

The Last Times

by

Kurt Simmons

Eschatology is the study of last things; it is the study of the various acts and events marking the close of the age and the fulness of God's redemptive purpose in Christ. The term is taken from the Greek *eschatos*, meaning the furthest, final, or latter end of a thing. Things mentioned in the New Testament belonging to the last end include the earthly ministry of Christ (I Pet. 1:20; cf. Heb. 9:27), the proclamation of the gospel (Heb. 1:2; I Pet. 1:5), the gifts of the Holy Ghost (Acts 2:17), the persecution of the saints (II Tim. 3:1), the apostasy (I Tim. 4:1; II Pet. 3:3, I Jno. 2:18,19), a resurrection of those who slept in the dust of the earth (Dan. 12:1,2) and a time of judgment. (Dan. 7:22; cf. Acts 17:31; 24:25; II Tim. 4:1)

Viewed in isolation, such portentous events might seem to herald the end of the universe. Indeed, most expositors have assumed as much. But, when studied from the vantage point of their roots and origin in the Old Testament, a marvelous thing appears: The "last days" take on an indisputably *Jewish* context. Hence, the Messiah would be a Jew and come to the Jews (Deut. 18:15-19); he would be of the seed of David (Isa. 9:6,7; 11:1,2); the New Covenant would be made with the "house of Israel and with the house of Judah" (Jer. 31:31; cf. Heb. 8:10-12); the law of the New Covenant would go forth from Zion (Isa. 2:1-4; cf. Lk. 24:47); the gift of the Holy Ghost was promised first to Jerusalem and mount Zion (Joel 2:28-32; Acts 2:16-21); the saints that would suffer persecution were first and foremost Jews (Dan. 7:21,22; 12:1); apostate Jews would precipitate the desolation of Jerusalem (Dan. 9:27); the power of the holy people, the Jews, would be scattered and the nation destroyed. (Dan. 12:7; cf. 9:24,27; 10:14) At every turn, the last days centered in and around Jerusalem, Judea and the Jews. Indeed, a study of Old Testament passages of the term "last days," or its equivalent, shows that, without exception, the term is set in, and anchored to, a first century, Jewish context. Nowhere does the term ever imply the end of the world. A survey of the Old Testament will bear this out.

Jacob's Prophecy To His Sons

The first occurrence of the term is in Gen. 49:1, where Jacob prophesied before his death what would befall the tribes of Israel in the last days:

"And Jacob called unto his sons, and said, Gather yourselves together, that I may tell you that which shall befall you in the last days...Judah, thou art he whom thy brethren shall praise: thy hand shall be in the neck of thine enemies; thy father's children shall bow down themselves before thee...The sceptre shall not depart from Judah, nor a lawgiver from between his feet, until Shiloh come; and unto him shall the gathering of the people be."
(Gen. 49:1,8,10)

Jacob's prophecy is the first clear indication that Judah would become the royal tribe; the tribe that would hold the royal sceptre over the people of Israel. Several hundred years would elapse before the monarchy would devolve upon Judah, but from the time of Jacob's prophecy onward, Judah's preeminence among the tribes became marked. Judah quickly became the most numerous, powerful and prestigious of the tribes. (Num. 2:4) Judah's camp was first in the numbering of the children of Israel and first to set forth. (v.9) In the battle against the Amelekites, it was Aaron and Hur, prince of the tribe of Judah, who kept Moses' hands aloft

(Ex. 17:12 *et seq.*), foreshadowing the kingly and priestly office that would one day be united together in Christ Jesus (Zech. 6:13), giving victory to Israel. David was the first from the tribe of Judah to ascend to the throne of Israel and through his seed Christ would come into the world. (II Sam. 7:12-14; Isa. 11:1-3) Jacob refers to this when he mentions "Shiloh," a euphemism for the Messiah. Fulfillment of Jacob's prophecy is seen in the words of the Hebrew writer when he says "For it is evident that our Lord sprang out of Juda." (Heb. 7:15) Jacob places the birth of Christ in the last days. The Hebrew writer seems conscious of this prophesy and to indicate its fulfillment, saying: "God, who at sundry times and diverse manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets, hath in these last days spoken unto us by his Son." (Heb. 1:1,2)

