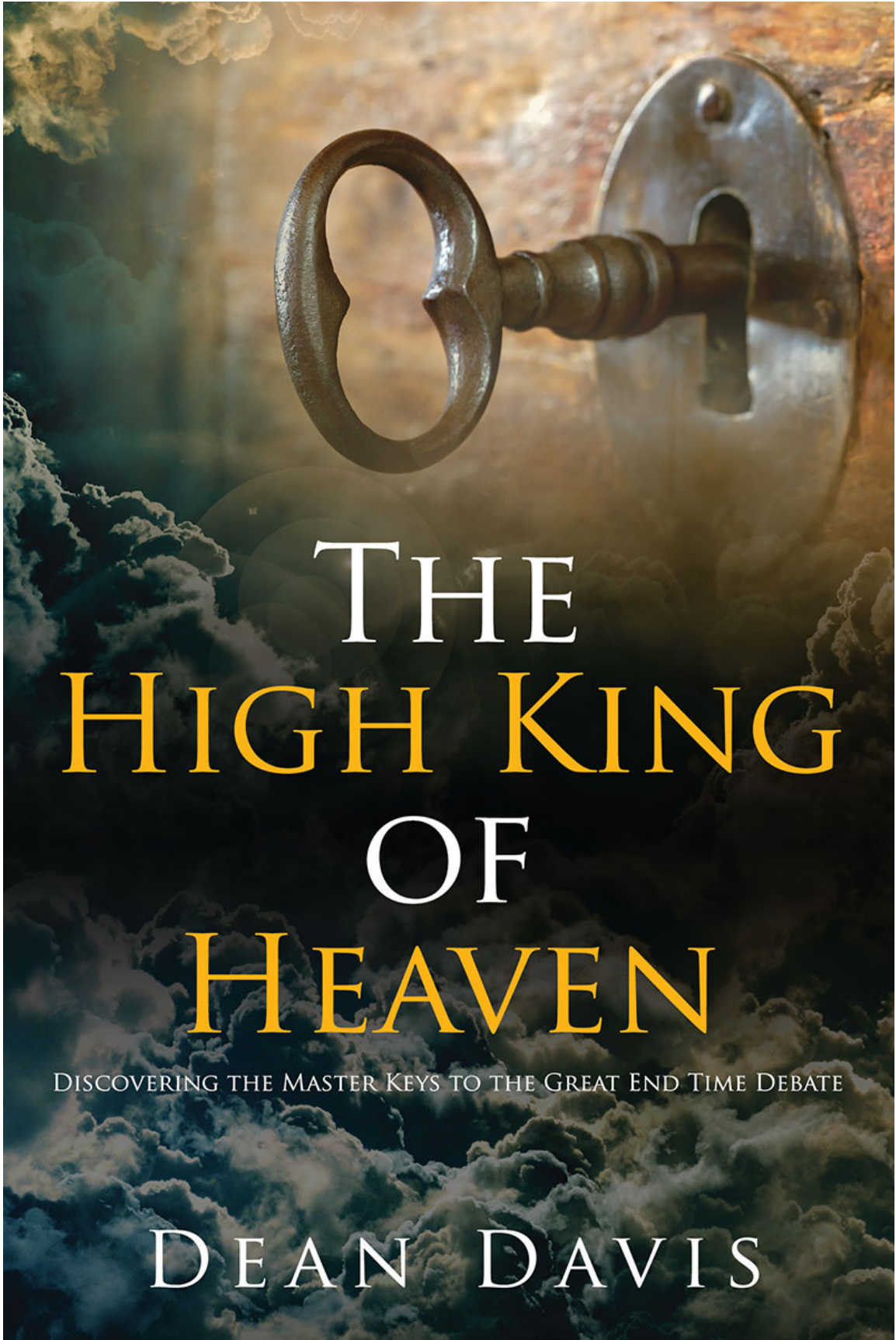




THE
HIGH KING
OF
HEAVEN

DISCOVERING THE MASTER KEYS TO THE GREAT END TIME DEBATE

DEAN DAVIS



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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)

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*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!*

Contents

[Prologue and Acknowledgments](#)

[Introduction: The Blessed Hope in These Last Days](#)

[Part 1: Issues and Options in Biblical Eschatology](#)

[1. What is Biblical Eschatology?](#)

