

# *Perspectives*

*explorations in theology and practice*

**Eschatology: Introduction**

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**Perspectives: explorations in theology and practice** continue in the theme of the ‘explorations’ series of books. On a given subject they are designed to provoke thought as well as presenting a perspective.

This fourth volume is an introduction to eschatology. There is often a desire to jump right in and decide how a text fits a system, however we have to lay some foundations first, particularly as to how we read the ancient piece of literature that we have in our sacred Scriptures. Once we have some foundations we can then come to the text; text not written to us, but certainly for us and all generations that precede us and will come after us.

Biblical texts quoted are from The New Revised Standard Version, Updated Edition, unless noted otherwise.

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# Eschatology: an introduction

If we have some understanding of the word 'eschatology' we will know it has something to do with the 'end times', the 'end of the world', or human destiny commonly expressed as 'heaven and hell'. Given that the term is derived from *ta eschata* ('end things') we are probably headed in the right direction. It certainly includes human destiny (and perhaps some discussion about certain world events) but the big element that is missing in the above understanding is the non-involvement of creation. Not only does eschatology have to consider human destiny, but also that of the destiny for the whole of creation; beyond human destiny we have to include the destiny of material creation. Indeed we would be better to replace the word 'destiny' in both uses with the word 'hope'. Eschatology is to do with the hope for the whole of creation, including the hope for humanity.

**Popular eschatology** has infiltrated the thinking of most believers with terms such as 'the rapture' (or 'the secret rapture'), the 'millennium' or the 'tribulation' being somewhere in the subconscious. Ideas such as we are in the end times because there are 'wars and rumours of wars' or that the signs of the times point in that direction likewise pervades much of our thoughts. Such thoughts do not encourage us to engage with a story that might put any such aspects into context and if we are to find where such terms fit (or do not) into any scheme we will

have to be patient. And a little pre-warning we will probably also need to be comfortable with not knowing what certain Scriptures mean or are referring to, and we will certainly have to avoid making texts fit what we want them to mean.

Any study of the 'end' or simply of 'the future' is inevitably something that attracts a lot of interest as there is something innate within humanity that wants to know about what is to come. Such knowledge can give us security and might at best confirm to us that God is in control and has not abandoned us; or we can treat the knowledge of what is to come as giving us secret knowledge, inside information, which certainly is not what Scripture is there to provide. Eschatology is much more than a remedy for anxiety in providing us with an explanation for what is taking place that might be disturbing us.

This attraction to knowledge means the imagination is alive and the whole area is not without its more than fair share of conspiracy theories. Any source suggesting that it can help us understand the future can be attractive. And when that source is a piece of ancient literature we can quickly pull it from its context and assume it is making predictions that directly relate to our historical context. We have as our source a piece of ancient literature, the Bible, so we need to be aware that it does not come from our context nor culture.

The Bible was **NOT** written to us; it is written for us (and

for people of every era) but there is a huge gap; we are separated from the biblical context by many centuries and our world-views are not the same. The gap of time and culture means we have to seek to do our best to understand something of that culture, era and context, or at least we must not force what we read to fit our culture, context and era.

What we assume about a piece of literature and how we interpret it will determine to a large measure what the outcome is. ***What we read in can be what we read out!*** If we take language one way but it was intended another way we will miss what is being communicated. An example of misunderstanding a phrase from our time and culture might illustrate how easy it is to mistake how language is being used. If we were to take the words 'You frightened the life out of me' to be a literal statement we would then expect that the sentences following would describe the arrival of a doctor who would confirm that death had taken place. The language ***literally*** says that I died through fright, but we understand the language is not to be understood literally but as a ***metaphor*** to communicate the level of fear I had experienced. Language has some measure of intrinsic meaning but we also have to understand how it is being used. As we come to our ancient book(s) we will have to understand how prophetic language is used and beyond prophetic language we will also encounter a genre known as ***apocalyptic*** (for example in the book of Revelation). Apocalyptic language is certainly not to be interpreted as literal as such language acts almost in the

same way as political cartoons do - communicating reality through the use of exaggerated imagery. Mistakes can certainly be made when we read certain texts and do not allow for the huge difference between our world and the world of the writers; likewise we can make mistakes when we do not understand what might be taking place with the choice of language and descriptions.

We will also read words and concepts that were rooted in the culture of the readers and so might not simply carry the same meaning that we might give to them. One of the most common words used for the 'coming' of Jesus (*parousia*) was a common word related to the presence or arrival of the emperor; likewise the Pauline phrase 'to meet' the Lord in the air was also a phrase related to the coming of the emperor to a location. The usage of those words in the culture will give us some guidelines as to how we might understand them. Rome's use is the pale copy of the real.

Finally, by way of introduction, and connecting to the opening comment that eschatology is connected to the restoration of creation we need some understanding that **the big sweep of Scripture is from creation to new creation** (with 'in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth' describing the beginning and the end of that trajectory being summarised in the statement that John said: 'I saw a new heaven and a new earth'). Once we grasp that it is highly unlikely that as we have 'in the beginning' the story of creation, that the hope

expressed (the conclusion to the story) would then be as simple as a 'hope to personally go to heaven' while this whole creation is destroyed being the conclusion. Consistently when the hope of restoration is expressed for the people we **also** have hope for creation; we have phrases such as 'and the trees of the fields will clap their hands'. A happy people and a happy creation! Metaphorical language for sure for trees do not have hands, but language that wonderfully conveys with deep significance that a future restoration includes all of creation. Eschatology (last words) must connect to 'protology' (first words). The arc of the biblical story takes us implicitly in the direction of the 'restoration of all things' as well as specific biblical texts that explicitly take us there.

