



# THE LAST DAYS

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RETHINKING BIBLE PROPHECY IN THE LIGHT OF SCRIPTURE AND HISTORY

'Eschatology' is the study of last things. Christians should never fear having their eschatological 'system' scrutinised by the plain teaching of the Bible. If you subscribe to the currently popular "Left Behind" system of eschatology, prepare to be challenged by Scripture and history. Moreover, prepare to gain a greater respect for the integrity of the Bible.

# THE BOOK OF HEBREWS

## *and the End of the Age*

BY TIMOTHY MILLER

*But Jesus, turning unto them said,  
Daughters of Jerusalem, weep not for me, but weep for  
yourselves, and for your children. —Luke 23:28*

The purpose of the Book of Hebrews, the nature of the kingdom of God and its entrance into the world and whether or not God has a future plan for the non-Christian, Jewish people have all been topics of debate among theologians in recent years. These issues are all closely related and cannot be resolved without a careful reading of the Book of Hebrews in its historical context and an understanding of its background. In light of internal evidence, historical accounts, and other witnesses from scripture, I would argue that, as the Jewish age was drawing to a close, the Book of Hebrews was written as a final warning to professing Jewish Christians not to reject entrance into the kingdom of God by apostatizing from Christianity just before God's covenantal wrath was to be violently poured out on the unregenerate, rebellious nation of Israel during the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD.

A clear, early reference to the nature of the coming kingdom, which also provides background information regarding the era in which the Book of Hebrews was to be written, can be found in the Book of Malachi. The prophecy presented by Malachi brought a number of charges against the nation of

Israel concerning their relationship to God and a warning that the coming of their long-awaited Messiah would bring fiery judgment upon them.

"Behold, I send My messenger. And he will prepare the way before Me. And the Lord, whom you seek, will suddenly come to His temple, even the Messenger of the covenant, in whom you delight. Behold He is coming," says the Lord of hosts. But who can endure the day of His coming? And who can stand when he appears? For He is like a refiner's fire and like launderer's soap. (Malachi 3:1,2 NKJV).

Malachi's prophecy warns the Jews that even though they delighted in the soon coming of the Lord, many would not be able to stand when he appears. His appearance would be "sudden" and he would come to "His temple" as a judge. J. Stuart Russell writes, "The temple was the center of the nation's life, the visible symbol of the covenant between God and His people; it was the spot where 'judgment must begin,' and which was to be overtaken with sudden destruction."<sup>1</sup>

Malachi closes his short book with another prophecy of the coming of the Messiah and His forerunner which he ends with the words, "lest I come and strike the land with a curse" (Malachi 4:6b NKJV). The Jews would be given a period of time in which to repent of their rebellion against God, but their land would be stricken with a curse if they did not.

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***By persecuting the church, the Jews had aligned themselves against God. It was in this era that the Book of Hebrews was written to stir the church to maturity and warn the unbeliever that, for those who have rejected Christ, there is NO place left in the kingdom of God.***

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Russell states, "The full import of this ominous declaration is not at once apparent. To the Hebrew mind it suggested the most terrible fate that could befall a city or a people. The 'curse' was the anathema, or cherim, which denoted that the person or thing on which the malediction was laid was given over to utter destruction."<sup>2</sup> These passages from Malachi are a foretelling of the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple, events which occurred shortly after the writing of the book of Hebrews.

John the baptist, Christ, and the apostle Paul also warned of impending wrath. John preached regarding the coming of the Messiah, "His winnowing fan is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clean out His threshing floor, and gather His wheat into the barn; but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire" (Matthew 3:1 NKJV). Such a separation of "wheat" and "chaff" occurred with the destruction of Jerusalem. Those who were followers of Christ heeded His warnings to them (see Matthew 24: 15,16) and fled just before the Roman army invaded, but the unbelievers were left to face the invasion without the covenantal protection of the God they had rejected. The epistles of Paul contain illustrations of this distinction between the true spiritual Jews (ie. the Christians) and false Jews. Examples of this distinction in Paul's writings can be found in the Book of Galatians.

