

Perspectives

explorations in theology and practice

Eschatology: Here not There

Volume 6 (December 2024)

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 sixth volume continues the theme of Eschatology, focusing on the direction of movement in Scripture. The opening section is a critique of Dispensationalism (best known for the ‘secret rapture’) which presents a movement of earth to heaven, something that I contend is the opposite of the biblical movement. The second section then presents the hope of the coming of the Lord and the restoration of all things, indicating a universal transformation, the fulfilment of God’s creational ‘project’.

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

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Eschatology: let's get the direction

Fundamental to Scripture and therefore to any understanding of eschatology is the **Jewish world view**, a view that does **not** set as a hope a better non-material life / disembodied spiritual existence elsewhere with a corresponding destruction of material creation. Embodied human existence is the norm and **also** the hope beyond death at some future point. As I wrote in an earlier volume we can suggest that Scripture is a little too vague concerning life after death for our liking, but it is very clear as to what can be expected when God conclusively intervenes (what the NT terms the *parousia* of Christ).

This volume will be in two parts as so much of eschatology has been influenced by a fairly recent view (Dispensationalism) which connects to a fundamentally ancient Hellenistic (Greek) world view that held a negative view of material substance - hence physical existence was all that separates us from a better life; death being the doorway to that life, and physical earthly life being more or less a prison (summed up in the play on words that they used '*soma sema*': 'the body a tomb'). The main way in which the Dispensationalist view has been influential is to present a belief in the 'secret rapture' of the church. A recent book written to substantiate such a viewpoint was advertised as:

This unique book showcases the compelling evidence for the reality of the Rapture, arguing that it is an actual Biblically prophesied global event that in God's timing, is set to happen at a given point in our near future. The Rapture of the Church

will inspire you with hope, build your faith, and help make sense of the growing chaos that is overwhelming our world. Most of all, it'll help ensure that you are not left behind.

At the heart of the rapture is a belief in a movement away (snatched away) from earth to heaven and in the latter part of this volume I will seek to show that movement in Scripture is from heaven to earth. Two immediate points that can be made are 1) that this removal of the church (3½ or 7 years prior to the *parousia*) is a recent perspective and 2) is based on a reading of 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 that removes the text from the question Paul is answering and from the language used. There are other passages drawn in to support the secret rapture view but it is my opinion that once the framework is set the 1 Thessalonians passage is absolutely central. Therefore I will start with that text then move on to look at how the system of interpretation developed.

What of those who have died? (The question)

Here is the passage (with my emphases added to highlight certain aspects that I will discuss further):

But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, **about those who have died**, so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God **will bring with him** those who have died. For this we declare to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will by no means precede those who have died. For the Lord himself, with a

cry of command, with the archangel's call and with the sound of God's trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be **caught up** in the clouds together with them **to meet** the Lord in the air, and so we will be with the Lord forever. Therefore encourage one another with these words.

Fundamental to the text is that Paul is seeking to answer the question 'about those who have died'. What follows is his answer to that question; it is **not** an answer to such questions as 'will we escape the tribulation?!'

The question itself should raise questions for us. Why would they be concerned about those who have died? Ask most evangelical Christians the question 'and what about those who have died?' and they would come back with an answer that they had learned from their very early days of understanding the 'gospel'. The answer would be that for those who had personally responded to Jesus' death on the cross that they have escaped hell-fire and have gone to their heavenly destination. They have gone before us to a 'better place'. Whatever truth is in the answer this is not the response of Paul to the question being posed. There seems to be two possibilities as to why the Thessalonians are asking the question about 'what about those who died?' Either Paul omitted to teach that 'they are now in heaven' or that understanding was not central (or perhaps even a part) of the gospel that he taught. The first option (he forgot to teach them the 'going to heaven when you die') can be quickly ruled out for he does not simply respond to the question with that answer. It can only be that Paul's gospel did not centre on life after death as understood in popular western theology. In the first chapter of this letter we read,

[O]ur message of the gospel came to you not in word only but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction; just as you know what kind of persons we proved to be among you for your sake. And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for in spite of persecution you received the word with joy from the Holy Spirit, so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia but in every place your faith in God has become known, so that we have no need to speak about it. For they report about us what kind of welcome we had among you and how you turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath (1 Thess. 1:5-10).

They had received the message and their faith was strong. I can only conclude that the Thessalonian believers are asking their question because the concept of ‘they are in a better place’ was not central (although Paul seems to have believed that those who had died were currently ‘with the Lord’ he does not use that to ‘comfort one another’).

The question, though, makes sense when one approaches the text assuming that the Thessalonians had been taught an understanding that was in line with a Hebraic belief that one day God would intervene and put right all wrongs with this new order being expressed **within this creation**. Hence there was always a question begging to be asked concerning those who had died prior to that intervention but had lived righteously before God. When God comes to reward the righteous (those alive and present on earth) a natural

question was: but if there were those who had already died prior to God's intervention and those people had been righteous they would not be present (here) to be rewarded, thus they would inevitably miss out. The response, based on **the faithfulness of God**, was that God would **resurrect them bodily** so that they would experience their reward at the time of God's intervention. Those who had died would certainly not miss out!

This was Paul's view, indeed as a Pharisee it was a very central belief, and it is that ancient Jewish belief, understood through the lens of Jesus, that is central in this passage. It seems that the Thessalonians believed in the soon coming of Jesus (as perhaps did Paul with his phrase 'we who are alive at his coming') and the inevitable question that was in their minds was 'will those who have died before Jesus comes miss out?' We can note that Paul does not approach the question of those who have died with 'of course they are in a better place, they have passed on to their reward' (such a response could well have been valid, but would not have answered the **reason** for their question). The words that we are to encourage ourselves with is effectively that we will together enjoy the blessings of the eschatological age, we will enjoy it here when Jesus returns. 'Here' not 'there' and 'then' not 'once we die' but 'when he comes'. We have to look elsewhere for what happens after death and we might have to conclude with a measure of dissatisfaction. Scripture does not always address our question, and we have to make the big shift from 'saving souls' to the restoration of all creation. (In a later volume I will seek to address the post-death and also ultimate destinies.)