As we engage with this theme we will need to exercise patience and we have the task (and it is not a small task!) of engaging with an ancient piece of writing, its world views and beliefs. Patience, a willingness to be left with loose ends, but a task that I am sure will be rewarding. Theology always has a 'in the light of this how do we live' element, always a very practical outworking.

## **Movement is from heaven to earth**

If I were to over-simplify popular eschatology I would

suggest that the movement is from earth to heaven, expressed as 'going to heaven when I die' and the final element being that of the burning up of creation, with eternal life being 'in heaven with the Lord forever'. In contrast I read the movement in Scripture as being from heaven to earth, with temporary movement prior to the 'end' in the other direction.

Within the Greek philosophical world there was a phrase '**soma sema**' (the body is a tomb). That phrase popularised the notion that the 'real' world was not this world but what we might term 'heaven'. Death was an escape from the body (the tomb) and an entrance into real existence; the material world held no intrinsic value - hence it could either be ignored through denial or exploited for enjoyment. In the area of sexuality, abstinence could be advocated or conversely total freedom without restraint; the physical element was not of value. Such a response is so unlike Scripture where we read,

present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God (Rom. 12:1).

The body has value, indeed in **bodily** form humanity was created in the image of God, and that body was formed from the 'dust of the earth'. God, humanity and creation are distinct from one another but are all connected.

In the post-New Testament period there was an engagement with the Graeco-Roman world and in order



to communicate concepts that were familiar within that world were engaged with, and in certain places and over a period of time rather than the concepts being transformed with regard to how they were understood the concepts changed the message to some extent. This resulted in a move from a Hebraic world-view to one that was shaped by Graeco-Roman philosophy, and we can see that influence very strongly with such language as 'going to heaven when we die' or 'saving souls'; and the embrace of the concept, that many assume(wrongly) is biblical, that of the immortality of the soul.

In reading Scripture we have to learn to 'unread' how we have been conditioned to read the text. A text we will examine later (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18) where Paul is responding to a question about 'what about those who have died', we should immediately note that he does not resort to a typical response that we might give along the lines of 'they are in a better place', or 'they are at home with the Lord'. Even if there were truth in those responses they are not the central biblical response that Paul gives, indeed those responses are not even hinted at in the passage. Rather we note that he speaks of their future **when** the Lord comes (*parousia*) stating that they will come with him (movement from heaven to earth). He does not focus at all on their current state, but on their **future** resurrection. There might be a phrase in there that could mislead us ('caught up to meet the Lord in the air': a phrase that in its historical context did not indicate a final destination of 'heaven' but quite the

opposite) but even if we were to misunderstand that one phrase we would have to ignore the overall context and that Paul's response is to answer the question as to the fate of the righteous dead **when** the Lord returns to the earth. The answer is consistent to a Hebraic world-view but certainly not to a Graeco-Roman, and sadly nor to many current world-views.

Movement from heaven to earth is something we will expand on as we proceed and we can note how 'heaven' is presented as a **temporary** place, a holding place until the restoration of all things.

- Jesus must remain in heaven **until** the time of universal restoration that God announced long ago through his holy prophets (Acts 3:21). There is no indication that Jesus is waiting for us to join him, indeed we are the ones who are awaiting a Saviour **from** heaven (Phil. 3:20). This latter text, of course, raises the question as to what happens to those who die before that time, for they are not 'here' to wait for the Lord to come.
- The prayer that Jesus taught has those central requests for the kingdom to **come** and for the will of God to be done **on earth** as in heaven.
- Jesus, while with the disciples, prayed that God would not take them out of the world (John 17:14).

We can say that the hope expressed is not a hope that

death is a door to a better life, but that death will not be the final word; death will not bring about a better existence but death itself will be swallowed up. The hope of Scripture is of embodied existence in the context of a renewed creation.

There is a consistent claim that the cross has universal impact. We might wish to (as do many theories of the atonement do) focus on the 'forgiveness of sins' but the cross of Jesus was in order to 'reconcile all things', those 'all things' being 'all things, whether in heaven or on earth' (Col. 1:19,20). The cross is a roadblock to destruction and a gateway to fulfilment. Eschatology then will be the completion of the 'creation project', one that includes a destiny for humanity and all of creation.

## Prophecy - how do we read those texts?

An important element is that we should not think of prophecy as being simply 'history written in advance'. A history book can tell me what took place in the (say) 14th Century, but prophecy is not the unfolding of what is about to take place in the 21st Century in the sense of a set of events. Scripture was **not written to us**, although it is written **for** us. That distinction is significant; we are not Jews whose prophets are giving

us a hope for the end of the Babylonian exile, and prophets writing about that hope are **not** writing to us, though the words remain with power for us.

Prophecy is in the realm primarily of **promise** in order to give hope, and promise goes far beyond prediction. In giving hope (or warning) prophecy will often pull on imagery that resonates with the hearers. That imagery might be pulled from the historical and geographical context of the hearers or from the sacred literature that belongs to the people's journey (in other words, it might draw from other parts of what we term the Old Testament).

The threat of attack from Gog and Magog (Ezek. 38, 39) should not be read as some prophecy that relates to a threat from Russia in the near future, with an approach that tries to align city names in Ezekiel to modern city names in Russia! Hebrew names are not Russian names in disguise. We read that Gog, the ruler of Magog, has an alliance with a host of other nations in Ezekiel but will be utterly defeated. It should not surprise us that Ezekiel uses descriptions for Gog that he has already used for the king of Tyre and for Pharaoh. The prophecy uses Gog, with the various alliances, symbolically of the nations who set themselves against God - the nations in rebellion that will be judged. And the language? Language borrowed from Genesis 10 where we read of the list of nations descended from Noah. All will be judged, but we should not try to align names in a way that we think might fit our world. The

prophet speaks into his world with the assurance that, be it Tyre, Babylon, Egypt or 'Magog', God will not remain inactive.

