

Praise for *The High King of Heaven*

In *The High King of Heaven*, Dean Davis gives us a long overdue systematic treatise on biblical eschatology. Leaving no stone unturned, he interacts with differing views as objectively as possible, challenging each one with the Word of God. While you may disagree with some of his conclusions, it will not be for a lack of Scriptural support. Though I remain undecided in my own view of the last things, I am now better equipped to further my study of the Bible and to wrestle with the mechanics of our one sure hope regarding the end times: Christ's glorious return. Christendom is indebted to Dean Davis for *The High King of Heaven*.

—Terry Delaney, Pastor, Union Baptist Church,
Mexico, MO; Book Reviewer, ChristianBookNotes.com

The High King of Heaven provides the depth of a seminary level course with readability accessible to the layman. Dean helps bring you into the evangelical debate about the end times while advocating for the amillennial position in a way that makes sense of the divine drama of redemption portrayed in Scripture. Furthermore, he helps the reader better learn how to read the Bible and recognize these truths in the Word. Through it all, he confronts alternative interpretations boldly but charitably.

—Reid Hankins: Pastor,
Trinity Orthodox Presbyterian Church, Novato, CA.

In *The High King of Heaven*, Dean Davis has provided us with a tremendous resource for wrestling through the biblical texts most directly speaking to eschatology. Any thoughtful reader will find this work deeply edifying, regardless of whether you agree with all of the conclusions put forward. Much could be said about the scholarship and thoughtfulness of the text. Also, as the title shows, Dean's heart passion for Jesus Christ to be glorified, and his deep love of God's Word, cannot be missed when reading this book. For this reason, I will regularly reference *The High King of Heaven* in my own study and will encourage others to do the same.

—Adam Peacocke: Pastor,
City Life Fellowship; Santa Rosa CA.

Dean Davis' book, *The High King of Heaven*, is as clear a presentation of the amillennial eschatological view as I've ever come across. While he ably defends his own view from Scripture, he always deals fairly and charitably with opposing positions. In a day and age when many young church leaders find it acceptable to remain noncommittal on issues surrounding the "last things," Davis makes a powerful case for the consistent exegesis of the biblical text, and pleads with us regarding the critical implications of viewing Jesus in the fullness of who He has revealed Himself to be... the High King of Heaven.

—**Stephen Saucier**: MA.

Biblical Exegesis and Linguistics, Dallas Theological Seminary

The High King of Heaven, by Dean Davis, is the most sweeping and comprehensive book on eschatology that I've ever encountered. The scope of this book is simply breathtaking. As is typical with all books on eschatology, no one will agree with everything he says. But everyone should wrestle vigorously and thoughtfully with his approach to reading prophetic texts. This isn't for bedside, late-night reading. In fact, it will probably keep you up at night!

—**Sam Storms**, Ph. D.: Pastor,

Bridgeway Church; author of *Kingdom Come: The Amillennial Alternative* (Mentor)

Dean Davis leaves no stone unturned as he carefully lays out his argument for amillennialism, and just as carefully (and gently) dismantles the other major eschatological views. He writes in a scholarly but relaxed and inviting manner that will satisfy theologian and new believer alike. The fragrance of Christ is in these pages. *The High King of Heaven* is not a book written simply to win an argument, but to edify the saints. Thank you, Dean, for this labor of scholarship and love for Christ and His church.

—**Doug Thompson**: Pastor,

Middletown Bible Church; professor,
Cornerstone Theological Seminary (CA)

THE
HIGH KING
OF
HEAVEN

THE HIGH KING OF HEAVEN

DISCOVERING THE MASTER KEYS TO THE GREAT END TIME DEBATE

DEAN DAVIS

REDEMPTION  PRESS

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2nd Printing 2014.

Published by Redemption Press, PO Box 427, Enumclaw, WA 98022

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ISBN 13 (Print): 978-1-63232-024-7

ISBN 13 (eBook): 978-1-63232-025-4

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 2013906137

*Come to me,
All who are weary and are heavy laden,
And I will give you rest.
Take my yoke upon you and learn from me,
For I am gentle and humble in heart,
And you shall find rest for your souls.
For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.*

*And behold ... I have the keys.
(Mt. 11:28ff, Rev. 1:18)*

*High King of Heaven
My victory won
May I reach heaven's joys
O bright Heaven's Sun ...
Heart of my own heart
Whatever befall
Still be my vision
O Ruler of all!*

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PROLOGUE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

AS FOOLS LONG to play Hamlet, so I longed to write a short, definitive book on biblical eschatology. I blush to present you with the results.

But truth to tell, I am actually quite pleased with them. Yes, the book is long. Indeed, for some it will be too long, perhaps even to open. Here is my defense: I really did want to write a definitive book; a book that would resolve, once and for all, the Great End Time Debate that has roiled the evangelical world for some 150 years. Whether or not I have achieved that ambitious goal is for you to judge. But of one thing I am now quite sure: There was no way I was going to produce a definitive book on eschatology without addressing all the issues, all the options, all the arguments, and all the relevant biblical texts. Apparently that requires *lots* of pages, more than I had planned. But I do believe I have done what I needed to do.

Now, having made my defense, let me suggest a few options for grappling with this intimidating tome.

First, if the prospect of wading into it is simply too daunting, please know that I am planning to write an abridged version, one that will target readers with a more modest appetite for eschatology. Doubtless the title will mention the High King of Heaven or the Great End Time Debate. I hope you'll keep an eye out for it in days ahead.

But secondly, if you want to get the gist of the book, I recommend that you read chapters 5, 9, 10, 13, 20, 21, and 25. In a relatively short space, they will give you my thinking on the four underlying issues of the Great End Time Debate: the nature and structure of the Kingdom of God, the proper interpretation of OT prophecies of the Kingdom, the meaning of the Millennium, and the purpose and structure of the Consummation.

And who knows: Perhaps by taking this little day hike through *The High King of Heaven* you will be moved to make the whole journey.

A third option is to use the book as a reference work, somewhat like a Bible dictionary. To do so, simply consult the Index of Subjects or the Index of Scriptures. There you can quickly locate my thoughts on all the main issues of biblical eschatology, and also on the proper interpretation of every major eschatological text. If it seems to you that I have overlooked one or more your favorites, by all means feel free to contact me through my website.

But finally, I do indeed hope you will consider reading the whole book straight through. If you read a chapter a day, you'll be done in less than a month. If you read half a chapter, you'll be done in two months. Honestly, I think you would find this a rewarding use of your time. It's not that I am a great theologian or writer. It's simply that this is a great subject, and that I have cared enough about it to probe it to the depths. Possibly, you will disagree with my conclusions. Certainly, you will find that in wrestling with the High King over his amazing eschatological truth, he will expand your mind, fill your heart, and mightily strengthen your grip on the glories of the Christian worldview.



Before embarking on our journey, I want to thank the friends and colleagues who helped me complete this challenging project.

I am especially grateful for Ms. Leah Lehr, a budding young graphic artist who produced the tables, charts, and diagrams you will find in the pages ahead. Great job, Leah! You're on your way now!

Thanks also to pastors Chris Bauer and Darrell Brooker, who kindly loaned me a number of very useful books from their excellent libraries.

Thanks to Reid Hankins, Adam Peacocke, Stephen Saucier, and Don Stenberg, zealous young pastors and theologians who kept me sharp with their wise and honest input.

Thanks also to Athena Dean and all my new friends at Redemption Press. I am truly grateful for your sincere, timely, and generous efforts to get this book back into print. My hope and prayer is that the Lord will richly bless you as you step out with Him into your fresh adventure in Christian publishing.

Special thanks to my dear wife, Linda, who always brightened my (early) mornings by opening the office door and placing a hot cup of Kenya Tea beside my keyboard. It was only one of her many kindnesses to the fevered author she so faithfully loves and supports.

