

Old Testament Eschatological Expectations and the Significance of Christ's First Coming

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Old Testament eschatological expectations

OT eschatological terminology

Several OT passages use the phrase “last days,” “latter days,” “latter years,” “days to come,” or “end time” in an eschatological sense. In the OT, the phrase “*acherith hayamim*” has generally been translated as “last days,” “latter days,” “latter years,” “days to come,” or “end time.” Some of the uses of *acherith hayamim* (or similar phrases) appear in the context of Israel’s situation following its exile in Babylon, whereas other such uses appear to be related to events of the absolute end of history. Additionally, the OT concept “relates to the *collective* aspect of eschatology: it deals with the fortunes and destinies of the people, not with the prospect and future of the individual.”¹

OT eschatological themes

Before the exile of Israel to Babylon, the prophets tended to stress Israel’s rebelliousness. After the exile, the prophetic emphasis shifted toward the responsibility of God’s people to prepare for the full establishing of God’s kingdom.² Those prophetic themes included:

* *A new exodus*. God’s people will be rescued from captivity.³ They will be rescued from their false shepherds (Ezekiel 34).

¹ Vos, *Pauline Eschatology*, 5.

² VanGemeren, *Interpreting*, 57-58, 68, 213-14.

³ Isa 43:1-7, 15-21; 48:20-21; 49:24-26; 51:9-11; 52:1-12; Jer 23:7-8; 30:4-11.

* *A new people.* Sometimes this is depicted as God's faithful remnant.⁴ God's failed, captive, and divided people will be remade, reanimated, and reunited.⁵ God also will bless the nations.⁶ Isaiah 56–58 appears to redefine the "people of God" contrary to the limitations of the Mosaic Covenant (see Deut 23:1-8).

* *A new agent to fulfill God's purposes.* God's agent is his anointed servant (Isa 42:1-9; 61:1-3). He appears as a suffering servant.⁷ He appears as a mysterious "son of man" (Dan 7:13-14). He is a new David.⁸

* *A new land.* There will be a new Zion.⁹ It will be a land of peace, plenty, and prosperity.¹⁰ There will even be a new heaven and earth (Isa 42:14-17; 65-66).

* *A New Covenant.* The OT promise of a "New Covenant" is explicitly made only in Jer 31:31-34, but is implicit elsewhere in Jeremiah and Ezekiel.¹¹ The New Covenant would not be like the Old, Mosaic Covenant which Israel broke. The New Covenant "internalizes" and "personalizes" God's relationship with his people in ways that none of the other covenants ever attempted.

* *A new rule of God.* There will be a new presence of God and a new temple.¹² God will pour out his Spirit on his people.¹³ Sometimes God himself is described as returning to Zion.¹⁴ His relationship with his people will be restored and renewed (Hos 2:16, 19-20; 3:5).

* *The "Day of the Lord."* The concept of "the Day of the Lord" emerges out of the above prophecies. Sometimes it is described as a day coming in the near future,¹⁵ in such cases it often appears to be talking about God's destroying OT Israel's enemies.¹⁶ Sometimes the time is not specified. The Day of the Lord is frequently described as a fearsome day of wrath and judgment.¹⁷

⁴ Isa 10:20-23; 11:11-12; 14:1-4; 46:3-4; 51:11; 61:4-7; Jer 23:1-8; 29:10-14; 30:10-11; 31:7-9; Mic 2:12.

⁵ Isa 11:11-16; Jer 30:18-22; Ezek 36:22-24; 37:1-28; Amos 9:11-15; Mic 4:6-13; Zeph 3:14-20.

⁶ Isa 2:2-4; 19:18-25; 49:5-6; 56:1-8; Mic 4:1-4; Zeph 3:9; Zech 8:20-23.

⁷ Isa 42:1-9; 49:1-6; 50:4-9; 52:13-53:12.

⁸ Isa 9:2-7; 11:1-5; 16:5; Jer 23:1-6; Ezek 34:23-24; 37:24-25; Amos 9:11.