The direct correlation between Jacob's prophecy to his sons and the Hebrew letter is no accident. Jacob prophesied concerning the last days of national Israel and the coming of the Messiah; the basic theme and assumption of fact underlying the book of Hebrews is the coming end of national Israel and the removal of the typical system of Judaism in Christ. (Heb. 8:13) The earthly kingdom was to be shaken and taken out of the way that the spiritual kingdom could remain in its place. (Heb. 12:26-29) During the long centuries of Jewish history under the law, God spake to the fathers by the prophets in veiled speech of types and similitudes; the glory of God's redemptive purpose was seen as through a glass darkly. (I Cor. 13:12,13; II Cor. 3:12-18) But, in the final days of national Israel and the law, God spake with open, unveiled face in the Son. (II Cor. 3:14,16; 4:6) The Hebrew writer wants his audience to understand that they are living in the last days of national Israel, and that the customs, traditions and institutions which they had known and once held dear would shortly be swept away in the coming wrath. He wants them to look ahead to the promised land, not back to the flesh pots of Egypt; he wants Christian Jews to put national Israel behind their backs and to enter into that which is behind the veil. (Heb. 10:19,20; *cf.* 6:19)

Part of the pressure the Hebrews were feeling to turn back to Judaism was the persecution they endured: first at the hands of Saul and later by their countrymen at the behest of Nero. Jacob's prophecy seems to speak in part to this in his oracle concerning Benjamin: "Benjamin shall ravin as a wolf: in the morning he shall devour the prey, and at night he shall divide the spoil." (Gen. 49:27) The early church fathers traditionally interpreted Jacob's oracle as a reference to Saul of Tarsus, a member of the tribe of Benjamin, and the persecution whereby he wasted the church. (Acts 8:1-4; 9:1-22; Phil. 3:5,6) Benjamin's "devouring the prey" in the morning may refer to the martyr of the saints at the beginning of the gospel; "dividing the spoil in the evening" to the renewal of persecution the church suffered in the years immediately proceeding the destruction of Jerusalem in the war with Rome. The Hebrew writer mentions the "spoiling" of Christian goods and possessions in the persecutions they suffered. (Heb. 10:34) The twin periods of persecution under Saul and Nero are alluded to when the writer sets the "great fight of afflictions" associated with the "former days" over against the persecution Jewish Christians were presently under. (Heb. 10:32-34;12:3,4; 13:3) In any event, what is clear is that Jacob's prophesy concerning the "last days" spoke to the final days of national Israel, not the world.

Balaam's Prophecy

The phrase "last days" next occurs in the book of Numbers where Balaam foretold the coming of the Star and Sceptre out of Jacob:

"And now, behold, I go unto my people: come therefore, and I will advertise thee what this people shall do to thy people in the latter days...there shall come a Star out of Jacob, and a Sceptre shall rise out of Israel...out of Jacob shall come he that shall have dominion, and shall destroy him that remaineth of the city." (Num. 24:14-19)

The “Star” and “Scepter” are obvious allusions to Christ; he would have the dominion and return the kingdom to Israel, vanquishing all the enemies of the children of light. “Him that remaineth of the city” refers to the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70., Moab here being put for the Jews. This is confirmed by what Balaam says in Num. 24:24: “And ships shall come from the coast of Chittim...and shall afflict Eber, and he also shall perish for ever.” (v. 24) “Chittim” is commonly understood to refer to the Romans. This is evidenced by the Vulgate, translated from the Hebrew into Latin about A.D. 387 by Jerome, which gives the rendering of Num. 24:24 thus: “*venient in trieribus de Italia*” – “they will come in ships from Italy.” The same word occurs in Dan. 11:30 where it is rendered in similar terms: “*et venient super eum trieres et Romani*” – “and there will come upon him ships and Romans.” “Eber” is commonly supposed to be the root of the word “Hebrew,” used of Abraham in Gen. 14:13, who was a descendant of Eber. (Gen. 10:16,26) If this is correct, Balaam's prophecy of the latter days and destruction of Eber by the ships from Chittim would be the earliest and clearest reference to the destruction of Jerusalem and the Jewish state in A.D. 70 by the Romans. However, no matter how we interpret his prophecy, it is certain that nothing Balaam says carries the least suggestion that the end of the world is in view in use of the term “last days.”

