

What's In An Age?

by Kevin Beck

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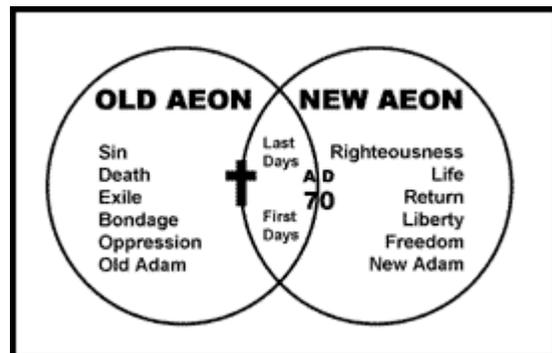
Old age isn't what it's cracked up to be. You seem out of place, like the world is changing before your eyes. As you grow old, you get to a point when you feel obsolete and ready to vanish away.

No, this is not a commentary of the human aging process. This is the biblical description of the transformation of the ages, the change of the aeons.

Unlike human aging that goes from young to old, the transformation of the ages begins with the Old and consummates with the New. The Bible speaks at length concerning the "age to come" in which the "restoration of all things" would occur (Eph. 1:21; Acts 3:21).

Not surprisingly, Jesus foresaw significant happenings in the age to come. He said that speaking against the Holy Spirit would not be forgiven in the age to come (Mt. 12:32). Also, the righteous were to shine forth as the sun in the New age (Mt. 13:39-43). Eternal life in the kingdom of God would be the reward in the age to come (Mk. 10:30 and Lk. 18:29-30). Finally, those counted worthy to attain that age would participate in the resurrection (Lk. 20:35-36).

The New Testament writers contrasted the two ages. The current age was filled with disputers whose wisdom was coming to nothing (1 Cor. 1:20; 2:6). It was a dark age from whose evil they hoped for final deliverance (Eph. 6:12; Gal. 1:4). The new age, however, would be headed by Jesus, and filled with resurrection life thanks to God's grace in Christ (Eph. 1:20; 2:5-7). It would be a glorious, never-ending age inundated with the power of God (1 Cor. 2:7; Eph. 3:21; Heb. 6:5).



Throughout the millennia, various generations, groups, and individuals have predicted the end of the age. In *A Doomsday Reader*, Ted Daniels surveys the social, political, economic, and religious predictors of the age to come. Ranging from Karl Marx to the Branch Davidians, countless seers have augured an imminent age-changing episode. Daniels claims the eschatological "narrative begins when someone says the world is about to be changed in every respect."

These "end-time" prophets usually foretell of an oncoming disaster in which millions will die from warfare or suffer disease. The righteous will miraculously come through the tribulation. Afterwards, the remnant of survivors--along with the purged world itself--will live to experience a tremendous change.

The imminent expectation of the passing of the Old age has a long history in the Judeo-Christian tradition. The Qumran community, keepers of the Dead Sea Scrolls, considered themselves to be living in the last days of the Old age. The War Scroll pictures a battle between the Sons of Light and the Sons of Darkness in which God would "destroy iniquity, to bring darkness low and to lend might to light . . . to annihilate all the Sons of Darkness and bring to joy--all the sons of light."

Other first-century Jewish sects awaited a rapidly-approaching change of the ages. E.P. Sanders notes, "Many Jews looked forward to a new and better age." From Judas the Galilean to Simon ben Kosiba, the numerous Jewish revolts against the Roman authorities serve to evidence the eager expectation of many first-century Jews to inaugurate the new age.



In this milieu Jesus advanced his own age-changing agenda. Like the majority of his contemporaries, Jesus anticipated the Old age to pass within a generation. "But I tell you truly, there are some standing here who shall not taste death till they see the kingdom of God" (Luke 9:27). When the disciples inquired about the "end of the age," Jesus predicted, "Assuredly, I say to you, this generation will by no means pass away till all these things are fulfilled" (Matt. 24:3,34).

