.'" To take Peter's sermon out of its textual setting eliminates what his original hearers heard: a specific call to "Save yourselves from this corrupt generation."<sup>86</sup>

Acts 2 may be Peter's most famous sermon, but he holds another last days conversation under the shade of Solomon's Porch in Acts 3. Believing that they were near the end, Peter spoke to his audience about "times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, and that he may send the Messiah appointed for you, that is, Jesus, who must remain in heaven until the time of universal restoration that God announced long ago through his holy prophets." He emphasizes that he wasn't making this up on the fly. Instead, he grounded his message of eschatological imminence in the ancient scriptures. "And all the prophets, as many as have spoken, from Samuel and those after him, also predicted these

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<sup>86</sup> Acts 2:16-17, 40.

days." *His* days, not some distant future, would be the time for the restoration of all things.

Peter's sermons announcing the last days set the tone for the entire book of Acts, including Paul's mission to the Gentiles. Paul's "own vocation, to be apostle to the Gentiles, makes sense within a narrative world according to which Israel's hopes have already come true."<sup>87</sup> Throughout his letters, Paul explains his self-understanding in relationship to his belief that he was living in the last days.

For instance, Paul interpreted the persecution that he and his friend Timothy were undergoing as an indication that the end was near.<sup>88</sup> Beyond that, Paul openly states his belief to his first-century Corinthian friends that they were living on the precipice of the end. Paul interpreted the Scriptures and the ancient story of the Exodus in light of his day: "These things happened to them to serve as an example, and they were written down to instruct us, on whom the ends of the ages have come."<sup>89</sup> Paul saw his generation as a transformational one, living in a period that transitioned humanity from one age to another. According to Paul, the end of the ages was 2,000 years ago. Where does this leave us? Not in some ever-lingering last days, but in the new age that Paul accurately anticipated.

Paul wasn't alone in this belief. The Epistle to the Hebrews specifies that it was written "in these last days." And in those last days, they were "receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken."<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Wright, *New Testament and the People of God*, 406. Also, Beck, "A Certain Contribution," <http://www.presence.tv/cms/offering.php>.

<sup>88</sup> 1 Tim. 4:1 and 2 Tim. 3:1. This equates to the "great tribulation" Jesus spoke of. By placing the tribulation in its proper setting, we can greatly reduce the fear mongering quotient.

<sup>89</sup> 1Cor. 10:11.

<sup>90</sup> Heb. 1:1 and 12:28.

James warns his audience of the eschatological judgment that they would undergo because they were living in the last days. Even though LaHaye and Hagee believe the end could happen any day now, James thought that the “coming of the Lord is near” in his day. In fact, it was so near that “the Judge is standing at the doors!”<sup>91</sup>

Peter encouraged his first-century readers concerning the “salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.”<sup>92</sup> He further maintained that the presence of certain scoffers in his time indicated that he was living in the last days.<sup>93</sup>

Jude, a brother of James and Jesus, agrees with Peter’s assessment that they were living in the last days.<sup>94</sup>

So if Jesus and his earliest followers were unanimous that they were living at the dusk of the end and the dawn of a new beginning, what do we think? And more importantly, what do we *do* with this?

### **More Already, Less Not Yet**

Because they saw themselves as living near the end, the apostles portray a sense of *already but not yet*. Like Jesus, they understood the end to have been inaugurated, yet it had not reached its fullness. This explains their distinction between “this age” and “the age to come.”<sup>95</sup> As the New Testament unfolds, we find this sense becoming more and more acute, so that by the final few letters we see that they perceived themselves as living in the last hour.

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<sup>91</sup> James 5:3, 8, 10.

<sup>92</sup> 1 Pet. 1:5. Peter apparently had a tight relationship with early Christian communities throughout the Romans Empire, and his letters to them illustrate his eschatological belief about the last days, the nearness of the end, and the great tribulation. See Beck, “Peter’s Pilgrims,” <http://www.presence.tv/cms/cov-peters-pilgrims.php>.

<sup>93</sup> 2 Pet. 3:3

<sup>94</sup> Jude 18.

<sup>95</sup> Eph. 1:21.



Let's start in 1 Thessalonians. Universally recognized as one of the earliest New Testament writings, Paul echoes Jesus' end time sentiment.<sup>96</sup> He goes on to say that he expected to rejoice with the Thessalonians at the coming of Christ.<sup>97</sup> In chapters 4 and 5 he employs the picturesque language of the Hebrew prophets—including Jesus—to describe the end. Specifically, he believes that he and at least some of the Thessalonians would be "alive and remain until the coming of the Lord."<sup>98</sup> Maybe I'm being a bit modernist here, but this leads me to one of three potential outcomes: (1) Paul's expectations came to pass; (2) Paul was patently wrong or; (3) There are some 2,000 year old people waiting around for Jesus to come back. Somebody call TBN, I want to pitch a *Christian Highlander* show where Spirit-filled immortals duke it out until Armageddon.

Paul continues this theme in chapter 5 where he comforts the Thessalonians with the knowledge that the day of the Lord would not overtake them as a thief in the night. They knew the signs, so they could watch and remain sober.<sup>99</sup>

Now this is interesting: By the time Paul wrote 2 Thessalonians, some of the church apparently believed that the end had come and gone.<sup>100</sup> Paul doesn't correct them by saying, "Dudes, look out your window. Everything is still here? Hell-o?" Instead, he reminds them of the eschatological signs that were "already at work."<sup>101</sup> Paul wants them to know that the end had begun, but it had not yet reached its goal. It

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<sup>96</sup> Compare 1 Thess. 2:13 and Matt. 23:32. Also, Beck, "1 Thessalonians in a First Century Setting," <http://www.presence.tv/cms/cov-1thess.php>.

<sup>97</sup> 1 Thess. 2:19; 3:13; 5:22.

<sup>98</sup> 1 Thess. 4:15. Notice Paul's inclusive use of the personal "we" throughout chapters 4 and 5.

<sup>99</sup> 1 Thess. 5:1-10. Compare this to Jesus' Olivet Discourse in Mark 13:32-37 and Matt. 25:1-13.

<sup>100</sup> 2 Thess. 2:1-2.

<sup>101</sup> 2 Thess. 2:7.

would, though, in relatively short order. After all, that's what the end time signs were for.

A few years later, in 2 Corinthians 3, Paul develops his belief that the last days had begun and they were wrapping up quickly. In contrasting the transformation of the ages, Paul asserts, "For if what is passing away was glorious, what remains is much more glorious."<sup>102</sup> Far from being a self-hating Jew who attempted to replace Judaism with Christianity, Paul saw himself a Hebrew of Hebrews living in the last days prior to the full arrival of the kingdom of God that would bless all families of the earth.<sup>103</sup>

A similar pattern emerges in Hebrews 8. The author quotes the Hebrew prophet Jeremiah and his oracle of the arrival of a New Covenant. "In speaking of 'a new covenant', he has made the first one obsolete. And what is obsolete and growing old will soon disappear."<sup>104</sup> The first hadn't vanished yet, but it soon would. *Soon* from a first-century vantage point, not ours. What was on their horizon is our ancient history.<sup>105</sup> And this is good news for us, as we'll soon explore.

Because the New Testament writers believed themselves to be living near the end, we find a growing sense of imminence as the day approached. The *already* intensified as the *not yet* neared completion. In Romans, Paul wrote, "Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near."<sup>106</sup> They knew the time. It was high time for them to experience the kingdom of God. Things were getting closer by the day.

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<sup>102</sup> 2 Cor. 3:11 NKJV.

<sup>103</sup> Paul believed in the salvation, not the conversion, of all Israel. See Rom. 11:26-27.

<sup>104</sup> Heb. 8:13.

<sup>105</sup> The book of Hebrews applies several prophecies from the Hebrew Bible to the first-century setting as it emphasizes that the end would come in a "little while" and "will not tarry" in places like Heb. 10:37.

<sup>106</sup> Rom. 13:12-13.

This explains why the apostle Peter—one of the original disciples listening to Jesus on the Mount of Olives—wrote to his first-century audience that “salvation [is] ready to be revealed in the last time.”<sup>107</sup> The ultimate eschatological deliverance, Peter believed, was all set to be unveiled, and this would amount to prophetic fulfillment in their day. In fact, Peter was convinced that “The end of all things is near; therefore be serious and discipline yourselves for the sake of your prayers.”<sup>108</sup> If we’re going to take Peter seriously, we’ve got to give him credit for being able to communicate his belief he was living near the end.

As the last days neared their end, the apostle John made a stunning declaration in a letter he wrote. “Children, it is the last hour! As you have heard that antichrist is coming, so now many antichrists have come. From this we know that it is the last hour.”<sup>109</sup> John, the only Gospel writer to mention a singular last day<sup>110</sup> now believed that he was living not only in the last days, but in the last hour of that last day.

How could this be when Jesus said that no one knew the day or the hour? Consider three factors. First: When Jesus spoke those words in the Olivet Discourse, no one did know the day or the hour.<sup>111</sup> They knew it would happen in their generation though. As time passed and the generation aged, it became more evident that the last days were coming to an end.

Second, in the Olivet Discourse, Jesus gave them signs to know that the end was near. John, one of the people who heard the Olivet Discourse first hand, saw the signs. One in particular stands out: the presence of antichrists. Jesus

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<sup>107</sup> 1 Pet. 1:5, 10-12.

<sup>108</sup> 1 Pet. 4:7. Like Paul and Jesus, Peter encourages his audience to be watchful in anticipation of the end.

<sup>109</sup> 1 John 2:18.

<sup>110</sup> John 11:24 and 12:48.

<sup>111</sup> King, “The Day and The Hour,”  
[http://www.presence.tv/cms/lpj\\_vol15\\_1\\_dayandhour.php](http://www.presence.tv/cms/lpj_vol15_1_dayandhour.php).

predicted that pseudo-Christes would arise in the last days.<sup>112</sup> Today's religious fear merchants see the Antichrist under every rock. John, as well as Peter and Jude,<sup>113</sup> said that the antichrists were active 2,000 years ago. The presence of antichrists in John's day was proof positive to him that the end was near back then.<sup>114</sup>

Third, how could John know it was the last hour if Jesus said only the Father knew such a thing? Jesus promised that the Spirit would guide the disciples into all truth, that the Spirit would disclose to them the "things to come."<sup>115</sup> As the last days unfolded and as he saw the signs, John received divine illumination—dare we say a Revelation?—as to the proximity of the last hour.

By the time we reach the book of Revelation, eschatological anticipation reaches a fevered pitch. In this vision, John sees countless images drawn directly from the picturesque language of the Hebrew poets and prophets.<sup>116</sup> Nevertheless, he makes one thing absolutely clear: The content of his vision was coming to fulfillment in his day. Twice in the first three verses, John asserts that the time is "at hand." By the time he reaches the conclusion of the book, the last days are almost completed and Christ promises, "See, I am coming soon!" John is so moved by the assurance that his hopes will be fulfilled soon that he blurts out, "Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!"<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> Matt. 24:23-23. As mentioned above, Paul speaks of this in 2Thessalonians as being "already at work."

<sup>113</sup> 2 Pet. 3:3 and Jude 18.

<sup>114</sup> There's a lot we could say about the first-century identity of antichrists, such as John referring to them in the plural, not the singular. Who were they? I tend to see them as members of the Jesus movement who sought to compel non-Jews into compliance with Jewish customs, including circumcision, as requirements for fellowship in the Messianic community. See Acts 15:1-5. See King, "The Presence of God, part 8," <http://www.presence.tv/cms/jrn-presenceofgod-08.php>.

<sup>115</sup> John 15:13-15.

<sup>116</sup> Beck, "Wrestling with Revelation," <http://www.presence.tv/cms/cov-wrestle-rev.php>.

<sup>117</sup> Rev. 22:6-7, 10, 20-21.

I know it makes titillating fodder for best-selling novels and hit movies, but the book of Revelation is not something that will come to pass in the future. John saw that it was all “at hand” in his day.

### What Difference Does It Make?

Well so what? I’ve got my life, my interests, my religion and my 401(k). Why is it important to see that the last days are behind us, not ahead of us? It makes all the difference in the world.

Our reading of the Bible impacts life on a day-to-day basis, from individual purpose to foreign policy. Besides, it most definitely shapes the whole of faith and our image of God. “Unless we have a right concept of ‘the last days’ we cannot make a proper application of prophecy. Missing the timing of the last days will lead us to false conclusions about the events of those days.”<sup>118</sup> If we anticipate things that occurred in the past to happen sometime in our indefinite future, we’ll have misplaced our hope and missed the divine abundance of the present moment.

Jesus wept over Jerusalem, “You did not recognize the time of your visitation from God.”<sup>119</sup> He told his adversaries, “The kingdom of God does not come with observation...because the kingdom of God is within you.”<sup>120</sup> And he encouraged those who were spiritually intuitive to hear what he was saying and put it into practice.

If we today aren’t recognizing our time, we’ll miss the kingdom that has already arrived. If we’ve closed our ears to the whisper of God, we’ll likely tune in to the shouting of fear mongers—or tune out of living all together.

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<sup>118</sup> King, *Spirit of Prophecy*, 133.

<sup>119</sup> Luke 19:44.

<sup>120</sup> Luke 17:20-21, NIV.

Consider all of the frightful rhetoric emanating from the belief that we are living in the last days. How many times have you heard that the antichrist is right around the corner?<sup>121</sup> What difference might it make in people's lives and in our world if we began to tell the Biblical story as one where the last days are behind us? That it all happened just as Jesus and the apostles foretold. Consider the possibilities of living empowered with the fullness of the divine presence, of living in the kingdom of God with power.

It is the difference between sick hearts and the tree of life, the difference between waiting for life and living life. It's the difference between donning purple shrouds when a comet appears and living abundantly. "Just as the end of adolescence leads into maturity of life, the end of God's mystery leads into a fullness of spiritual life that has no end."<sup>122</sup>

All this leads to a key question. If the end occurred in the first century, what precisely ended?

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<sup>121</sup> There are several eschatological events people are looking forward to that the New Testament suggests would occur in the first century. Beck, "Timing's Top Ten," <http://www.presence.tv/cms/timingtopten.php>.

<sup>122</sup> King, *Spirit of Prophecy*, 129.

# The End of the World As We Know It



I met the perfect woman. Alisa was (and still is) beautiful, smart, and artistic. Besides, she liked me, she really liked me. Best of all, we were in love. So I took a leap of faith and asked her to marry me. Looking back, it wasn't much of a leap. We had talked about marriage and decided that we both wanted to take this step together.

To make our engagement official, we needed one essential ingredient. In the immortal lispy words of the impressive clergyman marrying Humperdinck and Buttercup in *The Princess Bride*, "Have you the wing?" *Translation: "Have you the ring?"*

After studying the four C's of diamonds (this was before the days anyone knew about the social impact of the diamond market), I felt prepared to get her the perfect engagement ring. A friend recommended the jeweler—and, no, it wasn't some guy operating out of the trunk of his car. As I drove to the store, I turned on my radio and scanned through the stations looking for anything to calm my nerves.