**Prophecy releases hope** (promise not prediction) using language that is expressed in the context of that time. We read in Isaiah 19:18-25,

On that day there will be five cities in the land of Egypt that speak the language of Canaan and swear allegiance to the Lord of hosts. One of these will be called the City of the Sun.

On that day there will be an altar to the Lord in the midst of the land of Egypt and a pillar to the Lord at its border. It will be a sign and a witness to the Lord of hosts in the land of Egypt; when they cry to the Lord because of oppressors, he will send them a saviour and will defend and deliver them. The Lord will make himself known to the Egyptians, and the Egyptians will know the Lord on that day and will serve with sacrifice and offerings, and they will make vows to the Lord and perform them. The Lord will strike Egypt, striking but healing, so that they will return to the Lord, and he will listen to their supplications and heal them.

On that day there will be a highway from Egypt to Assyria, and the Assyrian will come into Egypt and the Egyptian into Assyria, and the Egyptians will serve with the Assyrians.

On that day Israel will be the third party with

Egypt and Assyria, a blessing in the midst of the earth, whom the Lord of hosts has blessed, saying, "Blessed be Egypt my people and Assyria the work of my hands and Israel my heritage."

What a hope! But is it a literal prediction that we wait to be fulfilled? We read of the two powerful nations that sandwiched Israel in the 'fertile crescent', one to the north (Assyria) and one to the South West (Egypt), taking not only the worship of Israel's God but being given titles that were given to Israel by God. Such statements called for a hope that would have expanded all vision. Hope and promise: to be fulfilled in a literal way? Or to be fulfilled when **all** nations acknowledge the God of Israel? I suggest the latter. Promise is beyond prediction; the 'prediction' is expressed in the temporal geographical situation of the era, but the promise is universal.

The hope for transformation in Assyria and Egypt would have been an all-but beyond belief for the hearers, but the hope that lies beyond those words are of the kingdoms of this world becoming the kingdom of our Lord and Christ!

I am sure we can use the Scripture to pray for Egypt and (the modern equivalent of) Assyria; by all means we can prophesy a great visitation in those lands... but to hold it as 'therefore this will take place' is to miss the element of promise.

**Promise** goes far beyond a literal fulfilment (hence again the point that all the promises of God are in Jesus). In Galatians we see how the coming of Jesus changes everything – so radically that to re-establish what once defined transgression would be to become a transgressor! The life and death of Jesus changes everything and we cannot draw a straight line from ‘predictions’ to an expected (literal) fulfilment without understanding that the cross of Jesus points us toward a greater fulfilment: the restoration of all things.

**Prophecy is not always fulfilled.** Allowing Scripture to comment on itself challenges our expectations and interpretations. One huge element is when we read of non-fulfilments of prophetic utterances. We read of situations where a prophecy is reversed through repentance (Jonah in Nineveh for example), but there are other prophecies that simply do not come to pass, with no factor expressed for the non-fulfilment. This principle is a significant element that has to be grasped. If within Scripture (and as will be quoted below even at times within the same book) there is prophecy that reads as a prediction but then we also read that the prediction did not take place this must make us cautious about insisting on simple literal fulfilments.

Here are some examples (from the work of John Goldingay).

Jeremiah prophesies that Jehoiakim would die without honour, his body dragged, buried outside Jerusalem and

that no descendent would sit on the throne:

Therefore thus says the Lord concerning King Jehoiakim son of Josiah of Judah:

They shall not lament for him, saying,

“Alas, my brother!” or “Alas, sister!”

They shall not lament for him, saying,

“Alas, lord!” or “Alas, his majesty!”

With the burial of a donkey he shall be buried:

dragged off and thrown out beyond the gates of Jerusalem (Jer. 22:18-19).

Therefore thus says the Lord concerning King Jehoiakim of Judah: He shall have no one to sit upon the throne of David, and his dead body shall be cast out to the heat by day and the frost by night (Jer. 36:30).

However! However if we read the report in 2 Kings we see that the above was not fulfilled.

So Jehoiakim slept with his ancestors; then his son Jehoiachin succeeded him (2 Kings 24:6).

Jehoiakim received a proper burial and his son succeeded him. The prediction is clearly **not** fulfilled.

Likewise Jeremiah prophesied to Zedekiah that he would not die by the sword but peacefully with people mourning for him.

Yet hear the word of the Lord, O King Zedekiah of Judah! Thus says the Lord concerning you:



You shall not die by the sword; you shall die in peace. And as spices were burned for your ancestors, the earlier kings who preceded you, so they shall burn spices for you and lament for you, saying, "Alas, lord!" For I have spoken the word, says the Lord. (Jer. 34:4-5).

But if we continue to read we will discover that Zedekiah is captured, has his eyes pulled out and then dies in prison (Jer. 39.7; 52:11). Again the prophecy is **not** fulfilled.

In Ezekiel chapters 26-28 we have an extended prophecy that Nebuchadrezzar of Babylon will defeat Tyre, kill its inhabitants, plunder the wealth and bring the walls down flat. Indeed the text suggests that Tyre will disappear and never be found again. The prediction is fairly conclusive and clear. In due course Nebuchadrezzar did come against the Tyre, but the effect was nothing like was prophesied (a few hundred years later one *might* be able to suggest that Alexander the Great came close to fulfilling that). The prophecy is **not** fulfilled through that Babylonian attack and what makes it even more interesting is that it seems that there is a further word to Nebuchadrezzar along the lines of – well that did not work out but you will attack Egypt... however that one did not work out either!