And finally, highest thanks to the High King himself, without whom, as the Scripture well says, I could have done nothing. Looking back, I realize that from my earliest days as a believer in Jesus I dreamed of writing a major work on biblical eschatology. It was, I trust, the Lord himself who planted the vision; just as it was the Lord himself who, over several decades of pastoral labors, nurtured and enlarged it until the happy day when he (and I) felt I was finally ready to bring it forth. The result is in your hands. As for the flaws you will doubtless find, I gladly take responsibility for them all. As for any truth you may find, I even more gladly give all the glory to the High King of Heaven. Faithful was he to begin the work; faithful was he to accomplish it.

INTRODUCTION

THE BLESSED HOPE IN THESE LAST DAYS

KNOWING THAT THE Passover was at hand; knowing that his hour had come to depart this world to the Father; knowing that he must leave his disciples behind to continue his work; knowing that they, like him, would face terrible opposition in doing so; and knowing that they would need an unfailing source of courage and strength to fulfill so difficult a task, the Lord Jesus Christ—faithfully loving his own to the end—left them with an unforgettable promise:

Let not you heart be troubled: Believe in God, believe also in Me. In My Father's house there are many dwelling-places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself, that where I am there you may be also.

—John 14:1-3

These are the words of the heavenly Bridegroom to his earthly Betrothed. In the manner of all young Jewish men, he must briefly leave her behind in order to prepare a place for her on his Father's estate. Nevertheless, in just a little while he will return, receive her to himself, proudly escort her to her new home, consummate the marriage covenant with unspeakable delight, and ever after live together with her there in the infinite fruitfulness of their mutual love. Thus did the Lord Jesus Christ give his disciples—*all of his disciples*—the gift of hope.

A Blessed Hope

The promise of Christ's coming again is no ordinary hope. His people do not hope for it as they hope for sunshine on the day of the picnic, or for the home-team to win the World Series. No, they are actually quite *certain* of their Lord's return. When the Spirit entered their heart, they were united—through repentance and faith—with the ascended Christ. Being thus united, they were seated with him in heavenly places (Eph. 2:6). Being thus seated, they began to survey, through the lens of Scripture, God's great plan for the ages; the character and course of Salvation History. And beholding this, they came to know—with absolute certainty—that as surely as their Lord had come to earth a first time to accomplish their redemption, so surely would he come again a second time to consummate it; to receive them, in glory, once and for all, to himself (John 16:13; Heb. 11:1, 7, 13; 1 Peter. 1:3-9).

Having pondered it often—and written of it much—the Apostle Paul referred to the second coming of Christ as the Church's *Blessed Hope*.

For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men, instructing us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires, and to live sensibly, righteously, and godly in the present age, looking for the blessed hope, even the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus; who gave himself for us that He might redeem us from every lawless deed and purify for Himself a people for His own possession, zealous for good works.

—Titus 2:11-14

In the journey before us, my goal is to plumb the Blessed Hope to its very depths. But before we embark, let us linger for a moment over the phrase itself.

As for the word "hope," we find throughout the NT that it means a *confident expectation of future good, presently seen only by faith* (Rom. 8:18-25, Heb. 11:1). Here, the believer's confidence is rooted in an objective fact, namely, that the future good in store has been *promised* to them by an omnipotent, covenant-keeping God who is always true to his word. As the apostle Paul put it, the saints enjoy a hope of eternal life which God, who cannot lie, promised long ages ago; and which even now he has made manifest by sending Christ into the world with the good news of the Gospel (Titus 1:2-3, Heb. 6:17-20).

But why is this hope *blessed*? One answer might be: It is blessed because on the day of Christ's return he will do so many wonderful things

to consummate the happiness of his people. And that is true enough. But a deeper, more penetrating answer would be: It is blessed because, as God's people contemplate this hope, the Holy Spirit *actually gives them a foretaste of the manifold joys they will experience on that Day*. Indeed, the Holy Spirit actually gives them a foretaste of the manifold joys *that God and Christ themselves will experience on that Day*, when the saints fully enter into the joy of their Lord (Mt. 25:21)!

Now, if all this be the case—if, under the Spirit of God, biblical teaching about the Blessed Hope actually puts God's people in contact with the power and joy of Christ at his return—then two closely related facts immediately become clear.

First, the Blessed Hope must actually be a fountain of *manifold* blessings; blessings that are meant to equip and empower God's people for a successful pilgrimage through the howling wilderness of this world; blessings such as eager anticipation, ardent desire, unquenchable curiosity and delight, courage, determination, endurance, self-sacrifice, and evangelistic confidence and effectiveness; blessings that the heavenly Bridegroom surely had in mind when, at his parting, he gave birth to this supernatural hope with his unforgettable word of promise.

But secondly—and quite soberingly—it is equally clear that any confusion about the true character of the Blessed Hope must hinder the work of the Spirit in imparting its attendant virtues; it must stanch the flow of the many-streamed fountain; and so it must grieve the heavenly Groom, whose word, somehow, has missed the mark, and whose Bride therefore now walks weak and wounded through the world.

A Darkened Sun

For at least 1500 years, the historic Christian Church, with the rarest of exceptions, stood united in her understanding of the Blessed Hope. Whether we think of Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Lutheran, Reformed, Presbyterian, Anglican, Baptist, or Methodist communions, all shared a united vision of the Consummation: Christ will come again once at the end of the present evil age. He will come bodily, visibly, and in power and great glory. He will bring all the holy angels and all the souls of the departed saints in his train. At his arrival in the skies above the earth, he will raise the dead, judge the world in righteousness, destroy the present universe by fire, and turn the wicked (along with Satan and his demons) into hell. And then he will create glorious new heavens and a new earth, the eternal home of the redeemed.

Here was an incomparably simple, clear, majestic, dreadful, and unspeakably soul-strengthening scenario that century after century warned and chastened sinners, even as it anchored and stirred the deepest hopes of the faithful saints.

Today, however, much has changed, especially in evangelical circles. Indeed, over the last 150 years the conservative Protestant consensus on eschatology has largely dissolved, with the result that leaders are unable to agree, and laymen are unable to decide between a bewildering number of competing eschatological options. Small wonder, then, that we find evangelical publishers continually giving us books with titles like *The Millennial Maze*, *Contemporary Options in Eschatology*, *Three Views on the Rapture*, and *The Revelation: Four Views!*

This troubling development raises a number of obvious and important questions. What has gone awry? Why has the historic consensus on eschatology collapsed? How could so many theologians and churchmen of the past have been wrong, if indeed they were wrong? Is biblical eschatology really as difficult as the present divisions seem to indicate? Is it that God is now giving us fresh light on eschatology? Or is it that the Church is now under spiritual attack, and therefore in danger of losing whatever eschatological light she formerly enjoyed?

For my part, I believe that the answer to these questions is found upon the lips of Christ himself, who once said to his disciples, "An enemy has done this" (Mt. 13:28). That enemy would be the devil and Satan, who, in Revelation 9:1-2, is pictured as a star fallen from heaven to the earth; a malevolent angelic being who opens the shaft of the abyss so that a great a cloud of smoke rises up *to darken the sun and the air*. Here, then, in the mystical symbolism of the Revelation, we find a warning that in the last days Satan and his army of evil spirits will strive mightily to obscure the truth of God; to cloud the minds of men with errors and lies; to deceive, if it were possible, the very elect; to toss them to and fro, and carry them about with every wind of false doctrine (Mt. 24:24, Eph. 4:14). In short, I believe the modern beclouding of the Blessed Hope of Christ's Church is a sure sign of intense spiritual warfare on the eschatological front.

Counting the Cost

For five weighty reasons, this warfare is costing the saints dearly.