Bart Ehrman in *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet of the New Millennium* observes, "Jesus, the teacher and prophet from Galilee, predicted that the God of Israel was about to perform a mighty act of destruction and salvation for his people. And he thought that some of those listening to him would be alive when it happened."

Few, if any, serious scholars deny the sense of imminence in the preaching of Jesus. Many, however, follow the route of Rudolf Bultmann who claimed, "Jesus' expectation of the near end of the world turned out to be an illusion." If, as Bultmann assumes, Jesus expected the destruction of the planet, then Jesus was indeed mistaken. However, the end predicted by Jesus was the end of the Old age and the beginning of the New. N.T. Wright points out, "there is virtually no evidence that Jews--including Jesus--were expecting the end of the space-time universe."

Clearly, regarding the imminence of the transformation of the ages, Jesus was in the mainstream of his day. The question is not if Jesus expected an imminent change in world orders. It is, How did he envision the change-taking place? In this area, Jesus stands in opposition to the prevailing first-century (and current) thought, but he stands firmly in the biblical tradition.

The common first-century perception was that the transformation would occur all at once in a bloody conflagration. Remember the Essenes? For them, the great war between the Sons of light and the Sons of darkness would consume the Old age and usher in the New.

Shammaite Pharisees--like Saul of Tarsus--promoted a similar agenda. The Old age, characterized by Israel's sin which resulted in her exile, would come to an end only when

Israel came more fully into line with the Torah.

Torah-zealous Jews resisted the Roman overlords because, in their view, as long as Caesar was king, God was not. They expected a war in which God would free Israel from the yoke of Gentile oppression. Afterwards, God and his people would rule the New age, just as Adam was to take dominion over the beasts of the field. The tables finally would be turned, and a purified and vindicated Israel would dominate the Gentiles. Achieving this end meant the taking up of arms. As Wright puts it, "for the first century Jew 'zeal' was something you did with a knife."

Many popular modern eschatological views pose a similar dualistic proposition. There are two worlds--one evil and the other righteous. We currently live in the Old age awaiting the arrival of the New. How will we know when the New gets here? There either will be a battle at Armageddon, or the planet itself will explode. Either way, the transformation of the ages is to occur: 1) in our future, and; 2) in a catastrophic manner.

Jesus' approach stands as a polar opposite to the catastrophic eschatological schemata of both his day and ours. Jesus did not advocate the amassing of weapons to transform the ages. Instead, he called Israel to lay down their weapons, to turn the other cheek, and to go the extra mile. Rather than killing their enemies, Jesus instructed Israel to love their enemies. In place of praying for vengeance, Jesus taught to pray for forgiveness.

Jesus lived and died for his age-changing method. Indeed, for Jesus, the cross was the determinative age-changing event. By going to the cross, Jesus effected the transformation of the ages. In this way, Jesus fulfilled prophetic passages such as Isaiah 53 that predicted God's suffering servant. God's servant would undergo persecution and rejection, but God finally would vindicate him and thereby launch the New aeon.

Hence, when standing before Pilate (the Roman overlord), Jesus asserted, "**My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would fight, so that I should not be delivered to the Jews**" (John 18:36). Jesus would not inaugurate the New age by calling twelve legions of angels to free him from the cross. The New age would come only by his dying to the Old and being raised by God to (and in) the New.

N.T. Wright observes, "Jesus did not expect, or proclaim, the end of the space-time universe. Nor did he take the normal option of the military revolutionary . . . Rather, he announced the end of the present evil age." Furthermore, by going to the cross "he proceeded to act it out, finding himself called, like Ezekiel, symbolically to undergo the fate he had announced." Jesus as Israel's representative took the consequences of the Old age upon himself and God raised him to life in the New.

In his book, *The Cross and the Parousia of Christ*, Max King contends that the cross is the effective power by which God transformed the ages at the A.D. 70 parousia (return) of Christ. King states that the cross and the coming form "the two foci of one complete, indivisible eschaton (end time) that pertain to the fulfillment of all redemptive history and prophecy within the closing period ('the last days') of the Old Testament aeon."