Taking the passage with this Jewish-oriented background we note that central to Paul is the core belief that, 'since we believe that

Jesus died and rose again', indicating that what Paul will continue to write is based on the cross and resurrection; death has been overcome, demonstrated by the resurrection of Jesus who is the 'firstfruits', the one who went first into the future, so that the future for all those in Christ might be guaranteed. Resurrection guarantees that those in Christ are destined to come with him at the *parousia*, he will 'bring... those who have died' with him when he comes, indeed when the question posed about what future will those righteous who have died we note that Paul says they will not miss out and our (those alive) future will not come into place before theirs. I do not consider Paul is using some sort of stopwatch to time who gets what first, simply he is making the point that the activity begins from heaven with the appearance of Jesus with the saints who have already died. They will be raised, then comes the transformation for those who are alive at his coming (and Paul uses the phrase 'we who are alive' probably indicating that he anticipated he would be alive at the coming of the Lord).

It is the next phrase that is used to support the idea of the rapture: 'we will be caught up in the clouds with them to meet the Lord in the air'. To take the passage as teaching a 'secret rapture' of believers snatched away is both to remove it from the Hebraic world-view and to take it in a way where there is no clear ancient evidence that it was ever understood in that way, The movement described is from heaven to earth, and that it is in answer to 'what about those who have died' and **Paul uses language from the culture of his world, language that described the emperor visiting the city;** in applying that language and imagery to the *parousia*, we first have to understand the mirror situation of the emperor's visit. When the emperor visited a city (also known as a *parousia*) he would come

with his entourage and those who were Roman appointed dignitaries would exit the city, to meet the emperor and then accompany him into the city. They would be clearly seen as those who were to be honoured, having met the Emperor outside the city to enter it triumphantly with the Imperial party. This ‘meeting’ (*apantesis*) is the same term as is used here. We find the same word used in Acts 28:15 when believers came from Rome to meet Paul outside the city to enter the city with him; the meeting place was not the final destination, in Paul’s case and the believers who met him, Rome was their final destination.

The brothers and sisters from there, when they heard of us, came as far as the Forum of Appius and Three Taverns **to meet** us (Acts 28:15).

The word is also used in the parable of the wise and foolish virgins who are informed that the bridegroom is on his way so they are to come out to ‘meet’ him (Matt. 25:6). In these two other biblical accounts as well as in the seemingly obvious allusion to the arrival of the imperial presence it is clear that the meeting takes place outside the destination and that the meeting party then escorts the host **into** the city. The movement out (or in the Thessalonian passage ‘up’) is **immediately reversed** and the triumphant entry has as its destination the city, or in the case of Jesus’ return, the destination is the earth.

Given the imperial setting the readers would not have understood the final destination as anything other than ‘here’, and they would have understood that when the great day of fulfilment came those who have died would be present ‘here’.

There is one other word that we should explore, though it is in reality only incidental given the context. It is the word 'caught up' (*harpazo*). It carries the sense of something happening that is sudden and not initiated by the person it occurs to - it is used when the people want to 'seize' Jesus and make him a king (John 6:15). It is an appropriate word to use here of the action that takes place. Unlike the emperor coming and those who are the dignitaries have foreknowledge of his coming and they move outside the city of their own volition to meet him, here though the coming that is predicted is unannounced (there is no announcement in the sense of 'Tuesday at 3:00pm'); it is sudden, everything happens in a moment, hence those who are going to re-enter the city with the Lord will be snatched in that moment, in the twinkling of an eye. Given that Paul is using the imperial visit as the pattern I am not persuaded that we should seek to press every detail, I personally doubt that there is an 'up into the clouds, turn around and back we come' in a **literal** physical sense. It all happens instantly and there is total physical transformation - those who have died receive resurrection, those alive experience physical transformation. As Paul puts it in 1 Corinthians,

Look, I will tell you a mystery! We will not all die, but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed (1 Cor. 15:51,52).

The concept of the rapture is that it will leave those 'left behind' wondering where all the others have gone (images of driverless cars come to mind!), hence it is often termed the 'secret rapture' but the Thessalonian passage with its 'cry of command, with the archangel's

call and with the sound of God's trumpet' hardly suggests something secret! The Lord descends from heaven and will come through the 'air' and this is where the meeting takes place (en route to the Lord's destination) - there is no indication of saints being taken to heaven, with the **only** mention of heaven being where the Lord comes from. **Paul is not suggesting a rapture but resurrection.** The Thessalonian passage cannot be used to suggest a snatching away from the world and its troubles, but answers the one perplexing question for those believers as to what will happen to those who have died when the Lord comes to restore all things here. The answer is resurrection.

The hope of the resurrection (not simply life after death) is central to Paul and to Scripture ; as he states before the Jewish council,

I am a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees. I am on trial concerning the hope of the resurrection of the dead (Acts 23:6).

And repeated in a non-Jewish context Paul says in front of King Agrippa,

And now I stand here on trial on account of my hope in the promise made by God to our ancestors, a promise that our twelve tribes hope to attain, as they earnestly worship day and night. It is for this hope, Your Excellency, that I am accused by Jews! Why is it thought incredible by any of you that God raises the dead? (Acts 26:6-8).

Resurrection was the central hope, for (most) Jews and for Paul the follower of Jesus as Messiah.

[The consensus of opinion is that there is no mention of the 'rapture'

in church history prior to 1830. Appeals have been made that a number of Early Church writers wrote concerning the rapture, for example Irenaeus (120-202AD) and the writing 'The Shepherd of Hermas' (140AD) are two early writings that are appealed to. My response is a) none of the writings that are quoted are unambiguous so 'escaping the tribulation' probably refers to escaping through death, rather than rapture, b) the bigger concern is the biblical / Hebraic world-view that remains which is the thrust of this booklet - eschatological movement is not one of escape from a troubled world but of an appearing in this world of the shalom of heaven. There are no clear writings that can be produced that unmistakably reference a secret rapture until what develops post 1830.]

Dispensationalism: its rise and development

The 'secret rapture' originally belongs within a scheme of teaching that is known as 'Dispensationalism' which developed from around 1830. Under this teaching the final years of this world will result in a one-world government under antiChrist, those years being of 'great tribulation' and the hope for the Christian is of escaping through being caught up to heaven, either prior to that time of Tribulation or in the middle of that period. There are those who believe in a Rapture who are not Dispensationalists, but virtually all who do believe in a Rapture are influenced by Dispensationalism, and the influence of Dispensationalism through books and even films is pervasive. *[As noted above there are no unambiguous references to a 'rapture' prior to this and it is without dispute that all current teachings on the rapture date from 1830 and develop in the decades that follow.]*

Beliefs shape our responses and behaviours and there is something about a hope of escape that can be very appealing, but we have to test any such belief against Scripture. It feeds from a perspective of 'being saved from', but if the thrust of Scripture is saved **for** a purpose of aligning with the work of heaven we can see how any 'removal' does not align well with Scripture. Jesus in the great prayer that is recorded in John 17 prayed for the protection of the disciples but he made it clear he was not asking them to be removed from the place of conflict,

I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one (John 17:15).