[2. Issues in Biblical Eschatology](#)

[3. Options in Biblical Eschatology](#)

[4. He *has* the Keys!](#)

[Part 2: Understanding the Kingdom of God](#)

[5. The Good News of the Kingdom](#)

[6. The Beginning and the Kingdom](#)

[7. The Covenant and the Kingdom](#)

[8. The OT Promise of the Kingdom](#)

[9. The Coming of the Kingdom](#)

[10. Salvation History: A Journey to the Kingdom](#)

[11. These *are* the Keys!](#)

[Part 3: Understanding Old Testament Kingdom Prophecy](#)

[12. The Nature and Stages of the Kingdom in Old Testament Prophecy](#)

[13. New Testament Principles for Interpreting OT Kingdom Prophecy](#)

[14. NT Examples of Interpreting OT Kingdom Prophecy](#)

[15. OT Kingdom Prophecies Considered: Psalms, Isaiah, Jeremiah](#)

[16. OT Kingdom Prophecies Considered: Ezekiel](#)

[17. OT Kingdom Prophecies Considered: Daniel](#)

[18. OT Kingdom Prophecies Considered: Zechariah](#)

[Part 4: Understanding the Millennium](#)

[19. The Revelation: Purpose and Literary Genre](#)

- [20. The Revelation: Structure and Key Symbols](#)
- [21. Revelation 20: The Meaning of the Millennium](#)

[Part 5: Understanding the Consummation](#)

- [22. The Design, Structure, and Unity of the Consummation](#)
- [23. Crucial NT Texts Pertaining to the Consummation \(1\)](#)
- [24. Crucial NT Texts Pertaining to the Consummation \(2\)](#)
- [25. The Consummation: A Biblical Scenario](#)

[Epilogue: Amillennialism: An Eschatology for These Last Days](#)

[Appendix 1: A Critique of Historic Premillennialism](#)

[Appendix 2: A Critique of Postmillennialism](#)

[Appendix 3: A Critique of Dispensational Premillennialism](#)

[Appendix 4: A Critique of Preterism](#)

[Appendix 5: Is the Modern State of Israel a Fulfillment of Biblical Prophecy?](#)

[Appendix 6: Old Testament Kingdom Prophecies Listed](#)

[Appendix 7: Old Testament Kingdom Prophecies Cited in the New Testament](#)

[Appendix 8: New Testament Texts Touching on the Parousia/Consummation](#)

[Appendix 9: Biblical Prophecies of the Last Battle](#)

[Appendix 10: The Creeds of Christendom on the Consummation](#)

[Endnotes](#)

[Subject Index](#)

[Scripture Index](#)

[Select Bibliography](#)

Table of timeline s, Charts, and Diagrams

- [1. The Beginner's Version of Salvation History](#)
- [2. Historic Premillennialism](#)
- [3. Amillennialism](#)
- [4. Postmillennialism](#)
- [5. Dispensational Premillennialism \(Dispensationalism\)](#)
- [6. Partial Preterism](#)
- [7. Full Preterism](#)
- [8. The Three Ages of Cosmic History](#)
- [9. Salvation History: Successive Administrations of the Eternal Covenant](#)
- [10. The Coming of the Kingdom](#)
- [11. The Clash of the Kingdoms](#)
- [12. Salvation History: A Journey to the Kingdom](#)
- [13. The Structure of the Revelation](#)
- [14. NT Texts on the Christ-centered Unity of the Consummation](#)

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 of 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 honest and wise input.

Thanks also to Athena Dean and 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 all 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 your 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 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 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 saints’ 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 forefathers 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*.

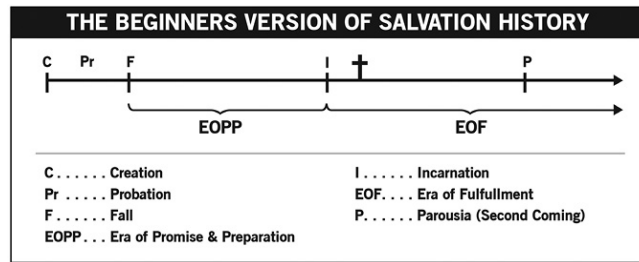
Now even if you have never heard this particular expression before, I would be willing to bet that you already have a good feel for the basic shape of Salvation History. All Christians who have read through the Bible at least once do.