A tune caught my ear. It was REM singing, "It's the End of the World as We Know It." How appropriate.

As I pulled into the parking lot, something strange happened. The song played again on the same station. I had never been able to understand all the lyrics—who has?—so I decided to stay put and listen. Then it played a third time. And a fourth. And a fifth. As it turns out, the station played it continually for 24 hours. I took it as a sign: For Alisa and me, one world was ending and another was beginning.<sup>123</sup>

In a similar way, Jesus and the apostles announced the end of the world as they knew it. And the world they expected to end was not planet earth. Instead, they anticipated the end of one world-order characterized by a particular covenant between God and Israel and a new one typified by a new covenant. We can call each of these world-orders a “covenant world.”

It might surprise you to hear someone say that the Bible doesn’t discuss the end of the physical universe and the destruction of the planet—especially when so many preachers tell you that it could happen any moment now. *Hurry up! Get your life straightened out before the world comes to an end!* But that’s exactly what I’m putting out there for your consideration: The end of the physical universe is never in view in the entire Hebrew-Christian Bible.

I’m not an ancient language scholar, and I don’t play one on TV. But since the New Testament was written in Greek, it might help to know the meaning of some of the original words that get translated as *world*. When we research the many accessible reference works, we discover that a world doesn’t necessarily amount to this blue-green ball orbiting the sun.

The first is the Greek word *kosmos* (sometimes spelled *cosmos*). It refers to all there is or a certain ordering of all there is.<sup>124</sup> The distinguished British historian Norman Cohn notes, “Cosmos, in the sense of all-embracing, all-pervading order,

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<sup>123</sup> More that a decade later, I think the sign proved correct.

<sup>124</sup> TDNT 3:868.



was taken for granted in the Ancient Near East.”<sup>125</sup> We might call it a world-order. Another Greek word often gets translated as *world*—the word *aion*.<sup>126</sup> *Aion* is also translated as “age.” Together they allow us to speak of a world, a kosmos, or an age interchangeably.

In a passage like the Great Commission as found in Matthew 28:18-20, Jesus promises to be with his disciples until the end of the world (*aion* in this case). He’s not envisioning the destruction of the planet. He is looking forward to the end of the age he was living in.

Of course, our galaxy may come to an end some day. Astrophysicists say we have about 7.5 billion years left.<sup>127</sup> Be that as it may, it isn’t the subject of the Biblical story. To appreciate the end, it will help to go back the beginning and read the story afresh.

### The Less-than-Greatest Story Ever Told

Brian McLaren points out the “failure of the world’s religions, especially its two largest religions, to provide a framing story capable of healing”<sup>128</sup> the crises our world faces today. What we need today is a new reading of the Biblical story. And this begins by reframing the end of the world and the “end” of the story.

To better understand the end of the story, it will help to re-read the beginning. If we see the beginning of the story as a failed attempt to create an ideal material planet, we’ll always search for a solution to that problem. As the old saying goes: When your only tool is a hammer, you’ll see the world as a nail.

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<sup>125</sup> Cohn, *Cosmos, Chaos and the World to Come*, 3.

<sup>126</sup> TDNT 1:197.

<sup>127</sup> Anjana Ahuja, “Official: World to End in 7.6 Billion Years,” March 10, 2008, <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/uk/science/article3523205.ece> (accessed May 6, 2008).

<sup>128</sup> McLaren, *Everything Must Change*, 5.

The story as it tends to be told makes God out to be a frustrated failure just waiting for the day when he can get even with us. See if this sounds familiar. God created a perfect world and put Adam and Eve in the garden. They disobeyed the one instruction God gave them. As a result, everything went to hell. We now live in a fallen world filled with horrors that God never intended—everything from crazy weather to physical death. But it's our fault because through our human willfulness we brought all this misfortune upon ourselves.<sup>129</sup>

To make it worse, we've made God really, really mad. But, never fear, God has a plan. He'll send Jesus and take out his frustrations on him so that everyone who believes God has punished Jesus can avoid punishment themselves.

Along the way, God took a liking to a special people and decided to make Jesus one of them. Meanwhile over a period of about 1,500 years, those people disobeyed him and God punished them royally. So much for being the chosen people.

The story continues. In the days of Augustus Caesar, God determined it would be the right time to send Jesus and set up a kingdom to fix the original problem. Unfortunately, God's special people rejected him and conspired with the Romans to have him executed.

Now God is just biding his time. In his "infinite mercy," he's waiting for people to stop being rebellious so he can save at least a few folks before he blows up the world.

At this point on this version of the story, we might start wondering what God can do right. He made a world that humans could mess up by eating fruit. He selected a people who through his prophets he called "stiff-necked and rebellious." He tries to set up a kingdom only to be foiled.

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<sup>129</sup> Bart Ehrman discusses the role of suffering and the weak theological answers addressing it in his spiritual memoir that chronicles his journey from fundamentalism to atheism in *God's Problem*.

But it gets worse. God becomes so frustrated with all of this failure that he decides to send Jesus back to earth to take care of things one way or another.

One version of this story has God renovating the planet and establishing a kingdom for a thousand years or so. He'll put up some fresh paint and wall paper. But at the end of the day, he'll still bring about the end of the world. Another variation has God just blowing everything up once and for all.

That is what passes for the gospel—the good news. I don't know about you, but that sounds more like the plotline from a Wes Craven film than the Greatest Story Ever Told.

A big problem with these traditional ways of telling the Biblical story is its view of the relationship between God and humanity. How can humanity foil God's purpose and corrupt the entire physical universe? Are we powerful enough to spoil the world created by an omnipotent God?

Many cultures have mythologies that envision the primordial past as a Golden Age that deteriorated through a series of calamitous human decisions. This way of reading human history is not limited to ancient legends or today's religion. Primitivists like Daniel Quinn look back and see a pleasant society of hunter-gatherers living harmoniously in a matriarchal society. This primeval world fell, and humanity became farmers and city builders run by oppressive males.

Knowing this tendency helps us see that our reading of the Biblical story may be shaped by our collective assumptions and cultural narratives of how humanity developed. When we get to Genesis 1-3 and read the story as people messing up God's perfect world, we might be projecting our archetypical cultural beliefs onto that story.

An innovative way of reading the story allows us to see a progressive creation. Notwithstanding Augustine, humanity did not fall, and we have not tainted the universe from the

inside out. This was never in our power. God placed humanity in a world-order that God fashioned for the specific purpose of creating humanity in the divine likeness through Christ.

### What in the World

Maybe the most famous words ever spoken are, “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.” Often understood solely as a statement about God fashioning the planet and all that is in it, this has fueled fruitless arguments ranging from the Scopes Monkey Trial to intelligent design to a career for Richard Dawkins.

So what in the world is the ‘world’ God created in Genesis? *Heaven and Earth* is a common Biblical phrase that refers to an arrangement of things—and not necessarily a planetary configuration. We see this in Deuteronomy 28:23 where Moses warns Israel what will occur if they disregard the covenant. “And your heavens which are over your head shall be bronze, and the earth which is under you shall be iron.” The atmosphere wouldn’t be shaded orangish with the dirt below suddenly transmuted into metal. Yet, their *world* would be hardened. Their world-order would become barren.

A rocky heavens and earth come into play in Leviticus 26 where Moses warns Israel against breaking the covenant.<sup>130</sup> The net result would amount to the destruction of their world. “I will break the pride of your power; I will make your heavens like iron and your earth like bronze.”<sup>131</sup> The planet wouldn’t come to an end, but their *world* would.

In chapter 2, I mentioned the colorful language of Isaiah’s oracle against Babylon. In Isaiah 13:13, the prophet speaks poetically about Egypt’s *heavens and earth*—“Therefore I will

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<sup>130</sup> Lev. 26:14-15.

<sup>131</sup> Lev. 26:19 NKJV

make the heavens tremble, and the earth will be shaken out of its place.”

We’ve already noted that the Biblical writers used various poetic images pointing to higher and deeper truths. The *heavens and earth* in Genesis are no exception. While the Genesis narrative likely articulates the ancient Hebrew beliefs about life’s origins, the physical creation is limited to a page or two. This might help us see the planet as the backdrop to God working out his relationship with humanity.

It might also clue us into the fact that Genesis is telling a bigger story. Recognizing that something beyond astrophysics is occurring in Genesis helps us appreciate that “no matter how literal, figurative, or mythological one holds it to be, the story of creation in the Book of Genesis is presented as just that—a story. And in order to recover this story, we must have the discipline to read it anew, perhaps with questions different from the ones we are used to asking.”<sup>132</sup>

Those new questions might help us find two phases in creation narrative. In the first three days, we find the creation of empty realms. The next three days has those realms being filled.<sup>133</sup> This provides an outline of a meta-narrative—a Big Story—that has two phases. The first is one of emptiness. The second is one of fullness. The first is about preparation. The second is about consummation. Both are absolutely essential to the creation of life in God’s image.

I’m not arguing whether or not Genesis is a scientific account or a mythological narrative. Instead, Genesis has layers showing us the beginning of God’s creation of humanity in the divine likeness. As 1 Corinthians 15:42-49 shows, the process begun in Genesis with the first Adam comes to its completion with the Last Adam, Christ.

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<sup>132</sup> King, *A House that Stands*, 29.

<sup>133</sup> Both J. Richard Middleton in *The Liberating Image* and Tim King in *A House That Stands* point this out and describe it in their own ways.

The heavens and earth point beyond themselves to illustrate two world-orders especially fit for God's creative task. Genesis tells us about the creation of the first world order and envisions the ultimate New Creation. It initiates the beginning of creation (after all Genesis means *beginning*) and looks forward to the fulfillment of creation—God and humanity dwelling together in fellowship in a world perfectly suited for this relationship.

### Covenant Worlds

In Galatians 4:21-31, Paul connects the world-orders with covenants by using a clever metaphor drawn from a familiar incident in Genesis. He begins with a given: Abraham had two sons, Ishmael and Isaac. They were truly "brothers from other mothers," Hagar the bond-woman (something between a servant and a slave) birthing Ishmael and Sarah, a "free-woman," giving birth to Isaac. To be sure that we understand that he is not simply drawing family trees, Paul states plainly, "Now this is an allegory."<sup>134</sup> Ok, Paul, an allegory of what? Paul answers, "These women are two covenants."<sup>135</sup>

Covenant One entails Mt. Sinai, bondage, and the Jerusalem that "now is." This Jerusalem gives birth to children in flesh.<sup>136</sup> Covenant Two symbolizes the Jerusalem "from above" that is free and bears children of promise, children birthed in spirit.<sup>137</sup>

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<sup>134</sup> Gal. 4:24. Other translations say, "These things are symbolic." Either way, Paul is pointing out that these things look past themselves and have greater significance.

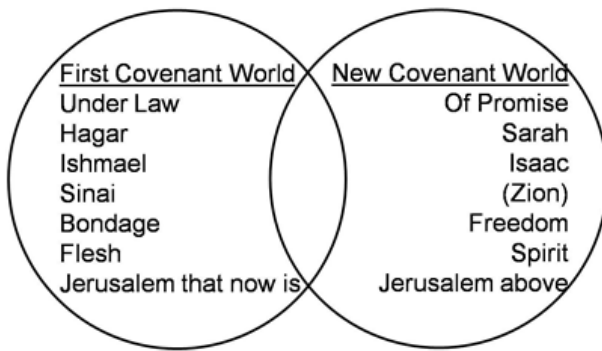
<sup>135</sup> Of course the women aren't the covenants themselves. They symbolize the covenants and the world the covenants represent.

<sup>136</sup> "Now is" being from Paul's standpoint 2,000 years ago.

<sup>137</sup> Paul is not contrasting Judaism and Christianity, and he certainly never meant this to be read as a polemic against Islam. Paul was a Jew and never renounced his Jewish identity. In fact, he counts on it and grounds his ministry in the Law and Prophets (Acts 24:14). He anticipated the salvation (not the conversion) of all Israel (Rom. 11:26). In Galatians 4, Paul makes a nuanced theological argument specific to his day related to the transformation

From there Paul carefully affirms a transition was occurring in his day, a world transformation from bondage to liberty. He wanted his original readers to know that as participants in the messianic community, they belonged to the free woman. They were already sharing in the promise of the New Jerusalem, the New Covenant. They prefigured the transformation of the ages that would soon affect all humanity.

I'm not a big chart guy. Most charts scare me—especially the ones that need to be unfolded several times. But some simple overlapping circles might help you visualize what Paul is saying.



Paul's contrast depicts the transformation happening in his day. It is a more detailed way to reiterate what Jesus announced. "The kingdom of God is near." The time was at hand and the kingdom of God was arriving with power. With the complete transformation of the covenant worlds, God's promise to make humanity in the divine image would be fulfilled.

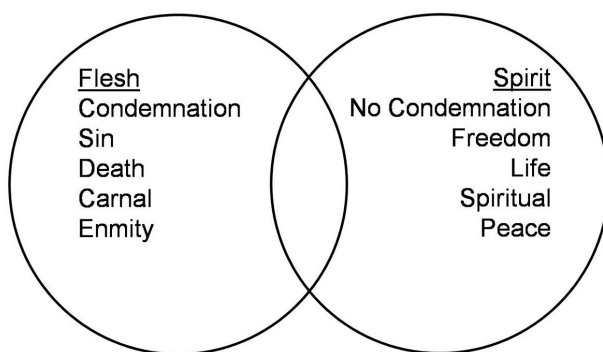
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of the world-orders. Several works explore the early split of Judaism and Christianity and the way forward in our world today. James, D.G. Dunn, ed., *Jews and Christians: The Parting of the Ways A.D. 70-135*. John Howard Yoder, *The Jewish-Christian Schism Revisited*. Darrell Jodock, ed., *Covenantal Conversations*.

What began with the first Adam in the first world-order would reach its high point with the Last Adam in the new world-order.

### In Between Days

The circles are helpful in reading several New Testament texts. One is Romans 8. This is Paul's well-known contrast between *flesh* and *spirit*. The ideas of flesh and spirit aren't ways of referring to material and non-material realities. Nor are they ways of alluding to bad behavior and good. "Flesh and spirit then are not two warring irreconcilable components which necessarily produce schizophrenia in human beings as long as mortal life endures."<sup>138</sup> Instead, they're categories describing covenant worlds. The world of *flesh* is the equivalent to the first covenant world, and the world of *spirit* is tantamount to the New Covenant world. Paul believed that he and his first-century readers were the pivotal generation living through the transition from one age to the next.