First, it diminishes eschatological *clarity*. The Bible assures us that our Lord very much desires such clarity for his Church. Having spoken

at length to his disciples about the mysteries of the Kingdom of God, he pointedly asked them, “Have you understood these things?” He knew, of course, that they hadn’t, and that they couldn’t until the Day of Pentecost, when the Spirit would come to teach them all things. Nevertheless, Christ’s remarks reveal his heart: *He wants his people to be clear about biblical eschatology.* In particular, he wants them to be clear about the Kingdom of God: its nature, its stages, the meaning of the OT prophecies that foretold it, and the design and structure of the great Consummation that will bring it to completion. In other words, he wants his people to be competent NT scribes, drawing out of the great treasure chest of biblical wisdom things new and old. He wants them to be skillful in using fully digested NT truth to understand, enjoy, and proclaim all that was revealed in OT times (Mt. 13:51-52).

Secondly, to the extent that it diminishes clarity, the present eschatological confusion also diminishes *expectancy, confidence, and joy.* Again, eschatological truth is meant to unite us spiritually with our Blessed Hope. It is meant to be a conduit through which the beauty, power, majesty, and joy of the Consummation pours into our souls even before the event itself occurs. It should enable us to “exult in the hope of the glory of God” (Romans 5:2)! If, however, our Blessed Hope is overshadowed by doubt or error, then to that degree expectancy, confidence, and joy must wither away.

Thirdly, the present confusion diminishes *comfort* in tribulation. All Christians understand that they are appointed to tribulation, sometimes to great tribulation (John 16:33, Mt. 24:21, 1 Thess. 3:1-5, Rev. 7:14). Certainly the apostle Paul understood this (Acts 14:22, 20:3, 2 Cor. 11). How, then, did he steel himself against the prospect of such terrible trials? How did he get them into perspective? How did he come to regard them as “light,” almost trivial?

The answer appears throughout his writings: In the midst of all his tribulations, Paul took great comfort in his *clear* vision of the Blessed Hope; in clearly seeing the unseen things waiting up ahead; in clearly seeing that his present afflictions were not worthy to be compared with the glories soon to come; in clearly seeing and savoring the eschatological blessings lovingly prepared for him in eternity past by a benevolent, sovereign, and omnipotent God (1 Cor. 2:1f, 2 Cor. 4:18, Rom. 8:18). Through Paul we therefore learn that eschatological clarity is crucial; that it is meant to prepare and gird Christ’s Church for her manifold tribulations, putting temporary earthly trials into eternal, heavenly

perspective. Small wonder, then, that the enemy of our souls—whom our Lord aptly describes as a thief and a robber—would dearly love to steal that clarity from us (John 10:1).

Fourthly, the current eschatological warfare diminishes *power in preaching*. As we know from the Great Commission, the *raison d'être* of the Church Militant is to preach the gospel to all nations, so that Christ may gather to himself a believing people, a holy Bride who will live with him forever in the World to Come (Mt. 28:18f, John 10:16, Titus 2:14, Rev. 21:1f). But just as a precious gem needs a worthy metallic setting for the proper display of its glory, so too the glorious message of redemption needs a worthy theological setting. It needs a carefully structured underpinning of closely related biblical doctrines. These include, of course, the doctrines of creation and fall. But they also include the doctrines surrounding the Consummation: Christ's second coming, the resurrection of the dead, the final judgment, and a glorious new world to come. In other words, one cannot "placard" Christ to full effect unless he does so against the backdrop of solid biblical teaching on the Consummation. The Church requires a sound eschatology in order to preach a sound Gospel.

The apostles understood this well. Peter, for example, on the Day of Pentecost, sought to move his Jewish neighbors to repentance and faith by speaking of Christ's heavenly reign (Acts 2:33-36). Only days later he again sought to do the same, this time by assuring his kinsmen of their Messiah's soon return, and of the restoration of all things spoken of by all the OT prophets (Acts 3:19-21). Similarly, Paul tried to rouse the slumbering conscience of the idolatrous Athenians by warning them of a coming Day of Judgment before the one true living God, a judgment that will occur at the hand of the risen Christ (Acts 17:31).

As for the apostle John, we read that it was given to him to behold an angel flying in midheaven, having an *eternal gospel* to preach to all the inhabitants of the earth. And what exactly was that Gospel? The answer is surprising: "Fear God, and give him glory, because the hour of his judgment has come" (Rev. 14:6-8)! But perhaps it is not so surprising after all. True, this text does not mention redemption by Christ, or justification by faith in him. However, it definitely supplies a powerful motive for trusting in the Redeemer, as well as clear instructions to believers about how they should preach him: They should preach him as the only One who can deliver us from the wrath to come (Mt. 3:7, Luke 3:7, Acts 4:12, 1 Thess. 1:10).

But what if the preacher is confused about the last things? What if he is unsure about “the hour of God’s judgment”: when it is coming, what will happen when it comes, who will do the judging, and what exactly he will do when he so judges? Yes, to the extent that an evangelist is unclear about his eschatology, to that extent his gospel will be truncated, and the power of his message—whether to saints or sinners—will be diminished.

Finally, the present spiritual warfare diminishes *the saint’s perception and enjoyment of the glory of Christ and God*. This dire consequence is upon us even now because the web of counterfeit eschatologies obscures two of the most radiant, mind-expanding, and heart-stirring components of the “mystery” of the Gospel: the heavenly mediatorial reign of Christ, and the Consummation that will seal it up when he comes again at the end of the present evil age. All Christians understand that God was pleased to glorify his Son (and himself) by his righteous life and atoning death. In the pages ahead, I will argue that he is equally eager to glorify his Son (and himself) by Christ’s heavenly reign, and by the Momentous Event that will bring it to a close. That *any* of these stupendous eschatological realities should be eclipsed in *any* way is injurious to our spiritual health, and must therefore be reckoned as a grievous loss for the Church Militant.

Here, then, is something of the weighty spiritual cost of our present eschatological confusion. By compromising the clarity of the Church’s Blessed Hope, it diminishes her expectation, confidence, joy, comfort in tribulation, power in preaching, and the soul-strengthening vision of the glory of Christ and God. For a lengthy season we have been paying this price, and have somehow managed to get by. Soon, however, we may not. Soon we will need the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.

Bad News: We Closed the Door

The bewildering array of eschatological options painfully confirms one of the core teachings of Scripture: We live in a fallen world. Because of indwelling sin in our members, and because of demonic deception, doctrinal error creeps into our theology. Even the most gifted, conscientious, and well-meaning Bible teachers can make mistakes. Worse still, they can stubbornly cling to views in which they are deeply invested, even when those views cannot stand up to thoughtful criticism. And amidst the resulting confusion and controversy, the people themselves grow discouraged: “If the experts can’t agree on eschatological truth,

how can we?” In so speaking, they forget, of course, that God is pleased to test our love of his truth by making parts of it a little more difficult to understand; that in the face of such testing, he would not have us fall into laziness, skepticism, or despair; that instead he wants us to emulate the noble-minded Bereans, who searched the Scriptures daily to see if this or that particular teaching was true; and that he promises richly to reward those who will do this very thing (Mt. 7:7f, Acts 17:1-12, 2 Peter 3:16). And yet, we fall. Therefore, with a little help from our enemies, we ourselves are the ones who close the door on our Blessed Hope.

So let us pray: for our leaders, ourselves, and God’s people everywhere. Let us pray that God would humble us beneath his mighty hand; that he would make us teachable, dependent, cooperative, and diligent; that he would sovereignly apply the heavenly salve to our sin-darkened eyes; that he would deliver us from our strong adversary, clear the air of his foul smoke, and fill our vision once again with the radiance of his truth. In short, let us pray that in these last days the Lord of the Church will open the door once again, unveiling afresh the Blessed Hope of his beloved Bride.

Good News: He Has the Keys!

My goal in this book is to contribute what I can to this worthy end. I have written it in faith: faith that our present eschatological confusion is *not* the norm; faith that God *wants* us to understand his revelation about the last things; faith that we really can; and faith that the truth is not nearly as complicated or difficult as some would have us believe.