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 timeline . In its most basic form—I will call it the Beginner’s

Version of Salvation History—such a Timeline will almost always look something like this:



The elements of this Timeline 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 twofold 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 Timeline 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 over again, both in the pages of the Old Testament and the New. That expression is *the last days* or *the latter-day s*. 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 fulfills God's eternal plan and manifold OT promises by entering history and***

accomplishing the redemption of a whole new world in Christ over the course of this Era and at its consummation.

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 timeline, 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 Timeline 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 twin curses 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 the 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-day s 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-day s." 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 as 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 the 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 Timeline 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 Timeline of Salvation History. We have introduced the main elements of biblical eschatology, the eras and events we hope properly to situate on that timeline . 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 Saints), (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. 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 Saints), (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 also have isolated the three great underlying issues in this controversy, issues that divide the Church and lead to protracted disagreements about the exact shape of Salvation History and the

Consummation. They are: (1) The Kingdom of God, both its nature and stages, (2) the meaning of the Millennium, and (3) the structure of the Consummation. However, in discussing these issues we have seen that all three actually revolve around a fourth: the proper interpretation of OT prophecies of the coming Kingdom. So then, it appears we must expand our list of underlying issues to four: (1) the nature and stages of the Kingdom of God, (2) the proper interpretation of OT Kingdom Prophecy, (3) the meaning of the Millennium, and (4) the structure of the Consummation. These four issues will serve as our road map for the journey ahead.

Now at this point it may seem that the next step in our journey is obvious: We must turn to the Bible—and in particular to the NT—and see what it says about the first underlying issue, the Kingdom of God. If, however, I were to take that step immediately, I fear I would be betraying 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, explaining how each one of them deals with the four underlying issues in this debate, and 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 Great 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 door, and see which one of these views is His truth!

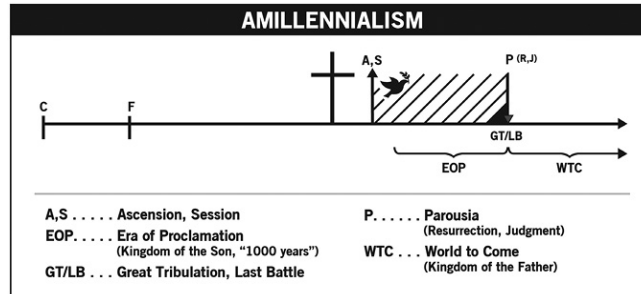
Options in Biblical Eschatology

I HAVE SAID that mastering the contemporary options in biblical eschatology is hard work, but I have no desire that it should be torture. Accordingly, I have tried to keep the present discussion as simple as possible. My goal is to introduce the competing views of Salvation History in their most basic form. I will not much delve into their history, or their (alleged) scriptural foundations, or their details, or the (endless) modifications of this or that particular view. Nor will I (here) critique any of these schools of thought. A simple introduction should be more than sufficient to attain the one thing needful: clarity about the basic nature of each eschatological option, so that we can bring it—and ourselves—to the feet of the High King of heaven for his judgment.

In the discussion ahead, we will look at five conceptions of Salvation History currently embraced by Bible-believing Christians. In each case, I will offer a brief historical summary, cite major modern proponents, and then explain how this particular school understands the four underlying issues of biblical eschatology: the Kingdom of God, the proper interpretation of OT Kingdom Prophecy, the Millennium, and the Consummation. My approach will be roughly chronological, looking at the older views first and the more recent views last. By way of conclusion, I will show how the five views can be divided into two simple categories, what I will call Future-millennial and Present-millennial. In other words, at the end of the day there are really only two basic views in the eschatological ring. That is good news. It means that the Bible is *not* a fertile field for rampant eschatological speculation; that its basic teachings about the Kingdom and the Consummation are reasonably clear; and that no discerning Christian ever needs to be overwhelmed or defeated by the Great End Time Debate.

In short, with God’s help—and with the Master Keys—we should be well able to pick the winner!

1. Amillennialism



The word amillennialism means *no millennium*. However, amillennarians do not deny the *existence* of a millennium, only that it begins *after* the Parousia and that it will last for a literal thousand years. Instead, they teach that the thousand years of Revelation 20 symbolize the present Era of Proclamation, during which time Christ reigns with (the departed spirits of) his saints in heaven. Amillennarians are, then, “present-millennarians.”