In considering the development of this rather recent approach to eschatology it is worth looking at the historic socio-political context. The predominant view during the 17th and 18th centuries was that of post-millennialism, post millennialism being the belief that the spread of the gospel would bring in a golden age. The rule of Christ would be manifest after (post) the work of evangelism. So in the 17th and 18th centuries there was an optimism that prevailed concerning the prospective success of world-evangelisation. The writings of the revivalists Jonathan Edwards and George Whitefield were prominent in spreading the belief that the millennium (the golden age for the gospel) was arriving. The gospel was expected to soon prevail and it would not be long before there would also be a conversion of the Jews to Christ.

There is however a shift that began to take place as the optimism was challenged by world events. In a short space of time there were three significant wars in the late 18th and early 19th centuries that brought a reality check.

- The war of independence (1775-84)
- The French revolution (1789-93)
- The Napoleonic wars (1809-15).

In this period there were also a number of major changes within a number of the European monarchies; there was widespread unrest in Britain, and the wider socio-political arena was equally unstable.

Napoleon was setting family members on various thrones in Europe – his vision was to become ‘supreme king of kings and sovereign of the Roman Empire’. A number of students of prophecy speculated that he could indeed be the antiChrist and that there would be a revived Roman Empire in fulfilment of Daniel 2. All of this unrest fuelled interest in things prophetic and *brought a revival of pre-millennial expectation*, that being the expectation that Jesus would return to set up his kingdom on earth as the spread of the gospel was failing and darkness was visibly increasing. (‘Pre-’ meaning before: Jesus would have to come before there would be any real manifestation of his kingdom on earth.) So in that context historically a re-newed interest in eschatology and the return of Christ began to develop: it is during this period that Adventism arose with Joseph Miller saying that Christ was to return on March 21, 1843; and, the Jehovah’s Witness movement developed with Charles Russell saying that Christ would set up his ‘heavenly kingdom’ in 1914.

A shift from the optimism of the triumph of the Gospel to a pessimistic view that the last times had arrived and the powers of darkness were prevailing now developed. The context of those years produced a loss of hope for transformation.

There are two early figures that are at the root of Dispensationalism

One is a controversial Scottish minister and the other one of the main influences within the Plymouth Brethren movement. As we look at this again note that – relatively speaking – Dispensationalism and a belief in the Rapture is a very recent phenomenon.

The first figure, **Edward Irving** (1792-1834), licensed as a church of Scotland minister in 1815, came to London to Caledonian Chapel in Hatton Gardens in 1822. He proved to be both controversial and popular. In 1825 he addressed an audience with the title of ‘Babylon and Infidelity Foredoomed’. In that he challenged the post-millennial optimism and spoke of a ‘series of thick-coming judgements and fearful perplexities before the return of Jesus Christ.’ He was disparaging about the success of mission work on many lands, including Southern Europe as judgments were about to fall there. Irving was in no doubt that the Gentile Church had failed, seeing the judgements of Matthew 24 as applying to the church. There was though an expectation of a Jewish Dispensation that would soon come:

When the Lord shall have finished the taking of witness against the Gentiles... he will begin to prepare another ark of testimony... and to that end will turn his Holy Spirit unto his ancient people, the Jews, and bring them unto those days of refreshing... This outpouring of the Spirit is known in Scripture by ‘the latter rain’. (Edward Irving, preliminary discourse, “on Ben Ezra”, *The Coming of Messiah in Glory and Majesty*, by Juan Josafat Ben-Ezra a converted Jew, Translated from the Spanish, with a Preliminary Discourse (London, L.B. Seeley & Sons, 1827), pp. 5-6.)

In 1826 Henry Drummond opened up his home at Albury Park to a group of 20 invited guests to discuss issues concerning the immediate fulfilment of prophecy. Irving had already developed a 'Society for the Investigation of Prophecy' and that society was soon subsumed under the conferences that were taking place at Albury. The conferences became an annual event from 1826-30 and became increasingly more speculative on issues of prophecy and the interpretation of Scripture. Alongside the conferences a publication began, '**The Morning Watch**'. Irving died in 1834 otherwise he might have become the main continuing voice in developing Dispensationalism. This, however, was to become the task of J.N. Darby.

John Nelson Darby (1800-82)

Although Darby did not acknowledge his sources most scholars point to Irving as a very significant influence on his developing views. Darby was a charismatic figure, a dominant personality, a persuasive speaker and was greatly zealous for his dispensationalist beliefs to spread. He personally founded Plymouth Brethren churches (the non-denominational denomination(!)) that he was the originator of) as far away as Germany, Switzerland, France and the United States, and he also translated the entire Scriptures.

The churches Darby planted (with the seeds of a separatist premillennial dispensationalism) in turn sent missionaries to Africa, the West Indies, Australia and New Zealand, so that by the time of his death in 1882, around 1500 Plymouth Brethren churches had already been founded world-wide.

His views also came to influence the Bible and Prophetic

Conferences associated with Niagara and other centres in North America from 1875. The shift of interpretation that Darby brought has been noted:

Roy Coad, writing a history of the Brethren Movement, admits that

For the traditional view of the Revelation, another was substituted. (Roy Coad, *A History of the Brethren Movement* (Exeter, Paternoster, 1968), p. 129.)

James Barr is considerably more forthright and argues that premillennial dispensationalism was,

...individually invented by J. N. Darby... concocted in complete contradiction to all main Christian tradition... (James Barr, *Escaping from Fundamentalism* (London, SCM, 1984), p. 6.)

It is almost certain (and Coad claims this) that the 'futurist view' of the end times, so evident in Darby's writings can be traced to the work Irving had translated: "The Coming of the Messiah in Glory and Majesty".

Clarence Bass concludes that with respect to Darby's views that:

Such a concept is singularly missing from historic Christian theology... Darby is pointedly correct in stating that this came to him as a new truth, since it is not to be found in theological literature prior to his proclamation of it. It is not that exegetes prior to his time did not see a covenant between God and Israel, or a future relation of Israel to the millennial reign, but they always viewed the church as the continuation of God's

single program of redemption begun in Israel. (Clarence Bass, *Backgrounds to Dispensationalism* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1986) pp. 26-27.)

It is here that we note an important point is being made: Darby does not see the church as the continuation of God's single redemptive program, rather the church becomes a parenthesis in the work of God. The purposes of God centred on Israel (past) and will again (future).