In the twenty-seventh year, in the first month, on the first day of the month, the word of the Lord came to me: Mortal, King Nebuchadrezzar of

Babylon made his army labour hard against Tyre; every head was made bald and every shoulder was rubbed bare, yet neither he nor his army got anything from Tyre to pay for the labour that he had expended against it. Therefore thus says the Lord God: I will give the land of Egypt to King Nebuchadrezzar of Babylon, and he shall carry off its wealth and despoil it and plunder it, and it shall be the wages for his army. I have given him the land of Egypt as his payment for which he laboured, because they worked for me, says the Lord God (Ezek. 29:17-20).

The Babylonians did not get 'anything from Tyre', so (we almost read) because that one did not come to fulfilment Egypt will be the nation you can plunder!

We might come up with reasons why there were non-fulfilments (and there might be some legitimate explanations) but the occurrences indicate that we should be careful about insisting on absolute literal fulfilments. Once we understand that Jesus is the centre, not the periphery of prophecy, we will be less insistent on literal fulfilments. Even when there is a fulfilment ('the young woman will be with child' indicating that this would take place as a sign in Isaiah's day) the 'larger' fulfilment is through a young submissive woman in the opening pages of the Gospels.

An example of a Scripture that is often pushed into the category of 'this will literally be fulfilled in the last days' is

Zechariah 14:4,

On that day his feet shall stand on the Mount of Olives, which lies before Jerusalem on the east, and the Mount of Olives shall be split in two from east to west by a very wide valley, so that one half of the mount shall withdraw northward and the other half southward.

Such a Scripture is often pulled in to fit a scheme of what will happen at 'the second coming' but It is more likely that Jesus saw himself as fulfilling that Scripture as he camped on the Mount of Olives during that Passover week. The Mount of Olives was the place where many pilgrims camped as Jerusalem itself could not contain the number of visitors that travelled for the feast. Those Jews who came experienced a great divide, those who saw him as the Messiah and those who rejected him; those who saw him as the fulfilment of Passover and those who continued to only celebrate the past. The Mount of Olives was indeed split in two then and not in a literal way, but in a far more significant way.

## **Interpreting (Old Testament) prophecies**

I suggest we should be very cautious about interpreting

such prophecies and seeking to apply them to the 'end times'. The main reason for this is that any straight line idea was seriously disrupted by the Easter event(s). We will always be better to say 'this is that' than trying to make some current or imminent world events fit. All prophecy receives it 'yes', its fulfilment in Jesus. The 'this' that is 'that' is a Christ event and the Christ event takes hope beyond any literal interpretation expressed within any predictions that we read. There is hope for Egypt and for Assyria, they can be given names reserved for Israel, for the fullness of all predictions is a hope for the restoration of the world that God has made.

New Testament hope is for the world and its restoration; it does not focus on the fulfilment of Old Testament predictions; Old Testament imagery and allusions might be referred to but none of that allows us to use prophecy as a crystal ball informing us of future events.

## **Creation to New Creation**

If, as I suggest, we move from creation to new creation, from protology to eschatology, it is probably important to understand a little about creation.

We have stories in the first chapters of Genesis that yield profound insights. They carry certain elements in common with other creation myths that come from the

surrounding culture and at that level the scientific world-views are, more or less, in agreement. Genesis presents the earth, not as a sphere that rotates around the sun, but as flat, and above it is a 'firmament' where the sun, moon and stars travel. That firmament is held up by pillars, beneath the earth are waters and above the firmament are also waters. Those views are not 'corrected' in those texts, and we should not try and squeeze what is written there into a more enlightened scientific view. The stories share the wider culture and historical setting, but when it comes to the theology of those chapters the gap between Genesis and the other myths becomes evident.

Humans tasked with providing food for the gods was a common view in other myths; Genesis disagrees. God provides food for humans and is the one who sets the garden out. The view of God is so different; the view of humanity is likewise in contrast to that which is in other myths. We read of humanity being 'the image of God', of being given a mandate for the world. Humans, not kings or semi-gods, create music and industry. Humans, all humans are in the image of God. The theology critiqued ancient world-views; the theology in those ancient writings critiqued the claims of the Roman emperors and elites; the theology remains foundational in our 'advanced' culture.

The scientific view in the Genesis narratives is of a flat world but what is described is a home or a house. Scientifically we will disagree with what is described, but

***theologically*** we gain incredible insight through the story. We are told that humans live in a context where there is a roof over their heads (the firmament that is held in place by the pillars). Creation then is God's gift to humanity, a place for us to live together, benefitting from the good provision of God.

The heavens are the Lord's heavens,  
but the earth he has given to human beings  
(Ps. 115:16).

God lives in the heavens (his home) and he has graciously given to humanity a house to be nurtured, cared for and developed. Earth is the dwelling place for humanity, but again when we follow the trajectory toward new creation we read that something remarkable happens as the story comes to a conclusion. What is remarkable is not of humans being removed from the earth to some celestial home, but the reverse:

See, the home of God is among mortals.  
He will dwell with them;  
they will be his peoples,  
and God himself will be with them (Rev. 21:3).

This concept of creation as a house can be seen when we compare two Scriptures in Proverbs. The first Scripture quoted below is a description of how a house is built, it being built by 'wisdom, understanding and knowledge'.

By wisdom a house is built,

and by understanding it is established;  
by knowledge the rooms are filled  
with all precious and pleasant riches (Prov.  
24:3,4).

And the Lord acted with 'wisdom, understanding and knowledge' to bring about creation according to those same three elements:

The Lord by wisdom founded the earth;  
by understanding he established the heavens;  
by his knowledge the deeps broke open,  
and the clouds drop down the dew (Prov.  
3:19-20).

