

The "Time" Element in the Bible: A Rejoinder

Written by [Don Preston](#)

The Christian Courier, September, 1989, contains an article by editor Wayne Jackson in which he examines the chronological statements of prophecy trying to prove what he calls "the elasticity of prophetic chronology." I consider brother Jackson a friend and hold him in esteem, but I believe he has seriously missed the truth in his article.

Jackson avers, "...time, in connection with prophecy, is an exceedingly relative matter." He insists this is the point of II Peter 3:8: "one day is with the Lord as a thousand years...".

Is prophetic time relative? If so, then Bible time statements cannot be taken seriously. When God says something is at hand we may expect it to be even hundreds, (thousands?), of years, or maybe only a few days! But consider Ezekiel 12:21-28. The prophet had said the day of the Lord was at hand, 7:12. The nation responded much like our brother; "It is really a long time away! Time is relative!" But Jehovah condemned such actions and said that when he says something is at hand it will happen in the time of the ones to whom he speaks the warning.

What of II Pet.3:8? Did Peter say time is relative? Jackson amazes us by suggesting this. Peter's point is not that time is relative, that we cannot know if God means near when he says near or a long time when he says a long time; the point is that the passing of time does not affect God's ability to keep his promises! Reader, if we cannot know that near means near and long time means a long time, how can we know love means love, or sin means sin?! Maybe these terms are "elastic" and "exceedingly relative!"

Must God not speak in man's terms? How are we to understand Him unless he communicates to us in a normal comprehensible manner? Was the New Testament not written in KOINE Greek, the common language of the "man on the street?" Jackson has God's language of chronology being an esoteric, mystical thing.

Jackson says no informed person will deny that prophetic time is relative because in several prophecies, Joel 1:15, 2:1, 3:14; Obadiah 15; Isaiah 13:6; Zephaniah 1:7,14 the prophets all said "the day of the Lord is near", "yet these prophets wrote over a span of perhaps three centuries!" Our brother has strangely omitted some very pertinent facts about these prophecies.

First, he has failed to inform the reader that the day of the Lord in these prophecies has nothing to do with the end of time. Instead, it is reference to God's actions in history to judge his enemies and vindicate his people. The action may be a locust plague, (Joel), or one nation, as his instrument, invading another, cf Isaiah 10:5-7.

Second, he has failed to admit that each of these prophecies was fulfilled in the very generation to whom the prophecies was spoken! See Homer Hailey's excellent, *Commentary On The Minor Prophets*, Baker Book House, 1973. It is, therefore, true these prophets wrote over a period of three centuries. But each prophet spoke to his own generation and their prophecies were fulfilled in those respective generations! Time was not elastic to them. The day of the Lord came in their lifetime!

Jackson says prophetic time is elastic to, "give a sense of certainty to the message." But relative means anything but certainty! How can something vague, unknowable, non-determinable impart certainty? Relativity and certainty are self contradictory terms! Would our brother argue that "relative MORALITY" gives a sense of certainty and stability to individuals?

He cites Obadiah 1:15, "the day of Jehovah is near upon all the nations"; and asserts "Chronologically, this day has not yet climaxed history." Yet history shows that Edom (the object of the prophecy) was destroyed, along with her confederates, by Nebuchadnezzar, following the destruction of Jerusalem. Study Isaiah 34, Jeremiah 49:7ff; Ezekiel 25, etc.. And see Pusey on the OT, Vol II. How can Edom be destroyed in a future day of the Lord when Edom does not currently even exist?! Does our brother agree with the dispensationalists who believe Edom will be reestablished only to be destroyed?

What relevance would the message to Edom have for God to say, "The day of the Lord is at hand" and mean he was not going to act for 2600 years! How does a delay of 2600 years give a "sense of certainty to the message"? How does 2600 years fit into "at hand"?

Our friend says another reason for the elasticity of time is "to stress the swiftness with which divine justice will be dispatched," (emp. his). He cites Luke 18 but this destroys his claims. In Revelation 6:9-11 the Lord promised the persecuted they would only have to wait for a "little while" for vindication. And what would give the martyrs comfort, the knowledge that when God finally acted, maybe after additional millennia, he would do so swiftly, or the promise it would not be long until he did act?

Jackson claims, "Some passages which speak of the 'nearness' of the Lord may denote proximity of presence, and not chronological nearness." He offers Philippians 4:5, "The Lord is at hand." He insists the Greek word engus "can mean nearby." Notice he uses the words "can mean" and "may denote." Jackson well knows the lexicographical evidence in reference to coming events or time is that "engus" (eggus) does not mean proximity but imminence.

The context of Philippians 4:5 is the parousia. In chapter 3:20-21 the apostle says they "eagerly" awaited the parousia. In chapter 4, an unfortunate division, he bases his exhortations to the Philippians on that coming. And he says Jesus, his coming just mentioned, is at hand.