The synoptic gospels are filled with Christ's warnings of the wrath to come. Probably the most well known of which is the Olivet discourse of Matthew 24 and parallels which we cannot look at in detail here. However, Christ was very clear in His descriptions of how the present, unregenerate generation would end. This generation would hear and reject the teachings and miracles produced in the ministries of John the baptist, Christ Himself and also the apostles. Of the generation present at that time, Jesus advised, "on you may come all the righteous blood shed on the earth, from the blood of righteous Able to the blood of Zechariah, son of Berechiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar. Assuredly, I say to you, all these things will come upon this generation" (Matthew 23:35,36 NKJV).

Internal evidence suggests the Book of Hebrews was written in part as a warning to its original audience just a short time before the fulfilment of these prophecies of judgment would occur.

The Book of Hebrews contains some of the most strongly worded warnings found in the New Testament outside of the synoptic gospels. These warnings contain an application to all readers throughout all ages but had a very real, pending application to its original audience. Hebrews 2:3 states, "how shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation, which was at the first began to be spoken by the Lord and was confirmed to us by those who heard Him" (NKJV). Clearly this passage applies to everyone who has ever lived, yet notice the author's use of terms such as "we" and "us". He also pinpoints his own generation by stating that they had heard the gospel through those who had heard Christ themselves. His warning here can certainly apply to the eternal torment awaiting in the hereafter for those who reject Christ in all ages, but history has provided us with a foretaste, a concrete example, of the wrath to come through an event that occurred during the lives of those the apostle was addressing. This event exemplified the reality of the wrath of God against those who stand in opposition to his kingdom.

The destruction of Jerusalem was so devastating and complete, Josephus, an ancient historian and eyewitness, records:

Now, as soon as the army had no more people to slay or to plunder, because there remained none to be objects of their fury (for they would not have spared any, had there remained any other such work to be done) Caesar gave orders that they should now demolish the entire city and temple... it was so thoroughly laid even with the ground by those that dug it up to the foundation, that there was left nothing to make those that came thither believe it had ever been inhabited.<sup>3</sup>

Josephus records 97,000 Jews were taken captive during the war with Rome (himself included) and 1.1 million were killed. The temple itself, the center and symbol of the nation of Israel's covenantal relationship to God, was completely destroyed, despite Titus' orders to the contrary. Regarding this event, Kenneth Gentry Jr. states, "No later era witnesses any events that even approach the fundamental covenantal significance of this calamity. Such an analysis of the covenantal and redemptive import of the collapse of the Jewish order is demanded by the nature of Christianity (cf. The Epistle to the Hebrews) and the nature of the final new covenant (cf. Luke 22:20; 1Cor. 11:25)." 4 As Christ had

prophesied to the unfaithful nation of Israel, their house was left to them desolate and, as far as the temple is concerned, remains so to this day.

The removal of the Jewish temple was absolutely necessary to relieve the stress on the first century Christians from persecution from the Jews. J. Stuart Russell writes, "the annihilation of the Jewish nationality therefore removed the most formidable antagonist of the gospel and brought rest and relief to suffering Christians."<sup>5</sup> It is ironic that the prime example of martyrdom under Jewish persecution was reported as teaching the destruction of the temple. When Stephen, one of the first deacons of the early church, began his ministry, the Synagogue of the Freedmen "set up false witnesses who said, 'This man does not cease to speak blasphemous words against this holy place and the law; for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs which Moses delivered to us'" (Acts 6:13f). Stephen was later stoned to death by an angry mob who rejected his preaching of the gospel.

