

Eschatology: Understanding the End of Days

F.F. Bruce

[p.43]

Eschatology, from the Greek *eschatos* meaning "last," is traditionally the doctrine or study of the "last things." The "last things" for an individual are death, resurrection, judgment and the afterlife; in a wider sense, however, they comprise the end of the world and all that goes with that concept.

Today the word eschatology is more often used to denote the study of the "last days"—a biblical term for the closing period of human history; or of some epoch of human history'. In Genesis 49:1 Jacob calls his sons around him to receive his blessing before he dies: "Gather yourselves together, that I may tell you what shall befall you in days to come." The last four words (two in Hebrew: *a-kha-RIT ha-ya-MIM*) rather accurately reproduce the sense of the Hebrew: the blessing seems to portray the situation of the tribes of Israel before and during the time of David. But the Septuagint, the oldest Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible—from the third century B.C.E.*—translates those same Hebrew words as "in the last days," giving them an eschatological twist.

Balaam uses a phrase very similar to "in the last days." You will recall that when Balaam was hired by the king of Moab to curse the Israelites, he is compelled to bless them instead; he then says to the king, "I will let you know what this people will do to your people in the latter days" (Numbers 24:14). The events he foretells were probably fulfilled in the time of David and his successors. But again, the Septuagint translators render this "in the last days" or "in the end of the days." In giving the phrase this eschatological flavor the Septuagint translators may have been influenced by interpretations current in their own time.** In Daniel 11:30, for example, Balaam's prophecy of an attack by "ships of Kittim" (Numbers 24:24) is reinterpreted as referring to the Roman fleet.

Several texts from Qumran—the Dead Sea Scrolls—take it for granted that the biblical prophets foretold of the period in which the Qumran sect's leader, the Teacher of Righteousness, arose in preparation for the new divine order. In these texts the "star" which, as Balaam said, "shall come forth out of Jacob" (Numbers 24:17) is interpreted not as King David (probably its original reference) but as the expected Messiah of Israel. So also Rabbi Akiva (about 132 C.E.) hailed Simeon ben Koseba, the leader of the Second Jewish Revolt against Rome (132-135 C.E.), as Balaam's "star out of Jacob," that is, the Messiah. Akiva's designation led to Simeon's being surnamed Bar-Kokhba, "son of the star." In each of these examples—the Septuagint, the Qumran texts and Rabbi Akiva—the interpreters preferred an eschatological interpretation of the Scriptures, applying to them what they believed were the last days—that is, the last days of the current world order. They would have agreed with Rabbi Hiyya (early third century C.E.) who said that "All the prophets prophesied with regard to the days of King Messiah" (Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 99a).

* B.C.E. (Before the Common Era) and C.E. (Common Era) are the religiously neutral terms used by scholars, corresponding to B.C. and A.D.

** If this prophecy could be reinterpreted in this way to refer to later events, phrases like "in the latter days" would be reinterpreted to refer to the "end of days."

A few years after Akiva, Justin Martyr, an early church father in about 150 C.E., identified the "star out of Jacob" with Jesus; he was probably not the first Christian teacher to do so.

In Ezekiel 38:16 Gog's invasion of the land of Israel is to take place "in the latter days"; here the original intention is eschatological. According to Ezekiel, when earlier prophets had spoken of a coming invader whom God would send against his land, it was Gog they had in mind, although they did not call him by that name (Ezekiel 38:17). This kind of prediction is continued in texts from Qumran; to Ezekiel's Gog there is added the "Assyrian" in Isaiah 10:5, the "Chaldeans" of Habakkuk 1:6, the "king of the north" of Daniel 11:21-45 and other invaders of Israel—all identified with the last gentile oppressor of Israel, the Roman Empire (usually called the "Kittim" by the Qumran commentators).

In the New Testament the eschatological note is all-pervasive. Paul speaks of himself and his readers as those "upon whom the end of the ages has come" (1 Corinthians 10:11). In Hebrews 9:26, Christ is said to have appeared "at the end of the age."

Jesus began his Galilean ministry by announcing that the appointed time had arrived and the kingdom of God was at hand. Many who heard him would have related his announcement to Daniel's prediction that when successive pagan empires had run their course, God would "set up a kingdom that will never be destroyed" (Daniel 2:44).

After Jesus' resurrection his disciples, according to Luke, asked if he was going to restore the kingdom of God to Israel. Luke replied that, in a few days, the disciples would receive heavenly power when the spirit of God came upon them (Acts 1:8). The Holy Spirit is thus an eschatological sign.

When Peter came upon the followers of Jesus on the first Christian Pentecost—the

[p.44]

Seventh Sunday after Easter, when the Holy Spirit descended on the disciples in the form of tongues of fire (Acts 2:1-4)—Peter addressed the crowd that had been attracted by the strange phenomena accompanying this experience. Peter explained that these things fulfilled a divine promise given through the prophet Joel: "And it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my spirit on all flesh" (Joel 2:28). But Peter changed Joel's "afterward" to "in the last days" (Acts 2:17), implying that the presence and power of the Spirit signified the arrival of the last days and indeed, in Christian usage "the last days" over the whole interval stretching from arises first coming to his second coming.

Before this outpouring of the Spirit occurs, Joel tells us, certain portents will appear, heralding the great and terrible day of the Lord (Joel 2:31). "The day of the Lord" is a recurring motif in the Old Testament; it is the day when the God of Israel will act decisively for the vindication of his cause. In particular, it is the day when God will establish righteousness and punish wickedness, especially if it is found among his own people (Amos 3:1-2, 5:18-20). As Joel's words are understood in Acts 2:22-40, the day of the Lord is the consummation of the new age inaugurated by the passion and triumph of Jesus; on that day everyone who calls on him will find deliverance from the judgment that it brings.

In other New Testament writings the day of the Lord marks the glorious advent of Christ (e.g. 1 Corinthians 5:5, 1 Thessalonians 5:2, 2 Thessalonians 2:2); indeed, it is also called "the day

of Christ" because it is the day when he comes to bestow judgment and reward (Philippians 1:10; 2:16).

Since the glorious return of Christ did not take place within the lifetime of the first Christian generation and the course of world events did not come to an end then but continues on, some reinterpretation of the original eschatological message has been called for. When theologians speak of "realized eschatology," "inaugurated eschatology," "proleptic eschatology" and so forth, these terms denote various forms of this reinterpretation. But Jews and Christians still maintain their eschatological faith when they say, in these words from the Nicene creed or in similar words, "I look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come."

© 1989 *Biblical Archaeology Society*. Reprinted by permission from *Bible Review* (<http://www.bib-arch.org/>)

Prepared for the Web in May 2008 by Robert I. Bradshaw.

<http://www.theologicalstudies.org.uk/>