In particular, I have written in the conviction that God—through Christ—has supplied us with a number of master keys for apprehending his eschatological truth *in its entirety*; that with these keys in hand, we will be able to arrive at deep conviction on such perennial flashpoints of eschatological controversy as the nature of the Kingdom of God, the stages of its appearing in history, the proper interpretation of OT Kingdom prophecy, the meaning of the Millennium of Revelation 20, and—the great prize of all our theological labors—the design and structure of the Consummation.

Yes, the Lord Jesus himself, in whom are found all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge, has the keys to God’s eschatological truth. And if he is pleased to place them in our hands, we shall once again be able to open the door, pass through, and find that we have rejoined our

evangelical fathers in an astonishingly beautiful and majestic world whose very air intoxicates with delight, joy, hope, and the power to serve.

Conclusion

In this Introduction I have suggested that evangelical confusion about eschatology is a sure sign of spiritual warfare on the theological front. But in a further effort to encourage you to enter the struggle for eschatological truth, I want to close by suggesting that it is also a sign of something else, and something far better: *The High King of Heaven is returning soon!*

In the pages ahead I will give my reasons for this persuasion. And if I am right, one thing is sure: The final theological struggle will be both fierce and painful. That does not necessarily mean, however, that it will be bad. As Martin Luther famously said, “The devil is God’s devil.” In other words, if Satan is indeed attacking the Church on the eschatological front, it is only because a good, wise, and sovereign God is pleased to let him, knowing that those attacks will redound not only to the greater glory of Christ, but also to the greater good of his people (Rom. 8:28-29).

Now, in the case before us, what exactly might that “greater good” be? Drawing generously from the words of the New Testament, my answer would go something like this:

In these last days, there must be eschatological factions among us, so that good Bereans everywhere, hungry for eschatological truth, might search the Scriptures daily to find out which view is right (Acts 17:11); so that the school of eschatological thought approved by the Lord may finally be recognized for what it is by the true spiritual Church (1 Cor. 11:9); so that God’s people may at last attain to the unity of the faith in the area of eschatology (Eph. 4:13); so that in the dark and difficult days just prior to Christ’s return, the saints will neither be deceived (Mt. 24:23-24), nor quickly shaken from their composure (2 Thess. 2:1-2), nor tossed to and fro by every wind of eschatological doctrine (Eph. 4:14); so that, on the contrary, they will stand strong, joyous, and hopeful, even amidst the most severe tribulations, which is a sure sign of salvation for them, but also of destruction for their enemies (Mt. 10:22, Phil. 1:28, 1 Thess. 1:4); so that in boldly holding forth the whole counsel of God—all the words of this life—they might effectively gather in what remains of God’s elect (Acts 20:27, Phil. 2:16, 2 Tim. 2:10); so that in the end, when the High King finally does appear in glory, they may be confident and

unashamed, with eyes fixed steadfastly upon the heavens (1 Pet. 1:13, 1 John 2:28); so that having thoroughly sanctified them by the washing of water with his word, he might present them to himself a glorious Bride, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish before him, world without end (John 17:17, Eph. 5:25-7). Amen.

PART 1

ISSUES AND OPTIONS IN
BIBLICAL ESCHATOLOGY

WHAT IS BIBLICAL ESCHATOLOGY?

ACCORDING TO A wise proverb, a journey of a thousand miles begins with the first step. But what if, in taking our first step, we step out in the wrong direction? In that case, we will not likely reach our destination; or, if we do, we will reach it circuitously, in a state of complete exhaustion, and with many a dear companion left straggling behind. So then, in view of the sharp spiritual warfare surrounding eschatology, we do well to start well: to define our terms carefully, to get the crucial issues in focus, and our final destination in clear view.

Varieties of Eschatology

Let us begin with the word “eschatology” itself. Though a little intimidating, its meaning is quite simple. It brings together two Greek words, *eschatos* and *logos*. The former means “last” and the latter means “word” or “teaching about.” So eschatology is teaching about “the last things,” about the things that will happen at the *end* of the story, whether of an individual life or of the universe itself.

There are two basic kinds of eschatology. The first—called *personal eschatology*—addresses one of the most urgent questions slumbering in the human heart: What happens when we die? Its concern is to think deeply about the destiny of the human mind, soul, or spirit. Does the soul survive the death of the body? If so, where does it go? How long does it stay there? Will it remain a disembodied spirit forever? Will it ever be reunited with a body? These are that kinds of questions that personal eschatology seeks to answer.

The second variety is called *cosmic eschatology*. Its concern is to think deeply about the future of the universe, life, and man. Is universal history moving in a straight line towards a specific end? If so, what is that end?

Will it be a permanent end, or is the universe always changing, perhaps even obeying a law of eternal recurrence? These are the kinds of BIG questions addressed by cosmic eschatology.

Very importantly, all viable worldviews—all viable philosophies and world religions—advance some kind of personal and cosmic eschatology. Atheists, pantheists, and theists all have the great questions of life—and especially the great questions of eschatology—burning in their hearts. Often with great existential urgency they wonder and ask, “What will happen when I die?” and “Where is history heading?” As Christians, we believe that God himself has graciously given us trustworthy answers to these questions in the teachings of Christ and the Bible. Accordingly, we also believe that the answers supplied by other worldviews are, to a greater or lesser degree, in error; that they can never really satisfy the spiritual hunger of seekers, nor lay to rest their fears about death, the afterlife, and the future of the universe, life, and man. If, then, we desire to love and serve our non-christian neighbors in these things, we do well to acquaint ourselves not only with biblical eschatology, but also with the eschatology of other worldviews. Then, when opportunity arises to speak with our friends and loved ones about “the last things,” we will be ready to do so competently, confidently, and compassionately.¹

The Bible and Personal Eschatology

Though our focus in the present book is cosmic eschatology, it is important briefly to survey the personal eschatology of the Bible, since the two are closely related and intersect at a number of crucial points.

Concerning all who die prior to Christ’s return, the Bible teaches that at the moment of death the human spirit (or soul) departs its body to one of two possible destinations—Heaven or Hades (Luke 16:19-31, Phil. 1:19-26, James 2:26, Rev. 6:9, 20:4).

Those who reach Heaven do so based not upon their own good works, but upon the work of Christ in their behalf—his righteous life and atoning death—, and upon their God-given faith in him (Mark 10:45, John 1:12, 3:16, Rom. 3:21f, Eph. 2:8-10). The saints in Heaven—fully aware of their surroundings and delighted by its manifold blessings (Heb. 12:22-24)—eagerly await their Lord’s return to Earth at the end of the age, when he will consummate their redemption by raising them from the dead in new, glorified, resurrection bodies, and by creating for them a glorious new world in which they will live together with him forever (Luke 20:27-40, John 5:28f, 1 Cor. 15, Phil. 3:20-21, 2 Pet. 3:13).

Those who enter Hades do so based upon their own evil works, especially upon the evil work of suppressing the truth that God made known to them through nature, the Law, and the Gospel, the last of which is God's only provision for the forgiveness of sin and the acquisition of the righteousness necessary for obtaining eternal life (John 3:19, 36, 5:29, Acts 13:46, Rom. 2:8f, 2 Thess. 1:8, Rev. 20:12). In Hades the lost are in torments, being excluded from the presence of God, deprived of his every life-giving blessing, conscious of his abiding wrath, and subject to the positive pains of divine retribution. Also, to the extent that they may be aware of it, the lost are tormented by anticipation of the Resurrection and the Day of Judgment, when Christ will send them—body and soul—into Gehenna, the eternal lake of fire prepared for the devil and his angels (Mt. 8:29, Mt. 10:28, 25:41, Mark 9:48, Luke 16:19-31, 2 Thess. 1:9, Rev. 20:14).

As we shall see in the pages ahead, throughout “these last days” it is the great burden of Christ's Church not only to proclaim the Gospel of salvation to every creature, but also to make these—the awesome, eternal consequences of a decision for or against Christ—crystal clear.² Evangelism and eschatology go hand in hand.