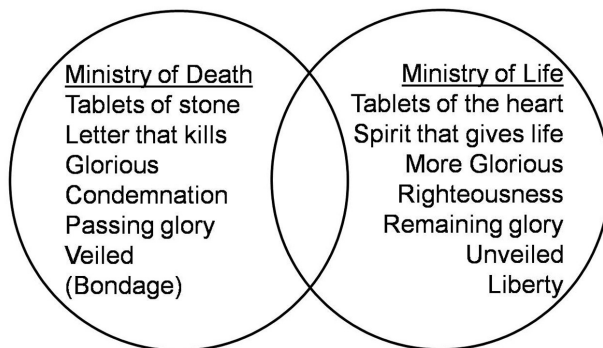


The circles also help in reading 2 Corinthians 3. In this setting, Paul makes a pronounced covenantal, world-changing contrast. He saw himself and the Corinthians living *in the middle of it all*. They were being transformed from glory to

<sup>138</sup> Kaylor, *Paul's Covenant Community*, 146.



glory, into the very image of God. Through this way of speaking, Paul intentionally echoes the Genesis creation story. He sees the process of creation that had begun in Genesis reaching its fullness in his day. The “empty” world-order was being filled with the very presence of God.



In all of these cases, we find a world-order contrast. One world was passing away, and another was coming into its fullness. Meanwhile, Paul notes that he and his first-century audience were living during this transitional time. Paul lived during the *already but not yet*. He wrote as one living between covenant worlds—in the overlap of two circles. That’s important to recognize because it places the *already but not yet* in the first century, not in our day. That generation was the transformational generation, the vanguard of a new heaven and earth that would become a full reality in that day.

### First World Function

At first glance, it may seem like Paul is critical of the first world-order on its own merits. Yet, a closer look reveals that he saw the first age as absolutely integral to God’s promises. The first world had a function in God creating the new age. That function served to confine all under sin.<sup>139</sup>

<sup>139</sup> Gal. 3:22.

Whoa. That's sounds pretty intense. It could use some unpacking, and we can start in Romans 8:20. "For the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope."

There's a lot here, but let's notice just a few things that echo Paul's metaphor in Galatians. First, Paul is discussing the creation.<sup>140</sup> Not the third rock from the sun, but the created covenant order. The world-order represented by a covenant.

Next, this creation was subjected to futility. Some translations say weakness; others say vanity or emptiness. This echoes back to the meta-narrative of Genesis and the days of creation. The first three days were days of emptiness waiting to be filled. Paul draws from this image to show that the first created order was a world of weakness and emptiness. Weakness doesn't mean it was bad, evil, or fallen. It means that it was waiting for fulfillment.

How did this world end up in futility? Paul says that someone subjected it. The traditional way of telling the story is that Adam and Eve subjected us all to futility, but Paul might disagree with that. God is the creator and as such God made the first covenant world weak. No one in the first covenant world could liberate themselves or their world. No one was powerful enough to create a new world-order.

Why would God create a weak world? What function could a weak world serve? Well, it's like a newborn. A tiny baby can't sit up, roll over, or even feed herself. She's weak—not bad. But her weakness enhances how precious she is and illustrates how much she depends on her loving parents.

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<sup>140</sup> The Greek word is *ktisis* (TDNT 3:1000), and it serves as a synonym for *kosmos*. Also, *ktisis* is the Greek word found in Mark's version of the Great Commission. I have a hard time believing that Jesus called his disciples to preach to the rocks and trees. Incidentally the TDNT 3:1034 notes, "The full revelation of the new creation which will manifest the refreshing of both man and the world will not come until Christ reveals Himself." I agree that humanity is determined by our God-created world. And that this world-order came into its maturity at the 70 CE revelation, not sometime in our future.

The function of the first covenant world was to put everyone on equal ground. Namely, the first weak world confined everyone under sin and its death—emptiness, weakness, powerlessness.<sup>141</sup> Not physical demise, but the realization that one cannot will themselves into the image of God. Sin-death was an inherent trait of the first world-order. Anyone born into that world—Jew or Gentile—was dead (or weak) already. “For God shows no partiality. All who have sinned apart from the law will also perish apart from the law, and all who have sinned under the law will be judged by the law.”<sup>142</sup>

But God didn’t leave the fledgling covenant world hopeless. The hope of the entire created order was deliverance—or new birth.

Importantly, Paul perceived this transformation process to be occurring in his day. He believed the whole creation was experiencing birth pains in his day.<sup>143</sup> He was living in the overlap of the two circles. The end of the world was near, and the New Creation was breaking forth. That’s why he insisted that the birth of the new world—the birth of “Isaac” was happening “now” and he was “eagerly waiting” for the deliverance.<sup>144</sup> As someone with one foot in the first world-order, Paul took pleasure in his weakness so that he would know God’s world-transforming power through Christ.<sup>145</sup>

### Covenant Representation

As Paul points out in Galatians 4, the covenant given at Sinai serves as a microcosm of the broader first world. The first world-order was arranged under a “do this and live” system.

<sup>141</sup> Rom. 3:19-20, 23; 4:19; 5:6-11, 12-21. 7:13. 11:22. Gal. 3:22.

<sup>142</sup> Rom. 2:11-12.

<sup>143</sup> Romans 8:22.

<sup>144</sup> Rom. 8:22, 23, 25.

<sup>145</sup> 2 Cor. 12:7-10 and Rom. 5:6.

Going all the way back to the Garden, God tells the man and woman, “Don’t eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil or you’ll die.”<sup>146</sup> The covenant given at Sinai encapsulates that principle par excellence. “You shall keep my statutes and my ordinances; by doing so one shall live.”<sup>147</sup>

The point is no matter what anyone did—good or evil—in the first covenant world they couldn’t rise above that world. That’s what made it so futile. It’s also what explains Paul’s exasperation in Romans 7. The attempt to “do” something in order to bring about the fulfillment of God’s promise to make humanity in God’s image was vanity of vanities.

Paul points out that if there were a law—*any* law—that could have brought about a new world order, then that’s the way God would have done it. But there wasn’t.<sup>148</sup> The Law that God did give served to amplify through Israel what was true of all humanity: eating from a tree of knowledge of good and evil is no way to reach God and fulfill God’s promise.

### **One World Passing**

What caused this first world-order to pass away? The crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. Without the crucifixion and resurrection, there could be no transformation of the ages. “The decisive role of the cross in eschatology is seen in a number of texts where Paul speaks of Christ’s resurrection.”<sup>149</sup>

The cross event is the determinative action through which God worked to bring about the creation of the new heavens and earth foretold by Isaiah. This is why Paul claimed to know nothing but Christ and him crucified. It would be through this act that God would bring the “rulers of this age”—the

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<sup>146</sup> Whether these were “real people” eating from a “real tree” is immaterial to how they *function* in the Genesis story.

<sup>147</sup> Lev. 18:5.

<sup>148</sup> Rom. 3:19-20; 7:7-13; Gal. 4:21-22. Paul emphasizes that the Law was never contrary to God’s promise.

<sup>149</sup> King, *Cross and Parousia*, 25.

principalities and powers—to nothing.<sup>150</sup> In Christ God was reconciling the world unto himself.<sup>151</sup>

Jesus' teachings in the synoptic Gospels are full of interesting and life-giving direction. Focusing only on Christ's crucifixion and resurrection might be like what Dallas Willard calls "vampire Christians," people out for Jesus' blood with little concern for what Jesus' character reveals about the Father. In knowing nothing but Christ and him crucified, Paul is not dismissing the teachings of Jesus as much as making a statement relative to the passing of one age and the birth of a new one.

This is similar to what he says in Philippians 3 about counting everything as a pile of—to use a polite word—rubbish in comparison to knowing and attaining the power of Christ's resurrection. Incidentally, that's coming from a guy who called himself a Hebrew of Hebrews. Paul, then, doesn't minimize the Jewish experience under the Law, even if some see him as a self-loathing Jew.

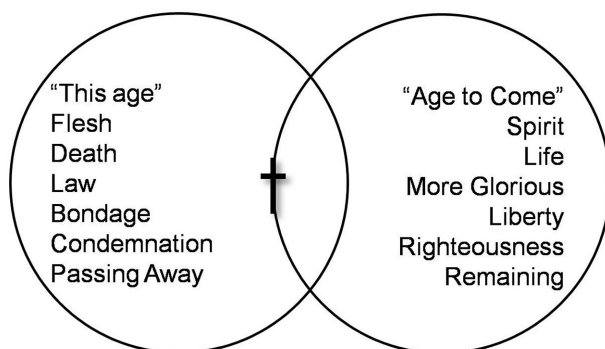
The crucifixion, then, is significant in several ways. It's a once-for-all (and all time) redemptive and historical act that inaugurates a New Age, one in which being in the divine-likeness does not mean that we exercise a "god complex" by forcing our wills upon others. That's not the way of God. Instead, it is God showing that the divine tabernacle is *with* us. On an existential and ethical level, it reveals what love is—and how we can experience the love of God and the fullness of our God-likeness when we don't consider equality with God as something to be grasped. It is most perfectly experienced when we take the form or role of a servant.

Let's revisit the circles, and add an essential element: the cross.

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<sup>150</sup> 1 Cor. 2:2-8. "This age" refers to the first world order that was passing away in Paul's day.

<sup>151</sup> 2 Cor. 5:17-21.



The cross opened the way for the new world to come into being. That's why Jesus calls himself the "way, the truth, and the life." He is the way to the ultimate fulfillment of God's promise of life. He is the one through whom God transformed the ages. It affects more than just a metaphysical shift, and it transcends the tired thinking that Jesus suffered so that we wouldn't have to. Jesus disclosed the truest face of God to humanity, Abba's real character which was always inherently creative and conciliatory. Jesus' death was the ultimate turning of the other cheek as the way to transform the ages and to model and empower our life.

Paul calls Jesus the firstborn from the dead and the firstborn over all creation because Jesus is the first to rise from the world of the dead and the first to enter the new creation.<sup>152</sup> He came into a world characterized by bondage and died to that world. Jesus was "born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law."<sup>153</sup> In so doing, he brought one world to an end and created a new one.

### When Did It Happen

Granted, traditional tellings of the story continue to look forward to a day when this world-transformation will occur. Yet, Paul believed it was going on way back in his day.

<sup>152</sup> Col. 1:15-18. Acts 26:22-23.

<sup>153</sup> Gal. 4:3-5.

As we saw in chapter 2, Jesus and the apostles believed they were living in the last days. They all predicted the end of the world—the end of their covenant world-order—would happen during their generation. This end came, marked by the devastating destruction of Jerusalem. Max King notes, “The fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 was a watershed event in the redemption of humanity.”<sup>154</sup>

But why? There’s no doubt that the sacking of Jerusalem and the temple was understood then—as well as now—as a significant theological event. The prophets recognized the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem and the first temple in 586 BCE as an unmitigated theological disaster. Jeremiah’s Lamentations ruefully eulogize the lonely city that sat like a widow and had become a slave. Perhaps this explains why Jesus’ contemporaries called him Jeremiah: he was foretelling a similar fate for the city six centuries later.

Immediately prior to his Olivet Discourse, Jesus’ predicted that if his kinsmen attempted to bring about the kingdom of God through violence, they would suffer a devastating defeat. This didn’t make him anti-Semitic any more than Jeremiah’s warnings did. Instead, he sought to save Jerusalem from unspeakable carnage.

“Truly I tell you, all this will come upon this generation. ‘Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! See, your house is left to you, desolate. For I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, ‘Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.’”<sup>155</sup>

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<sup>154</sup> King, *Spirit of Prophecy*, 349.

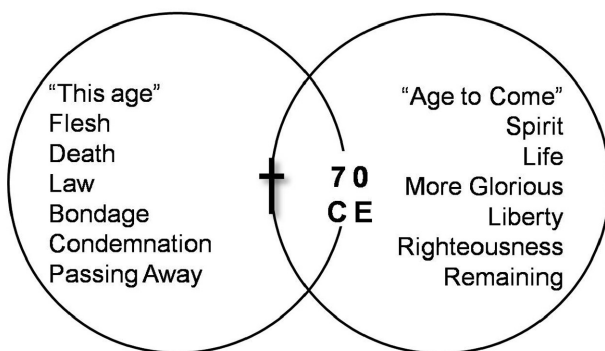
<sup>155</sup> Matt. 23:36-36. Also, Luke 19:41-42.

Immediately thereafter Jesus head to the Mount of Olives. There he speaks to his disciples and links the looming fall of the city with the words spoken by the prophets.

“When you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation has come near. Then those in Judea must flee to the mountains, and those inside the city must leave it, and those out in the country must not enter it; for these are days of vengeance, as a fulfillment of all that is written.”<sup>156</sup>

Jerusalem and the temple served the focal point of what the entire first world-order was about. Separation. God’s presence veiled. Do and live. Its removal signified the end of one world and the beginning of another. The veil of the temple was torn, and humanity entered into the very presence of God through a new and living way into a New Creation. “As long as Herod’s Temple stood, the symbols of the Old Covenant system stood intact....the heavenly Jerusalem would come down only after the earthly Jerusalem was taken out of the way.”<sup>157</sup>

Once again, we turn to the circles. This time you’ll notice the initial phase of the end and the consummation of it.



<sup>156</sup> Luke 21:20-22.

<sup>157</sup> King, *Spirit of Prophecy*, 349.



In other words, the ending had a definite initiation point but its final fading was a process. This spans an approximately 40 year period—not coincidentally the same amount of time Israel wandered through the desert before entering the Promised Land.<sup>158</sup>

With the passing of one world order, a new one was born. Death gives place to life. This is the stuff of resurrection.

### **A New World Whole**

The first world-order phased out and a new world represented by a New Covenant came into being. Jeremiah prophesied this New Covenant,<sup>159</sup> and he described it as a covenant different than the famous one made with Moses at Sinai. It would be of another order. Unlike the world characterized by futility and weakness, the world characterized by the New Covenant would keep no record of sin (and its death—which was separation, not biological demise). God would pass over the sin of the first world and remember sin no more.<sup>160</sup>

Beyond this, relationship with God in the new world-order would not be based on your knowledge of God. Instead, it is based solely on God's intimate indwelling with you. God promised to know all "from the least to the greatest."<sup>161</sup> Employing the symbolism of sun, moon, and stars, Jeremiah assures us that the New Covenant would remain forever.

We find this New Creation imagery throughout the writings of the New Testament, but it stands out in two places.

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<sup>158</sup> Hebrews 3:7-4:11 makes use of this image. This transitional generation mirrored the transition of the Exodus generation. Just as the Exodus generation brought all Israel into her rest, the ekklesia was bringing all humanity into its rest.

<sup>159</sup> Jer. 31:31-40.

<sup>160</sup> Rom. 3:25.

<sup>161</sup> Paul anticipated this transformation, linking it to love in 1 Corinthians 13:12-13.

