

# Covenant Eschatology and the Hymenaeian Heresy

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On the Web site [www.chalcedon.edu](http://www.chalcedon.edu) in an article dated February 14, 1999, Andrew Sandlin cited 2 Timothy 2:17f, and called the full preterist view "Hymenaeus Resurrected." He called full preterists heretical preterists. At the R. C. Sproul Prophecy conference in Florida, February 1999, Keith Matheson also appealed to 2 Timothy 2 to condemn what he called the "Hymenaeian Heresy."

In 2 Timothy 2, Paul told Timothy that Hymenaeus and Philetus were teaching, "*that the resurrection is past already, and overthrow the faith of some.*" Is Covenant Eschatology a revival of the Hymenaeian Heresy, or are those who appeal to this text guilty of a hermeneutic of anachronism? I will consider several areas of study to answer this question.

## How is This Possible?

One of the most critical questions about 2 Timothy seems to have completely escaped the notice of the adversaries of Covenant Eschatology. If the resurrection is a time ending, earth burning, history ending event, when the material body of every person who has ever lived is instantaneously reconstructed and raised out of the ground, not to mention the sea, just how in the name of reason could anyone convince anyone that this had already occurred? Paul dealt with the same issue in Thessalonica (2 Thessalonians 2:1-2).

When Paul confronted error he always met issues head on. If Hymenaeus was teaching the wrong concept of the resurrection, Paul could have easily negated him by showing that he was teaching the wrong *kind* of resurrection. Paul could have said, "Brethren, the resurrection is a physically observable event! Hymenaeus is teaching that it is a spiritual event. Hymenaeus does not even understand the nature of the resurrection," but he did not. Why? The only reason can be that Paul and Hymenaeus were essentially on the same page in regard to the *nature* of the resurrection. Paul did *not* correct the concept of the parousia/resurrection, he corrected *the chronology*.

Is it not abundantly clear that Hymenaeus was not saying that time had ended? He was not saying earth had burned up, he was not saying all of the physically dead had come out of the ground. As Bruce says, "*It cannot be supposed that the Thessalonians...could have been misled...that the events of 1 Thessalonians had taken place.*" True — if one insists on a literal fulfillment of 1 Thessalonians 4. Thus, as Knight suggests, "*Their teaching apparently related the resurrection only to the inner spiritual life.*"

The fact that Paul corrected Hymenaeus' chronology, and not his concept of the nature of the resurrection, is absolutely critical to any discussion of 2 Timothy, and yet, it is totally ignored by those who oppose Covenant Eschatology. It is time for those who would appeal to 2 Timothy 2 to try to explain how it is possible, given their literalistic view of resurrection, that anyone could believe that it had already happened.

## The Issues Involved

Another issue that has seemingly escaped the attention of those who attempt to use 2 Timothy 2 against Covenant Eschatology is verse 19. Paul continues his discussion of the Hymenaeian

controversy by giving encouragement to those in Ephesus, *"Nevertheless, the foundation of God stands, having this seal: 'The Lord knows those who are His,' and, 'let every one who names the name of Christ depart from iniquity.'"*

Knight and others have noted that Paul quotes here from the LXX of Numbers 16 and the rebellion of Korah. What relationship does that rebellion have to the situation in Ephesus?

The issue in Numbers was one of authority, a question of identity (Numbers 16:3-5). Was Moses to be the sole leader, or would others share in that authority? The issue in Timothy was, *"Nevertheless...The Lord knows who are His"* (2 Timothy 2:19). It is a question of identity.

Let's look a little closer at Hymenaeus to see the significance of Paul's assurances in 2 Timothy 2:19.

### **Who Was Hymenaeus and Where Did His Teaching Come From?**

Was Hymenaeus a gnostic as proposed by Adam Clark? Lenski says this proposal is fairly common but claims the gnostic philosophy, *"does not extend back into Paul's time."* There is considerable debate about Lenski's claims. However, I suggest that Hymenaeus and Philetus were Judaizers.