In his book, *The Momentous Event*, W. J. Grier has shown that, contrary to popular belief, the majority of the early Church fathers were amillennarian. They include Clement of Rome, Polycarp, the author(s) of *The Didache*, Barnabas, Caius of Rome, Hippolytus, and Origen. By the early fourth century, Lactantius was the only theologian of note defending premillennialism. Shortly thereafter, Eusebius, Athanasius, and Augustine completely laid it to rest until post-Reformation times. Notably, the early creeds were all amillennial: The (early form of the) Apostles Creed (3rd century), the Nicene Creed (4th century) and the Athanasian Creed (6th century).

Though Augustine initially embraced premillennialism, he later came to regard it as a “carnal” understanding of biblical prophecy. In time he powerfully articulated a symbolic interpretation of Revelation 20 that identified Christ’s millennial reign with his *spiritual* rule over the saints (both in heaven and upon earth); a rule that would hold sway throughout the entire Era of Proclamation. As we have seen, this view quickly became orthodoxy among the Roman Catholic and Orthodox communions, and

later, with slight modifications, among the majority of the Protestant churches as well. Thus, amillennialism is the “traditional view” of which I have already spoken in our study. Contemporary defenders of amillennialism include Greg Beale, Floyd Hamilton, Anthony Hoekema, Dennis Johnson, Kim Riddlebarger, Sam Storms, and Rodman Williams.

By far the simplest of the eschatological options, amillennialism gives a very concise picture of Salvation History. In OT times the prophets used the language and imagery of the Mosaic Law to give a *veiled revelation* of the coming Kingdom of God. Accordingly, OTKP can only be understood under the brighter light of the NT, where the exact truth about the nature and stages of God’s Kingdom is finally revealed. Augustine first articulated the guiding interpretive principle of amillennialism, stating pithily, “The Old Covenant is the New concealed; the New Covenant is the Old revealed.” Armed with this principle, amillennarians offer a figurative, New Covenant interpretation of the many OT prophecies of the Kingdom of God.

Concerning the Kingdom itself, amillennarians turn first and foremost to the gospels and epistles, arguing from them that the Kingdom enters the world in just two stages. The first is the Era of Proclamation, also called the Kingdom of the Son. It begins at Pentecost, when the Church is born, and concludes at the Parousia, when Christ himself consummates the Father’s plan of salvation. During this phase of the Kingdom, Christ rules over his Church from heaven by the Holy Spirit, being seated at the Father’s right hand as the High King of heaven; as the mediatorial King of the universe. Very importantly, this is none other than the millennial reign of Christ spoken of in Revelation 20, a reign in which the *souls* of the departed saints now share as a reward for faithfulness during their lives on earth. The second stage of the Kingdom is the World to Come, or the new heavens and the new earth. It may also be called the Kingdom of the Father, since it begins when Christ—in his final act of the Consummation—delivers up his glorified Kingdom (i.e., a whole new humanity and whole new physical world) to God the Father

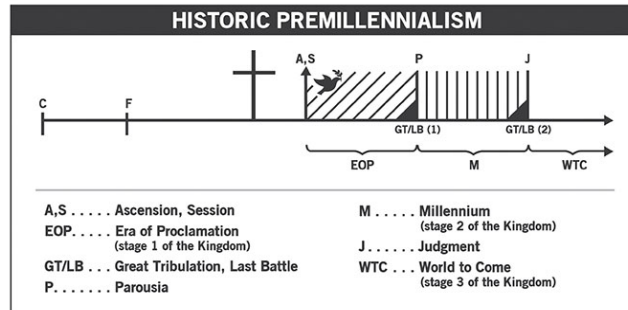
Because it is based on a simple two-staged view of the Kingdom, the amillennial view of the Consummation is also quite simple—and therefore quite powerful and majestic. As the present evil age draws to a close, the pilgrim Church completes her mission of global evangelization, rejoicing at

last to see the great mass of Jews turn to their Messiah under the faithful preaching of the Gospel. But now the fallen world-system plunges into deepest spiritual darkness, more or less completely rebelling against God, Christ, and righteousness. Divine judgments—prevalent throughout the entire Church Era—intensify. Lawlessness abounds, with many professing believers falling away from the faith. As Satan is now released from divine restraint, the Antichrist appears, deceiving the nations with a false gospel that is buttressed by false signs and wonders. His ascendancy triggers a brief but convulsive season of unparalleled global tribulation. It is characterized by fierce persecution of the true spiritual Church, but also by severe judgments of God—warnings to all humanity that the Last Judgment is now at the door.