Is brother Jackson aware of the dilemma he poses for himself? He divests engus of imminence when it speaks of Jesus' return. But he avers the imminence of engus in Mark 1:15. It says, "The kingdom of God is at hand." He insists, "John the Baptizer, Jesus himself, and the twelve disciples, all preached that the coming of the kingdom was "at hand," literally meaning, "is come near." (Compare Luke 21:30 for the meaning of "at hand." Thus, they preached the nearness of the kingdom of God, and such can scarcely be harmonized with the notion that it hasn't come." Premillennialism, A System of Infidelity, p.4. We agree. But the writers of the New Testament also said, "the coming of the Lord is at hand." Jackson wants imminence in reference to the kingdom but denies it, even though the same word is used, in reference to the parousia! What is it someone said about consistency?

Our brother says statements of imminence are used "to emphasize the need for constant vigilance. This is especially true with reference to passages that predict the second coming of Christ in terms of seeming closeness." He gives James 5:7. In other words, the Holy Spirit used words of imminency even though there was no fact of imminency! We are reminded of our "once in grace, always in grace" friends who insist it is impossible to fall from grace but the Spirit warned against it nonetheless! Jackson says the parousia was not near, it was only "seemingly" so, but God gave all the warnings about the coming being near anyway! If God knew the parousia was not imminent, but said it was, is that not deceitful? Does the Bible not speak at length of the FAITHFULNESS OF GOD?

Jackson's proof that James 5:7 does not teach the imminence of Jesus' return is because Paul in II Thessalonians 2:2 urged the Thessalonians not to believe the day of the Lord was at hand, KJV.

But Paul did NOT say the coming was not at hand. He said it had not already come. We have consulted 26 translations of the Bible and various Greek authorities. Only three translations, KJV, ASV, and Lamsa render the passage at hand. The Greek authorities are adamant. The word as used in Thessalonians, in the tense used there, has but one meaning, "has already come."

Further, in James, proof that the coming was indeed imminent is seen in the two other warnings. The writer told the brethren to be patient "until the coming of the Lord." He did not say "until death," he said "until the coming of the Lord!" And he said the Lord was standing right at the door! Reader, if the idea of imminence is not exuding from the very pores, from every letter of these verses, then language means nothing at all!

The Courier says that in passages which speak of the Lord's coming as being at hand, "the emphasis may not be on time. These passages must be balanced with others which indicate that the Lord would 'tarry' "...for a long time." If one will study the passages which indicate the possibility of delay in the coming he will see very quickly that the delay is only in regard to the generation then living!

This is true in Matthew 24:48. And it is strange indeed that Jackson uses this verse since elsewhere he argues that in Matthew 24 the pronoun "you" is one of proximity and always refers to events to be seen by the apostles! But in verse 44 Jesus clearly directs his comments about his coming to his apostles.

Jackson urges his readers not to lose confidence in the integrity of the scriptures because of distorted concepts of chronology. He says one must not resort to "bizarre exegetical schemes in order to resolve what he perceives as a chronological difficulty within the context of prophecy." But our brother DOES what he urges others not to do!

Does it not impugn the integrity of scripture to assert that God does not communicate sensibly to mankind? Is it not harmful to say God may promise something is at hand when in reality centuries would pass? Does our brother not know that "hope deferred makes the heart sick," Proverbs 13:12? If God says something is at hand and it may not be fulfilled for centuries, what does it mean when he said something would not happen for a long time? See Numbers 24:17, Daniel 8:26. Might a "long time" really mean "shortly?" Is it not a "bizarre exegetical scheme" to insist on imminence when speaking of the coming of the kingdom but emphatically denying imminence in reference to the parousia even though the identical Greek terms and tenses are used?

In the past, our brother has done some excellent work on the 70 weeks of Daniel. In his October, 1979 Courier he attacks the millennial theory of a gap of centuries between the 69th and 70th week, rightly insisting there is absolutely no justification for such a gap. But wait. By averring the "elasticity of prophetic chronology" Jackson has opened the door for all kinds of gaps! He sees it possible that although James said, "The coming of the Lord is at hand," there has been a 2000 year gap between then and now. Worse, Obadiah said the day of the Lord is at hand but there has been a 2600 year gap between then and now! That is a longer gap than posited by the millennialists so strongly condemned by our brother!

The Premillennialist will love what Jackson is doing with the time statements of scripture. They have argued for years that time statements are relative. Jackson has debated them on the point. Now he has joined their camp and abandoned any foundation upon which to deny their claims! On Mark 1:15 they have used II Pet. 3:8 to offset the unmistakable language. God does not think in time like man they say, therefore at hand could be many years. Jackson has rightly denied this up to now. But now he has capitulated and adopted the millennialist's arguments!

We also urge readers not to lose faith in the scriptures or adopt "bizarre exegetical schemes" to avoid the undeniable time statements of scriptures. Accept them! It will mean you will have to rethink your traditionally held positions but truth is more precious than tradition! Refuse to blindly accept the directives of prominent men. Study for yourself!

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