The readers of the Book of Hebrews, probably residents of Jerusalem themselves, were not ignorant of these promises from the Lord that the wheat and the chaff would be separated. But with the passing of the years and the increase of persecution, they had lost the expectancy of it occurring in their own lifetime, and, in their complacency, were about to run the risk of being caught up in the judgment themselves, hence the urgency of the Epistle to the Hebrews. The attitude of these Christians was far from that of the earlier church members who were even selling their soon-to-be-worthless lots of land in the Jerusalem area and distributing the profits out of brotherly love to those of the church in need. The writer of Hebrews delivers an exhortation filled with warnings of the consequences of rejecting Christ or of failing to grow to maturity in Christ.

The basic argument of the Book of Hebrews is an appeal by the apostle for his readers to fully embrace the kingdom of God and not to give in to pressure from the Jews and turn back to Judaism. The author shows the superiority of Christ and that nothing is lacking or inferior in the New Covenant when compared to the old. The kingdom of God finds its fulfilment in Christ and there is nothing to turn back to other than the shadow of what is now fulfilled.

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There was a brief overlap of the two covenants during this generation as exemplified in Paul's willingness to accommodate his Jewish Christian brothers by taking a vow and entering the temple and his ministry in the synagogues. But this period was coming to a close. The author states, "In that He says 'A new covenant,' He has made the first obsolete. Now what is becoming obsolete and growing is ready to vanish away" (Hebrews 8:13 NKJV). John Brown states, "in a very few years it did expire, with the flames which consumed the holy city and the holier temple—vanished into a vapour and invisibility."<sup>6</sup> The shadow of the new covenant was exemplified by the Levitical priesthood and the temple. These were the centers of the Jewish economy and were soon to be divinely removed.

A concern of the author is that his readers not "vanish away" with the old covenant. It is clear from many passages in Hebrews that the book was written before the destruction of the temple. In several verses the Levitical priesthood is referred to in the present tense as if their work had not yet been interrupted (eg. 5:1-5; 7:21; 7:27; 8:3f; 8:13; 9:6,9,13,25; 10:1-3; 10:8,11; 13:10). He rebukes his original readers by telling them, "though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the first principles of the oracles of God" (6:12 NKJV). Their complacency was putting them in a dangerous position. He encourages them to grow to maturity and "show the same diligence

to the full assurance of hope until the end, that you do not become sluggish, but imitate those who through faith and patience inherit the promises" (6:11,12 NKJV). Considering that the original readers probably resided in the Jerusalem area, these verses had a particularly practical application for them in light of the soon coming Roman invasion. For those who had not fully embraced the kingdom of God or were having second thoughts, the author warned:

For if we sin willfully after we have received the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a certain fearful expectation of judgment, and fiery indignation which will devour the adversaries. Anyone who has rejected Moses' law dies without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. Of how much worse punishment, do you suppose, will he be thought worthy who has trampled the Son of God underfoot, counted the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified a common thing, and insulted the Spirit of grace?... It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God (10:26-29,31 NKJV).

His readers had indeed received the knowledge of the truth. For nearly forty years the inhabitants of Jerusalem had been exposed to the preaching of the gospel. Yet the author warns them of becoming like those who had received the blessings of God for forty years in the wilderness and still rebelled through unbelief and perished without entering into canaan. Once again, at the end of this forty year period, God's wrath was about to come upon those who were in

rebellion. The apostle warns, "Beware, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God," and, "Let us therefore be diligent to enter that rest, lest anyone fall according to the same example of disobedience" (3:12; 4:11 NKJV). Once again we see that the readers were in danger through their complacency of falling into the same fate awaiting those who had rejected the gospel.

By way of conclusion I would say that the coming of the kingdom of God was preceded with the warnings of Malachi and John the Baptist of judgment on those of the Jewish economy who did not repent. The messages of Christ also warned of judgment upon the very generation hearing Him. After a 40 year period in which the Jews heard the preaching of the gospel through the apostles, the wheat and the chaff were about to be separated in a tangible way. By persecuting the church, the Jews had aligned themselves against God. It was in this era that the Book of Hebrews was written to stir the church to maturity and warn the unbeliever that, for those who have rejected Christ, there is no place left in the kingdom of God.