⁹ Isa 1:27; 2:1-3; 11:6-9; 35:1-10; 54:1-17; 61:3-62:12; Ezek 34:11-16, 25-31; 36:35-38.

¹⁰ Hos 2:14-18; Joel 3:18; Amos 9:13-15; Mic 4:3-4.

¹¹ Jer 32:38-40; 50:4-5; Ezek 11:16-20; 36:24-32; 37:15-28.

¹² Isa 12:6; Ezek 37:27-28; 40-48; Joel 3:16-17; Zeph 3:14-17.

¹³ Joel 2:28-32; Isa 32:9-20; 44:3-5; Ezek 36:25-28; 37:14.

¹⁴ Isa 4:1-6; 26:21; 52:7-9; 66:15; Ezek 43:2-7; Zech 2:10; 8:3; 14:3-5; Mal 3:1.

¹⁵ Isa 13:6; Ezek 30:1-3; Joel 1:15; 2:1; 3:14; Obad 15; Zeph 1:7, 14.

¹⁶ Joel 3:4; Obad 18-21; Zeph 1:7-11; 2:4-15.

¹⁷ Isa 2:12-21; 10:3 ("day of punishment"); 13:6-13; 26:21; 34:8; 63:1-4a ("day of vengeance"), 6; Jer 46:10 ("day of vengeance"); Ezek 7:19; 13:1-5; 30:1-3; Hos 1:11 ("day of Jezreel"); Joel 1:15; 2:1, 11; 3:14; Amos 5:18-20; Obad 15-16; Zeph 1:7—2:3; Zech 14:1-7; Mal 4:5.

Other passages speak of salvation for the Lord's people on that day.¹⁸ These latter senses depict the "*day of the Lord*" as a final, eschatological day of God's visitation in grace and judgment.

No OT synthesis

The above prophetic themes were not systematized into a coherent whole. The OT prophetic themes created hope and expectation that God would visit his people in grace and his enemies in judgment. The prophetic themes outlined above found partial fulfillment with the return of Israel from exile, the rebuilding of the temple, and the re-establishment of the priesthood and sacrificial system. But such fulfillment fell short of the eschatological language the prophets had used and the expectations they had raised.

Christ's first coming and the fulfillment of the OT eschatological prophecies concerning Israel

The NT reveals that the synthesis and fulfillment of the OT promises are found in Christ, of whom Paul says, "*For as many as are the promises of God, in Him they are yes*" (2 Cor 1:20). Anthony Hoekema reminds us that "not until the New Testament times would it be revealed that what was thought of in Old Testament days as one coming of the Messiah would be fulfilled in two stages: a first and second coming."¹⁹

Christ and his church fulfill the OT prophecies in ways that were not anticipated by the OT prophets themselves.²⁰ That fact has tremendous eschatological significance: since Christ and the church fulfill the OT prophecies concerning Israel, including the prophecies concerning the restoration of Israel, it is *not legitimate* hermeneutically to contend that those same OT prophecies also must have a future "literal" fulfillment in the physical nation of Israel. Some of the ways in which Christ and the church fulfill the OT prophecies regarding Israel are the following:

Jesus is the new, true Israel, the true "seed" of Abraham, the fulfiller of the Abrahamic Covenant

Jesus himself stressed that the Abrahamic Covenant ultimately was spiritual and that he fulfilled it (John 8:31–58). Gal 3:16 points out that the promise was made to Abraham "*and to his seed.*" Paul emphasizes that the word for "seed" is

¹⁸ Isa 35:4; 40:9-11; 63:4b-5; Joel 2:30-32; Obad 17; Zech 2:10-13.

¹⁹ Hoekema, *Bible and Future*, 12.

²⁰ Because the church is "in Christ," the church also fulfills the OT promises regarding Israel, as will be discussed. Because of limitations of space, this book can only show a few of the ways in which Christ and the church fulfill OT prophecy regarding Israel. For more see Menn, *Biblical Theology*.

singular, and refers to Christ. Gal 3:29 goes on to state that those who belong to Christ (i.e., the church) likewise are Abraham's seed.