It is in this light we can interpret 2 Corinthians 5:17. "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new."

The Old age characterized by sin and death could not be destroyed by militaristic means. It could be destroyed, ironically enough, only by Jesus' dying to it and being raised again in a new mode, and those identified with Christ partake of the new life (Rom. 9:9-11). Paul, therefore, could claim that anyone in Christ is a new creation. In other words, those in covenant with Christ belong to the New age, and participate in all its blessings.

One of the difficulties of human aging is going through transitions. The transition between the end of the Old age and the consummation of the New presents problems for scholars as well.

As noted above, many age-ending arrangements see the change of the ages occurring all at once. The ages remain completely separate from one another. Several modern eschatological schools fail to account for a transition between the Old age and the New. For example, the traditional amillennial position recognizes the separation of the ages as coming at the cross rather than commencing by the power of the cross. Subsequently, it fails to recognize the lingering state of the Old aeon after the cross. The usual dispensationalist depiction separates several ages while currently awaiting a global age-changing conflict. The biblical view reveals a different portrait.

Astute readers of the New Testament epistles will readily notice a tension between what appears to be continuance of the Old age during the inauguration of the New age. For instance, while claiming that anyone in Christ is a new creation, Paul continued to long for deliverance "from this present evil age" (Gal. 1:4). Christ already had delivered the Colossians from the power of darkness, but the Ephesians continued to wrestle against the rulers of "the darkness of this age" (Col. 1:13; Eph. 6:12). The Hebrews had only tasted of the age to come (Heb. 6:5).

Additionally, in 2 Corinthians 3, Paul contrasts the two covenants of the two ages. The first was a ministry of death and condemnation written and engraved on stones. The second was a more glorious ministry of righteousness and the spirit. The Old had yet to vanish, and the New had yet to arrive fully. "For if what is passing away was glorious, what remains is much more glorious. Therefore, since we have such hope, we use great boldness of speech" (2 Cor. 3:11-12).

Hebrews recognizes this overlap of the ages when it describes the two covenants as foretold by Jeremiah. In the new covenant, God would forgive all sins and all of His people would know Him. "In that He says, 'A new covenant,' He has made the first obsolete. Now what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away" (Heb. 8:13).

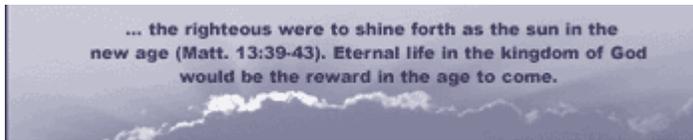
Although the cross had inaugurated the New age, it still awaited consummation. This is in line with the Biblical tradition. Israel's defining historical event was the Exodus. By passing through the Red Sea, God freed Israel from the yoke of Gentile bondage.

However, it would take 40 years until Israel entered her promised land and thereby completed the Exodus. Not coincidentally, the book of Hebrews likens the first-century church to the Exodus generation. The early Hebrew Christians were preparing to enter into the "rest for the people of God" (Heb. 4:10).

The Transmillennial® worldview understands the New age to have begun at the cross, followed by a 40-year transition, and the consummation to have occurred by the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70.

While some scholars admit to a transition period between the ages, they often lengthen it to include the current time. This was the "Salvation History" approach of Oscar Cullman, an influential German theologian of the 20th century. He felt that that our age, like New Testament believers, are marked by a continuing tension between the cross and the end. The tension, as he saw it, was "between the decisive 'already fulfilled' and the 'not yet completed,' between present and future."

But stretching the transition period for twenty centuries ignores the clear sense of imminence concerning the transition of the ages communicated in the New Testament (Rom. 8:19; 1 Cor. 10:11, 1 Peter 4:7, 2 Peter 3:12, 1 John 2:18, Rev. 1:1,3).



The transformation of the ages has occurred. Today, God's New age of righteousness, life, freedom, and liberty is a reality. Thanks be to God, that through the finished work of Jesus Christ, sin no longer separates God from man. The Old things have passed away. Behold! All things have become new.

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