The Judaizers accepted Jesus as the Messiah. They accepted the church as the kingdom. The Judaizers gladly accepted Jesus; they also clung tenaciously to the Old Law, Old Jerusalem, and the Old Cultus. They demanded that the Gentile converts, "keep the Law of Moses and be circumcised to be saved" (Acts 15:2). They, therefore, believed that the promised Messiah and His New World incorporated the Old World into the New. The New World was inclusive of the Old.

The Old World could never deliver from death. The Old Law was the strength of sin (Romans 7:7f), and the ministration of death (2 Corinthians 3:6f). The Law was weak through the flesh, and could never deliver from the law of sin and death (Romans 8:1-4). While it was perfect for the purposes intended, the Law was imperfect to save (Romans 5:21; Galatians 3:32-21; Hebrews 8). For the Judaizers, therefore, to insist that Christ's New World was inclusive of the Old Law was destructive to the salvation by grace that Paul taught. The "resurrection," Christ's New World of Life and righteousness, could not be complete while the Old World remained (Hebrews 9:6-10). For Hymenaeus to suggest that the New World was perfected, inclusive of the Old World, therefore, was to say that the resurrection was past, and over throw the faith of some by insisting on the continued observance of the Old Law. It was to continue in Law, and not go on to Grace, and they could never be perfected by the Law (Galatians 3:1-5).

The Judaizers, e.g. Hymenaeus, insisted that Old Covenant Israel's things continued valid, that the Old World identified the true people, with the addition of Jesus as Messiah. The Judaizers believed that Israel remained the chosen seed, and that Gentiles had to be incorporated into that Old World. Paul however, through the Spirit, realized, *"they are not all Israel who are of Israel"* (Romans 9:6f). The question had to be settled as to whether the Old World remained as the chosen, or if Jehovah was in the process of creating a new people with a New Name (Isaiah 65:13-19). Who was the True Seed (Galatians 4:22f)?

The controversy therefore, between the Judaizers and Paul was a question of identity, one of authority, just like the story of Korah. How was the controversy with Korah settled? We return to Numbers 16, where Paul has taken us.

## God's Sign of Sonship

In the rebellion of Korah, Jehovah told Moses to inform the people, *"Depart now from the tents of these wicked men. Touch nothing of theirs, lest you be consumed in all their tents"* (Numbers 16:26). The Lord was to give a sign that would settle the issue of His chosen. Moses said, *"If these men die naturally like all men, or if they are visited by the common fate of all men, then the Lord has not sent me. But if the Lord creates a new thing, and the earth opens its mouth and swallows them up with all that belongs to them, and they go alive into the pit, then you will understand that these men have rejected the Lord"* (Numbers 16:29f). (It is interesting that God calls the judgment of Israel in A.D. 70 an "unusual act," meaning it would be something they did not expect, Isaiah 28:21.) As Moses said, *"The Lord will show who is His, and who is holy"* (Numbers 16:5). The Lord would settle the question about the identity of His chosen by bringing judgment on the rebellious.

This issue of son ship is the burning issue in much of the New Testament. In Romans, Paul taught that the Abrahamic seed of the flesh was not true Israel (Romans 2:28f; 9:6f). In Galatians 4, his famous allegory is about son ship, who are the chosen seed of Abraham? Is it the physical seed of Abraham or the spiritual? Paul's declaration is emphatic, *"the Jerusalem that now is, and is in bondage with her children"* (Galatians 4:25), was Old Covenant Israel according to the flesh, and was to be cast out (Galatians 4:30). In Philippians 3:2, Paul addresses the church and says, *"We are the circumcision,"* a contrast and claim against the Judaizers as well as Israel.