A dwelling place for humanity, and more than that, a temple for God's own presence. All of creation is a temple for God, for we read that heaven is God's throne and the earth his footstool, the image being of God seated and his presence filling all of creation, therefore no house that could be built should ever be thought of as containing God (Acts 7:49 - Stephen's speech, hence it makes no sense to have an eschatological hope of a literal rebuilt physical temple).

In the ancient near eastern world when temples were constructed the last element placed in the temple was the image of the god. In such cultures it was said that the image had its mouth washed so that the life of the god went into the image. Our Scriptures tell us that there was no carved image made, but of humanity being breathed into and those humans being placed in the

garden. A living image. Any carving of images was therefore prohibited for to do so would be to belittle God's activity, an insult **both** to God and to humanity.

**The first word**... a garden with a couple. That garden being a temple where they were to reflect the image of God and to be bearers of the presence of the God in whose image they were.

**The last word**... a city that has all the garden elements in it, that fills all the earth, and is occupied by a company of people who cannot be numbered.

**The first word**... a God who visited in the evening time.

**The last word**... a God who now dwells permanently with his people.

In these and other ways we see how there is a move (an eschatological arc) from creation to new creation. A dwelling place for humanity that eventually becomes a dwelling place for God with his people.

## An eschatological temple

There is no temple in the eschatological vision of John.

I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb (Rev.



21:22).

He sees a city, but a city with no temple; there is no separate holy space because the presence of God and of the Lamb are there in fullness.

At the time of the crucifixion there are creational signs such as an earthquake and an eclipse of the sun; there are temporal disturbances that affect the realm of the deceased; and there is a huge sign in the Temple when the curtain, that separated the holy of holies, was torn apart. The ultimate holy space was no longer to be separate from creation. The temple in process of being constructed (or better that is in process of growing) is described in Ephesians. It is a temple that is not of one physical stone placed upon another, but of one person being joined to another as each building block is aligned to Jesus 'the cornerstone.

But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us, abolishing the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to

those who were near, for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then, you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone; in him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God (Ephes. 2:13-22).

To suggest that this work will eventually be expressed in a rebuilt temple in Jerusalem would be to suggest a symbol that belongs to the past will be restored as a fulfilment! The fulfilment is the presence of God in and throughout the whole earth.

Matthew's Gospel is wonderfully focused on 'fulfilments' of Scripture and it seems there is a deliberate shaping of the Gospel that frames the whole book and places 'the Gospel' as a fulfilment to the 'normal' shape of the Jewish Scriptures as a whole. The Jewish Scriptures can be described as 'the law, the prophets and the writings', thus shaping the various scrolls into an order different to what we term the 'Old Testament'. With that ordering we have 'Genesis' as the first scroll and 'Chronicles' as the last scroll. The opening words of Matthew:

An account of the genealogy (*genesis*: beginning

/ birth) of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David,  
the son of Abraham.

An account of the **genesis** of Jesus. Surely in a book of fulfilments the first book of the Torah is alluded to. Jesus is **the** fulfilment of the whole of what has gone before, and when we come to the closing words (the Great Commission) of Matthew we have clear resonances with the closing words in the last book of the Writings. We read:

In the first year of King Cyrus of Persia, to fulfill the word of the Lord spoken by Jeremiah, the Lord stirred up the spirit of King Cyrus of Persia so that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom and also in writing, saying: "Thus says King Cyrus of Persia: The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Let any of those among you who are of his people—may the Lord their God be with them!—go up." (2 Chron 36:22,23).

Cyrus makes a claim to having received a level of authority that means he can commission people to go to Jerusalem to build God a house there and he proclaims that God will be with them. Matthew seems to consciously report the Great Commission as not simply echoing but transcending Cyrus' commission.

And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority

in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” (Matt. 28:18-20).

The same themes:

- **Authority**, but an authority beyond that of Cyrus. Jesus has all authority within all creation.
- **Direction**: but not going to Jerusalem, but going from it and the scope is universal (all nations).
- **Presence**: the intimate and committed presence of Jesus is promised.

And what is being ‘constructed’? In both cases a temple, but the one that Matthew reports that Jesus is commissioning is one that is of disciples from all nations, with the presence of God filling all creation, the glory of God coming to cover the earth. This commission being the means by which the eschatological temple will be finally manifested. Thus the ‘Great Commission’ and the ‘Creation Mandate’ are one and the same, to multiply and fill the earth with the image of God (indicating how important humanity is). Images, biblically, point to what they image **and** draw what they image to themselves. ***‘Even so come, Lord Jesus.’***

## Ezekiel's temple vision

In the closing chapters of Ezekiel there are detailed descriptions of the eschatological temple that expressed the future hope. Those visions certainly influenced John in Revelation, who saw 'no temple' in the eschatological fulfilment, and given the texts in Ephesians and the structure of Matthew's Gospel it would be strange indeed if Ezekiel should be used to fuel a hope of a rebuilt temple in Jerusalem. I suggest we cast a look at Ezekiel as it will also underline why I do not seek to make OT prophecies into a literal fulfilment but seek to understand them as promise.

Ezekiel can be divided into two. The first part begins with Ezekiel in Exile and by the river he sees the glorious throne of God in Babylon. He understands that the idolatry in Israel has caused the glory to depart the Temple in Jerusalem. Into this he prophesied judgement; judgement on Israel, the nations and on Jerusalem, and within those proclamations of judgement we encounter a wonderful section of hope that God will give Israel a 'new heart' and will put his Spirit within them (Ezek. 11: 14-21). Judgement does not obliterate hope and hope pervades the second half of the book. In chapter 34 there is a transition that picks up on that restoration hope. God will restore; Ezekiel has spoken of judgement on Israel and the nations but he now speaks of hope for Israel and the nations... and beyond the nations for creation.