Darby began publishing his prophetic speculations in 1831. Both he and Edward Irving began to postulate two stages to Christ's imminent return. First, there would be an invisible 'appearing' when Christians would meet Christ in the air and be removed from the earth, a process which came to be known as 'the rapture of the saints'. Then with the restraining presence of the Holy Spirit removed from the world, the antiChrist would arise and the seven year tribulation would begin. His rule would finally be crushed only by the public 'appearing' of Jesus Christ.

Darby had an increasing influence on other venues including the Powerscourt Conferences in Dublin held in the 1830's (he was originally an ordained Anglican priest in Dublin), in New York in 1868, London in 1873, Chicago in 1875, and then culminating in the Bible Conference Movement and the Niagara Conferences of 1883 to 1897. Regular topics covered included speculations on the Second Coming.

Regarding the rapture, Darby admitted as much that his doctrine of the rapture was an innovation, the result of 'express revelation', indeed he seemed quite pleased with the reaction to it.

Although his influence on Brethrenism in Britain waned, Darby's influence in North America increased and he made seven journeys there over a twenty year period. It has been estimated that he spent 40% of his time in the United States during those 20 years, and had considerable influence on leaders such as James H. Brookes, Dwight L. Moody, William Blackstone and C. I. Scofield, as well as on emerging evangelical Bible Schools and Prophecy Conferences.

George Marsden, in his history of the rise of fundamentalism between 1870 and 1930, says (and note the names he lists):

This new form of premillennial teaching, imported from England, first spread in America through prophecy conferences where the Bible was studied intently. Summer conferences, a newly popular form of vacation in the age of the trains, were particularly effective. Most importantly, Dwight L. Moody had sympathies with the broad outlines of dispensationalism and had as his closest lieutenants dispensationalist leaders such as Reuben A. Torrey (1856-1928), James M. Gray (1851-1925), C. I. Scofield (1843-1921), William J. Erdman (1833-1923), A.C. Dixon (1854-1925), and A. J. Gordon (1836-1895). These men were activist evangelists who promoted a host of Bible conferences and other missionary and evangelistic efforts. They also gave the dispensationalist movement institutional permanence by assuming leadership of the new Bible institutes such as the Moody Bible Institute (1886), the Bible Institute of Los Angeles (1907), and the Philadelphia College of the Bible (1914). The network of related institutes that soon sprang up became the nucleus for much of the important fundamentalist movement of the twentieth century.

Dispensationalist leaders, in fact, actively organised this antimodernist effort. Notably, they oversaw the publication between 1910-1915 of the widely distributed twelve-volume paperback series, *The Fundamentals*. (George M. Marsden. *Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids, Michigan, Eerdmans), 1991. p. 40.)

If it had not been for the connection with these influential leaders in North America, Dispensationalism might well have simply become a minor perspective on eschatology. In that list of names that Marsden quotes is 'C.I. Scofield' who became the author of the Scofield Bible, the Bible that became the singularly most powerful tool in enabling a Dispensational interpretation of Scripture to take root.

Cyrus Ingerson Scofield (1843-1921)

There are many controversies surrounding the life of Scofield, and questions regarding his integrity have never been adequately answered. However, the key issue in this article is to do with his popularising of the Dispensational viewpoint.

Scofield was a disciple of James Brookes (minister of Walnut Street Presbyterian Church, St. Louis) who was influenced by J.N. Darby, and Scofield was subsequently a major influence on D.L. Moody (and it was Scofield who officiated at his funeral).

Scofield took the text in 2 Timothy 2:15 about 'rightly dividing the word of truth' to indicate that there were divisions within Scripture that were to be rightly discerned. This was the foundation to his understanding of the different dispensations in Scripture. The Moody Bible Institute and Dallas Theological Seminary gave their support to

the book *Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth* that Scofield wrote, thus giving it a major boost. (And since those early years the book has been often reprinted.)

The influence of the Scofield Bible (Scofield Reference Bible (1917); The New Scofield Study Bible (1984)) cannot be underestimated. The 'genius' of it was to explain the 'how' to interpret the Bible within its own pages. There was no need for an add-on book, the whole system was self-contained.

The following quotes will illustrate the influence of the Scofield Bible:

The most important single document of all fundamentalism... which has been the normal religious diet of many millions of readers. Its name itself makes clear what it is, A private interpretation... Both serious biblical scholarship and the established traditions of the major churches were alike ignored. (James Barr, *Escaping from Fundamentalism* (London, SCM, 1984), p. 6.)

The Scofield Reference Bible became the Bible of fundamentalism, and the theology of the notes approached confessional status in many Bible schools, institutes and seminaries established in the early decades of this century. (Craig A. Blaising 'Dispensationalism, The Search for Definition' in *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church, The Search for Definition* ed. Craig A. Blaising & Darrell L. Bock (Grand Rapids, Michigan, Zondervan, 1992) p. 21.) *[We also can note that Blaising himself is a (progressive) Dispensationalist, so he is not making this statement as a direct criticism of Scofield's work.]*

The Bible itself sold phenomenally. In the USA alone by 1945 there had been some 2 million copies that had been sold.

Scofield's seven dispensations

Although there are differences between the Dispensations in the original Bible of 1917 and the revised work in 1984, the underlying shape remains the same. Here I outline the newer list:

1. Innocence (Gen. 1.28)
2. Conscience or Moral Responsibility (Gen. 3.7)
3. Human Government (Gen.8.15)
4. Promise (Gen. 12.1)
5. Law (Ex. 19.1)
6. Church (Acts 2.1)
7. Kingdom (Rev. 20.4)

To state that these are divisions imposed on Scripture I hope is clear. (The clear division in Scripture is between the Law and the Prophets and the gospel that came through Christ. We read that 'all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John' (Matt. 11:13). But in the Scofield division, Jesus is ministering under the dispensation of law!)

Under this scheme the Gospels are for the Jew, so for example the Lord's Prayer and the phrase 'forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us' is not applicable to the church as it is based on 'legal ground'. The Letters then are for the church age, and the age of grace will end with the apostasy of the church. When the church age ends in failure and apostasy it will be replaced by a revived national Israel who will enjoy the blessings of

the final kingdom dispensation. In making the divide between Israel and the church Scofield can even insist that Israel is the wife of Yahweh, while the church is the bride of Christ. (Scofield, Scofield., fn. 1, p. 922.)

The end of the church era (or dispensation of grace) will be the apostasy of the church, with the confusion of a false unity based around the papacy. The Babylon of Revelation takes two forms: an ecclesial-Babylon and a political Babylon, with the latter eventually destroying the former (Rev. 17:15-18).