The Bible and Cosmic Eschatology

In the popular Christian imagination, cosmic eschatology deals with the spectrum of events surrounding our Lord's return at the end of the present evil age. This is both understandable and—to a certain extent—fitting. It is understandable because we modern Christians live after Christ's first advent, but prior to his second. Accordingly, we tend to think of eschatology as the study of the end of *our* story; of the coming of Christ that will bring *our* walk through the wilderness of this world to its happy end. Moreover, it is fitting to think this way, since the Bible clearly teaches that Christ's second coming will indeed bring to a close the last chapter of Salvation History.

Nevertheless, the more we examine Scripture as a whole, the more we realize that this is, in fact, a seriously truncated view of biblical eschatology; that “the last days” and “the last things” take in a far broader spectrum of events than the grand finale of history, important and fascinating as the latter may be. Moreover, it is not until we have seen this truth—it is not until we have discerned from Scripture itself *the true sphere of the Bible's eschatological interest*—that we can rightly

and most richly understand what interests us most: the Consummation set to occur at the end of this present evil age.

Salvation History

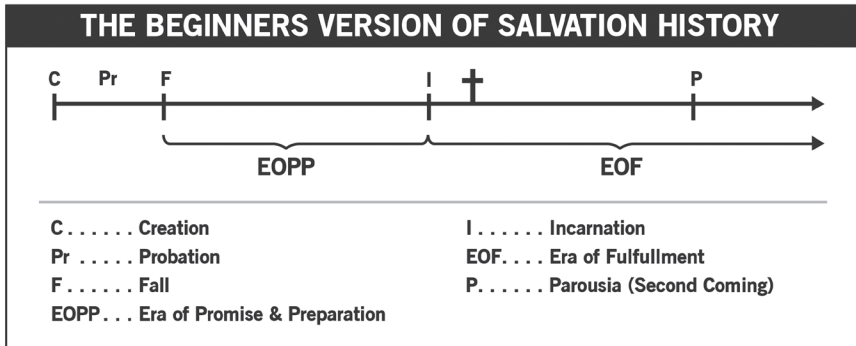
In order to understand all this better—and in order to arrive at our goal in this chapter—let us begin our journey by getting better acquainted with an extremely useful theological expression: *Salvation History*. I will define this as *the record of God's redemptive activity found in his Word, the Bible*.

Now even if you have never heard this particular expression before, I would be willing to bet that you already have a good feel for the basic shape *Salvation History*. All Christians who have read through the Bible at least once do.

They know, for example, that at its heart the Bible is not a poem or a philosophical treatise, but rather a story; indeed, that it is *His Story*, a true history of God's dealings with the universe, life, and man; a history that spans from creation to consummation.

Furthermore, all Christians realize that the vast majority of this story (i.e., from Genesis 4 to Revelation 22) deals with God's specifically *redemptive* acts in history. In other words, it deals with the special actions by which he was (and is) pleased to rescue and restore a sinful but beloved people and their world, all through the saving work of his only-begotten Son, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Very importantly, biblically alert Christians also can readily discern the basic structure of *Salvation History*. Indeed, simply by reading chronologically from Genesis to Revelation, they find that the narrative positively begs them to situate the main elements of its grand story on some kind of time-line. In its most basic form—I will call it the *Beginner's Version of Salvation History*—such a time-line will almost always look something like this:



The elements of this time-line are familiar and easy to understand.

First comes *Creation* in six days, wherein God created a very good world, primarily as a habitation for the apple of his eye, the family of man.

Next comes Adam's *Probation* in the Garden of Eden, a probation that he failed, resulting in the disastrous *Fall* of man and nature. The Fall was two-fold in its nature: *away* from all the goodness that God had in store for them, and *into* all manner of physical and spiritual evils, the worst of which was divine condemnation and the peril of hell.

Next comes a very lengthy *Era of Promise and Preparation*, an era described on the pages of the OT from Genesis 4 to Malachi 4. Here we find God continually promising, prefiguring, and preparing for his gracious gift of a Redeemer: a supreme Spirit-Anointed (Messianic) Prophet, Priest, and King; his only-begotten Son, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Finally, there comes the lengthy *Era of Fulfillment*. As the diagram indicates, this begins with the appearing of the incarnate Son of God in history and extends all the way into eternity future. Here, however, we come upon something most interesting: This era is not monolithic, but is comprised of *at least* two stages (many Christians posit more). For though Christ has already appeared at the beginning of this era, he has yet to come again. He has, as it were, *inaugurated* the redemption of his people by living, dying, rising, and entering heaven for them, and then by sending the Spirit to live in them; but he still has not come again to *perfect* or *complete* their redemption by extending it to their physical bodies and their world. And so, with eager expectation, the saints wait.

Earlier I stated that for many modern Christians eschatology has primarily to do with the Consummation, with the spectrum of events yet

to occur near and at Christ's second coming. However, in our Beginner's Time-line of Salvation History we now see that eschatology actually deals with something far bigger: *It deals with the entire Era of Fulfillment inaugurated by the first coming Christ.*

Why do I say this? In large part, I say it because of an important biblical phrase that appears over and again, both in the pages of the Old Testament and the New. That expression is *the last days* or *the latter days*. As we shall see later, for the OT prophets the last days were the days in which God would send his Messiah; the days in which he would redeem his people; the days in which he would pour out his Spirit; the days in which he would roll back the effects of the curse; the days in which he would rule and reign over the nations, and bring in a whole new world characterized by justice, health, peace, prosperity, and the universal knowledge of the glory of God (Isaiah 2:2, Micah 4:1f, Jer. 48:47, 49:39, Dan. 2:28, Hosea 3:5).

When, however, we step onto NT ground, we find to our amazement that the disciples are no longer looking forward to these things, or at least not in the same way that their OT forefathers did. For even now—*prior* to Christ's return and the consummation of their redemption—they affirm that they are living in the last days. Peter, for example, seeking to explain to his Jewish brethren the spiritual fireworks of the Day of Pentecost, declares, "This is that which was spoken through the prophet Joel, 'And it shall be *in the last days*,' says God, 'that I will pour forth of My Spirit upon all flesh ...'" (Acts 2:16-17). Similarly, the writer to the Hebrews opens his letter by saying, "God, having spoken in times past to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, has, *in these last days*, spoken to us by his Son ..." (Heb. 1:1-2; cf., 2 Tim. 3:1, 2 Peter 3:3). So then, now that Christ has entered the world—and now that the saints are beginning to experience his redemptive blessings—believers are living in the last days; they are experiencing—if only in a measure—*the last things*, the specifically redemptive things promised by the prophets of old. Again, this means that the true subject matter of biblical eschatology is *the entire Era of Fulfillment* inaugurated by Christ's first coming into the world.

Here, then, is my best shot at a rigorous definition of biblical (or cosmic) eschatology: *Biblical Eschatology is the study of the last days; the days of the Era of Fulfillment; the days in which the Son of God, in fulfillment of God's eternal plan and manifold OT promises, enters history and, over*

the course of this Era, accomplishes the complete redemption of a whole new world in Christ, after the final destruction of the old.

Now we are ready to proceed. Now the great goal of our journey is before us: *to discern from the pages of Scripture the true shape of the Era of Fulfillment; and, having discerned it, to arrive at an accurate and reasonably detailed picture of the entire course of Salvation History.*

The journey will not be easy. In the chapters ahead, we will see why.

Here, however, I want to conclude with a delightful question. Would it not be ironic—and too wonderful for words—if the Beginner’s Version of Salvation History turned out to be the true picture after all; if the Era of Fulfillment really was composed of two simple stages, with a single Parousia in between? What a blessing that would be for multitudes of confused and discouraged sheep, scattered upon the manifold hillsides of contemporary eschatology! Why, even little lambs could understand and rejoice in a picture as clear and simple as that!