The hope for Israel is in a new David being raised up (surely that fulfilment is in Jesus as the 'Good Shepherd'). The nation, depicted as corpses lying in a valley, will be raised up with the breath of God within them. This restoration is followed by the judgement on the nations - symbolically referred to as Gog (the leader) and a group of nations - that oppose God. The re-ordering of the world is in view, and it is in that context we have those final visions of a renewed Temple. Ezekiel is shown around this temple which is beyond anything that has gone before, beyond Solomon's Temple.

The glory had departed the Jerusalem Temple with the Babylonian exile, but the glory returns to this new (future) temple in chapter 43. He then sees a mighty river flow from that future temple bringing life to the most dead of places. Trees will grow, their leaves providing healing.

It might be possible to postulate that this vision of the future temple is to be fulfilled literally in the future, but the whole vision seems beyond that. John in Revelation is deeply influenced by Ezekiel's temple vision, and he moves beyond even what Ezekiel recorded; John describes a city where there was no temple. He includes, among other aspects, the trees with healing in their leaves and at the conclusion of John's words he writes:

But the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in

it, and his servants will worship him (Rev. 22:3).

The throne of God that Ezekiel had seen had departed from Jerusalem returns to the Temple (Ezekiel). John does not have the throne return to the temple but it is within the city as a whole, for there is no temple for it to return to. John is influenced by Ezekiel, but goes beyond what we read in those final chapters of Ezekiel. We can also not that nowhere does Ezekiel say that the city is Jerusalem - the city is called:

And the name of the city from that time on shall be, The Lord Is There (Ezek.48:35).

For John God (and the Lamb) is there within the new Jerusalem. The presence of God in the new city that comes down from heaven (Revelation) is where God dwells. That city in Revelation is described without a Temple, and when measured it occupies the then known world. John, influenced deeply by Ezekiel, understands the fulfilment to be the presence of God ***within all creation***.

Ezekiel is best understood as describing a future hope for the restoration of all creation, and when we read New Testament texts they take what Ezekiel saw and take it even further. The future temple inside a future city disappears. The temple and city become one, and one can even say the city and planet become one.

An eschatological temple indeed. One that we interpret from the pages of the New Testament, so that we get

some idea of 'this is that'.

## Increased 'horizons'

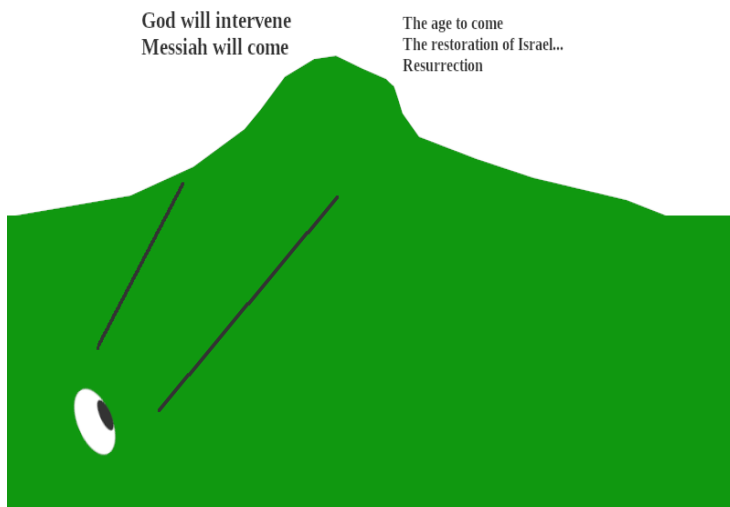
*[I owe the language and concept of 'horizons' to the work of Andrew Perriman; he expresses it differently to how I do; he sees the conversion of the nations as expressed in what we term 'christendom' as being an important element in the eschatological horizons.]*

If we say that 'Jews believed' or the 'Jewish hope was...' we do have to realise that the Jewish faith was not monolithic, so we have to make allowances for divergent beliefs. We see this with the hope for a Messiah. That could vary from a Messiah who would be royal, or a Messiah who would be priestly, or two Messiahs, or none! Somewhat varied. However, it is certainly not wrong to suggest that widespread among Jews was the hope for an intervention of God (whether through the agency of Messiah or not) that would put all things right and fulfil the hopes of Israel, thus restoring the kingdom to Israel.

This age would end and the age to come would be present (the word often translated 'eternity' is simply the word for 'age', eternal life being life of 'the age to come'; the shock of the New Testament was that the life of the age to come was being offered in the here and now).



There might be a process involved in this coming age becoming present but there would be a definite before and after. We can represent this as a 'one horizon' view:



The hope was simple - a one horizon view - that God would intervene. It might take place over a period of time but the result would be the end of this present (evil) age, the restoration of Israel, the rule of God over the nations, the kingdom of God would have arrived. Into that there was a predominant view that God would resurrect the righteous to benefit from the new era. Finally, it should be noted that all of the above would

occur **within** this world, the idea of this being a celestial experience in heaven was not held.

There were expectations and hopes for the intervention of God at various times in history and certainly there was a lively expectation expressed in the opening pages of the New Testament. John was asked directly if he was the Messiah. Jesus prophesied that in the years after the crucifixion there would be Messianic figures who would arise. The hopes were alive for the intervention of God for the overriding view was that in spite of a return to the land they were not free; Israel was an occupied land, the people were far from being 'the head not the tail'. A return to the land did not signify the end of the Exile, but God would restore their fortunes.