Moses' Prophetic Utterances

Moses also uses the phrase "last days;" in each instance the end of national Israel is in view:

"When thou shalt beget children, and children's children, and ye shall have remained long in the land, and shall corrupt yourselves, and make a graven image, or the likeness of any thing, and shall do evil in the sight of the Lord thy God, to provoke him to anger: I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day, that ye shall soon utterly perish from off the land whereunto ye go over Jordan to possess it; ye shall not prolong your days upon it, but shall utterly be destroyed. And the Lord shall scatter you among the nations, and ye shall be left few in number among the heathen, whither the Lord shall lead you. And there ye shall serve gods, the work of men's hands, wood and stone, which neither see, nor hear, nor eat, nor smell. But if from thence thou shalt seek the Lord thy God, thou shalt find him, if thou seek him with all thy heart and with all thy soul. When thou are in tribulation, and all these things are come upon thee, even in the latter days, if thou turn to the Lord thy God, and shalt be obedient unto his voice." (Deut. 4:25-30)

This passage makes indisputable reference, as do all references to the last days, to the destruction of Jerusalem and the Jewish state. The gist of Moses' utterance is that even at the very extremities of God's wrath, if the Jews had turned to repent and obey, God would have spared the nation. But as it is, they refused and rebelled, and so were destroyed. Again, despite use of the phrase "latter days," the end of the world is nowhere alluded to or in sight. This is equally true of the Song of Moses.

The Song of Moses was given to Moses by God as a warning against the future wrath upon Israel. As ever, it was timed for the last days:

"Gather unto me all the elders of your tribes, and your officers, that I may speak these words in their ears, and call heaven and earth to record against them. For I know that after my death ye will utterly corrupt yourselves, and turn aside from the way which I have commanded you; and evil will befall you in the latter days; because ye will do evil in the sight of the Lord, to provoke him to anger through the works of your hands." (Deut. 31:28,29)

Note that there is not the least hint of the end of the world in these verses; nothing but national judgment is alluded to. The words of the Song itself make this even more clear:

"For they are a nation void of counsel, neither is there any understanding in them. O that they were wise, that they understood this, that they would consider their latter end!...For their vine is the vine of Sodom, and of the fields of Gomorrah: their grapes are grapes of gall, their clusters are bitter: Their wine is the poison of dragons, and the cruel venom of asps. Is not this laid up in store with me, and sealed up among my treasures? To me belongeth vengeance, and recompence; their foot shall slide in due time: for the day of their calamity is at hand, and the things that shall come upon them make haste. For the Lord shall judge his people, and repent himself for his servants, when he seeth that their power is gone, and there is none shut up or left." (Deut. 32:28-36)

There are several points here worthy of notice. First, it is clear that *latter days* equates with Israel's *latter end*. The terms are used interchangeably, each embracing and defining the other. This same pattern is present in Daniel where the "time of the end" is also referred to as "the last end of the indignation" upon the upon the Jewish people. (Dan. 8:17,19; cf. 9:26,27; 10:14) This, of course, is the same end Jesus spoke of in his Olivet discourse when he predicted the destruction of Jerusalem. (Matt. 24:14; Mk. 13:7; Lk. 21:9,20) Second, it is significant that the Hebrew writer quotes from the Song of Moses, saying: "For we know him that hath said, Vengeance belongeth unto me, I will recompense, saith the Lord. And again, The Lord shall judge his people." (Heb. 10:30) The writer's quotation from the Song of Moses is not accidental. National Israel was in apostasy. To join oneself to national Judaism was to invite the vengeance of God. Moreover, it was foolhardy and futile: The imminent destruction of the nation and temple meant that there was nothing to turn back to. The tender associations of their homeland and the customs associated with the temple service would soon vanish away. (Heb. 8:13) In bringing to remembrance the prophecy of Moses concerning the coming wrath upon the people and nation, the writer seeks to strengthen his reader's resolve to press on. The nearness of the coming *eschaton* is indicated in verse 37, saying: "For yet a little while, and he that shall come will come, and will not tarry." The literal Greek reads "*mikron hoson hoson*," literally, *a very, very little while*. (Berry's Interlinear) That is, it was a very, very little while and Christ would come in wrath upon the Jews, avenging the blood of his covenant. Hence the Hebrew Christians were encouraged to hold out a short time more. They should keep the profession of their faith without wavering (Heb. 10:23), not forsaking the assembling of themselves together, but exhorting one another as they saw the day of national judgment drawing near. (Heb. 10:25) Hence, the Song of Moses, Daniel, Christ's Olivet discourse and the Hebrew letter all come together as separate strands of a single cord pointing to the fact that the last days contemplates the end of the mosaic economy, not the world.