#### End Notes

1. Russell, J. Stuart. *The Parousia: A Critical Inquiry into the New Testament Doctrine of Our Lord's Second Coming*. New ed. 1887. Reprint ed. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983, p. 6.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 7.
3. Josephus, Flavius. *The Wars of the Jews*. In *The Complete Works*. Translated by William Whiston. Reprint ed. Nashville, Thomas Nelson, 1998, p. 900.
4. Gentry, Kenneth L., Jr. *Before Jerusalem Fell: Dating the Book of Revelation: An Exegetical and Historical Argument for a Pre-A.D. 70 Composition*. Tyler, Tex.: Institute for Christian Economics, 1989, p. 143.
5. Russell, *The Parousia*, p. 163.
6. Brown, John. *Hebrews*. Reprint ed. Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1994, p. 374.

## *The Rich Man & Lazarus*

BY CECIL HOOK

**T**his interpretation of the story of the rich man and Lazarus was suggested to me by Byron Bradfute, a local friend of sorts!). He claims that it was an original idea of his; so I accept it as such, for Brad is trustworthy (at times). If you disagree with this interpretation, give Brad all the credit for it. If you think it is a brilliant revelation of truth, consider me as the one taking the rough stone which he found and polishing it to such a sparkle. Brad began by asking the question that I have been asked many times: Is the account of the rich man and Lazarus in

Luke 16:19-31 a parable or a true story? He considers it to be a parable, and I agree that it is figurative – either a parable or an allegory. Regarding it as a parable, I previously thought the rich man and Lazarus were not real persons but that all other points of the story were literal. But parables teach hidden lessons, and many parables emphasize only one point. An allegory is a sustained analogy, a prolonged metaphor which suppresses all mention of the principal subject as in the story that Nathan told David about the rich man taking the poor man's only ewe lamb. The subject was not mentioned in the allegory.

Thinking that we might have missed some less obvious meaning, I would invite you to explore some more with me. What are the veiled messages in this parable or the suppressed subject of this allegory? Are we to understand that

angels carry away the bodies of the poor when they die but leave the rich dead to be buried? Is Jesus teaching that the redeemed dead actually go into Abraham's arms in physical bodies immediately at their death, that the damned are cast into literal fire in their physical bodies the moment they die, and that the saved and the lost can see and communicate with each other? Is Abraham in charge of the unseen world and departed spirits? Does this give us the actual locations for those dubious diagrams about "Where are the dead?" Is Jesus teaching here that wealth is sinful and that poverty is virtue?

In most of the parables, Jesus set forth some veiled truth about the coming kingdom. Some of those parables dealt with the forthcoming rejection of the Christ and his kingdom by the Jews and their forthcoming rejection by God as a

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consequence. Let us think of this parable in such a framework.

Jesus said much about the Jews losing their favored status with God. Early in his ministry, in commending the faith of the Gentile centurion, he said to the Jews: "I tell you, many will come from east and west and sit with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, while the sons of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness; there men will weep and gnash their teeth" (Matt. 8:11f). Is this not a parallel to the account of the rich man and Lazarus?

In the parable of the vineyard Jesus warned, "He will put those wretches to a miserable death, and let out the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the fruits in their seasons (Matt. 21:33-41).

In another parable, because they spurned the king's invitation to the wedding feast, the wedding hall was filled with others and "The king was angry, and sent his troops and destroyed those murderers and burned their city" (Matt. 22:1-14). The guests were not judged according to favored national or racial status but according to character depicted by the wedding garment. Because of their forthcoming rejection, Jesus pronounced woes against them prophetically declaring, "Behold, your house is forsaken and desolate" (Matt. 23).

The account under study is generally thought to be a lesson concerning the use of earthly wealth, and some of the context could support that approach. But the context also speaks of the good news of the kingdom (16:16).