The first is 2 Peter 3. Peter believes that he is living in the last days.<sup>162</sup> He encourages his original audience to diligently look forward to the dissolution of one world order and the full arrival of new cosmos.<sup>163</sup>

He grounded his eschatological hope of a New Heaven and Earth in the promise of God made through Jesus and the prophets. And he expected that his original readers would be alive to experience it as they hastened the day.<sup>164</sup>

The second and perhaps most prominent discourse on the New Creation is the book of Revelation. Old Testament images saturate John's vision, but three things stand out, and they all resemble Paul's metaphor in Galatians.

One, the old world is represented by a city where "our Lord had been crucified" and as a lonely woman who had been a queen. That's an echo of Jeremiah's *Lamentation* weeping over the Jerusalem that "now is."

Two, when the world passes away it gives place to a New Heaven and Earth characterized by a New Jerusalem. There is no temple structure in this city because God dwells with everyone and all things, from the least to the greatest.<sup>165</sup>

Three, John believed that the realization of his vision was at hand. He fully expected the consummated arrival of the New World to occur in his lifetime—just as Jesus told him it would. Standing in the prophetic traditions "like Jesus and Paul, he insists that the end of the world is nigh."<sup>166</sup>

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<sup>162</sup> 2 Pet. 3:3.

<sup>163</sup> 2 Pet. 3:12-14.

<sup>164</sup> 2 Pet. 3:2, 13.

<sup>165</sup> Also, Revelation 21:1 says that the New Heaven and Earth has no sea. This would be an odd world, indeed, if we were to take it literally. However, if the sea refers to the bronze sea in the temple or as a representation the chaos of separation, we might understand the absence of the sea as a way of affirming God's presence with humanity.

<sup>166</sup> Kirsch, *History of the End of the World*, 51.

## Summary

Where does that leave us? Smack dab in the middle of a world-order filled with God unmediated by institutional hierarchies. We are humanity created after the order of Christ, the Last Adam. Humanity fashioned by God in the divine likeness, dwelling in an age where the home of God is among us. He lives with us as our God; we are his people, and God himself indwells us and our world.<sup>167</sup>

This world is a world of abundant divine empowerment. We are able to walk with God as friends and relate to God face to face because humanity has been transformed into the glory that allows us to see God as he is: unconditional love. Shortly before his death, Henry David Thoreau was asked if he had made his peace with God. Thoreau replied, "I did not know we had ever quarreled." This is the essence of life in the New Creation.

But wait. Just look outside: nothing has changed. We're all still doing a whole bunch of bad stuff. We're harming one another, exploiting the poor, and engaging in unethical and immoral acts. How can *this* world be the new world? How can this world be the one where the wolf and lamb dwell in harmony?

Perhaps we're looking with the wrong vision.

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<sup>167</sup> Rev. 21:3.

## What About...?



“Nor will it do to say, as do some...that the events of A.D. 70 were themselves the second coming of Jesus so that ever since then we have been living in God’s new age and there is no further coming to await. This may seem to many readers, as indeed it seems to me a bizarre position to hold...” Thus saith the Bishop of Durham.<sup>168</sup>

I can understand how someone might think this to be strange. It seemed bizarre to me when I began to entertain the possibility that Jesus and the apostles linked the fulfillment of their eschatological expectations to the time of Jerusalem’s downfall. This approach ran counter to most everything I knew—or thought I knew—about eschatology and traditional ways of telling the Biblical story.

And it raised a host of questions about some specific planks in God’s end-time platform. After all, when you change the way you read the end of the story, you change the way you read the entire story.

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<sup>168</sup> Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, 127. I don’t know anyone who has ever said the events of 70 CE “were themselves the second coming of Jesus.” Instead, they served as sign indicating a theological event, an act of God in history, a map pointing beyond itself. Wright himself indicates that the fall of Jerusalem was seen in stark theological terms by those living through it. See Wright, *New Testament and the People of God*, 116-7, 373-4, 352, 395-6.

But is this a bad thing? Rereading the old, old story in new ways opens fresh possibilities for experiencing faith, spiritual formation, and community. I don't belong to the Reformed church, but who can argue with the principle *semper reformanda*—always reforming? Or better yet—*always transforming*, rising above the old partisanships of left/right, liberal/conservative, us/them. If Paul could envision a Christ-formed humanity in which either/or dualisms of ethnicity, gender, and economic relationships could be integrated into a New Creation, then why do we today feel compelled to perpetuate readings of the Biblical story that foster separation and end in disaster?

If we always read the story in the same old ways, we'll continue getting the same old results. And what have been some of the more bitter fruits of arising from the old ways of reading the story? Division, hostility, confusion. Call me idealistic, but I don't think that's what Jesus had in mind when he prayed that his followers would be one with God and each other. I believe we can have the fruit of the Spirit without the thorns and briars.

We owe it to ourselves to read the Bible anew even if that may seem bizarre to those invested with power positions in maintaining the status quo. As Ronald Reagan astutely noted *status quo* is Latin for "the mess we're in."

As we start getting out of this mess, we might feel like Neo after taking the red pill—dizzy and disoriented. But the vertigo quickly gives way to liberation.

The liberation that we reach is like eye salve—or maybe even more comprehensive, like laser surgery—something that reorients and clarifies our vision. But we get there through curiosity, intuition, and inquiry. At this point, questions might be running through your head, questions about some of the specifics related to the Biblical story. In this chapter, I'll introduce five issues that jumped out at me when I began this

journey. Today these tend to be the same questions that many people coming to a Transmillennial understanding ask about: the Millennium, the Second Coming, Resurrection, Judgment, and the Church. Y'know, just that stuff.

Throughout this chapter, I'll refer back to the overlapping circles. They'll serve as a model, a mental map, to help us fit together the pieces of the puzzle.

### **What About the Millennium?**

With the way the John Hagees, Jack Van Impes, and Tim LaHayes of the world talk about it, you'd figure "the millennium" was written on every page of the Bible. Yet the closest we get to it in the Bible is Revelation 20, where it uses the phrase "a thousand years."

What was this thousand year period and why is it important? The millennium relates specifically to the last days, to the fullness of time.<sup>169</sup> It's a symbolic way of referring to that period when the end was arriving. Max King notes that "the New Testament's framework for the 'last things' is clear enough already to identify the period of Christ's reign as that which preceded the end of the age and the coming reign of God in 'the age to come.'"<sup>170</sup>

So does this equate to a literal thousand calendar years? Does the Lord's "cattle on a thousand hills" refer to more than literal cows on grassy knolls? I'm inclined to read my Bible in a way that hearkens to its initial poetic intent in these passages. Just as David was saying that the fullness of all things belonged to God, John envisioned the fullness of time as being a day in which God was bringing about the long-awaited transformation.

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<sup>169</sup> For an extensive study of the millennium, see King, *Cross and Parousia*, 209-261.

<sup>170</sup> Ibid., 214.

If we approach the thousand years symbolically, we can see them in terms of a full period through which the transformation of the ages became complete through the reign of Christ.<sup>171</sup> It was not intended to convey a thousand revolutions of the earth around the sun. Instead, it points to the completeness of the transforming work. "The reign was complete and invincible in regard to its purpose and accomplishment."<sup>172</sup>

This fullness of time was perfectly suited to echo the forty years of the Exodus. After leaving Egyptian slavery, Israel waited forty years before entering the Promised Land. Even though they were delivered at the decisive act of the Red Sea crossing, they didn't enter into their full rest until a generation had passed. They were free already, but not yet.

Following this pattern, the millennium marks a forty year transitional period. Deliverance from the world of bondage had been secured at the cross, and it would reach its fullness forty years later.<sup>173</sup>

Also, forty years is a key concept related to the Hebrew kings. Saul reigned forty years. So did David and Solomon. None of the kings of Israel were effective in transforming the ages. The world-orders remained the same. Sacrifice, law, temple, and institutional religion reinforced a sense of guilt, separation, and hierarchy.

The forty year reign of Christ transformed the ages and brought the kingdom of God. There's no end to this kingdom, and no separation between God and humanity. The dwelling place of God is now with us.

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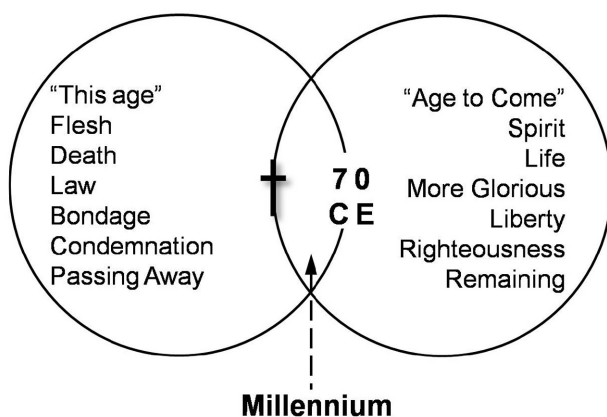
<sup>171</sup> Ibid., 213.

<sup>172</sup> Ibid., 214.

<sup>173</sup> 1Cor. 10:1-11 and Heb. 3:1-4:10. Max King notes H. J. Schoeps research about the Rabbinic literature "concerning the days of the Messiah which 'fix a very short interval for the interim period, namely, forty years (R. Eliezer ben Hyrcanus; Bar. in Sanh. 99a; R. Aqiba: Midr. Teh. on Ps. 90:15; Tanch. Ekeb 7b, Pes. Rabb. 4a).'" H. J. Schoeps, *Paul: The Theology of the Apostle in Light of Jewish Religious History*, 100, quoted in King, *Cross and Parousia*, 213.

Besides, John makes very specific time statements at the beginning and the end of his book to let the readers know that the entirety of his vision was “at hand.” John was writing near the end of the millennium, not before it and not in its early stages. He was living in its last days—the last hour.

The entirety of last things fits into this forty year millennial period. That’s one reason why we’re calling this view *Transmillennial*. Humanity has been transformed through the work of God in Christ through that millennial setting. Framing it in this perspective keeps the millennium in its historical setting, and remains faithful to John’s insistence that the events in Revelation “must shortly come to pass.”<sup>174</sup> That millennial transition transcends all ages by creating a divine ecosystem of God with us.



### What About the Second Coming?

I find it interesting the Bible never uses the actual phrase “the second coming of Christ.” Someone may consider this to be inconsequential, but as Don Everts points out, “Words are powerful.”<sup>175</sup>

<sup>174</sup> Rev. 1:1. Of course, it helps to remember that John believed the timing of the fulfillment of his vision was of paramount importance.

<sup>175</sup> Everts, *All the Ideas Living in my Head*, 17.



If we use the phrase “Christ’s second coming” or “the return of Christ” without carefully considering what we actually mean by it, we’re bound to bring along a lot of spoken and unspoken theological baggage. Most of this baggage is better—if you’ll pardon the expression—left behind.

You may have heard the litany:

“Christ came the first time physically, so he’ll come a second time physically.”

“He’ll descend from heaven on a cloud.”

“Everyone will see him all at the same time.”

And the biggest one of all: Jesus Christ will come back to earth sometime in our future because “the second coming has not yet occurred.”<sup>176</sup> All these assumptions about the “second coming” could benefit from a second look.

Three Greek words get translated into the English as *come* or *coming*. The first is *parousia*, and it means “presence.”<sup>177</sup> The second is *erchomai*, and it means “arrival.”<sup>178</sup> The third is *apokalypsis*, and it means “revealing or unveiling.”<sup>179</sup>

When Jesus and the apostles talk about the “coming,” they are referring to a presence, arrival, and revealing. None of this necessarily implies anything about a biological entity descending from a place spatially “up.”

Instead, it suggests something more akin to two important Biblical themes: the appearance of the kingdom of God and the arrival of the high priest.

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<sup>176</sup> Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, 127.

<sup>177</sup> It is used in several places, including Matt. 24:3, 27, 37. 1 Cor. 15:23. 1 Thess. 2:19; 3:3; 5:23. 2 Thess. 2:1, 8-9. James 5:7-8. 2 Pet. 3:4, 12. 1 John 2:28.

<sup>178</sup> 1 Thess. 5:2. 2 Thess. 1:10. Heb. 10:37. Rev. 1:7.

<sup>179</sup> It is where we get our word “apocalypse.” It is the name of the book of Revelation; hence the “unveiling of Jesus” in Revelation 1:1. Also, 1 Cor. 1:7. 2 Thess. 1:7. 1 Pet. 1:7, 13; 4:13.

## The Appearance of the Kingdom

The entire book of Daniel is filled with kingdom imagery, but chapter 7 stands out.<sup>180</sup> The Son of Man comes on the clouds to take the throne of an everlasting kingdom that he shares with his co-regents. When Jesus and the New Testament writers talk about the coming of the Son of Man, they have this image in mind. It's a royal procession in which God's kingdom arrives and the presence of God dwells with humanity once and for all.

Granted, I might be a little naïve, but it looks to me that Jesus thought that at least some of his disciples would be alive to witness the coming of the Son of Man in their generation. Consider Matthew 10:23. "For truly I tell you, you will not have gone through all the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes." Scot McKnight makes a candid comment on this passage: "No amount of mental gymnastics can evade their obvious import...All this, Jesus thought, would happen within one generation, that is, within about 30 to 40 years."<sup>181</sup>

Then there's Matthew 16:27-28. Once again Jesus says that the Son of Man would come in God's glory with the angels—not in thousands of years, but within a generation. "Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom."<sup>182</sup> Some folks have read this as a prediction of the transfiguration that occurs in chapter 17. Yet, "it seems hardly realistic to suppose that Jesus would state that some of those standing there with him would not *taste death* before they would see the arrival of the kingdom of God if he were referring to an event [the transfiguration] that was to take place *six days* later."<sup>183</sup>

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<sup>180</sup> King, *Spirit of Prophecy*, 220-49. King, *Cross and Parousia*, 688-703. Perriman, *Coming of the Son of Man*.

<sup>181</sup> McKnight, *New Vision for Israel*, 129, 133-5.

<sup>182</sup> Compare Mark 9:1.

<sup>183</sup> G. R. Beasley-Murray, *Jesus and the Kingdom of God*, 188, quoted in McKnight, *New Vision for Israel*, 136.

However, if the event happened to be about forty years in the future, such language would be warranted.

Now, we come to the Olivet Discourse.<sup>184</sup> Jesus tells his disciples that the 70 CE events would signify the arrival of the Son of Man.<sup>185</sup>

One of the signs included Jerusalem being surrounded by armies. Jesus warns his disciples that when they saw this happening, they should head for the hills. Now I don't know about you, but I'm not sure how running to the mountains could protect them from the atmospheric arrival of an avenging Christ. But it *could* save them from Roman legions.

Jesus insists that these events would signify the Son of Man coming on a cloud and the arrival of the kingdom of God. And it all would happen in the lifetime of at least some of the disciples. "Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place."<sup>186</sup> McKnight reminds us that this saying "has been more resisted than understood...That generation, as history has informed us, suffered horribly at the hands of the Romans."<sup>187</sup> The ancient Jewish historian Josephus estimates that 1.1 million Jews died in the fall of the city and another 97,000 were taken captive.<sup>188</sup> Even if Josephus exaggerated slightly, this would have been seen as an immense human tragedy.