There are obvious contradictions to Scripture in the system developed, but this work has shaped the way for those who follow, and many have built on his work, making the basic underlying approach popular and accessible. Perhaps one person worth highlighting is Hal Lindsey (of 'The Late Great Planet Earth' fame).

Hal Lindsey (1929-2024)

Writers such as Hal Lindsey have sought to explain current events as the clear fulfillment of Scripture. The foundation of the state of Israel in 1948 being a key fulfilment and from that have developed an expectation of a revival among Jews and the imminent return of Christ. He was a prolific writer and claimed to be able to interpret current events in the light of prophetic Scriptures, and became a major influencer on the Dispensationalist believers.

His books include (some of which are rewrites of earlier titles):

- Late Great Planet Earth (1970)
- There's a New World Coming (1973)
- The 1980's Countdown to Armageddon (1980)

- The Final Battle (1994)
- Planet Earth 2000 A.D. (1994, & 1996)
- Apocalypse Code (1997)
- Planet Earth: The Final Chapter (1998).

It is inevitable that there have been revisions regarding the predictions within the book (this is inevitable whenever there is an attempt to make current events fit into biblical prophecy!). Here is one such revision (the first quote from a publication in 1980 and the second from 1998):

The goal of this book is not merely to show which prophecies have been fulfilled since Late Great came out in 1970, however. Even more important, it is intended to analyze what will occur in the decade we have just entered... The decade of the 1980's could very well be the last decade of history as we know it. (Lindsey, *The 1980's Countdown to Armageddon* (1980), p. 7.)

This book doesn't dwell on the past, it looks to the future. Because we are so close to the final, climactic stages of world history, it is considerably easier today for the student of Bible prophecy to see with some accuracy what's coming next... I am certain... The Second Advent will occur in the next few years – probably in your lifetime. (Lindsey, *Planet Earth: The Final Chapter* (1998), p. 3.)

The first book written in 1980 predicts the 80s as the likely final decade; the second book written in 1998 pushes it a few years forward!! Given that we are now years beyond 1998, an inevitable new prediction is required! He has consistently held to the

interpretive perspective that the current generation is the one that the Bible is talking about when it comes to the fulfilment of Scripture:

It is clear that the Bible can't be talking about any other time in history but today. No man knows the day or hour this dramatic climax is going to occur. But there can be little doubt that this is the generation. It could start tomorrow. (Lindsey, Planet Earth: 2000 A.D. (1994), p. 151.)

He interprets current nations as being the nations in the Bible such as the Palestinians are the Philistines of Scripture, Lebanon is the Tyre of old. (Lindsey, Planet Earth: The Final Chapter (1998), pp. 2-3.) This is without warrant, and ignores the context of the biblical writings which are not written **to** us nor about our **era**.

Lindsey interprets the apocalyptic visions of Revelation and are to be taken literally (or at least literal once re-interpreted through Lindsey's grid). John, he suggests, did not have language to describe what he saw, so with Lindsey's guidance we know (for example) that John's 'locusts' are really helicopters:

'[H]orses prepared for battle' are heavily armed attack helicopters, 'crowns of gold' are the helmets worn by pilots, and the 'sound of their wings' are the thunderous sound of many attack helicopters flying overhead. (Lindsey, Apocalypse Code (1997), p. 42.)

And the 'bow' wielded by the antiChrist(?) in Revelation 6:1-2, is apparently inter-continental ballistic missiles. (Lindsey, Apocalypse Code (1997), p. 72.)

This type of interpretation is what makes the books both popular and

also dangerous. Popular because the reader now has inside information as to the progress of history, and dangerous because there is no desire to bring about any level of change to the world we live in. Within Lindsey's worldview the world is hurtling toward destruction, but wonderfully the believer will be raptured from the scene thus avoiding all the troubles. Regarding celebrations for the millennium Lindsey wrote:

Just for the record: I'm not planning to attend. In fact looking at the state of the world today, I wouldn't make any long-term earthly plans. We may be caught up to meet Christ in the clouds, between now and then - just as I described in an earlier chapter. Could I be wrong? Of course. The rapture may not occur between now and the year 2000. But never before in the history of the planet have events and conditions so coincided as to set the stage for this history-stopping event... I want to spend the final pages of this book discussing what I expect to see happen in the hours and minutes we have left. (Lindsey, Planet earth: 2000 A.D., p. 306.)

The imminence of the 'end-times' can be seen in Lindsey's assertions that the antiChrist is alive, in Europe, and imminently getting ready. Here are a number of quotes from Lindsey's writings (the 'EEC' being the precursor for the European Union):

I believe this man is alive today—alive and waiting to come forth... I believe this leader is alive somewhere in Europe; perhaps he is already a member of the EEC parliament (Lindsey, Late Great Planet Earth (1970), p. 113.)

He will immediately rise to prominence in the EEC and from that post he will offer the world amazing solutions to all its complex and terrifying problems. Because of his superhuman powers and his solutions to the world's conflicts, the anti-Christ will be chosen to lead the EEC. (Lindsey, *The 1980's Countdown to Armageddon* (1980), pp. 15, 106.)

Heading up what will evolve into a 10-nation confederacy will be a man of such magnetism and power that he will become the greatest dictator the world has ever known... And he is alive today. There is a potential dictator waiting in the wings somewhere in Europe who will make Adolf Hitler and Josef Stalin look like choir boys. Right now he is preparing to take his throne, inflaming his soul with visions of what he will be able to do for mankind with his grand schemes and revolutionary ideas... Is alive and well on planet Earth... Lets go meet him. (Lindsey, *The 1980's Countdown to Armageddon* (1980), p. 109.)

I am not writing simply to discuss all the details of Lindsey (and other author(s)), merely to try and track the development of the theology and also to show how embedded it has become within much Christian thought. The whole system does not have to be bought into but one can see how much it has shaped what we might term 'popular' eschatology. And at the heart of the scheme is a belief in the rapture.

The Dispensationalist program for the end

Daniel's vision of the 70 weeks (Dan. 9:24-27) is seen to be a key. Sometime toward the end of the 69th week the anointed one will be

cut off - this being a reference to Jesus. There then ensues a gap in the time sequence with the 70th week remaining future. (Each of these 70 'weeks' being a period of 7 years, thus there being a 7 year period that has not yet begun but is future.) [This parenthesis is absolutely key to the Dispensational pattern, although nothing in the text gives this indication.]

In the parenthesis the church age is experienced. And at the end of the church age there is the secret rapture (church being taken to heaven), and then the final week begins to unfold. [There are some who hold that the church is raptured half way through this final week, so 3 1/2 years into the period.]