In Revelation, the issue is one of son ship and identity. Jesus assured the churches in Smyrna and Philadelphia that He was aware of their conflict with the synagogue of Satan and, *"those who say they are Jews, but are not, for they are liars"* (Revelation 2:9; 3:9). The Lord assured them He was about to come and, *"I will make them come and worship before your feet, and to know that I have loved you"* (Rev 3:9). The fall of Babylon, the city "where the Lord was slain" would be the ultimate sign of the identity of God's true people. The Lord would bring judgment on those claiming to be the Sons of God, but who were in fact rebellious against God's chosen.

Franklin Camp noted, "The fall of Jerusalem settled the question as to who are the sons of God. The struggle between the Jews, Judaizing teachers, and the apostles, especially the apostle Paul, runs through all the epistles." The truth of this statement can hardly be denied. And there can be no doubt that in 2 Timothy 2:17-19 one of the issues is the identity of the Sons of God, for Paul takes note of Hymenaeus and then says "Nevertheless, God knows who are His." Paul was saying that in spite of Hymenaeus' claims, God knows His children.

Thus, Paul's use of Numbers contains the implicit but clear warning of impending judgment on the "false children." Just as God gave Israel a sign, the destruction of Korah and his followers, that identified the true Sons of God, He was about to give another sign to confirm the identity of the True Israel. He would destroy the Old World, thus removing any argument of the Judaizers, Hymenaeus and his followers, not to mention the Jews, for maintaining that the Old World remained the focus of God's attention. The Judaizer's argument that God had completed His work, that the resurrection had been perfected and included the Old World, would be definitively shown to be false.

## The Time and Nature of the Resurrection

How would it be possible for Hymenaeus to teach what he did? Hymenaeus clearly thought he had support for his views. Was not Jesus the firstfruits from the dead, and if the firstfruits had come then had not the harvest time arrived? Did not Paul himself proclaim that resurrection from the dead was a reality already (Romans 6:3-5, 9-11; Ephesians 2:1-5; Philippians 3:9-16; Colossians 2:12-13;

3:1f)? Had Paul himself not told the Romans "reckon yourselves to be alive from the dead" (Romans 6:10)? Had he not told the Colossians that they had risen with Christ? Hymenaeus, therefore, ostensibly had somewhat of a case, for as Max King has well stated, "The question is not whether the eschatological resurrection had begun, but whether it was a completed or consummated work of the quickening Spirit?" Hymenaeus could indeed effectively prove that the time had come for the resurrection.

Did Hymenaeus have grounds for saying the time for the resurrection had come? He knew Jesus had come at the end of the age (Galatians 4:4; Hebrews 1:1; Hebrews 9:26), and that the resurrection was to occur at the time of the end (Daniel 12:2-4). Thus, the time for the resurrection was present! He could hardly have been unaware that even Paul said, "*the end of the ages has come upon us*" (1 Corinthians 10:11). Was he not also aware that Peter said Jesus was, "*ready* (Greek, *hetoimos*) *to judge the living and the dead*"? (1 Peter 4:5), and "the time has come for the judgment to begin at the house of God" (1 Peter 4:17)? Thus, Jesus and his own apostles clearly taught that the time for the resurrection was present.

In addition, Daniel predicted that the end time resurrection was to be associated with the judgment of Israel (Daniel 12:2-7). Scripture is clear that Israel's salvation would come through judgment (Isaiah 4:4; Joel 2-3; Zechariah 12-14).

In Isaiah 24-25 Jehovah promised that at the time of the judgment of the "city of confusion" (24:10), for breaking "the everlasting covenant" (24:5), He would "swallow up death forever" (25:8). Thus, resurrection and the judgment of Israel are inextricably linked in prophecy, and Hymenaeus even had a Jerusalem catastrophe to substantiate his claim that if resurrection was associated with judgment on Jerusalem, then it had, in fact, occurred.