People holding out for a future physical coming of Christ often pull out Acts 1:11 as undeniable proof that Christ will return to planet earth in physical form. As Christ ascends on high, two men in white robes question the on-looking apostles: "Men of Galilee, why do you stand gazing up into

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<sup>184</sup> Matt. 23-25. Mark 13. Luke 21.

<sup>185</sup> In Mark 13:4, the disciples ask for a *sign*, and Jesus gives it to them. If the second coming amounted to what most folks consider it to be, Jesus might have said something like this, "Dudes, you won't need any sign. It'll be very clear when I crack the sky and come racing through the azure blue."

<sup>186</sup> Luke 21:20-32.

<sup>187</sup> McKnight, *New Vision for Israel*, 137.

<sup>188</sup> Josephus. *Wars*. 6.9.3.

heaven? This same Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will so come in like manner as you saw Him go into heaven.”<sup>189</sup> There you have it, ladies and gentlemen. Jesus left physically, and he’ll return in “like manner.” So that must mean that he’ll come back physically.

It sounds good. But if we’re going to be strict on “like manner” having a 1:1 relationship to what’s happening in the scene, then let’s apply it across the board. This leaves us with Jesus returning physically to the Mount of Olives appearing only to the eleven disciples and to two others. I don’t think *that* fits anyone’s description of a second coming.

When we look at the broader context, we see there’s more than a prediction of a physical second coming going on here. Acts 1 is about the arrival of God’s kingdom. Early on, Christ and his disciples speak about the kingdom of God. Afterward, Jesus is taken up on a cloud—which as we’ve seen is an image from Daniel related to the kingdom’s presence. When the two men assure the disciples that Jesus will come in like manner, it is their way of signaling that the kingdom of God will make its full appearance and that at least some of the disciples will witness it. The Son of Man will come on a cloud in that generation, just like Jesus predicted.<sup>190</sup>

But there’s more. “The phrase ‘in like manner’ is from the Greek—*hon tropon*. The lexical definition of this word is, ‘as, even as, like as.’”<sup>191</sup> Think “like” as a simile, a figure of speech. In fact, *tropology* is the study of figures of speech.

The point of “in like manner,” then, is not that Christ will come back to earth in biological form. Instead, it conjures up Daniel’s prophecy. The ascension in Acts 1 prefigures the

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<sup>189</sup> NKJV

<sup>190</sup> “Coming in the clouds” is a common Biblical phrase that often indicates judgment, not atmospheric phenomenon. In Isaiah 19:1, the prophet says, “See, the Lord is riding on a swift cloud and comes to Egypt.”

<sup>191</sup> King, “Maps and Photographs,”  
[http://www.presence.tv/cms/maps\\_photos\\_bible.php#\\_ednref16](http://www.presence.tv/cms/maps_photos_bible.php#_ednref16).

arrival of the kingdom with power—which the disciples who had been with Jesus expected to occur within their lifetimes.

### The Arrival of the High Priest

In addition to the kingdom imagery associated with the second coming, there is a priestly theme. The most significant day on the ancient Hebrew calendar was the Day of Atonement.<sup>192</sup> Israel's high priest performed an annual ritual by going into the most sacred place, the room in the tabernacle that symbolically housed the presence of God. The congregation would wait outside while the priest would take in the sacrificial blood and sprinkle it on the mercy seat—a piece of sacred furniture.

Following the ritual, he would return. *Good news! The sacrifice had been accepted. Israel's sin had been atoned.* And if the priest doesn't return? That's a worst-case scenario. It meant that he died because he and the sacrifice were defiled and unacceptable. As a result, there was no atonement.

The New Testament letter to the Hebrews<sup>193</sup> picks up this theme, describing Christ as the ultimate high priest. He entered the presence of God with his own blood to atone for sin once and for all. Meanwhile, the congregation awaited his return. If he didn't make it out of the Most Holy Place, that would mean his sacrifice was refused, and sin would remain.

The folks reading that letter expected the high priest to return shortly. "So Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin, but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him."<sup>194</sup> They held to the belief that Christ's sacrifice was effective in dealing with sin, and that he would come back in short order with the good news of salvation.

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<sup>192</sup> Lev. 16; 23:26-32

<sup>193</sup> Especially Hebrews 9.

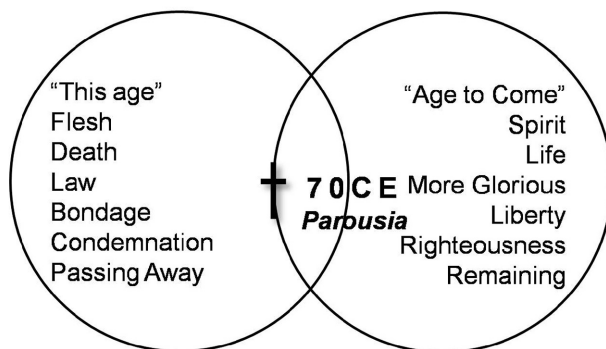
<sup>194</sup> Heb. 9:28.

Why did they hold this hope? Like the Corinthians and the Romans, they believed that they were living in the last days, at the very consummation of the ages. "But as it is, he has appeared once for all at the end of the age to remove sin by the sacrifice of himself."<sup>195</sup>

If we're still waiting for the return of the high priest after two millennia, we might start wondering whether or not the sacrifice was accepted. Certainly, if the High Priest didn't return, the first century believers died with dashed hopes. And it makes me wonder why we should hold out hope for something clearly promised to them that they failed to see and experience.

"Again, sticking with the context of Hebrews 9, those who were eagerly awaiting his return, the return of the High Priest from the most Holy place, were anticipating their joining with him in the self-same salvation that would be realized at his coming."<sup>196</sup>

Looking at the circles, we have the complete unveiling of God's kingdom and the presence of God dwelling with humanity initiated at the cross and fully realized some forty years later. The presence of God and the kingdom, the revelation of full redemption, the consummated work of the high priest are marked by the fall of Jerusalem.



<sup>195</sup> Heb. 9:26.

<sup>196</sup> King, "Maps and Photographs,"  
[http://www.presence.tv/cms/maps\\_photos\\_bible.php#\\_ednref16](http://www.presence.tv/cms/maps_photos_bible.php#_ednref16).

## What About Resurrection?

Easter Sunday always seems to give rise to sermons and conversations on resurrection. You don't just hear the exchange of ideas on the meaning of resurrection in church, but in the public square too. It sells newspapers and magazines. On the most recent Good Friday (isn't every Friday "good Friday"?) I turned on a national cable news channel to find the reporter interviewing two authors on the significance of the resurrection. The conversation was similar to many others. Both authors suggested that the resurrection of Jesus was the key element of Christianity.

It would be hard to argue with the significance of the resurrection of Jesus, especially in light of what Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 15:1-4. Christ died and rose again the third day according to the Scriptures. That seems pretty straightforward until we start asking questions about what it all means. What does the resurrection of Christ signify? How does it relate to the consummation of all things? How broad are its redemptive effects? And what on heaven and earth does this mean for us today? Once we begin exploring these types of issues, we rarely find consensus.

Nonetheless, resurrection tends to be understood as a primarily physical phenomenon.<sup>197</sup> Usually, the conversation on resurrection goes something like this: *One day, we'll all breathe our last and physically expire. Just as Jesus walked out of his grave all of us will one day walk forth from our tomb—whether it is in a cave, underground, at sea, in a mausoleum, in the stomach of a wild animal, or with ashes scattered by the winds. God will miraculously reconstitute our molecular, atomic, and subatomic structure.*

From there, the opinions vary as to what will happen. One view says that after regaining our new physical structure we'll undergo further transformation by dropping this new physical

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<sup>197</sup> For a detailed study of resurrection, I recommend King, *Cross and Parousia*, 381-666. Yes, I think it's funny too—666.

form. In the twinkling of an eye, we take on a new kind of bodily structure so that we can enter our eternal abode.

Another school of thought envisions a biologically resurrected humanity inhabiting planet earth for a period of years (3½, 7, or even 1,000) until the cosmos itself dissolves. After that, we might take on another new physical existence or drop our physicality all together.

A third view proposes that one day we all will receive some type of transphysicality that will impact not only humanity but also the inanimate world, thereby causing the rocks, trees, and hills to burst forth in literal song.

It's not just resurrection that fires the imagination; the mechanics of resurrection (and pre-resurrection) are a hot topic. Do individuals lose consciousness, only to awaken sometime down the line, surprised by their new biological existence? Do they come forth naked or clothed? Do they enjoy a foretaste of glory divine in a holding cell awaiting the place to clear out?

Once, I heard a funeral sermon in which the preacher comforted the audience with the assurance that our loved one had left the earth to go to heaven where she enjoyed the delights of the Lord. The minister continued by predicting that one day our dearly departed would fly with Jesus back to earth, reenter her biological body, burst forth from her tomb, and ascend with Christ and his minions to re-inhabit the heavenly abode she had just left.

That seems pretty convoluted to me—and maybe kind of gross. (There must be a special delegation of angels devoted exclusively to health and beauty!)

As diverse as these approaches to resurrection are, they share at least three features. One, they assume that biology is the primary stuff of resurrection. Two, they suppose that biological reconstitution somehow remedies all of humanity's



supposed problems in relationship with God. Three, the resurrection of Jesus on a physical level sets the stage for a future biological resurrection.

Setting aside the logistical problems related to biological resurrection (like the fact that we are all made of stardust and the recycled dust of one another), Paul's comments in Romans 6:5-8 might help us reframe the way we understand and experience the power of resurrection.

Speaking to that transitional and transformational group (the *ekklesia*, the firstfruits "church" of the first century), Paul reminds them that they had been crucified in the likeness of Jesus' death. They had died a death "like his."

Had they hung on a cross? Been tortured, beaten, bruised, and wearing a crown of thorns? Were they marched outside the city gates of Jerusalem to the hill of Golgotha? Had soldiers cast lots for their clothes while they underwent the torment of having nails pounded through their hands and feet? Did anyone pierce their side with a spear?

No. None of that happened. In fact, they obviously hadn't experienced physical death at all. Had Paul lost his mind? No. He knew perfectly well that their biological life continued as it always had. Yet, he recognized that they had surely died, and their death was like that of Christ. It wasn't the same, but it was in like manner.

Paul uses this same type of imagery in Galatians 2:20 where he affirms, "I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me." He had no delusions about undergoing execution sometime in his past. He clearly understood his "crucifixion" in relationship to his dying "with Christ" to the first world-order characterized by law, sin, and weakness. In this way, he and the Romans had become united in the "body of Christ" during the *already but not yet* time. This body is not a biological organism. It was the community of believers living in the transformational period.

Let's return to Romans 6. Paul doesn't make a leap from asserting that the Romans had died a non-biological death to insisting that they will undergo a biological resurrection sometime in the future. Instead, he reminds them (*them*, not *us* 2,000 years later) that just as these partakers in the body of Christ were united in the likeness of his death, they would participate in the likeness—not the duplication—of his resurrection. "We will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his."

How was their resurrection like his? In the singular body of Christ, they would be raised with Christ. "The last Adam became a life-giving spirit . . . we shall also bear the image of the heavenly. Now this I say, brethren, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God" (1Corinthians 15:45-50).

The resurrection of Jesus pointed beyond itself, not as a prefabricated house that all people will one day reproduce. In Matthew 12:38-40, the scribes and Pharisees ask Jesus for a sign. The Galilean replies by telling them, "An evil and adulterous generation asks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah." Here he describes his death and resurrection as a sign for his generation. What did it signify?

Among other things, his resurrection fulfilled the will of God by inaugurating the firstfruits body<sup>198</sup>, and "by that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all."<sup>199</sup>

Today we don't wait to die biologically so that we can be resurrected biologically. Moreover, we can't participate in the once-for-all transformative dying and rising of the firstfruits body of Christ any more than we can build an ark as Noah did.

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<sup>198</sup> More on this below.

<sup>199</sup> Heb. 10:10.

Instead of looking *forward* to resurrection, we live fully *now* in the Kingdom of God because of the fullness of the resurrection. Resurrection was a means—not an end—of reconciling humanity to God. Life and immortality have been revealed by the appearing of Jesus Christ, the Last Adam who lives forever—and because he does, so do we.

Today, we're not subject to resurrection because we're not subjects of a world of sin and its death. What? How can this be? Unless I've missed something, people still die. We still go to funerals. Isn't it obvious that we're subject to death?

I think there's a different way to view the question—one that can reshape the way we find an answer. The death solved by resurrection is not biological demise. Resurrection solves the problem of our perceived separation from God.

The death and resurrection of Christ working in process through the millennial period created a view of the world that allows us to see that religious establishments and institutions—things like sacrifices, temples, legal codes, doctrines, dogmas, duly appointed mediators—are unnecessary in our ability to encounter God face to face. Trappist John Jacob Raub observes, "Sin is a belief in a fictional separation."<sup>200</sup> The resurrection ends that separation and allows humanity—all humanity—to awaken to and experience the power of living a life integrated with God.

The problem—to the extent we even frame it as a problem—has never been our biology or our physical nature.

To suggest that the space-time universe is somehow out of whack implies that God created all things with an error in the code (so to speak).

And, frankly, if God didn't get it right the first time, what makes us suppose God will get it right "next time?"

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<sup>200</sup> Raub, *Who Told You That You Were Naked*, 81.

More than that, by imagining that our biology is inherently evil and in desperate need of a divine makeover, we'll live with inescapable self-hatred and self-destructive behaviors. The issue is not one of substance; it is one of stance and standing.<sup>201</sup> It's a matter of realizing what world we live in. Resurrection marked the finality of a world-order in which the letter kills, and it consummated the second world-order in which the Spirit gives life. Just as what you sow cannot come alive until it first dies, the body of Christ died and rose thereby creating a new world, a new age, in which God dwells at the center in the New Jerusalem out of which the water of life flows freely and eternally.

As we awaken to the life God has already provided, we can stop waiting to get something we already have. We will begin to experience life more fully in relationship to ourselves, with others, in culture, and on the planet. Recognizing that we dwell in a world of life and love liberates us to experience and practice the freedom of loving God by loving others. Love opens the possibility of humanity experiencing a true interconnectedness, an equity, a sharing in our communal life with one another in God and in the likeness of God.

Rather than waiting for God to reconstitute our molecular structure why don't we get off our duffs, recognizing that God has *already completely* ended the separation?

If we stop being so literalist and modernist when approaching prophetic passages, we can stop waiting for God to wave a magic wand and eliminate pain, hatred, strife, envy, fear, and violence through an act of divine hocus pocus. Resurrection has demonstrated the elimination of any gap between God and humanity. When we recognize that we already have our heart's desire—God—we can experience an on-the-ground transformation.