“But surely,” you say, “eschatology really is complicated. Surely such a picture is too simple, too clear, and too good to be true.”

Read on.

ISSUES IN BIBLICAL ESCHATOLOGY

IN OUR JOURNEY thus far we have seen that the proper goal of biblical eschatology is to discern from Scripture, in as much detail as possible, the true structure of Salvation History as a whole, and of the Era of Fulfillment in particular. But alas, it turns out that this is not an easy task. As many of us know all too well, when Christians go to create such a time-line, they don't all come back with the same one!

Why is this?

Answer: They have issues!

Happily, one of the issues they *don't* have is identifying what might be called the *elements* of biblical eschatology. By “elements” I mean the biblically revealed eras and events that, like the pieces of a puzzle, must be properly situated on the time-line of Salvation History. They include:

- The Kingdom of God (its nature and stages)
- The Millennium (or the thousand year reign of Christ described in Revelation 20)
- The Antichrist
- The Last Battle
- The Parousia (i.e., the Second Coming—also called the Revelation and the Appearing—of Christ)
- The Resurrection of the Dead (and the Glorification of the Living Saints)
- The Catching Up (or Rapture) of the Saints to meet the Lord in the air
- The Last Judgment
- The Destruction of the Present Heavens and Earth by Fire

- The Creation of the New Heavens and a New Earth
- The Delivering Up of the Kingdom to the Father
- The Completed Kingdom of God (also called the Final State, the Eschaton, and the World to Come)

Again, all Christians agree that these are the elements, or building blocks, of biblical eschatology. However, after that the disagreements begin. They disagree, for example, as to how some of these elements are properly defined. They disagree as to whether certain elements (e.g., the Parousia, the Resurrection, the Judgment) will happen once, twice, or even three times! And, of course, they disagree about the exact order or chronological sequence of the elements.

This brings us to our focus in the present chapter: the deep, underlying *issues* in biblical eschatology. Very importantly, these are different from the elements, though they do indeed powerfully affect how we think about the elements. Also, they are far fewer than the elements. In fact, I discern only three such issues. And if I'm right, that is very good news, for it means that in order to resolve the Great End Time Debate, all we *really* need is to discern the truth about these three great pillars of biblical eschatology, and then stand back and watch the true structure of Salvation History emerge out of the fogs of complexity, confusion, and contention.

Let us therefore devote the rest of this chapter simply to introducing and carefully describing these three closely related and all-important issues.

1. The Kingdom of God

Trust me when I say that this issue belongs at the top of our list. Virtually every flashpoint of controversy in the Great End Time Debate is related, in one way or another, to differing interpretations of the nature and coming of the Kingdom predicted by the OT prophets during the Era of Promise. Let us therefore take a few moments to discuss three aspects of this foundational issue: 1) the OT picture of the Kingdom; 2) the difficulty in accepting it at face value; and 3) the two main solutions offered by Christian interpreters down through the years.

The OT Picture of the Kingdom of God

As we shall see later, the sphere of redemption that Christ referred to as the Kingdom of God was “mystically” on display from the very foundation of the world. However, it was not until the giving of the

Mosaic Law (ca. 1500 BC) and the resulting constitution of Abraham's family as a nation (i.e., a kingdom), that God, through the OT prophets, began positively to predict a coming King and a coming Kingdom. A few of these prophecies appeared in the Law itself (Deut. 30, 32), many more in the Psalms (2, 18, 22, 72, 89, 96, 132), but most in the so-called writing prophets (i.e., Isaiah to Malachi).

Old Testament Kingdom prophecy (OTKP) began as a trickle and ended in a torrent; that is, there is a *progressive OT revelation* of the Kingdom, beginning with Moses and culminating with Malachi. Sadly, this ever-swelling stream ran closely parallel to Israel's ever-deepening apostasy from her God. In other words, the farther the nation wandered from her King, the more fervently the prophets warned them that God's covenant curses were about to fall upon them, up to and including the curse of expulsion from their homeland and captivity to foreign nations in foreign lands (Lev. 26, Deut. 28).

And yet, there was hope. For even as the prophets threatened the apostates with coming judgment, they also comforted the faithful with promises of an ultimate restoration; of a once-for-all return of the believing remnant to their homeland, where, in company with a very special heaven-sent King (i.e., the Messiah), a new, Spirit-filled Israel would forever enjoy God's covenant blessings in peace and prosperity.

Indeed, the more closely we examine these prophecies, the more we realize that in them God was promising nothing less than *complete cosmic redemption*. That is, when he steps into history to accomplish the promised restoration, he will *rescue* his people from every effect of sin—both theirs and Adam's—, and he will *restore* them to every blessing enjoyed and offered to man in Paradise. Here then is the heart of the OT revelation of the Kingdom. In the days of Israel's ultimate restoration, the LORD will *reign* over people as never before: through the Messiah, by the Spirit, and in perfect holiness, peace, and joy, world without end. Moreover, when the promised Kingdom comes, multitudes of Gentiles will also be included in the blessedness of eternal life under God's redemptive rule.

Later in our journey we will examine the OT promise of the Kingdom more closely. Here, however, we must pause to consider an outstanding characteristic of OTKP, a characteristic that has proven to be one of thorniest and most intractable flashpoints of controversy in the Great End Time Debate. In a nutshell, it is this: As a general rule—though not always—the Holy Spirit moved the OT prophets to depict the coming Kingdom as a theocracy. In particular, we may say that he usually pictured

the future Kingdom as *an eternal, universal theocracy, mediated by ethnic Israel and her Messiah, administered in accordance with the Law of Moses, and set in a spiritually renewed cosmos*. In the pages ahead, I will refer to this as *The Representative OT Idea of the Kingdom of God*, or simply *The Representative Idea of the Kingdom*.

To get a feel for this idea, let us briefly consider a classic OTKP found in the book of Micah:

Now it shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the LORD'S house will be established as the chief of (or, on top of) the mountains, and it shall be exalted above the hills; and peoples shall flow to it. Many nations shall come and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob. He will teach us His ways, and we shall walk in His paths." For out of Zion the law (or, instruction) shall go forth, even the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.

—Micah 4:1-2

As we learn at the very outset of the prophecy, the events here described will occur in "the latter days." That is, they will occur in the days of the coming Kingdom, when God, through his Messianic King, will again rule over the world. But here is something interesting and—for us Christians—troubling: In those days, it appears that the Mosaic Law will still be in effect! As in Solomon's time, so here: A great temple will sit atop Mt. Zion. Many peoples of the world—Gentile nations—will make pilgrimages to it. The LORD himself will dwell in this temple, presumably between the cherubim of the Ark of the Covenant. And however it is that he will teach the peoples, it will be out of "the Law," that incomparable body of statutes, judgments, and ordinances, of which Moses said that they are Israel's "wisdom and understanding," meant by God to provoke the nations to jealousy and admiration (Deut. 4:5-8).

Very importantly, all of this is quite typical of OTKP. For example, according to David, God will install his Messianic King on Mt. Zion (Psalm 2:6), and from there he will stretch forth his strong scepter to rule over Israel and the nations (Psalm 110:2). According to Isaiah, eunuchs and foreigners who hold fast to the Covenant and honor God's Sabbaths will serve as priests in his house, on his holy mountain, placing burnt offerings for sin upon his altar (Isaiah 56:6-8). According to Jeremiah, when the Messianic son of David finally appears, the Levitical priests will never lack a man to offer burnt offerings and prepare sacrifices before God, and they will do so "continually" (literally, "all the days," Jer. 33:17-18).

According to Ezekiel, Gentile nations will look with amazement upon Israel, as God once again takes up residence among his people in their ancient homeland, residing in a new, glorious, and everlasting temple (Ezek. 37:24-28). Moreover, in those days the princes will offer the full spectrum of burnt offerings, grain offerings, and drink offerings, on all the appointed feast days, new moons, and Sabbaths (45:17). And so shall it be done, forever (37:25, 43:7, 9). According to Haggai, one day soon God will fill his temple with the wealth of all nations (Haggai 2:6-9). And according to Zechariah, in Kingdom times all the families of the earth will be required to make annual pilgrimage to Jerusalem, there to worship the LORD by observing the Feast of Booths (Zech. 14:16-19).