Jesus fulfills the prophecies regarding the new exodus and the rescue of Israel from false shepherds

Eckhard Schnabel points out, "When Jesus speaks of himself as the shepherd who has a flock (John 10:11), he alludes to a rich biblical tradition that describes Israel as YHWH's flock, with either YHWH (Ps 23) or Israel's leaders (Ezek 34) as shepherds."²¹

Jesus fulfills the prophecies of the anointed servant and new messianic agent

Jesus both lived like a Servant and described himself as a Servant.²² Further, the NT specifically quotes and applies the Servant passages (Isa 42:1-9; 49:1-6; 50:4-9; 52:13—53:12) to Jesus as the fulfillment of prophecy.

Jesus fulfills and inaugurated the New Covenant

At the Last Supper Jesus explicitly stated that he was inaugurating the New Covenant in his blood.²³ Jesus himself drew connections between what he was about to do on the cross and the OT prophetic expectations. Paul Williamson states, "The allusions to both the forgiveness anticipated by Jeremiah (Matt. 26:28; Jer. 31:34) and the blood associated with the establishment of the original Mosaic covenant (Luke 22:20; Exod. 24:7) further underline that Jesus understood his death as the inauguration of the new covenant."²⁴

Jesus fulfills the prophecies regarding the new people and rule of God

Jesus forced his contemporaries to make a choice: "What does loyalty to Israel's god mean for a Palestinian Jew faced with the announcement that the long-awaited kingdom is now at last appearing? Jesus' zealous contemporaries would have said: Torah provides the litmus test of loyalty to Israel's god and to his covenant. Jesus said: what counts is following me."²⁵ Unlike the political nation of OT Israel, Jesus now governs his people internally, by giving them new hearts and pouring out his Spirit on them.²⁶

²¹ Schnabel, "Israel, the People," 44.

²² Matt 20:28; Mark 10:45; Luke 22:27; John 13:5-16.

²³ Luke 22:20; 1 Cor 11:25; see also Matt 26:27-29; Mark 14:23-25.

²⁴ Williamson, *Sealed with an Oath*, 184.

²⁵ Wright, *Victory*, 381.

²⁶ See John 14:16-17; Acts 2:14-18; Rom 8:9, 14; 1 Cor 3:16; 6:19; 2 Cor 3:2-3. In this regard the New Covenant represents a radically new way by which God's people are governed. In Gal 3:22—4:11 Paul contrasts governance under the Law and the Spirit. He argues that the Law was a "*pedagogue*" (3:24-25), a "*guardian and manager*" (Gal 4:2), which had custody over "*minor children*" (Gal 4:1-3). Linda Belleville notes, "The tightly knit structure of this argument and the

Jesus fulfills the prophecies regarding the restoration of Israel

The prophets (e.g., Isaiah 60–62; Jeremiah 30–33; Ezekiel 34–37) had prophesied the restoration of Israel under the leadership of God’s anointed king who would reign from Jerusalem or Mount Zion. In Jesus, those prophecies are fulfilled (Luke 1:68) but in an unexpected way: the new Zion, the restored Israel, is not identified with a place or a nation but with the person of Christ and his people.

The early church understood that, in Christ, not only had the true “Israel” been restored, but it had been redefined. At the Council of Jerusalem in Acts 15:15–18, James quotes from Amos 9:11–12 (which concerns rebuilding “*the fallen tabernacle of David*”) and concludes that the Gentiles coming into the church *is* the rebuilding of the “*tabernacle of David*” (i.e., the restoration of Israel). In fact, the coming to faith by the Gentiles shows that the “*tabernacle of David*” *already had been rebuilt*, since, as Walker observes, “the text suggests there must indeed be a ‘restoration’ before the Gentiles can come in (‘I will restore it, so that . . . the Gentiles’). James’ using it to affirm the validity of Gentile mission must indicate acceptance that Israel had *already* been restored.”²⁷