In 587 Jerusalem was destroyed along with the temple by Babylon. The majority of the people were taken to Babylon. The prophets spoke of the hope for the end of exile, and indeed after a span of time some did return, a temple was built, but it was inferior to the one that had been destroyed. In some ways the return to the land indicated the end of exile, but the oppression continued with the land becoming subservient to the Greek and then the Roman empire. The question continued as to when God would intervene.

The two disciples on the way to Emmaus verbalised how their hope had been in Jesus as being the one who would bring about the restoration, they were living (as

were the other disciples) with that one horizon viewpoint:

The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel (Lk. 24:19-21).

Within the Jewish world there were those who spoke of the exile as continuing, This perspective is explicitly stated in the inter-testamental work of Baruch:

So to this day there have clung to us the calamities and the curse which the Lord declared through his servant Moses (1:20)

and again

See, we are today in our exile where you have scattered us, to be reproached and cursed and punished for all the iniquities of our ancestors, who forsook the Lord our God (3:8).

So although there was a stream that rejoiced that there had been a return to the land after Babylon the verdict of history was of the Exile, at least in part, continuing. The same 'exile is continuing' is framed in Matthew's Gospel. Jesus will forgive *his* people (Jews) their sins (the reason for the Exile / oppression) and in his person God will be with them, for his name was to be Emmanuel.

The hope then we can express as looking to the future and somewhere on the horizon there would come 'the restoration of all things'.

## **The transformation of the one horizon perspective**

The coming of Jesus greatly changed the 'one horizon' view. What was not embraced was the death of Messiah; Messiah was to conquer all the enemies of God's people and purpose, not be conquered by them. The crucifixion was not visible as part of Messiah's journey to (for example) Peter, who saw Jesus as the Messiah, 'the Christ of God'. After proclaiming that Jesus was the Christ he then rebuked Jesus for indicating that death in Jerusalem lay ahead. Only a failed (and hence a false) Messiah could be sentenced to death. There was no concept within the one horizon perspective for the crucifixion, indeed it could not be so as anyone who was hung on a tree was considered 'cursed', and Messiah certainly could not be cursed (Deut. 21:23; Gal. 3:13).

The death of Jesus at Easter / Passover was not foreseen, indeed it was resisted, and when it took place it destroyed their hopes. The other side of the resurrection, the death on the cross was seen as the defeat of all enemies, even the ultimate enemy, death itself, and this defeat of death was essential as the

original story had been that death entered the world through the sin of humanity.

This new horizon gave sight to a God who intervenes not to destroy the perceived enemies of Israel but the spiritual forces that captivated Israel (and the nations). This immediately shifts our understanding of the promises of God within the Old Testament narrative. The resurrection taking place in a garden surrounded by death speaks loudly (as does the identification of Jesus by Mary as 'the Gardener') that the crucifixion was restoring the original commission, the possibility now of working to bring creation to a place of restoration was present.

We might take the various events from the cross, the resurrection, the ascension and pentecost as one event, indeed so they are as they all flow together, but if I separate out pentecost we really have a re-enacting of the creation of humanity. Taken from the dust, the life of God being breathed into them, so that they, now as community, might be a new humanity. We can take pentecost as a new horizon or part of the same horizon.

From the breathing into those first disciples a movement is released with the last word of Acts being 'unhindered', thus we are to understand a movement released that was always anticipated to continue, not a movement that would fade out. The breath is into a new creation, with the mandate from that first creation is picked up. Subduing the earth and multiplying. The growth and

expansion is clearly noted throughout Acts. We read phrases such as:

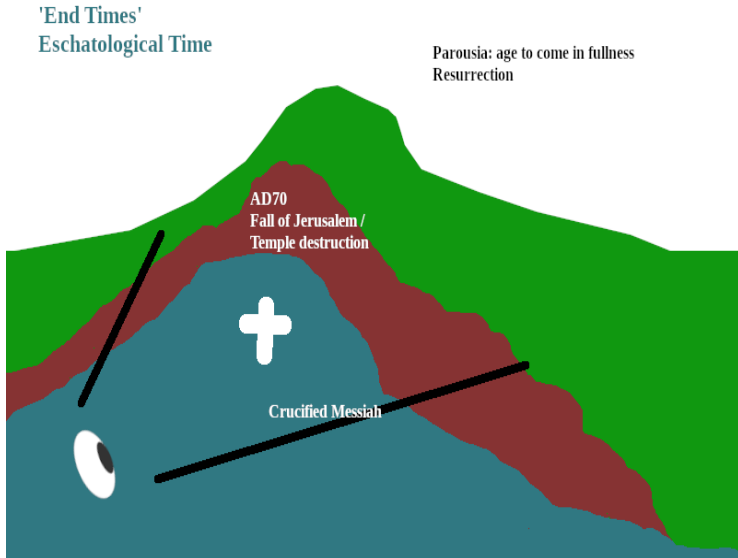
- Added to their number (Acts 2:47).
- But many of those who heard the word believed (Acts 4:4).
- A great number of people would also gather from the towns around Jerusalem (Acts 5:16).
- You have filled Jerusalem with your teaching (Acts 5:28).
- The word of God continued to spread; the number of the disciples increased greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith (Acts 6:7).
- Samaria had accepted the word of God (Acts 8:14).
- Proclaiming the good news to many villages of the Samaritans (Acts 8:25).
- He proclaimed the good news to all the town (Acts 8:40).
- Meanwhile the church throughout Judea, Galilee, and Samaria had peace and was built up. Living in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it increased in numbers. (Acts 9:31).
- This became known throughout Joppa, and many believed in the Lord (Acts 9:42).
- But the word of God continued to advance and gain adherents (Acts 12:24).
- Thus the word of the Lord spread throughout the region (Acts 13:49).
- This continued for two years, so that all the

residents of Asia, both Jews and Greeks, heard the word of the Lord (Acts 19:10).