The Supper of the Lamb will take place in heaven during these last 7 years, the presence of the Spirit is removed from the earth, and in this setting antiChrist appears and in the middle of this final week he comes and destroys the rebuilt Temple in Jerusalem. He will then gather the armies together to fight Israel and the battle of Armageddon will take place.

Following that we have the Second Coming of Jesus who destroys these forces that have gathered against Israel (and this is understood as a literal battle). Through the persecution that took place Jews will now be able to receive Jesus as Messiah.

Following this battle the Millennial kingdom of 1000 years will be established with all nations subject to the Davidic king, Jesus.

During this millennial reign people will be born and also die, and some will not turn to Jesus, so that at the end of the period when Satan is released one more time he is able to deceive the nations,

and there is a final battle (Rev. 20:7-9).

Following this there is a final judgement, and eternity then dawns with the church enjoying God's Presence in the new heaven and Israel the promises to David in the kingdom on the new earth.

[There are variations on the scheme I have laid out here, but this is sufficiently typical that when there is another pattern that differs, it can still be seen to be shaped Dispensationally.]

None of the above is clear from Scripture, hence the interpretive grid has to be employed, the writings of such exponents have to be read in order to understand clearly what is at best obscure and to be honest not present in any of the texts.

Summary of the growth of Dispensationalism

- Irving and Darby at the roots.
- The buying into the scheme by D.L. Moody the very influential north American revivalist.
- Coupled to the publication of the Scofield Bible (and off-shoots such as Charles Ryrie study Bible) where the way to interpret Scripture is placed within the very pages of Scripture.
- The reaction to liberalism and the publication of the twelve-volume paperback series, The Fundamentals (1910-15) – influenced greatly by Dispensational teachers.
- Pentecostalism which borrowed its eschatology from Dispensationalism. Even great parts of the Charismatic movement has done the same.

[In the mid-90s I studied the eschatology of the new church

movement (a MS is available at: <https://3generations.eu/resources>) and noted in a study on the restoration of the church a question in the margin (what about Laodicea?). This showed the tension. The eschatology that was known was Dispensationalist... Laodicea being the 'lukewarm' church and a description of the last church, being a letter to the church in the final phase on earth... but the article was on the restoration of the church. I see this again in places today. Revival, restoration of the five-fold ministry, but no consistent teaching on eschatology either to moderate the (over-the-top-optimistic) belief or to counteract the pessimism of Dispensationalism.]

Dispensationalism took a major hold on evangelicalism through these people and events that I have sought to outline, and if we consider that there is a popular appeal at the heart of it through helping us interpret current events that indicate the time of the rapture is close we can see how insidious and dangerous it becomes. The mode of interpretation begs the question whether the Bible is being studied as a book written to the people of its era with an attendant culture using language from that era or is it using a methodology of seeking to find some tenuous link between events and certain biblical texts. We might term the latter newspaper exegesis and is certainly not unfair to call it eisegesis (reading into the text).

Charisma magazine published an article in April 1991, entitled 'The Gulf War and Beyond: Respected Church Leaders Address Questions About War, Peace, Prophecy and the Middle East'.

One leader interviewed in this article said this:

Isaiah 21 speaks of the fall of Babylon. Verse 1 mentions a storm coming from the desert: “As whirlwinds in the South (the Negeb) sweep through, so it [the judgment of God by hostile armies] comes from the desert” (Amp.). This could be Operation Desert Storm!

[For those that are able to recall, the American response was called Operation Desert Storm - the name given to the US land and air operation.]

At first glance, this may sound quite reasonable; there seem to be some remarkable parallels between Isaiah 21 and the Gulf War. But we need to ask if the war of the late 20th Century was what Isaiah had in mind. When we do so we can see the parallels are simply coincidental.

Why should the terrors of Revelation be around the corner... why not past? – why not the bubonic plague that killed 1/3 of the population of Europe... or why not another interpretation all-together?

It is this frightening influence (with the effect often being fear not faith releasing) that makes this approach so disturbing.

I have covered the material above on the rapture (and wider on Dispensationalism) as its influence at a popular level is so widespread but the much bigger theme is that of the eschatological hope that Scripture presents. This is the real test for eschatology and rapture theology only has substance if it fits well within the world the Scriptures were written into and the underlying Hebraic understanding of the heavenly movement from heaven to earth. On

those issues I consider it dismally fails.

Any claims that rapture theology has a history prior to 1830 does not carry weight. That God will preserve his people through any tribulation is present, and at times there seems to be the suggestion that people will escape through death, but there is no compelling evidence of a two-stage coming of the Lord. Even if there was teaching of that nature we would still have to test the teaching against Scripture. Darby certainly did not make the claim that he was teaching what had been present in the church prior to him. It is, of course, possible he simply did not acknowledge his sources but it is more likely that his views were essentially his own and novel, fuelled by the culture of his day and his way of reading (into) Scripture. He certainly is the source that others have worked from and I consider two huge moves have solidified a misguided belief that 'this is what Scripture teaches': namely that of a Bible that instructs us how to understand the various texts (Scofield Bible and those similar) and the creation of novels (and films) such as the 'Left Behind' series. The study Bible effectively makes the notes the Bible; the novels embed what is not claimed to be the 'truth' as the true guide to what is to come.

The direction and goal of Eschatology

The opening lines of Genesis 'in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth' that acknowledges creation as being from God with clear indications of God's purpose within that framework, and the end of the story with John in Revelation saying that he saw 'a new heavens and a new earth' give us a 'from this' to 'that'

trajectory. Any understanding then sits between the past and the future, so it is not the destruction of creation but the fulfilment of God's 'creation project' that we are to anticipate. In this trajectory we have a 'from' this at the beginning 'to' and this at the end. Such as

- From the clear separation of heaven and earth to the seamlessness of heaven and earth.
- From a couple to a multitude that no one could number.
- From God visiting at the evening time to the presence of God forever dwelling with humanity.
- From humanity being created for immortality (but failing) to becoming incorruptible and immortal through resurrection.
- From a holy place (Eden, Israel, Temple, Holy of Holies) to the universal presence of God so that there is no 'separate' Temple.

It is the big narrative of Scripture that sets the scene for eschatology, which is beyond 'who is saved' and what happens after death or what about heaven and hell, to a renewal of creation, within which righteousness dwells. Eschatology (last words) relates firmly to protology (first words).

We read a summary of what we wait for in 2 Peter,

But, in accordance with his promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home (2 Peter 3:13).