As a matter of fact, there were two specific events that had happened in Jerusalem which might have been used to convince the Thessalonians and Ephesians the day of the Lord had already come. Josephus tells us that sometime between 48-52 A. D. there was a riot in the Temple area of Jerusalem in which over 30,000 people were trampled to death in one day. Earlier, between 39-41 AD, occurred the infamous incident in which Caligula commanded that his statue be erected in the Temple at Jerusalem. This incident brought the nation to the brink of war. Either of these events, or both combined, could have been the basis of the claims of Hymenaeus. The incident involving Caligula's statue could have been understood as fulfillment of Paul's teaching about the son of perdition (II Thessalonians 2:5), and the catastrophe involving all the deaths could have been understood as Christ's wrath on the Temple. Thus, the time was right, and events in Jerusalem suggested that the time had actually come. But there was more.

Hymenaeus had even more evidence. The resurrection is inseparably linked with the establishment of the kingdom. This fact is sadly, and egregiously, ignored or denied by the amillennialist. Yet scripture is plain, death would be destroyed when Jehovah established His rule in Zion (Isaiah 24-25).

John saw the vision of the resurrection as the time when, "*the kingdoms of this world have become the kingdoms of our Lord and of His Christ*" (Revelation 11:15). Daniel saw the time when the books were opened as the time when the Son of Man received the kingdom (Daniel 7:9-14). John saw the time of the opening of the books as the time of the resurrection (Revelation 20:12f). Paul said Christ was about to (*mello*), "judge the living and the dead at His appearing and kingdom" (2 Timothy 4:1), and the judgment of the nations is depicted as the time when the Son would "sit on the throne of His glory" (Matthew 25:31f). Thus, the kingdom and resurrection are Siamese twins, they cannot be separated.

When Jesus came proclaiming, "The kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Mark 1:15), this was nothing less than a declaration that the time for the resurrection had come. This is confirmed in the Immerser's message. He proclaimed the imminence of the kingdom (Matthew 3:2), and said the instruments of the harvest were already in Jesus' hand (Matthew 3:10f). The harvest is the time of the resurrection (Matthew 13:36-40). If Hymenaeus knew this, and how could he not, then he knew that Christ himself said that the resurrection would occur in that generation.

If the kingdom and the resurrection are related, what then is the nature of the resurrection? Is it discernible with the human eye? Why did Paul not tell Hymenaeus and the Ephesians, "My eyes are not seeing what my ears are hearing, Hymenaeus!?" Why did Paul not tell his readers to go to the cemetery and open their eyes? Because the resurrection is associated with the kingdom, it is not a visibly discernible event.

Jesus was approached by the Pharisees, who believed in a physical resurrection, and asked, "when the kingdom of God would come" (Luke 17:20). Jesus' response is critical, "The kingdom of God does not come with observation." If the kingdom and the resurrection are inseparably linked, and the kingdom is not with observation, why is the resurrection a visible event?

When Paul discussed the resurrection change from the outward man that was perishing to the inner man, "not made with hands, eternal in the heavens" in 2 Corinthians 4-5, he said, "we do not look on the things that are seen, but at the things that are unseen" (2 Corinthians 4:16f). This is an emphatic declaration that the resurrection was not to be a visibly discernible event. This is confirmed by Paul's trial and conflict with the Pharisees.

In Acts 23:6f, Paul was placed on trial before the Sanhedrin. He ostensibly associated himself with the Pharisees in believing in the resurrection. The Pharisees accepted that testimony to such an extent that they initially sought to release Paul. However, just seven days later, the Pharisees, who believed in the resurrection, were now seeking Paul's life (Acts 24:13). Why the radical change? We suggest that just as the Jews longed for the kingdom, but rejected Jesus when they discovered He was offering a kingdom that would not come with observation, the Pharisees, who initially welcomed Paul's declaration of belief in the resurrection, soon discovered that Paul, like his Lord, was not offering the kind of kingdom and resurrection they desired. If Paul was preaching the resurrection the Pharisees wanted, why did they want to kill him for preaching the resurrection? Do you fire the preacher for preaching what you want to hear?