So again, the Representative Idea of the Kingdom—the picture of the Kingdom purveyed by a great many OT prophecies such as these—is of *an eternal, universal theocracy, mediated by ethnic Israel and her Messiah, administered in accordance with the Law of Moses, and set in a spiritually renewed cosmos.*

Difficulties In Accepting This View at Face Value

Careful students of Scripture—especially those steeped in the NT—have great difficulty accepting this representation of the Kingdom at face value. The reasons are not hard to understand.

First, the OT itself occasionally advances a diametrically opposed view. For example, in a passage much cited in the NT, we find Jeremiah saying:

“Behold, days are coming,” declares the LORD, “when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah, not like the covenant which I made with their fathers in the day I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke, though I was a husband to them,” declares the LORD. “But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days,” declares the LORD: “I will put My law within them, and on their heart I will write it; and I will be their God, and they will be My people. And they shall not teach again, each man his neighbor and each man his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD,’ for they shall all know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them,” declares the LORD, “for I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more.”

—Jeremiah 31:31-34

Here God is speaking of the days of the coming Kingdom (Jer. 30-33). But is this Kingdom—this rule of God over his people—associated with the Mosaic Law? Clearly not. Rather, Jeremiah foresees a new covenant; a covenant different from that of Moses; a covenant that will introduce a direct spiritual reign of God over the hearts of his inwardly transformed people. In other words, the Kingdom (or rule) of God here envisioned by Jeremiah is *not* mediated by the theocratic institutions traditionally associated with the Mosaic Law, but simply by the Messiah and his Spirit. Thus, even in OT times God seems to have hinted that his coming reign would *not* conform to the Representative Idea of the Kingdom found in most OT prophecy.

Secondly, Christ himself seems clearly to have affirmed this very thing. In the pages ahead, we shall see that he does so in many different ways. For example, much like Jeremiah he represents the Kingdom as a direct spiritual reign of God over his people and their world, a reign that may be entered by simple faith in the One whom he has sent (Mt. 11:28-30, 18:3, John 3:3, 5). Also, again like Jeremiah, Jesus associates this Kingdom, not with the Old Covenant, but with a New Covenant that he himself is bringing into the world (Luke 22:20). Moreover, Jesus explicitly teaches that this New Covenant not only fulfills (the symbolism of) the Old, but positively renders it obsolete (Mt. 5:17). The powerful wine of the New Covenant requires new wineskins to contain it, so much so that the old must be altogether cast aside (Mt. 9:17). Now that the tree of the New Covenant has been planted in the earth, the tree of the Old is forever cursed, never again to bear fruit (Mt. 21:19). Now that the eschatological Moses has come down from the Holy Mount with a new Law (or Instruction) for God's people, men are henceforth to build their lives upon it and it alone, even unto the end of the age (Mt. 7:24-29, 28:18ff). Now that Christ has appeared, God himself is building a new temple, a temple not made with human hands (Mark 14:58, John 2:19, Eph. 2:11-22). And now that the New Covenant era has begun, men no longer need to worship on Zion, or any other mountain, since henceforth they are free to worship the Father in spirit and truth (John 4:21-24, Heb. 12:18f).

And as if all this were not enough, we also have the testimony of Christ's apostles, the appointed heralds and interpreters of the New Covenant that Christ instituted by his death, resurrection, and the outpouring of the Spirit. It is, if possible, even more decisive. In the book of Acts, for example, we find the apostles preaching the good news of

the Kingdom (8:12, 19:8, 28:31), yet at the very same time ferociously protecting Gentile believers from the slightest suggestion that they must convert to Judaism or observe the Mosaic Law (Acts 15). And in his epistles, we find Paul doing much the same, carefully explaining the nuanced relationship between the Law (the Old Covenant) and the Gospel (the New Covenant). As we shall see later, he concludes, with Christ, that the New Covenant fulfills the Old, supercedes it, and renders it obsolete; that it is, in fact, the Eternal Covenant, the “mystery” of God, hidden from human sight in ages past, but now, through Christ, brought into the world and out into the open; that it is the eternal “substance” or “body” of which the events and institutions of the Old Covenant were merely passing “shadows” (Heb. 8:13, 13:20, Col. 2:17).

In sum, it appears that Jeremiah, Jesus, and all the apostles agree that the Kingdom of God is a direct spiritual reign of the Father, through Christ, by the Spirit; that it is closely associated with the New Covenant; and that the New Covenant both fulfills the Old Covenant and renders it forever obsolete. If so, it hardly seems possible to take the Representative Idea of the Kingdom at face value, or to interpret OTKP’s literally.

The Two Main Solutions

So now we have a problem—the biggest, thorniest, and most fundamental of the Great End Time Debate. How shall we reconcile this apparent contradiction in Scripture? How shall we reconcile the OT foreview of the Kingdom—which seems to represent it as a reign of God (primarily) over ethnic Israel, a reign mediated by the Old Covenant—with the NT view of the Kingdom, which seems to represent it a (spiritual) reign of God over a new spiritual Israel, mediated by a new and Eternal Covenant that Christ gave to his Church (Gal. 6:16)?

Needless to say, biblical interpreters subsequent to the apostles have wrestled long and hard with this challenging question. The result, as we shall see on the next leg of our journey, is a largish number of different solutions to the eschatological puzzle. Nevertheless, I will argue that the situation is not nearly as confusing as it might appear to be at first glance, for in the end the solutions fall more or less neatly into one of two categories. In other words, fundamentally, there are only two possible solutions to this theological problem.

On the one hand, there is the solution embraced by the traditional Church; the solution implied and required by the vast majority of

Christian creeds and confessions.¹ According to this view, in OT times God was pleased to clothe or *veil* his revelations of the coming Kingdom in imagery drawn from the Old Covenant under which his OT people lived. Effectively, this rendered the true nature of the promised Kingdom a “mystery,” a secret that would not be fully revealed until the coming of Christ the King. This means that when we walk onto OT turf, seeking to understand OTKP, we must bring with us the riches of NT teaching about the nature and structure of the Kingdom. In particular, we must follow the lead of Christ and his apostles by interpreting OTKP, not *literally*, in terms of the Old Covenant, but *figuratively*, in terms of the New Covenant. We must, as it were, use the Rosetta Stone of the New Covenant to translate the mystical language of Old. In so doing, our goal is always the same: to see the blessings that Christ brought us in New Testament times mystically promised and prefigured in the Old—and to savor them when we do.

All this is, of course, a theological mouthful, one that we will carefully chew and digest in the pages ahead.

On the other hand, there is the solution advanced by what I will call the prophetic literalists. These are the brethren who say, “No, we cannot allow ourselves to spiritualize OTKP, for down that road lies endless speculation, controversy, and uncertainty. Rather, we must approach OTKP just as we would any other part of the Bible, whether Old Testament or New. In other words, unless there is a clear textual mandate to do otherwise, we must interpret OTKP *literally*. And indeed, the OT itself encourages us to do this very thing, since dozens of OT prophecies have already been literally fulfilled. Moreover, this includes a great many Messianic prophecies, such as those predicting the details of Christ’s incarnation, birth, miraculous ministry to Israel, triumphal entry, rejection, death, and resurrection.”

I do not believe I have ever met a Christian who has not felt the force of this argument, an argument that is both reasonable and commendable. It is reasonable because no one can deny that many OT prophecies have indeed been literally fulfilled. And it is commendable because it displays a fierce loyalty, not only to the divine inspiration of the Bible, but also to what theologians call the “perspicuity”—or clarity—of Holy Scripture. The premise here is that God, in giving us a revelation of his truth, actually desires us to understand it, and so, as a general rule, couches it in straightforward language that his people should straightforwardly receive. Again, it is hard to deny this premise.