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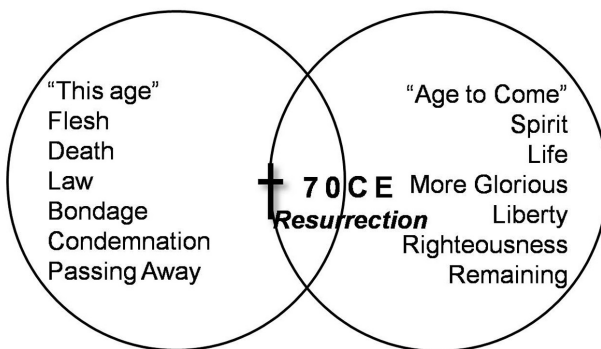
<sup>201</sup> King and Scott, *Covenant Eschatology: A Comprehensive Overview*, 36.

This is the point of Jesus' story of the wayward son in Luke 15. His fellowship with the father was broken as he left home to do his own thing. Upon his return home, he experiences the utter joy of his father who exults, "My son who was dead is now alive! Let's have a party!" The entire account is rich with possibilities. Reconciliation to the father amounted to nothing less than a move from death to life. It was nothing less than resurrection.

Preserving an old world awareness perpetuates old word realities. Living with a new world awareness causes new realities to emerge. Therefore all the junk we inflict on each other really is what it seems to be, but is out of place and ready to be transcended once we each and collectively experience awakening.

Resurrection helps me envision a world where God has already done everything he's promised. Now he asks us to be co-architects with him as participants in the divine nature, as together we build this New Reality.<sup>202</sup>

All of this would have the implicit frank admission that, though the cosmic 'heavy lifting' is finished, we haven't yet arranged the furniture—or even built too many eco-friendly buildings in God's new ecosystem.



<sup>202</sup> 2 Pet. 1:4.

## What About the Last Judgment?

The staple of most religious sentiment is judgment. Brother Bob eagerly anticipated Christ coming back to judge all of the decadent college students. A more “enlightened” piety awaits God to show up and judge people who inflict what most of us perceive to be social injustice.<sup>203</sup> Either way, judgment and moral outrage are at the heart of this judgmental hope.

Maybe no image in western civilization captures this like Michelangelo’s fresco. A radiant Christ rides a cloud, welcoming some into everlasting bliss and sending others into tortuous despair. The look on the face of the guy being pulled down by two demons and a snake-like creature is absolutely terrifying.

The longing for and fear of judgment are common. No one denies that judgment is a prominent Biblical theme. But it’s important to see judgment in its world-transforming context.

In 1 Timothy 4:1, Paul encourages his young apprentice, “In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is (1) to judge (2) the living and the dead, and (3) in view of his appearing and (4) his kingdom...” This is a notable passage because it makes these four important connections of judgment, resurrection, the parousia, and the kingdom.

Significantly and not too surprisingly, Paul tells Timothy that all of this was about to occur. One more bit of Greek. When Paul says that Christ “is to judge the living and the dead,” the Greek word is *mello*. *Mello* means to be on the point of doing something, to be about to do something. For Paul, the last judgment was about to begin. And Paul wasn’t the

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<sup>203</sup> I understand that social justice is a slippery term, and maybe even condescending. What is socially just is always contextually determined and open for conversation. I think we can understand a longing for an end to oppression and violence. The way to end it is not to wait for God to destroy the perpetrators. Instead, it is for us to enact love as bearers of the divine image.

only New Testament writer to hold this belief. Peter shared it—as did John, James, and the author of the book of Hebrews.<sup>204</sup> The last judgment would occur at the consummation of the transformation of the ages. We’ve already noted that these would reach their fullness by 70 CE.

While we tend to think of judgment solely in terms of denunciation, judgment always has a two-fold function: condemnation and deliverance.<sup>205</sup> Just as Israel’s judges (Othniel, Deborah, Samson, etc.) vanquished oppressive forces and saved the nation, Christ as the judge of the world vanquished the oppressive force of sin and delivered humanity. The final judgment at the end of the age functioned to condemn and to deliver. The judgment condemned the entire first world. Why? Because it was a world of weakness, death, and bondage. It was a world of separation. The judgment demonstrates that separation is an illusion.

The condemnation doesn’t amount to all—or even most or any—of the individuals being confined to a never-ending torture chamber. Just the opposite. God condemned the world so that he could deliver humanity, both Jews and Gentiles.<sup>206</sup> No one would be left behind. Paul put it like this: “For God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may be merciful to all.”<sup>207</sup>

In another place, Paul wrote that God through Christ “condemned sin in the flesh...[so] that the creation itself will

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<sup>204</sup> 1Pet. 4:5, 17. Rev. 11:18; James 5:9; Heb. 12:23.

<sup>205</sup> King, “A Two Sided Coin,”

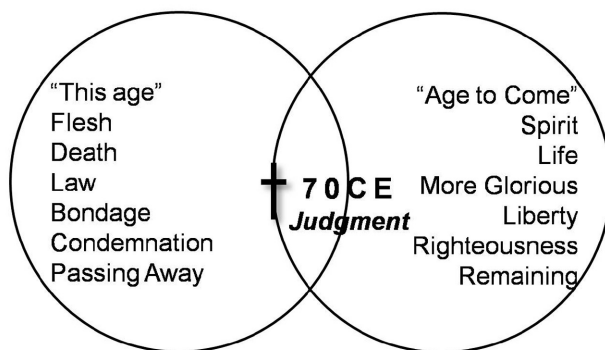
[http://www.presence.tv/cms/israel\\_jesus\\_paul\\_pt5.php](http://www.presence.tv/cms/israel_jesus_paul_pt5.php).

<sup>206</sup> I need to make an important point here. We shouldn’t confuse judgment with the destruction of Jerusalem. God is not an anti-Semite who took out his anger on Jerusalem because “the Jews rejected Jesus.” All humanity—both Jew and Gentile—in the first age needed deliverance. The crucifixion of Christ was the means by which God brought about comprehensive death. “One has died for all; therefore all have died.” (2 Cor. 5:14). The fall of Jerusalem *signified* the judgment of God that brought about comprehensive deliverance. “One man’s righteous act leads to justification and life for all” (Rom. 5:18).

<sup>207</sup> Rom. 11:32.

be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.”<sup>208</sup> As we’ve seen, Paul isn’t expressing a hope that the stones, trees, and hills will undergo some paranormal change. Instead, Paul was eagerly expecting the first covenant world to pass so that all (Jews and Gentiles) would experience the freedom of the new covenant world.

Judgment, then, was functional. It was the act of ending one weak world of separation and bringing all humanity into a new world of unity. Into the kingdom of God with power. Into the image of God.<sup>209</sup>



### What About Church?

My friend Austin and I sat down to lunch. He knew that I had ministered in churches for nearly two decades, but now I didn’t pride myself in attending church. He wanted to know, “Why? Isn’t church what Christ came to establish?”

I replied, “Christ came to bring the kingdom of God, and we settled for the church.”

<sup>208</sup> Rom. 8:3, 21.

<sup>209</sup> A great book in the issues of hell and judgment and its meaning within a first-century setting is *The Last Word and the Word After That* by Brian McLaren.



At this point, it might help to rethink a few things. Like: what exactly does the New Testament mean when it talks about the church? Our word “church” carries a lot of baggage. Like the church being an institution filled with officers, committees, and ministries.<sup>210</sup>

Then there’s the whole “going to church” thing. Jesus told the Samaritan woman that God didn’t require people to go to Jerusalem or to the mountain to worship. The institutional church replied, “That’s right. You come down to *our* building so *our* worship leader can set the tone for you to worship like *our* followers do!” I know because that was the message I was encouraged to preach and the mission I was encouraged to carry out: *Get people to come to church.*

Too bad none of this is found anywhere in Scripture. In fact, I think it’s safe to say that the Bible never talks about “church” at all. Gasp!

Let me explain. We can start by going back to the Greek once again. You may already know that the word our English Bibles translate as “church” is the Greek word *ekklesia*. In the first century, this was a pretty ordinary word. It meant “group” or “assembly.” It could also mean “mob”<sup>211</sup>—sadly we all know that church sometimes resembles a mob.

This group was not intended to be a self-perpetuating organization that will replicate itself over the centuries. Instead, it was group called out of the first world in union with Christ to usher in the transformation of the new world.

You probably know that the New Testament refers to the *ekklesia* as “the body of Christ.” Of course, it is not referring to his personal, individual, biological body.<sup>212</sup> It’s the organic

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<sup>210</sup> Why is it that the word *institution* gets paired most frequently with church, prison, and mental hospitals?

<sup>211</sup> Acts 19:32.

<sup>212</sup> This alone ought to cause us to rethink traditional understandings of the resurrection.

entity united together with Jesus as the head.<sup>213</sup> Jesus shares his messianic work with his body. In this sense, the body of Christ was an exclusive group commissioned by God to help bring about the full inclusion of those made in his image via their redemption through the transformation of the ages.<sup>214</sup>

One of the key images in understanding the *ekklesia* is firstfruits. Unlike most of our world today, the ancient Hebrews were an agricultural people. Much of their writing is filled with agricultural symbols. Even Jesus talked about wheat and tares, vine and branches, and farmers going out to sow seeds.

One integral part of their agricultural life was the “firstfruits.” We read about firstfruits throughout the Torah. Whether wheat or barley, the firstfruits were special. Among other things, the firstfruits signaled the full harvest to come. They weren’t an end unto themselves. With the bringing in of the firstfruits, the ancient Hebrews threw a party. The celebration of the firstfruits is also known as Pentecost.

It’s no coincidence that at the feast of Pentecost in Acts 2, we find the beginnings of the *ekklesia*—the *firstfruits body of Christ*. Paul describes Jesus as the head of the body of Christ. Jesus is the *first* of the firstfruits.<sup>215</sup> As the firstborn from the world of the dead, Jesus holds the preeminent place. And just like the prophecy in Daniel 7, he shares his millennial reign. This is the firstfruits group.<sup>216</sup> In the New Testament, the *ekklesia* refers specifically to the firstfruits body of Christ. It performed a key role in dying to that old covenant world-order

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<sup>213</sup> Rom. 6:4-5. Eph. 1:22-23; 4:11-13; 5:30.

<sup>214</sup> See King, “The Firstfruits Body,”

[http://www.presence.tv/cms/firstfruits\\_jesus\\_paul\\_pt1.php](http://www.presence.tv/cms/firstfruits_jesus_paul_pt1.php).

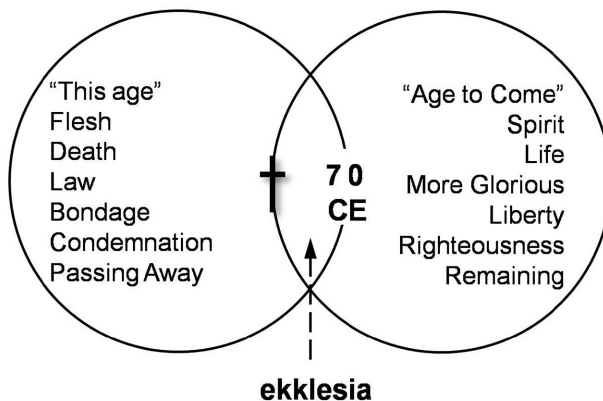
<sup>215</sup> 1Cor. 15:20, 23.

<sup>216</sup> Rom. 8:23. James 1:18. Rev. 14:4. Also, Beck, “Exploring Ethnicity in Ephesians,” <http://www.presence.tv/cms/cov-exploring-ephesians.php>.

and being raised to the new one by the spirit of God on behalf of the entire harvest, which contains all humanity.<sup>217</sup>

The apostle Peter saw the firstfruits body of Christ as a specific generation chosen by God to offer spiritual sacrifices on behalf of all. In the same way, Paul invited the *ekklesia* in Rome to present themselves as living sacrifices that would bring about world transformation.<sup>218</sup> This was a key eschatological function of the firstfruits body of Christ.<sup>219</sup>

Once again, we turn to the circles to illustrate the role of the firstfruits *ekklesia* in joining with Christ to usher in the new world-order.



With the passing of worlds, the entire harvest—not only the firstfruits—was accepted. At that point there was no more need for the firstfruits to function in that specific capacity. The body of Christ reached its maturity just as Paul believed it would, thereby filling all in all.<sup>220</sup>

Should we just chuck spiritual fellowships in the trash bin? God forbid! Unless of course they are power-hungry, self-

<sup>217</sup> King, "The Entire Harvest,"  
[http://www.presence.tv/cms/israel\\_jesus\\_paul\\_pt4.php](http://www.presence.tv/cms/israel_jesus_paul_pt4.php).

<sup>218</sup> 1 Pet. 2:5-10. Rom. 12:1-2.

<sup>219</sup> Col. 1:24-28.

<sup>220</sup> Eph. 4:11-16.

perpetuating, Matrix-imitating machines bent on repressing people from experiencing their authentic God-given identity.<sup>221</sup> But of course not all groups are like that.

Today's spiritual fellowships can't duplicate the role of the firstfruits body of Christ. But people gathering in communities to share their lives, meals, and ideas can be a profound and meaningful way of creating a sense of welcome. It can generate opportunities to contribute to and serve our world. In fact, the greatest potential for fostering creative societal transformation today might be found in spiritual fellowships.<sup>222</sup> Besides, who would want to stifle authentic fellowship, hospitality, worship, and service? Studying, singing, and praying together can provide a sense of transcendence, as well as create deep and lasting friendships.

However, liturgical activity—whether high, low, or somewhere in between—often does little more than pump up the ego with a pseudo-spirituality directing us away from addressing real issues in our lives and our world. I know—I've been there. Like the time when I, as a young and zealous minister, refused to allow an aging man who attended our congregation to say a public prayer because he didn't meet the doctrinal standards of our church. Yep, I was that self-righteous. But I did it in good conscience believing that God demanded separation from the "unfaithful."

Then it fed my ego. Now it breaks my heart.

Many people long for participation in collective worship experiences. But, of course, others don't. Some people experience Eucharist and baptism (or bathing in the Ganges or taking the Hajj) as life-changing activities. Paul provides some guiding principles when it comes to these types of issues in

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<sup>221</sup> Brown Taylor, *Leaving Church*. Also, Beck, "Stop Going to Church," <http://www.presence.tv/cms/org-stop-going.php>.

<sup>222</sup> See Beck, "Generosity Centers," <http://www.presence.tv/cms/org-generosity-ctr.php>. And Beck, "Post-Greedal Spirituality," <http://www.presence.tv/cms/org-post-greedal.php>.

Romans 14. Welcome people and don't quarrel over issues. Be convinced in your own mind and don't push your views onto others. Don't pass judgment on anyone else.

Honor God as your heart and conscience directs. Participate in a thriving spiritual fellowship with some close friends—and if you do, keep it real.