It is clear therefore, that Jesus and Paul did not preach the kind of visible, discernible kingdom and resurrection desired by the Pharisees. They proclaimed, "the kingdom (and thus resurrection, DKP) does not come with observation" (Luke 17:20f). Hymenaeus proclaimed an accomplished spiritual resurrection. It is critical to state again that Paul did not correct Hymenaeus' concept of the nature of the resurrection, and this is because Paul also proclaimed a spiritual resurrection.

### **What About *Every Eye*?**

It might be, and is, rejoined that John says, "every eye shall see Him" (Revelation 1:7), and therefore, Jesus' parousia, the establishment of the kingdom and the resurrection must be visible events. Interestingly, even many of those who oppose Covenant Eschatology recognize that this is an invalid argument.

Stafford North, in a lecture delivered in 1990 commented on Matthew 24:30, "*Whenever Christ is said to move on the clouds the reference is not to a physical coming, but to a spiritual one. Just as God came on the clouds to destroy Egypt (Isaiah 19), so Jesus came on the clouds to destroy*



*Jerusalem.*" North posits Revelation 1:7 as a prediction of Christ's coming against Rome, nevertheless, he understands that the language of Revelation 1:7 cannot be interpreted literally. It is typical apocalyptic language to describe God's actions in judgment.

It is significant that many of those who insist on the visible, literal parousia and resurrection are vehement in recognizing the apocalyptic language of Matthew 24:29-31. Those who do a fine job of showing the metaphoric nature of the language of Matthew would do well to apply their own understanding of apocalyptic language to Revelation 1:7, and see (only a small pun intended) the inconsistency of their interpretation. If they can see that the parousia of Matthew 24, which was to be seen, but was not an optical event, then they can surely see that the resurrection could also not be an optical event.

## **Summary**

Thus, for Hymenaeus, the words of Jesus, the testimony of Paul, the resurrection of Jesus, the arrival of the prophesied time, and historical events all seemed to suggest that the resurrection had indeed occurred. The resurrection did involve judgment on Israel, but what happened in 39-49 A.D. did not qualify as the destruction of the power of the holy people required by Daniel 12. The resurrection was "spiritual," and involved conversion and the establishment of the body of Christ (Romans 6; Colossians 2, etc.). But there was a futuristic element being ignored by Hymenaeus (Romans 6:5; Colossians 3:2-4). The resurrection did involve Old Covenant Israel, but it meant the dissolution of that old shadow world, not the inclusion into Christ's New World. Hymenaeus simply had his timing off, and believed that Old Covenant things belonged to Christ's New Order.

Many attempt to use 2 Timothy 2:17-19 to refute Covenant Eschatology. Yet in doing so they are guilty of the worst sort of "proof texting." They find a verse that sounds impressive, and use it to their advantage without actually investigating the true interpretation of the text. Those attempting to use this text to prove a yet future resurrection are failing to explain how anyone, given the literalistic interpretation of the resurrection, could believe it had already happened. They are ignoring or ignorant of the Biblically defined time for the resurrection, the first century. They take a text that was written just prior to the prophesied time of fulfillment, and insist that if it was future then it must be future now. The operative principle seems to be "once future, always future." That is a hermeneutic of anachronism. They are ignoring the true context of the resurrection, the last days of Israel, and the time of her judgment. They are failing to see how Paul's citation of the book of Numbers relates to the controversy with Hymenaeus. They are failing to give proper import to the relationship of the kingdom and the resurrection, and they are failing to see that Jesus and Paul emphatically stated that the kingdom and the resurrection were not optically discernable events.

To attempt to utilize 2 Timothy 2:17-19 to negate Covenant Eschatology is, therefore, unscholarly, specious and futile. The failure to honor the true issues at stake in 2 Timothy 2 is leading to the false accusation of the resurrection of the Hymenaeian Heresy. The proper understanding of these verses supports the A.D. 70 parousia and resurrection.