- So the word of the Lord grew mightily and prevailed (Acts 19:20).
- Without hindrance (Acts 28:31).

Multiply and fill the earth, a new humanity with the breath of God living among the 'animals', both domestic and wild (beasts). Drawing from the creation narratives the nations were understood to be like animals and some of them - those who sought to oppress others - were described as beasts. This multiplication was taking place throughout all the nations of the earth, the earth was being subdued, not through some top-down force of will, but through a people who were understanding that they were to love, nurture and inspire a bending of powers to heaven's ways.

A transformation of understanding of that one horizon expectation is what we encounter in the New Testament. The cross was necessary to defeat the powers, to enable the release of those carrying the breath of the Spirit to partner together, and with heaven, in 'subduing the earth' and 'multiplying'.



## The ultimate horizon

There are two horizons beyond the pages of Scripture: one we might call the ultimate one - the *parousia*; the visible appearing of Jesus ('he will appear a second time' Heb. 9:28).

This of course is what most people mean when they talk about eschatology, but they often focus more on a set of events that will take place, with the return of Jesus the appendix to a set of events. It is questionable if a set of events that take place in the so-called end-times are indicated in Scripture. What is pointed to is not a set of



events but a final appearing of Jesus that ushers in the 'new heavens and the new earth', the time when all things are 'made new' (not 'all new things are made!'), that brings about the fullness of the restoration of all things.

I have written about an end-time horizon, from that first Easter to the breath of God into human clay on the day of Pentecost; and in the preceding paragraphs I have written of an ultimate end-time horizon: the *parousia* of Jesus. Between that first and final horizons lie one other horizon. It is important to grasp this for without that understanding we are likely to try and make some major extensive words of Jesus concerning Jerusalem's future fit into some end-time scheme. The words of Jesus (as recorded in Matt. 24; Mark 13 and Luke 21) are addressing a future that unfolds after the majority of Scripture has been written and some 40 years after Jesus died. It is important to note those events.

## **AD70: the fall of Jerusalem**

Prior to that final horizon breaking in on us there is an event that was ultra-traumatic, an event that certainly was not anticipated and certainly would never have been seen as a God-intervention. The concept of the total destruction of Jerusalem could only be understood as a major setback and a killer-blow to hope. The war with Rome (66-70AD) occurs after the majority of the

writings that we now have, that we term the New Testament, (I date Revelation, at least in the form that we have, as being later than 70AD and is addressing a different context, the fall of Imperial power), so we do not have details of that war within the pages of the New Testament but we do have clear predictions concerning it.

When we talk of the 'end of the age' we should not think primarily of the destruction of everything related to this world, but of such a transition from one era to the next that the world **as was known** would come to an end. Such was the effect of the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple in AD70. It felt like the end of the age, for it was the end of the age, the end of the ordering of the world as it was - it marked a significant before and after.

If we do not take note that many of the Scriptures relate to the period between the first Easter event and the fall of Jerusalem (40 years, the suggested length of a generation) we will universalise those Scriptures and miss the narrative that is being unfolded. Conversely, if we allow those Scriptures to speak into their context we will follow the trajectory of the narrative and allow all Scripture that was not written to us to be powerfully available as being for us.

Jesus in his prophecy concerning the fall of Jerusalem states that this will take place within a generation,

Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away

until all things have taken place (Lk. 21:32).  
Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away  
until all these things have taken place (Matt.  
24:34).

And in Acts as the proclamation is made to those within Jerusalem we find that there are texts that fit right into how the listeners are to respond. They are to save themselves from 'this generation' (Acts 2:40) otherwise they will be 'will be utterly rooted out of the people' (Acts 3:23). It is this context that we have to place the declaration that,

There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved (Acts 4:12).

Yes it has universal application, but the context is to Jews who could claim Abraham as their 'father', the one who was given the covenant of circumcision in which they were included. Something had shifted; Messiah had come; salvation was now in Messiah's name.

The fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple was devastating. In the closing days of the resistance the Romans were crucifying up to 500 at a time within sight of the walls; cannibalism was taking place inside the city; the corpses of those who died were being thrown over the walls into the valleys outside (one of which was the valley known as Gehenna - often translated as 'hell'). Jesus warned of what was to come, which Luke records in straightforward language that

Gentile converts who were not so accustomed to the language of Daniel ('the abomination that causes desolation') could understand:

When you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation has come near (Lk. 21:20).

*[Matthew, writing for those with a Jewish background does not decipher the language and simply writes: 'So when you see the desolating sacrilege, spoken of by the prophet Daniel, standing in the holy place (let the reader understand), then those in Judea must flee to the mountains...'. Luke interprets it for those not from that background.]*

For the generation after that first Easter there was truly the end of an age. Time was called, but as we read in Acts, the proclamation of the kingdom of God and the teachings about Jesus continued unhindered.

Conclusion to our introduction!

We have a long way to travel on our journey through the various Scriptures in order to come to a settled place of understanding and we will need patience. In this volume I have urged caution about trying to make (Old Testament) Scriptures fit into the world that we know. They were written into a context; they were not written to us. The nature of the prophecies are not to be understood as simple predictions but as promise that are expressed within their world; the fulfilments of those

promises will exceed the literal words.

We exercise caution as we read the text and must allow the New Testament to be the lens through which we read Old Testament texts of hope. **All** the promises are in Jesus, and it is for this reason that the first eschatological event, the first horizon is the crucifixion. The second horizon, the events that take place some 40 years later will be the focus of the next volume.