Finally, against an altogether darkened sky, the glorified Christ appears in the heavens, racing earthward with all the holy angels and all the souls of the departed saints. In quick succession, the several elements of the Consummation now unfold: Christ raises the dead (both saved and unsaved), transforms the living, and, through angelic agency, catches all of them up in the air, where together they appear before the judgment seat of Christ. Meanwhile, the earth and its works are destroyed by fire, Gehenna (or the Lake of Fire) appears in the vacancy of space (or possibly in another dimension altogether), and a new earth emerges out of the ashes of the old. The wicked (both human and demonic) are turned into hell. And then, with the cosmos purified of all evil, Christ and his glorified Bride descend to the beautiful new world below. As the final act of his heavenly reign, Christ delivers up this glorious, completed Kingdom to the Father, so that God (and Christ)—throughout endless ages to come—may be all in all.

Once again, the amillennial scheme of Salvation History has been the majority report—the traditional view of the Church—throughout nearly all generations. Obviously, its great simplicity weighs heavily in its favor. The question remains, however, as to whether or not it is the true teaching of Scripture. Some say that God, in these last days, is bringing in a new and deeper understanding of biblical eschatology. Others reply that Satan, in these last days, has been working overtime to becloud and undermine the life-giving truth of the old. Who is right? In the pages ahead, we will be at great pains to answer this vitally important question.

2. Historic Premillennialism



This view is called *premillennial* because it teaches that Christ will come again *before* a thousand year reign upon the earth. It is called *historic* because, according to some, it was the dominant view of the early Church, and because, in various forms, it has appeared throughout much of Church History.

There are two kinds of historic premillennialism (HP). The first may be called New Covenant (or Christian) historic premillennialism (NCHP). Its chief characteristic is that it places the Church at the center of the millennial scenario. Here, OTKP is fulfilled under the New Covenant, whether in the Era of Proclamation, the Millennium, or the World to Come. Accordingly, NCHP does not anticipate the exaltation of national Israel in the Millennium, or a return to OT ordinances such as temple worship, animal sacrifices, and Jewish feasts. Rather, the Millennium is that stage in Salvation History where Christ's Kingship is publically vindicated and celebrated in a renewed (but not yet perfected) cosmos, and where his faithful New Covenant people are rewarded by sharing in his triumphant earthly reign.

All of the ante-Nicene premillennarians were of this persuasion. They include Papias, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Tertullian, the Montanists, and Lactantius. After Augustine, NCHP was eclipsed for over a thousand years by amillennialism. However, in the 17th and 18th centuries a number of Protestant leaders embraced it again. They include Johann Alsted, Cotton Mather, Philipp Spener, Joseph Bengel, John Gill, Joseph Mede, and Charles Wesley. Some of these men looked for a latter-day conversion of the Jews, but few if any for a restoration of national Israel in the Millennium. In the 19th century, many premillennarians began to experiment

with a more literal interpretation of OTKP, and therefore showed an intensified interest in Israel's future in Palestine. In time this led to the triumph of dispensational premillennialism, with its unprecedented focus upon Israel's millennial glory. However, since the mid-20th century a large number of evangelicals, following the lead of theologian George Ladd, have rejected Dispensationalism and returned once again to the classic NCHP. Prominent among them are Clarence Bass, Millard Erickson, Jim Hamilton, Grant Osborne, J. Barton Payne, and John Piper. Arguably, this is the majority view of American theologians today, though not of pastors and the people in the pews.

There is, however, a second form of HP. Again, it arose primarily in the 19th century, when many evangelicals embraced a more literal interpretation of OTKP. All of them agreed that prior to the Parousia God would restore and revive national Israel in Palestine; many asserted that he would also exalt that nation in the Millennium. Their company is impressive. It includes David Baron, Andrew and Horatio Bonar, Franz Delitzsche, Robert M' Cheyne, George Peters, J. C. Ryle, Charles Spurgeon, Samuel Tregelles, and Nathaniel West. Because of its focus upon the future of ethnic Israel, we may call this view Old Covenant (or Jewish) historic premillennialism (OCHP).