Jesus fulfills the prophecies regarding Mount Zion

The OT picture of the “*mountain of God*” (e.g., Isa 56:7) was a “shadow” or “copy,” using picture or physical language, to denote the greater living and spiritual reality of Christ himself (Col 2:16–17; Heb 8:1—10:22). Thus, while the Old Covenant was still in effect, even during Jesus’ earthly ministry, Jerusalem was called the “holy city.”²⁸ However, Simon Kistemaker points us to the significant fact that “after that period, the term ‘holy city’ no longer occurs, for God took up residence not in Jerusalem but in the church; and at Pentecost the Holy Spirit filled not the temple or Jerusalem but the apostles and all those who repented and were baptized (Acts 2:1–4, 38–39).”²⁹ Heb 12:18, 22 therefore

broad pattern of chiasm in these verses points to a single function of the Law. This function is that of a custodian who closely regulates and supervises God’s people in a period of spiritual minority. Like the elementary principles of the world [Gal 4:3, 9], the Law orders the daily affairs of its wards until sonship is realized. It was established as a temporary but necessary expedient given the operative principle of sin and functions as a ‘bridle’ for a people that are prone to sin, bringing to light the defined will of God as a basis for covenant obligation. With the coming of faith in Christ, the Law’s function as guardian and custodian ceases and the Spirit becomes the internal guiding principle.” Belleville, “Under Law,” 70. Gal 3:23 and 3:25 show the contrast: “*before faith came in, we were kept in custody under the law,*” but “*now that faith has come, we are no longer under a pedagogue.*” That “faith” is found in Jesus Christ (Gal 3:24).

²⁷ Walker, *Jesus*, 97.

²⁸ Isa 48:2; Dan 9:24; Neh 11:1, 18; Matt 4:4; 27:53.

²⁹ Kistemaker, “Temple,” 437. Paul made the same point in Gal 4:21–31, where he said that the physical Mount Sinai and physical Jerusalem were actually in slavery, but “*the Jerusalem above*” is free, and “*she is our mother.*” Significantly, “Paul not only applied to the *heavenly* Jerusalem an Old Testament text (Isa. 54:1 in Gal. 4:27) which had originally applied to the *earthly* Jerusalem;

concludes by saying that in Christ we have “*not come to a mountain that can be touched . . . but you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem*” (see also Gal 4:21–31).

The kingdom of God

Even though the eschatological kingdom of God is future and awaits Christ’s coming again in glory, Christ’s first coming *inaugurated* that same eschatological kingdom. “Not clearly foreseen, apparently, by either Old Testament prophets or the earliest New Testament disciples, was the already-not yet complexion of the messianic age,”³⁰ i.e., the kingdom of God and reign of Christ have been inaugurated, realized in principle, and are present now (the “already” of the kingdom); however, they have not yet been fully manifested, but await a future consummation in all their glory (the “not yet” of the kingdom). Currently, good and evil co-exist, but there will come a time of harvest and of separation of good from evil.³¹ Believers already have come to the heavenly Jerusalem (Heb 12:22); yet the full, glorious presence of the New Jerusalem is future (Rev 21:10–11). Oscar Cullmann puts it this way:

*The decisive battle in a war may already have occurred in a relatively early stage of the war, and yet the war continues. Although the decisive effect of that battle is perhaps not recognized by all, it nevertheless already means victory. But the war must still be carried on for an indefinite time, until “Victory Day.” Precisely this is the situation of which the New Testament is conscious, as a result of the recognition of the new division of time; the revelation consists precisely in the fact of the proclamation that that event on the cross, together with the resurrection which followed, was the already concluded decisive battle.*³²

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he also denied that the latter was in any way connected to the ‘Jerusalem above.’” Walker, *Jesus*, 131.

³⁰ Yarbrough, “Biblical Theology,” 65.

³¹ This is reflected in Jesus’ parable of the wheat and the tares (Matt 13:24-30, 36-43) and parable of the dragnet (Matt 13:47-50). See Alexander, *From Eden*, 95.

³² Cullmann, *Christ and Time*, 84, emphasis in original.

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