Nevertheless, a big problem remains for the prophetic literalist. It is this: If OTKP really is to be interpreted literally, how is it that the Lord Jesus, who definitely welcomes all who believe in him into the Kingdom of God, does not insist that they live under the Mosaic Law? Indeed, how is it that both he and his holy apostles and prophets effectively divorced God's NT people from Judaism, placing them under a completely different—and decidedly non-theocratic—set of institutions (e.g., preaching, teaching, baptism, the Lord's Supper, Church discipline, etc.)? For over 2000 years the spiritual citizens of Christ's Kingdom, following the rule of the NT to the best of their ability, have never yet felt compelled or warranted to institute anything like the Representative OT Idea of the Kingdom. How then, for the prophetic literalist, are the OT prophecies embodying that idea to be fulfilled?

The answer, of course, is precisely what it would have to be in order to retain even a semblance of the divine inspiration and truthfulness of Scripture: The OT prophecies of a future theocratic Kingdom are literally fulfilled, not in the present Church era, but in another era altogether; an era that will follow the Church era; an era in which God, for wise reasons, will revert, at least in a measure, to the institutions of the OT Law.

And this, at long last, brings us to the second underlying issue in the Great End Time Debate, which is ...

2. The Millennium

Only once in all of Scripture do we find mention of a thousand year reign of the Messiah: in chapter 20 of the Revelation. But what a huge theological ruckus that little chapter has raised! In part, this is because interpreting it has proven difficult. Is John speaking of a literal thousand years, or is this number, like so many other images in the Revelation, a symbol? Does this reign of Christ occur *after* his second coming or *before* it? What of "the first resurrection" mentioned here: Is it physical or spiritual? Do Christ and his saints reign in heaven or upon the earth? And what exactly is it that they reign over? These are only a few of the questions over which earnest interpreters divide, making it quite difficult for the Church at large to fit this particular scriptural piece into the overall eschatological puzzle.

It is crucial to understand, however, that the *primary* reason for the controversy over Revelation 20 is not found in the chapter itself. Rather, it is found in the vast treasury of OT prophecies that promote the Representative Idea of the Kingdom; that seem to anticipate a Mosaic

theocracy centered in Palestine. Now it is obvious that those who favor a literal interpretation of such prophecies must find a slot in the time-line of Salvation History wherein they can be literally fulfilled. Or, to state the case a bit more precisely, it is obvious that they must find room in Salvation History for a specifically “theocratic” stage of the Kingdom of God. Furthermore, it is a matter of considerable urgency that these interpreters find *an explicit NT warrant* for believing that God has indeed planned such a stage. For as we have just seen, in the present Church Era he certainly is not calling his New Covenant people to live under a Jewish theocracy! Indeed, the overall teaching of the gospels and epistles is decidedly hostile to any suggestion of a reversion to the now-fulfilled and now-obsolete institutions of the Mosaic Law.

So then, OT prophetic literalists are in a big NT pinch!

And this is why Revelation 20 is so important to them. Here, they argue, we find an explicit NT promise of a *future* phase of the Kingdom of God and Christ; a phase that will begin *after* the second coming of Christ at the end of the present Church Era; a literal thousand year reign of the Messiah, centered in an earthly Jerusalem; a millennial rule of Christ in which the OT prophecies of a theocratic Kingdom will at last be literally fulfilled.

Since these interpreters argue that Christ will come again *before* this phase of the Kingdom, they are usually called *premillennarians*, and their eschatological school, *Premillennialism*. Yes, premillennarians make a very big deal of the Millennium. Now we see why, and also why this is one of the three hottest flashpoints of controversy in the Great End Time Debate.

3. The Consummation

The third and final flashpoint of eschatological controversy is the Consummation. Theologians use this word to describe the complex of events that will consummate (i.e., complete or perfect or bring to a conclusion) both God’s judgments and his redemptive acts in Christ.

You will remember that the traditional view of the Consummation is quite simple: Christ will come again once, at the end of the present evil age, to raise the dead, judge the world in righteousness, transform the physical cosmos, and inaugurate the Kingdom in its full and final form. Now observe carefully that this simple view of the Consummation is compatible *only* with a simple view of the Kingdom of God. That is, it is compatible only with a Kingdom that appears in two simple stages: the present Church Era (inaugurated on the Day of Pentecost), followed

by the eternal World to Come (inaugurated at Christ's Second Coming). You cannot have a simple all-at-once Consummation without having this simple two-staged view of the Kingdom of God.

Once this is understood, it is easy to see why the Consummation itself has been painfully embroiled in theological controversy. To state the matter concisely: The moment we multiply the stages of the Kingdom, from that moment on we also *must* multiply the elements (or events) of the Consummation. For example, the moment we insert a millennial stage of the Kingdom between the Church Era and the World to Come, from that moment on we must have Christ coming again (at least) twice: once at the beginning of the Millennium, and once at its end. And because of this, we must also envision him presiding over (at least) two resurrections, two judgments, and two transformations of nature—for the Scriptures are quite emphatic that it is indeed Christ himself, at his Coming(s), who will do all these things (John 5:19-29; Mt. 24-25, Acts 17:31, 1 Cor. 15:20-28, 50-58, Phil. 3:20-21, 1 Thess. 4:13-18, 2 Thess. 1:3-10, 2 Peter 3:1-13).

So then, does the Great End Time Debate involve the Consummation? Definitely. But is the Consummation itself the *real* crux of the controversy—the deep, underlying source of all the confusion? Definitely not. Rather, the real root of the controversy is conflicting views about the proper interpretation of OTKP, the nature and stages of the Kingdom, and where in the world the Millennium of Revelation 20 fits into the equation. Experience makes it abundantly clear that the positions we embrace on these matters will profoundly shape our understanding of the third and final issue in the Great End Time Debate: the Consummation.

Conclusion

In our journey thus far we have been equipping ourselves to think clearly and deeply about the End Time Debate. We have seen that the great prize in this controversy—the Holy Grail of biblical eschatology—is the one true time-line of Salvation History. We have introduced the main elements of biblical eschatology, the eras and events we hope properly to situate on that time-line. They include: 1) The Kingdom of God, 2) the Millennium, 3) the (rise of the) Antichrist, 4) the Last Battle, 5) the Parousia, 6) the Resurrection of the dead (and the transformation of the living), 7) the catching up of the saints at Christ's return, 8) the Last Judgment, 9) the Destruction of the present heavens and earth by fire;

10) the Delivering Up of the Kingdom to God the Father; and 11) the coming of the Kingdom in its full, final, and eternal form.

Very importantly, we have also isolated the three great underlying issues in this controversy; the issues that divide the Church and lead to protracted disagreements about the exact shape of Salvation History and the Consummation. These are: 1) The Kingdom of God, both its nature and stages, 2) the meaning of the Millennium, and 3) the structure of the Consummation.

Having done all this, the next logical step in our journey seems clear enough: We should turn to the Bible—and in particular to the NT—to see what they really teach about the Kingdom, the Millennium, and the Consummation.

If, however, I were to take that step immediately, I fear I would betray the present generation of God's children (Psalm 73:13). Therefore, in order to be kind, I must be a little cruel; I must inflict a little (healing) pain on you. How? By introducing you to the various schools of contemporary eschatology; by explaining how each one deals with the three underlying issues of this debate; and by showing how each one situates the various elements of biblical eschatology on the time-line of Salvation History.

Yes, this will involve some work. And again, it may be a little painful. But good Bereans, take heart! Once having mastered these views, you will be far less intimidated by the End Time Debate, and far more confident about engaging it. More importantly still, you will then be ready for the truly exciting part: the part where we receive the Master Keys from the High King of heaven, insert them in the locks, open up the doors, and see which one of these views is the truth!