Establishment Of The Kingdom

Thus far, most of the passages mentioning the last days were of a negative character, focusing mostly on the destruction of the Jewish state. This is only half the picture. The other side of the coin is that the last days also mark the establishment of the messianic kingdom. Isaiah is the first to use the phrase in this context:

"The word that Isaiah the son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem. And it shall come to pass in the last days, that the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established in the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills; and all nations shall flow unto it. And many people say go and say, Come ye, and let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; and he will teach us of his ways, and we will walk in his paths: for out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem." (Isa. 2:1-3; cf. Mic. 4:1,2)

Isaiah opens this prophecy by expressly stating that it applies to "Judah and Jerusalem." (Isa. 2:1) The time for fulfillment is the "last days." (v. 2) The mountain of the Lord's house is Zion. Zion is a euphemism for the church, the kingdom of the Messiah. The Hebrew writer makes this abundantly clear: "But ye are come unto mount Sion, and unto the city of the living

God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to an innumerable company of angels, to the general assembly and church of the firstborn, which are written in heaven, and to God the Judge of all, and to the spirits of just men made perfect." (Heb. 12:22,23) Daniel described the church in similar terms, referring to it as a great mountain which filled all the earth. (Dan. 2:38) Thus, Isaiah, Daniel and the Hebrew writer all place establishment of the church in the latter days. (Isa. 2:2; Dan. 2:28; Heb. 1:2)

Peter also had occasion to speak of the latter days in the context of the establishment of the church and the outpouring of the Holy Ghost. (Acts 2:17-21; cf. Joel 2:28-32) Peter quotes Joel in support of the proposition that the outpouring of the Holy Ghost in the latter days would precede the destruction of the Jewish state and the "great and notable day of the Lord." (v. 20) Peter concluded his discourse, saying "save yourselves from this untoward generation." (v. 40) Peter's warning echoes Jesus' prediction of the fall of Jerusalem when he said "this generation shall not pass till all these things take place." (Matt. 24:34; cf. 23:34-39) Hence, the last days, day of the Lord and destruction of Jerusalem all found fulfillment in that generation.

It is often assumed that the mosaic age ended abruptly at the cross, but this is wrong. The law was fulfilled at the cross, but the mosaic age and economy lingered on for a time. (Heb. 8:13; II Cor. 3:11 - *the verb here is the present participle, "being abolished," not "is abolished."*) The Hebrew writer recognizes that the messianic age was not come when he mentions the "world to come whereof we speak." (*Grk. aion - age*; Heb. 2:5; 6:5; cf. Eph. 1:21) It was this age Jewish Christians were pressing into as they awaited the removal of the mosaic dispensation. Paul also indicates the continuing presence of the age dominated by sin and death when he mentions the "present evil world." (*Grk. aion*; Gal. 1:4) The Christian age by contrast is the "eternal age," the "age of ages." (Eph. 3:21) The sign of the end of the mosaic age was the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem. (Matt. 24:1-3) Christianity came out of the womb of national Israel. Jewish Christians shared a common heritage with unbelieving Jews. It was not until A.D. 70 that Christianity and Judaism were parted for all time. The years immediately preceding the removal of the typical system is the period the last days signified.