The rich man may well portray the Jewish leaders and their nation. Being clothed in the purple of royalty and fine linen of the priesthood, they fared sumptuously on spiritual advantages. Paul wrote of this: "They are Israelites, and to them belong the sonship, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the Law, the worship, and the promises; to them belong the patriarchs, and of their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ" (Rom. 9:2-5). Accepting these blessings as though they deserved them, they became smug, exclusive, and nationalistic. They could argue among themselves as to which religious party among them was right without even considering that a Gentile might qualify for God's favor.

Lazarus — whose name means "without help" — pictures the spiritually starving

Gentile world that was ignored and disdained by the Jews. In his powerless state, he was laid, not near the table or the door, but outside the gate. Hear Paul concerning the condition of the Gentile: "Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called the uncircumcision by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands — remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near in the blood of Christ" (Eph. 2:11-13).

While the Jews were enjoying the "chosen" status "near" to God, the Gentiles were "far off." In the company of dogs (idols), they had repulsive spiritual sores, soothed only by the licking of their pagan beliefs. While they were starving, the smug Jews had little mission even to toss them spiritual crumbs. A few proselytes would find crumbs through which means they might be led to become "twice as much a child of hell as yourselves" (Matt. 23:15). But now they would be welcomed by Abraham as his children through faith and as the chosen of God in him, along with individual Jews who together would become the new spiritual Israel.

Even as the Jews trusted that they were children of Abraham and children of the kingdom, they had become children of disobedience, children of hell, and children of their father, the devil. The roles were reversed so that Lazarus was in Abraham's arms and the rich man was rejected and "far off." The Jewish nation with its earthly hopes was overthrown in 70 A.D. when Jerusalem was destroyed and the Jews were dispersed among the Gentiles. In the succeeding centuries, the rich man has been calling for mercy from Lazarus as he has been scattered and persecuted among the nations. This allegory had an earthly and a spiritual meaning projecting into the centuries and into eternity.

This message was prophetic. Jesus was not describing the condition that existed at the moment, for their full rejection of Jesus was yet to come. The rich man asked that one be sent back from the dead to induce belief. Jews asked for greater signs, but they had Moses and

the prophets, the same testimonies that would cause the Gentiles to believe, to induce faith. Yet, to further accommodate them, Jesus would call another Lazarus back from the dead. Instead of their being convinced by that demonstration, they began to consider how to put Jesus to death (John 11). After they had killed Jesus and he was proven to be the Son of God by his resurrection, the Jews still continued their rejection.

No other messenger would be sent. Jesus was the last prophet. The great chasm remains. The rich man cannot cross over. This is the last scene. Many modern disciples want to add another scene depicting the Jewish nation crossing that great gulf and being restored to favor as a nation. But the curtain falls!

Since beginning this essay, I have read of others who put forth a similar explanation going all the way back to Augustine and Gregory the Great. So I feel a bit less uneasy. Maybe Brad is smarter than I thought, his ancient mind enabling him to think like the ancients!

This approach to interpreting this parable does no violence to other teachings of the Scriptures, and it does eliminate puzzling questions which we raised earlier.

Now let me entice you further into this uncertain course of interpretation. Let us look backward in our context. The Jews had been enriched by the mammon of earthly blessings along with the enrichment of spiritual advantage. While grasping the earthly promises, they proved themselves unfaithful in little. They were not trustworthy of the much greater spiritual treasures (Luke 16:10-13).

Then look back to the perplexing parable of the dishonest steward (v. 1-16). Having failed their stewardship and their loss of favor, they could still save themselves individually by dispensing the grace of God in forgiving sins through Christ like the Jewish apostles and evangelists did. This individual acceptance and proclamation of Christ would allow them to be forgiven and to be received into eternal habitations.

You could more easily swallow a whale than this interpretation? Well, some do have mouths larger than their minds! You are still my beloved brother or sister even when we disagree. That's what counts.

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*For many walk, of whom I often told you, and now tell you even weeping, as enemies of Messiah's torture stake, whose end is destruction, whose god is "appetite", and who glory in their shame, who set their minds on earthly things. (Philippians 3:18-19)*