Limiting God's fellowship to only those in the good graces of the institutional church (or network, or house group, or Christendom) misses the entire point of what the firstfruits body of Christ accomplished. Today we have the blessing of enjoying face-to-face fellowship with God every day. Not just on Sundays. Not mediated by properly ordained ministers of the word and sacrament. Every day, every moment, is God-saturated because God has already come in fullness. And because of this, humanity is to be thankful for the service of the ekklesia (church, firstfruits body) throughout all time.<sup>223</sup> Thank God for his working through them on our behalf.

## Summary

All eschatology is contextual eschatology. And the context of the Biblical writers was the first century covenantal transformation. Through his death and resurrection, Christ left the "word below" to transform the ages once for all. With the return of the high priest, God signals the acceptance of the ultimate sacrifice. Life, unhindered relationship with God, came through the work of God in the firstfruits body of Christ during the forty year period between the cross and the parousia. The saints who were urged to proclaim the message of God in Christ Jesus who was about (1) to judge (2) the living and the dead (3) at his appearing and (4) kingdom were blessed to see it come to fruition in their lifetime.

But where does that leave us today?

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<sup>223</sup> Eph. 3:21.

## So What?



For years I hoped that the Transmillennial message of transformation would cross national boundaries, that it wasn't just another theology that had little or no relevance to anyone outside predominately western nations. When I met Sonnyboy Skosana my belief was confirmed.

Sonnyboy lives in Johannesburg and belongs to the *Hilaros* fellowship. If that word sounds familiar, it's where *hilarious* comes from.

Here is a group of people gathering from various traditions to celebrate the actual presence of God. Not in rituals or sacraments. Not in expectation of the end. Not in the *already but not yet*. They weren't looking forward to a time when Jesus would come back to earth and start all over. They weren't expecting God to remake the physical planet or miraculously wave a magic wand to do away with all of life's troubles. They weren't expecting to get raptured away from it all.

Instead, Sonnyboy and Hilaros had discovered joy in a new awareness of the presence of God in the fullness of life in their setting—in post-colonial South Africa.

As I've been saying throughout these few pages, context is everything. So you may have some big questions about what all of this means in your context. What does it look like in real life, not just on the pages of a book?

Another way to phrase it is: *how does the message of fulfilment translate into a life of fulfilment?*

Maybe it's overly utilitarian—or even downright selfish—but it seems to me that this is a pivotal question. *What difference does it make to believe in fulfilment if you can't have a fulfilling experience?*

One of the vital tasks we at Presence do is help people read (and reread) their Bible. We host a variety of online webinars each month. But it doesn't stop there. In rereading the Bible, we've begun to read and reread our lives and world. Consider Saul of Tarsus. He always read the scriptures and interpreted his world and vocation in their light. But when he reread them in light of the resurrected Jesus, he reread his life and world.

When you start seeing prophecy as fulfilled, everything begins to look different. How do you make sense of what you are seeing? This can be a real challenge, and one that Presence takes very seriously. Rereading the Biblical story can be very fulfilling in itself. It's been a great comfort to me to discover there's a coherent narrative running from Genesis through Revelation. One person put it like this: "Presence has given me a picture that matches the puzzle pieces inside the box!"

I believe that this one act of rereading the Bible can make all the difference in the world. It can be the launching pad for rereading our lives, relationships, and world.

But if it ends with reading and conversation, we become the Fulfilled Prophecy Pocket-Protecting Armchair Geek Society. If the Transmillennial view doesn't make a substantive life transformation, then why bother?

I've experienced the difference it makes in my life and witnessed the renewal it makes in the lives of others. The simple act of rereading the Bible is an act of creation that compels comprehensive change.

## Agapetheism and Agapeology

Reading the Bible anew changes the way you read God. Fulfilled eschatology has to be more than just a new set of doctrines to staple on the back end of your already-accepted theology. To paraphrase Paul: *If I have all knowledge and understand all eschatology but have not love I've become a loud obnoxious noise.*

For me, reading the Bible in terms of fulfillment has changed the way I see God. It's allowed me to move away from a view of an angry God waiting to punish people who aren't lucky enough to think all of the "right ideas."

Seeing God in a new light has allowed me to appreciate that God really is Love. And this has opened up a *New Kind of Theism* transforming the fruitless millennia of fighting over who owns the rights to God—as if God were a commodity to be brokered. It transcends holy wars and jihads pervading our world in a premodern attempt to determine which God is the "right God."

As I see it, God's primary concern—God's overarching interest—is *love*. The New Testament word is *Agape*. I believe that God poured so much of himself into love—that God so identified with love—that the apostle John could say without fear of being contradicted, "God is love."

Today, the new kind of theism I am calling for is *Agapetheism*.<sup>224</sup> Agape—Love—tells us who God is, what God does, and what God calls us to. Agapetheism is simply this: Approaching God in terms of *Love*, not quantity of gods or the metaphysical number of God's inner being.

Agapetheism defuses fights over God because love does no harm, is not puffed up, does not seek its own. Agapetheism doesn't enter the religious fracas, because love is not in fights over God. Love does not behave rudely.

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<sup>224</sup> Beck, "Agapetheism," <http://www.presence.tv/cms/conf-agapetheism.php>.



Love shines a fresh light on the presence of God and God's Kingdom. John Caputo suggests that the Kingdom of God is the event called by the name of God. And what is the name and the event of God, but *Agape*? Love!

The Apostle Paul put it like this in Romans 14:17, "For the kingdom of God is not food and drink but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit." And the best part of all is that you don't have to wait for some undetermined time in the future to experience and practice love. You can do that today. Right now. "The kingdom is a way of living, not in eternity, but in time, a way of living without why, living for the day, like the lilies of the field."<sup>225</sup> The kingdom of God is a way of living in and with the presence of Love.

In fact, I'd say that living with the belief that God really has already transformed the ages opens you to love unconditionally—which, after all, is what makes love *love*. You don't have to do anything to earn the love of God. It is already yours. And when you know that God loves you because God has transformed the worlds, you can finally see that God loves us all. God is truly no respecter of persons.

This brings us to the point of eschatology. It's not simply about getting all of the textual facts in alignment. Instead, it brings us to the life practice of *Agapeology*. Loving your neighbor as yourself. It invites us to be open to others around us, so that we ourselves change, deeply inside.

If you were to ask Paul, "What's the point of eschatology?" I think he might answer with Romans 13:8-10:

"Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments, 'You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not

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<sup>225</sup> Caputo, *Weakness of God*, 15. By the way, Caputo also notes that in the book of Romans Paul "thinks that the second coming is around the corner." *Weakness of God*, 50.

covet'; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law."

Twice in here Paul speaks of fulfilling the Law, and by any measure this is an eschatological subject. And twice Paul says the fulfilling of the Law translates to *Love*.

In Romans 13:8 Paul says that loving another is fulfilling the Law. He speaks of the one who has loved another as being the one who fulfilled the Law. The questions are: "Who is the One who loved another? Who is the one that fulfilled the Law?" The answer comes back "Jesus." Jesus is the one who fulfilled the Law by loving others in emptying himself and dying the death of the cross. Love, then, was God's means of fulfilling the Law.

Then in Romans 13:10 Paul affirms that Love is the fulfillment of the Law. In other words, Love was the ultimate goal of the Law all along.

Through Jesus, God transformed the ages. Living with this awareness empowers us to have the same mind in us that was in Christ Jesus. When we are moved by love, speak love, embody love, enact love, transmit love, and show love, we are doing nothing less than expressing the Kingdom of God, the Domain of Love.

But what is Love? (Maybe you hear the Haddaway song and see the bouncing heads of Will Ferrell and Chris Kattan.) That's one of those eternal questions. And it's not easy to answer, especially if we're looking for a formula. Love is not a science; it's an art—an open-ended practice that invites you to live creatively in your relationships and world.

Since there are multiple Greek words that are translated love, *agape* is often understood as the highest form of love. Divine, unconditional, self-sacrificing, active, volitional,

thoughtful love. In *The Four Loves*, C.S. Lewis describes “Divine-gift love.” And in *A Room Called Remember*, Frederick Buechner talks about “Love beyond Love.”

All of these are excellent descriptions of agape. To them we can add another layer. Agape always describes something that creates connectedness. Another word we might use to describe agape is “integrated.” Integration allows us to retain our individual distinctions while continuing to connect. Agape “is the ultimate welcoming into the fold—but in a way in which the fold itself expands.”<sup>226</sup>

This is extraordinarily relevant when it comes to seeing *agape* as the point of the Biblical story. The point of everything from Genesis to Revelation is connectedness because God is agape. God is connected. Not separate, isolated from, or exclusionary.

God is not on the other side of a vast cavern waiting for us to walk a tightrope to reach the other side. God is not roped off from us so that we cannot approach. The veil has been torn in two. God is fully Emmanuel, with us. Right now.

God welcomes you and all of us so that the entire fold expands, because God is all-in-all. Awakening to this reality allows us to creatively share that welcome with others. It is an invitation to embrace the connectedness that already is—that God has already made.

Agapeology allows us to transcend life and death, angels, principalities and powers, things present and things to come, height, depth or any other created thing because nothing can separate us from the Love of God.

But there’s more, so buckle your seatbelts. Agapeology allows us to even transcend historic Christianity—perhaps entertaining the evolution from Christianity to post-Christianity.

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<sup>226</sup> Phillips, *Socrates in Love*, 227.

“What in the world,” you might ask, “are you saying?” I’m not advocating the abandonment of Christianity. After all, Christianity needs to experience the love of God too. Instead I’m suggesting we *transcend and include*.<sup>227</sup> A post-Christian identity speaks into and shapes our post-Christian culture in ways authentic to the Biblical story and to our living context. Not by attempting to purify today’s church by returning to ancient forms. Not by replicating the function of believers from 2,000 years ago, nor by actively working for a nuclear Armageddon in the future. But by connecting God’s consummated world transformation with people’s lives and our world today.

Agapeology transforms us from only thinking, talking, and arguing about God into being God in our world by being love in our world. Being connected to our world. Transforming our world in, by, and into love—because when you love, you’ve already changed the world.

The Transmillennial rereading of the story gives me back my Bible, rescuing me and it from an extremist mentality that would use the Bible to legislate preferred forms of behavior and that would use the Bible as a pretext to enact a global cataclysm based on a reading of so-called last things.

It rescues me and it from a condescending arrogance that looks at the Bible as little more than a quaint book of a bygone age—even if this mentality is expressed by someone with a fancy title.

It gives me common ground with people who do not profess any God, yet they see the importance of love, compassion, kindness, and service.

It gives me new vision, as I can look with the eye of love and see beneath the superficial veneer and recognize our

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<sup>227</sup> Borrowing a concept from philosopher Ken Wilber

complete divine interconnectedness. When we see love, we know God.

When eschatology or theology or any *ology* is expressed as *Agapeology*, the study of first things, last things, and all things transforms into the study of love—studied through the experience of loving and being loved.

### Comprehensive Grace

But if God has transformed the worlds and really loves all of us, what about sin today? If the last judgment occurred 2,000 years ago, what's stopping me from doing whatever I want? If the church was the transformational firstfruits body of Christ specific to the transitional period, then who am I accountable to? And beyond all that, where will I go after I die?

Over the millennia, we've been conditioned to think about God in dualistic terms of "this life" and the "next one." As a teen, I heard this sentiment expressed every week in church. "This life is just a proving ground for the next one." Are you kidding me? Do you mean to say that life is like try-outs for varsity basketball? If you happen to be good enough to make it, you get to play in heaven for all eternity. But if you get cut, you not only fail to make the team but you also get tortured? I'm pretty sure I wouldn't want to play for that coach anyway.

Jesus said that he had a pro-life agenda. Actually, it was more like an abundant life agenda. Life to the max. That's a far cry from plodding through our daily existence, biding our time until we die, hoping not to mess up too badly in the meantime. Where's the abundant life in that?

Brian McLaren writes, "Jesus is concerned with one central thing—the kingdom of God. Matthew calls it the Kingdom of

Heaven, but as we've discussed before, that doesn't mean 'heaven after you die.'"<sup>228</sup>

Living with an overly-cautious gaze, believing in the necessity of having a prayer partner to hear our daily confession, believing we must go someplace on a special day of the week to honor God so we can go someplace else to honor him after we die just seems to me like we've missed the point of the kingdom of God. The *presence* of God. God with us. Here and now—and forever more.

Sister Amelia was a lovely church member with a bottom-line disposition. When talking with her about this Transmillennial understanding, she had only one question. "Will this affect my salvation?" Initially, I wanted to say, "Absolutely. If you believe that you could be lost, you'll always wander through life, never feeling at peace. If you think you're lost, you'll live like you're lost."

Knowing her the way I did, I took a different approach. "You'll forgive me if I suggest that this might be the wrong question. Well, at least it might be the wrong question to obsess over. A more pressing one is: what does *life* look like? An authentic life. A full life lived in fellowship with others, knowing that God has reconciled the world unto himself."

The only way we can explore this question is by living it boldly. Hannah Montana sings, "Everybody makes mistakes."<sup>229</sup> Maybe. But even if it's true, a life lived in the presence of God—with the God who moved heaven and earth to embrace you and me and all humanity—can give us the confidence and poise to live without the oppressive anxiety that comes with "making mistakes."<sup>230</sup>

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<sup>228</sup> McLaren, *The Last Word*, 77.

<sup>229</sup> My children love Miley Cyrus and her alter ego, Hannah Montana. By the way, she illustrates that a world does not have to be a physical planet in her song "The Best of Both Worlds."

<sup>230</sup> King, *Furious Pursuit*.

Despite popular opinion, God and Jesus aren't in the human condemnation business. In being about his father's business, Jesus redeemed humanity through the process of judging sin and its world, thereby releasing people from its bondage. In Romans 8:3 Paul affirms that God through Christ "condemned sin in the flesh." The person penning the letter to the Hebrews concurs: "But now once for all he has appeared at the end of the ages to take away sin by his sacrifice."<sup>231</sup>

Accepting that God through Christ dealt decisively with sin might be hard to believe. After all, many of us have been told that we were conceived in, born in, and live in sin—and one day we'll most likely die in sin and suffer eternally for our sin. We've been scolded for our sinful actions, thoughts, deeds, and misdeeds. We've been coerced into praying, "I confess to almighty God, and to you my brothers and sisters, that I have sinned through my own fault, in my thoughts and in my words, in what I have done and what I have failed to do." We look out our windows and see human atrocities committed before our eyes. How can *this* world be God's world?

You may remember the Biblical story of Joshua, Caleb and the ten other Israeli spies. Upon returning to Moses, the ten reported that there were giants in the land. They couldn't see any way of inhabiting the land that God had described as flowing with milk and honey. Even though they swam against the mainstream, Joshua and Caleb saw the situation as God had described. They envisioned the world as called into existence by God.