Usage By Other Prophets

Jeremiah used the term to describe a time of coming wrath upon Israel, saying: "The anger of the Lord shall not return until he have executed, and till he have performed the thoughts of his heart: in the latter days ye shall consider it perfectly." (Jer. 23:20) The prophet also uses it to describe the return of the captivity in the latter days; a figure for the kingdom of the Messiah. (Jer. 30:23,24) Similar language occurs in reference to the gathering in of the gentiles such as Moab (Jer. 48:47) and Elam. (Jer. 49:39) The prophet Ezekiel twice uses the phrase to describe the descent of Gog upon the land of Israel. (Ezek. 38:8,16) Many commentators believe this prophecy referred in its first instance to Antiochus Epiphanes' invasion of Israel. This is corroborated to some extent by the book of Daniel which also describes the invasion of Antiochus; like Ezekiel, Daniel places Antiochus' invasion in the "time of the end" and the "last end of the indignation" against the Jews. (Dan. 8:17,19) Allowing that Ezekiel's prophecy of Gog may have secondarily spoken to the invasion of the Syrian king, it is clear that the prophecy's primary and plenary significance was messianic, and referred to the persecution of the church foretold by Daniel and Christ. (Dan. 12:2, Matt. 24:21; cf. Rev. 20:8). This is clear from the fact that in the chapter immediately preceding the prophecy of Gog, Ezekiel foretells the restoration of the kingdom to Israel and the reign of "David," their prince. (Ezek. 37) Chapters thirty-eight and thirty-nine and their description of Gog's invasion of restored Israel are expansions upon the kingdom and reign of David the Messiah and the victory he would procure on behalf of the saints. Nothing about Ezekiel's prophecy of the latter days suggests the end of the world. To the contrary, Ezekiel portrays victorious Israel inhabiting its land and

burying the dead multitudes of Gog. Nowhere does the prophet suggest the earth is to be destroyed.

The prophet Daniel makes the most frequent use of the term, employing variations of the phrase "latter days," "last end," "the end," "the consummation," the "end of days," etc., no fewer than twelve times. (Dan. 2:28, 7:26; 8:17,19; 9:26,27; 10:14; 11:27,40; 12:4,9,13) The theme of the book of Daniel is the coming of the Messiah, the establishment of the kingdom, and the end of the Jewish people and state. As Jacob had told his sons what would befall their tribes in the latter days, Gabriel informs Daniel "what shall befall thy people in the latter days." (Dan. 10:14; *cf.* 9:24) Thus in Daniel we see the approaching fruition of Jacob's prophecy concerning his sons. Two time lines are provided by Daniel for fulfillment of the events he wrote about. The first is the image from Nebuchadnezzar's dream, in chapter two, which places establishment of the church in the days of the Roman emperors (Mk. 1:15); the second is the 490 prophetic years in Dan. 9:24-27. The time limitations of Daniel, and the fact that virtually every other Old Testament reference to the latter days has a Jewish context, renders impossible an interpretation which would extend this prophetic period into our modern era. Add the fact that Daniel expressly states that the things he wrote of would be fulfilled when the power of the Jewish nation was scattered and destroyed (Dan. 12:7; *cf.* 10:14; 9:24-27), and the conclusion is inescapable: the latter days is inexorably set in a first century, Jewish context; *viz.*, the destruction of Jerusalem by Rome in A.D. 70. For us this means that any interpretation of Revelation or eschatological teaching of the New Testament which purports to project the latter days into our modern era must necessarily be divorced from the Old Testament and therefore scripturally ungrounded and unsound. *Nothing that cannot be supported by resort to Old Testament sources should be read into New Testament eschatological doctrine or teaching.*

Conclusion

Although mistakenly assumed to refer to the end of the universe, the last days plainly refers to the end of the mosaic age and economy. Nobody reading Old Testament sources can fail to see the truth of this statement. To overlook this simple fact is to miss the whole redemptive and eschatological scheme of scripture. The final act in God's redemptive purpose was the close of the mosaic age, not the end of the cosmos.