So much of Scripture is story, hence it is not surprising that a healthy eschatology suggests that we should be looking for a fitting end to the big story of God the Creator who is revealed as God the

Redeemer - the one who does not come to destroy but to bring all things to a fitting completion and manifestation of restoration. An eschatology that is not connected to the story of God's creation, that we read of in Genesis, would be strange. If God is not a redeemer then it could feasibly be logical to suggest that he will destroy that which he created, but God is a redeemer and the witness of Scripture is of a restoration of all things.

The hope in the prophets when they communicate about restoration is not simply that of the people re-aligning with God but that the effect will be manifest within creation. We read such phrases as 'the desert will blossom', 'the trees of the fields will clap their hands', 'the wolf will lie with the lamb'. When restoration takes place the impact will go beyond simply humanity to include the wider creation.

Heavenly citizenship?

The song from a culture and time that is distant for most of us had the lyrics,

This world is not my home
I'm just a-passing through
My treasures are laid up
Somewhere beyond the blue

Written in the world of harsh slavery the lyrics are indeed understandable, and there is a truth that this world as it is is not our home ('in' but not 'of' this world), but the concept of 'going somewhere' as our hope I do not believe is the core of biblical eschatological hope.

In Philippians Paul does write that 'our citizenship is in heaven' and

that could be taken as some sort of affirmation of the lyrics quoted above, but it would only do so if 1) we assume Scripture is written to us and therefore fail to understand how the readers would hear such language; 2) if we failed to read the wider context.

Here is the text,

But our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ. He will transform the body of our humiliation so that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself.

Therefore, my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved (Phil. 3:20-4:1).

The wider context is that in the light of being citizens of heaven we expect a Saviour to come 'from there' not that we expect to go! And I include the opening verse of chapter 4 with its 'therefore', in other words in the light of our heavenly citizenship, we are to 'stand firm'. However, we understand the term 'heavenly citizenship' Paul did not use it in a way that was to encourage the Philippian believers to hope for a better life somewhere else.

If we wish to understand how those believers would have understood the term 'heavenly citizenship' we can look at the historic culture of that day, and of that locality. (This is why we first understand that Scripture was not written **to** us, though it is written **for** us.)

Those born free, or who were granted citizenship in Philippi, were

citizens of Rome. We know the phrase 'all roads lead to Rome', and that had a great truth in it, as it drew many people toward that centre. It did, however, cause certain issues for as the population increased it put pressure on the infrastructure such as water and sanitation. To curb the Rome-ward movement a policy was created where one could live in certain other cities and although living away from Rome one was granted to be a citizen of Rome. One's focus was to live in that city (Philippi being one such city) in such a way as to seek to help that city conform to Roman culture and values. Philippi was to look like Rome. With that background the believers would have understood that the call of the *ekklesia* was to enable Philippi to look somewhat like heaven! A subversive and challenging adventure!

Just as the natural citizens were not encouraged to look for an escape from Philippi to go to Rome, so Paul is not encouraging the believers to set their hope on 'heaven'. The Philippian citizens looked forward to the day when the emperor would come... the believers to the appearing of the Lord from central HQ.

The text when looked at in the wider textual and historical context sits right within Scripture; the movement we are longing for is that from heaven to earth and this sets our 'task' in context, not one of dictating but of seeing the 'atmosphere' change so that there is a likeness of a specific geography to heaven. The church is indeed 'political' but not in the sense of dictating nor in the sense of party-political.

Pauline passages - hope beyond the personal

A central passage in Paul's letter to the Romans clearly includes

creation as sharing in redemption. Our hope as believers is for something to happen beyond us,

I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God, for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its enslavement to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning together as it suffers together the pains of labor, and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope, for who hopes for what one already sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience (Rom. 8:18-25).

The narrative undergirding Paul's thoughts here seems to be that of Israel under bondage waiting to be freed through the Exodus, and Paul applies this waiting motif to creation that has been subjected to bondage through humanity's sin. From the beginning of Genesis we read that the 'earth will be cursed because of you'. Creation follows humanity and at the *eschaton* will follow humanity's bodily redemption into its freedom. *[Note that the destiny for humanity is not a bodiless existence but an embodied one.]*

Another passage that records an early proclamation following Pentecost. Peter says,

Repent, therefore, and turn to God so that your sins may be wiped out, so that 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 (Acts 3;19-21).

Heaven is not a permanent home for Jesus, for he is present there *until*... until the restoration of all things. God is going to restore all things, the 'all things' of creation, this is beyond all peoples. When Jesus returns from heaven there will be the restoration of all things. The hope again is focused on a future when what has been tarnished will be restored, Peter quoting the hope of the prophets, as mentioned above, so that even the trees of the fields will rejoice!

Paul in his letters to the Colossians and the letter to the Ephesians uses similar language,

In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and insight he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth (Ephesians 1:7-10).

The scope of redemption (the plan for the fullness of time) is to gather all things together, things in heaven and on earth, not simply a gathering of all believers and certainly not to gather those believers to heaven! As we will quote later a vision of a 'new heaven and a new earth'.

In the parallel letter to the Colossians Paul writes,

He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross. (Col. 1:18-20).

In Ephesians ‘to gather all things’ and in Colossians ‘to reconcile all things’ and in both letters we read that the scope of this is ‘things on earth and in heaven’. The scope of redemption is universal, with an order of righteousness established, of all things restored.

Jesus gave to the disciples a bright hope when he said to them,

Jesus said to them, “Truly I tell you, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man is seated on the throne of his glory, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel (Matt. 19:28).

The ‘renewal of all things’. Here Jesus uses the word (*palingenesia*) translated as rebirth or regeneration, the same term also used in Titus 3:8 and translated ‘rebirth’.

[H]e saved us, not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy, through the water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit.

The testimony of Scripture seems clear and unequivocally moves us away from a future that is expressed in a non-material heavenly

existence, with everything material destroyed. There is one passage that might be called upon to suggest 'the burning up / destruction' of this creation. It is to that I turn.

2 Peter 3: 10-13 - destruction?

I first will quote verse 10 from the Authorised (KJV) version, although it might not be the version that one uses, it translates the text in a way that is often quoted,

But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night; in the which the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat, the earth also and the works that are therein shall be burned up.

'Burned up' indicates some serious end to this world, and although I will go on to examine the underlying text, I quote it as above so that the popular view of the end of 'planet earth' is stated clearly.

Below is the wider text and I will follow with some comments,

But do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day. The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish but all to come to repentance. But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be destroyed with fire, and the earth and everything that is done on it will be disclosed.