St. Bonaventure described three types of vision. The eye of the flesh looks at the outer appearances. The eye of the mind perceives the world rationally, using logic. The eye of the spirit looks through the flesh and above the mind to see the world called into existence by God. Just look at the cross. The eye of the flesh sees a man executed as a potential political rival. The

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<sup>231</sup> Hebrews 9:9.

eye of the mind sees an injustice, an innocent man killed to satisfy the power elites. The eye of the spirit sees the pivotal event of God emptying himself on the world's behalf. Looking out the window is not the best way to determine whether or not this is God's world.

Of course that's not to deny the reality of suffering, violence, and pain. Looking with the eyes of love allows us to truly feel the pain and to engage the root causes of it. The perception of separation drives people to hope for and attempt to get what we already have. If we perceive ourselves to be separate from God, God's love, and God's kingdom, we'll try to compensate by taking what we believe is rightfully ours. Yet, when we awaken to God as all-in-all, we'll embody the graceful connectedness of God. We'll enact our divine likeness and become co-creators with God in our world. We'll stop waiting for God to sort it all out and begin acting out of a love consciousness instead of a sin consciousness.

The rote admission of sin consciousness pays little attention to the redemptive work of Christ. Again, the book of Hebrews quotes the Psalmist in ascribing to Christ the fulfillment of God's will. "By that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all."<sup>232</sup> And because of that once-for-all sacrifice, there is no need for a reminder of sin year after year or day after day. "How much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal spirit offered himself unblemished to God, purge our consciences from dead works to worship the living God?"<sup>233</sup>

How much more? How about infinitely more? Eternally more. Decisively more.

A purged conscience frees us from fear and opens our hearts and minds to a world of liberating possibilities. It allows us to inquire into all of our actions and acknowledge our

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<sup>232</sup> Hebrews 10:10.

<sup>233</sup> Hebrews 9:14.



hurtful deeds without fear of incurring divine punishment. It permits us to become active participants in our own lives instead of resigning ourselves to the status of helpless victims or puppets in God's divine drama. We don't need to beg God for mercy, and we can humbly acknowledge ourselves as called by God.

But wait. If people believe that they've been freed from sin and a guilty conscience, won't they do anything they want without fear of consequences? I don't know. It seems to me that most people do what they want to regardless of their feelings of guilt, as Paul might have alluded to when he said, "The good that I will to do, I do not do; but the evil I will not to do, that I practice."<sup>234</sup>

It seems obvious that humanity's religious insistence that fear and guilt are essential inhibitors to keep people from doing harmful things, hasn't in fact kept humanity from doing those things. Maybe its time to try an approach other than fear and guilt to move humanity from self-centeredness to others-centeredness. Mountain bike riders are told to keep an eye on their "line"—the path they wish to travel—rather than on obstacles because when you focus on the obstacles, you tend to ride right into them!

Instead of fearing that people will throw off all restraint when experiencing the liberty of a purged conscience, I believe awakening to God's comprehensive grace in a transformed covenant world allows us to feel an overwhelming sense of humble gratitude that reorients us from a selfish sense of "how I get to heaven" to "how can I be graceful in my world?" Grace is not dangerous. Fear is. Fear drives people to undue angst and needless panic. Grace calms us in the embrace of the God who loves us and the Christ who welcomes us.

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<sup>234</sup> Romans 7:19.

Of course, we can understand (and misunderstand) grace on several levels. Grace is not an inoculation that allows us to ignore ownership in the decisions we make and the pain we cause. On the contrary, grace permits us to face reality and our part in shaping it. Subsequently, this may cause us to experience emotions of guilt, remorse, and shame.

What then?

Songwriter Grover Levy reminds us, "When we fail love we've got to trust the love that won't fail us." The apostle John put it like this, "And by this we will know that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts before him whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything."<sup>235</sup>

Did you get that? God is greater than our hearts. When you feel self-condemnation shouting out from your heart, remember that there is One greater than your heart. God knows all, and better yet God understands all. To understand completely is to forgive completely. God knows from the least to the greatest and has forgotten sin, purging even *his* conscience by the world-transforming sacrifice of Christ.

"Simply stated, man is changed because his world is changed. Man is reconciled to God because he no longer lives under the rule of sin and death as determined by the Mosaic world. Through the gift of Christ he dwells in a world of righteousness and life. The issue is cosmic and corporate, not individual and limited."<sup>236</sup>

Comprehensive grace empowers us to recognize that grace is not just something to receive, like a gift at Christmas. Being made in the image of God blesses us with the ability to live grace-fully. Filled with grace. Not painting a smile on our faces

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<sup>235</sup> 1 John 3:20.

<sup>236</sup> King, "Comprehensive Grace,"  
<http://www.presence.tv/cms/compgrace.php>.

and whistling a happy tune. Instead, embodying grace is learning to face pain, suffering, disappointment, and offenses with dignity, understanding, reorientation, and even gratitude.

And that brings us to an empowering realization about love, deep connection, and comprehensive grace.

## No Escape

Rapture-ism says that if you're good enough, God will help you escape the tribulation of the last days. Existential eschatology tells you to hold out hope for God to make your life better sometime in the future. Transphysical eschatology says that God will get a do-over on making the space-time universe when he'll finally get it right. More traditional views suggest that we'll eventually dig our way out of the ground and fly away to another realm where all is sweetness and light.

Regardless of their differences, all of these theologies have a common feature. *They hope for an escape from the present.* Whether it comes in the afterlife or in a new universe, the present is not quite right and our best bet is for God to take *us* away and leave the rest behind. Even if we're motivated to engage our world, escapism looks beyond the present moment hoping to experience divine intimacy elsewhere.

The presence of the kingdom of God assures us that God walks with us as friend in and through all of life's seasons. It honors grief as well as joy. It doesn't shy away from suffering or pleasure. It encompasses both the oppressed and the oppressor.

Let's face it. Sometimes life can feel harsh. We all experience challenges regardless of our economic status, educational background, or ethnic identity. Granted, some hardships are more immediate than others. A young Thai girl conscripted into sex-trafficking faces a brutal situation that needs urgent attention, whereas a middle-aged British banker

might be able to wait a day before receiving the results from her heart cath.

The point is not about the enormity of our struggles. It's the commonality. Even though your struggles might be of a different order than mine, yours are still yours. You still have to face your challenges head on, while I can stop thinking about you for at least a little while.

Once, I sat in a room with Darryl, who was dying from lymphoma. A woman from his faith fellowship came by to visit. Less than two minutes after entering the room, she began talking about her ailments, allergies, and arthritis. I don't really blame her. After all, it's tough to set aside our own aches and pains—even for a moment, even in the presence of a dying man—so we can empathize with someone else. At the end of the day, “All must carry their own loads.”<sup>237</sup>

Often, though, we try to enter into the worlds of the suffering of others. But even when we're at our best, it's nearly impossible to create an authentic connection or to provide any genuine comfort. Frequently, we end up like Job's friends Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar. Well-meaning, but ineffective.

The question is: If the kingdom of God is here, why do any of us have problems? Why do we still fight wars, face environmental catastrophes, and inflict human rights abuses upon one another?

It seems like the presence of the kingdom ought to answer all of those things—and so much more. Once again, Brian McLaren notes, “No matter how good your answer is, it's not good enough if you're asking the wrong question.”<sup>238</sup>

Perhaps this leads us to a more relevant question. How does the presence of God allow you to face these problems? How do love, connection, and grace allow you to reframe

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<sup>237</sup> Gal. 6:5.

<sup>238</sup> McLaren, *The Last Word*, 69.

these issues and find creative ways of addressing them head on?

Going back to the Biblical story, Jesus' contemporaries looked forward to a time when God would overthrow the Gentile oppressors. They hoped for a repeat of the Maccabean miracle in which God would destroy all of the bad guys and set the world straight.

Meanwhile Jesus reminded them that the kingdom was of a different order. He touched lepers, ate with outcasts, and befriended unlikely characters. This is his way of demonstrating the essence of the kingdom of God. The kingdom would not be one of escaping the world's problems. It would be the means by which we can enter into them with love and grace.

Tim King describes the three-fold practice of presence as "awareness, acceptance, and journey."<sup>239</sup> Being aware awakens us to God with us regardless of our circumstances. Acceptance is coming to terms with our life and world—not necessarily approving, but dealing with reality instead of fantasy. Journey propels us forward with a new perspective.

This process helps us reframe the question about the presence of the kingdom and the apparent brokenness of our world. The kingdom of God is here. Yet, we see problems. What can we do about it? Name the injustice you perceive. Then reframe it. Don't just call it a bad name and feel outrage at the perpetrators. Invest yourself as a bearer of grace to redeem the situation and the people involved—not as a moralizing superhero, but as someone fully invested in the project of humanity.<sup>240</sup> Instead of hoping for a massive mop up job by God, we can inject love, connection, and grace

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<sup>239</sup> *A House that Stands*.

<sup>240</sup> See Volf, *The End of Memory* and Marshall, *What It Means to be Human* for challenging and creative explorations of this idea.

into any situation. And when we do, we might just see an immense transformation.

### **Post-Eschatological Hope**

I say we *might* see an immense transformation, not to hedge my bets, but as an expression of my belief in open-endedness. While the Biblical story has a fabulous end, the human story continues on. In many ways, it's the real never-ending story.

There are no guarantees of how things will unfold tomorrow. Sufficient is today for itself. Whatever future emerges, God will continue with us as we unfold.

Frankly, I see love, connection, and grace as the only hope for humanity. As we awaken to God's new covenant creation—the new divine ecosystem—we've got to ask ourselves: Why have we settled for so much less than the full presence of God? Why have we preferred to live with postponement rather than fulfillment? Why have we chosen to replicate old-world practices of separation rather than embracing our new world consciousness?

Tim King asks, "Is it possible that we somehow have returned to such a ministry of death today?"<sup>241</sup>

The core problem is one of deferred hope that leads to sick hearts. Postponing the presence of God and God's kingdom until a future day delays our conscious participation in the creation of our world in the likeness of love. Eating from the tree of life—the tree of love—allows us to find, experience, and practice the blessing of God's promises fulfilled.

Jesus' depictions of the Kingdom defied his contemporaries' expectations, and it could be the same now with us. Like Naaman the leprous Syrian, we might be looking for some big thing to cure our ills, while Elisha invites us to

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<sup>241</sup> King, *A House that Stands*, 126.

just dip in the Jordan. The kingdom of God is actualized in all of the small moments of our lives. Stuart Kaufmann puts it like this: “When small things are done with love it’s not a flawed you or me who does them: it’s love...I have boundless faith in love...small things, lovingly done, are always within our reach.”<sup>242</sup>

With people of all faith traditions (and no faith tradition) battling over which way is the right way, a growing movement of people is transcending traditional expressions of faith and practice. Paul Hawken describes this movement as a “values system” with a “confluence of evolving ideas that never ceases; a creator of choice, actions, and solutions that confront suffering and degradations visited upon people and the earth.” Importantly, “It is not burdened with a syndrome of trying to *save* the world; it is trying to *remake* the world.”<sup>243</sup>

I might tweak that just a little and say that this movement is awakening to the world already remade by God. Transmillennial is part of this greater movement of God in the world. And by reframing the way we read and tell the story, I believe it is playing a key role in contributing to the realization of a sustainable 21<sup>st</sup> century.

So where does that leave our future? It gives us a present confidence and a post-eschatological hope knowing that our future is God’s future, and God’s future is ours—whatever we make of our future—because God is intimately connected to us all, just as Jesus prayed in John 17. “I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us.”

If we’re expecting something to occur that has already occurred, we’re robbing ourselves of the possibilities of a brand

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<sup>242</sup> Stuart Kauffman, *At Home in the Universe*, 45 quoted in Paul Hawken, *Blessed Unrest*, 188.

<sup>243</sup> Hawken, *Blessed Unrest*, 176-7.

new hope. We're also depriving ourselves of the fulfilled blessings that birth this new hope in us. When we take away false hope, we can replace it with viable hope, a hope that recovers humanity's true identity and fosters constructive possibilities for our collective future. Instead of waiting for an eschatological act of God to blow everything up or to change everything into a reinvented physical reality, we have the God-given blessing of being co-creators in our world.<sup>244</sup> And this blessing reaches into every life, touches all cultures, and transcends every millennium.

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<sup>244</sup> Beck, "A Post-Eschatological Hope," [http://www.presence.tv/cms/org\\_post-eschatological-hope.php](http://www.presence.tv/cms/org_post-eschatological-hope.php).



## The End of the Beginning



I spent several years in church ministry. Like most preachers I know, I headed toward the back of the building following the services to shake hands, exchange hugs, and hear criticisms as folks filed out. Some traditions are hard to break.

So here I am, at it again.

First, thanks for reading this. Maybe it sounds a little corny, but I appreciate you taking the time to mull over these ideas.

Second, as I wrote I've regularly returned to the sentiment of philosopher Jacques Derrida as a key principle. "[O]ne sees that respect for the great texts, for the texts of the Greeks and others, too, is the condition of our work...I love them and I feel I have to start again and again and again. It is a task which is in front of me, before me."<sup>245</sup> My love for the Bible and my belief in God's creative impulse compels me to return to the text and read it afresh again and again.

Third, this book presents an introduction to Transmillennialism. My hope is that you'll use this book as the starting point for further exploration. I've embedded several links to the Presence International website ([www.presence.tv](http://www.presence.tv))

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<sup>245</sup> Caputo, ed., *Deconstruction in a Nutshell*, 9.

where you'll find articles and webcasts that survey Transmillennial thinking at length.

Besides the Presence website, I invite you look at the many resources published by Presence International. *The Spirit of Prophecy* comes with an accompanying 12-part DVD series. *The Cross and the Parousia* provides an in-depth exploration of key theological issues. In *A House that Stands*, you will discover a detailed retelling of the Genesis story and the days of creation that will help you find a new depth of God's grace. You can find a broader history of Presence International in the book *Give Me This Mountain*.<sup>246</sup>

Fourth, I ask you to send me your feedback. Because the Transmillennial view is always emerging, just like life itself, I'd love to further the conversation. You can reach me at [connect@presence.tv](mailto:connect@presence.tv).

Finally, whether you agree, disagree, or find yourself somewhere in between, I hope and pray that you will experience the deep interconnectedness of love. Because when all is said and done, God is neither theology nor eschatology. God is love, and that's why love never fails.

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<sup>246</sup> You can find all of these and more available at <http://www.presence.tv/cms/books.php>.

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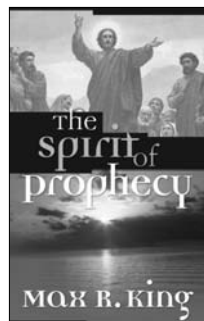
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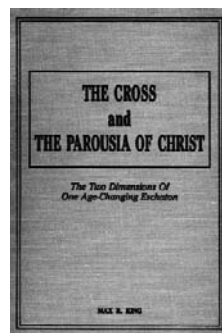


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