Since all these things are to be destroyed in this way, what sort of persons ought you to be in leading lives of holiness

and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set ablaze and destroyed and the elements will melt with fire? But, in accordance with his promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home (2 Peter 3:8-13)..

Language! An indicator as to what is being described here is to consider what Peter has written earlier in the chapter. Writing about the flood he says that the world of that time ‘perished’

They deliberately ignore this fact, that by the word of God heavens existed long ago and an earth was formed out of water and by means of water, through which the world of that time was deluged with water and perished. But by the same word the present heavens and earth have been reserved for fire, being kept until the day of judgement and destruction of the godless.

It was indeed a day of judgement and the world of that time perished - not a reference to the destruction of the material world but to the destruction of that ungodly ‘world order’, or we might say, the world as it was known. There was a judgement by water, but the judgement to come will be a judgement by fire. The former judgement and the latter are paralleled and also contrasted; in the former the world (as material creation) continued, so there is no reason to think Peter is presenting a view that contrasts to the views related to the redemption / restoration of all things. In both instances we are dealing with figurative (apocalyptic) language. Judgements are in view, one past that was not final, one future that is final and of a different order to the former one.

These texts are using language from Isaiah 66 where there is the promised new heaven and new earth that comes through the fire of God's judgement on all ungodliness.¹⁵

For the Lord will come in fire,
and his chariots like the whirlwind,
to pay back his anger in fury,
and his rebuke in flames of fire.
For by fire will the Lord execute judgement,
and by his sword, on all flesh;
and those slain by the Lord shall be many...
For as the new heavens and the new earth,
which I will make,
shall remain before me, says the Lord,
so shall your descendants and your name remain.
From new moon to new moon,
and from sabbath to sabbath,
all flesh shall come to worship before me,
says the Lord.
And they shall go out and look at the dead bodies of the
people who have rebelled against me; for their worm shall
not die, their fire shall not be quenched, and they shall be an
abhorrence to all flesh (Is. 66:15, 16, 22-24).

The fire is connected to judgement and the other side is a cleansed creation, expressed as 'new heavens and new earth' corresponding to Peter's hope that 'in accordance with his promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home'.

[SideNote: this text in Isaiah is also the text that lies behind the NT phrase of 'their worm shall not die' and certainly that phrase cannot be taken to imply non-ending torment as is clear from this passage.]

The fire is not describing destruction but cleansing.

And we can take this further, going beyond the KJV of 'burned up'. From the mid-1970s onwards there has been a move away from this translation of 'burned up' due to the discovery of older and better manuscripts than were available in the 17th Century. All the older manuscripts agree (and some translations have continued with 'burned up' not because of the older manuscripts but simply to follow what has been embedded in our thinking as this is what the text means) that the verb underlying what will happen to the 'works' that are within the earth is the verb *heurisko*, meaning to find; here in the passive - 'to be found'. The history of the manuscripts which were copied by hand can be explained by a later scribe 'correcting' the mistake and replacing εὕρεθήσεται (*heuresetai*) with κατακαήσεται (*katakesetai*), probably influenced by the prevailing view in the medieval times that the earth would be destroyed, thus 'the works in the earth being found' would not make sense.

The fire of judgement will purify and the works done in it will be revealed / found / disclosed / discovered. The text is not speaking of destruction but follows the theme of Scripture of a testing by fire that will come. It lines up well with Paul's words of warning in 1 Corinthians,

Each builder must choose with care how to build on it. For no one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid; that foundation is Jesus Christ. Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw—the work of each builder will become visible, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each has done. If what has

been built on the foundation survives, the builder will receive a reward. If the work is burned, the builder will suffer loss; the builder will be saved, but only as through fire (1 Cor. 3:10-15).

Fire and works - the same link. The imagery (and context) of Paul is that of valuable material being used for the building of the Tabernacle / Temple. The works are parallel to the material used for the OT building for God's dwelling place and if the work done is suspect it will prove to be 'wood, hay and stubble' and of course burned up. Only the valuable material of 'gold, silver and precious stones' will come through the fire. This is what Peter is referring to - the works that were done in it will be tested, tested by fire. The text is not indicating the destruction of earth.

Peter makes the statement that we wait for the new order ('new heavens and new earth') where righteousness will dwell. This term 'heavens and earth' are what is known as a merism, where two elements are taken as they are at opposite ends of the spectrum to indicate the inclusion of the entire spectrum. Such as 'I searched high and low' does not mean I only searched high and I only searched low but I searched everywhere. This is the hope for a whole new order, for the fulfilment of what was in the beginning, when God created 'the heavens and the earth'.

John in Revelation uses the same words,

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more (Rev. 21:1)

This is the eschaton, and the words used for 'new' we could equally translate as 'renewed' (the word is *καινός*, not *νέος* which could indicate something brand new). This (re-)newing is consistent with the other Scriptures such 'restoration of all things'. Creation is not to be burned up but to be renewed, to get a major overall through the testing of fire. We should not simply suggest it is this world with a quick clean up, for this is a major transformation involved, but we certainly should not suggest that it is set for destruction while we, the redeemed, continue to exist bodiless in an immaterial context! That would not be consistent with the hope that is continually expressed in Scripture. And finally to quote Revelation 21:5 indicating the renewal of all things,

See, I am making all things new

'All things', and it does not say God makes all new things, but consistent with the work of redemption there is a renewal to come to all things at the *parousia*.

Eschatological movement: practically

Beyond the scope of this article is the tying together of 'the works being found' and the new Jerusalem coming down from the throne of God' is the understanding that only God builds that city that emerges without a separate temple, but the concept of works strongly that we are to supply the building material.

With the movement to be from heaven to earth:

- We centre our hope where Scripture puts it - the appearing of

Jesus not the disappearance of the saints. Our prayer is 'maranatha' not 'get me out of here'.

- We should resist the desire to fit news into 'signs of the last days'. All wars, conflicts, sadness and death are signs - signs that this world is not as it should be, but we should be hesitant about seeking to plot them on some timeline. Throughout history people have done this, but it proves only to be a distraction, and moves us away from the hope and expectation of the return of Jesus to a fascination with events.
- We continue to act in line with the movement of Scripture from heaven to earth and so pray that the kingdom of heaven come.
- We look for signposts now of what is then. We do not look for what is perfect but that which is something of an image of the future when there will be no sadness nor weeping. All manifestations of justice need to be rejoiced in.
- We act now in the light of the future expectation. The speculative details we avoid - and if we have an open future there are no details to speculate about.
- We by faith know every good work is of eternal value; cups of cold water contribute.