While there are differences among them, most OCHP's would endorse the following sketch of Salvation History. In OT times God promised, prefigured, and prepared for an eschatological Kingdom that would appear in three stages: The Church Era of Gospel Proclamation, the Millennium, and the World to Come. The mission of the Church will advance in history infallibly, though with great difficulty. Towards the end of the age, the world will plunge into deep spiritual darkness, thereby triggering the rise of the Antichrist, a brief season of great tribulation (i.e., persecution), and the apostasy of many professing believers. Then Christ will come again. When he does (or shortly before it), the great mass of Jews, now returned to Palestine, will be converted. Acting in judgment, he will destroy the Antichrist and his followers, and then confine Satan to the abyss. Acting in redemption, he will resurrect the saints of all time (or the martyrs alone), glorify living believers, partially lift the curse from the earth, and welcome believing Jews and the spared children of unbelievers into the Millennium. Then begins the theocratic stage of the Kingdom, when God's

unlike amillennialism, it is highly optimistic about the progress of the Gospel during the Era of Proclamation. The seeds of this persuasion were planted by Augustine himself, who felt quite confident about the redemptive power and future growth of the City of God (i.e., the Church). In Reformation times certain Dutch theologians refined his view, asserting that the thousand years of Revelation 20 symbolize *a later portion* of the Church Era, during which time the world will be more or less completely Christianized, and the Jews converted and returned to their ancient homeland.

Though hardly the majority report of the Church, postmillennialism has had some astute defenders. In 17th century England it appeared in the Savoy Declaration, and in the writings of Daniel Whitby and John Owen. Many American Puritans, such as John Cotton and Jonathan Edwards, were postmillennarians. They believed that God was using the American experiment in a special way to advance his Kingdom in the earth. Princeton theologians Charles Hodge and Benjamin Warfield were also postmillennarian, as was the Reformed Baptist, Augustus Strong. Their writings inclined not a few of their Reformed brethren to embrace this eschatological option. In our own day, Lorraine Boettner, John Jefferson Davis, Marcellus Kik, Keith Mathison, and Doug Wilson have served as the leading proponents of postmillennialism. The disciples of Rousas Rushdoony—the founder of a theological school called Christian Reconstructionism—are also postmillennial. They include Greg Bahnsen, Ken Gentry, Gary North, and Martin Selbrede.

Like amillennarians, postmillennarians interpret OTKP more or less figuratively, and as being fulfilled in the Era of Proclamation and the Final State. However, unlike their amillennial cousins, they argue that many of these prophecies predict *a global triumph of the Gospel in (some portion of) the Church Era*, with the result that world society will become increasingly pure, peaceful, and prosperous.

Postmillennarians disagree about how exactly to interpret the thousand years of Revelation 20. Some identify it with the entire Era of Proclamation, others with its final thousand years, still others with a season of indeterminate length situated near the end of the present evil age, a season that will commence with a special, latter-day binding of Satan, possibly at the time of the conversion of ethnic Israel at large (this is the

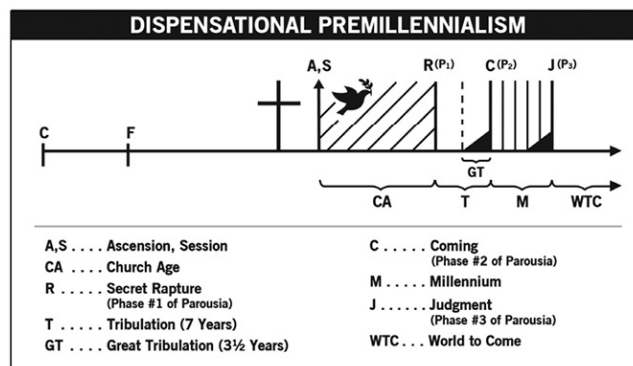
view I have pictured in the diagram above). All agree, however, that the basic trajectory of Church history, despite occasional setbacks, is one of gospel triumph.

Regarding the final days of the Era of Proclamation, most postmillennarians look for a conversion of the great bulk of Jews under the preaching of the Gospel. Also, they reluctantly concede that Revelation 20:7-10 does indeed anticipate a final, global rebellion against Christ and his faithful people. They insist, however, that it will be of very short duration and largely unsuccessful. This painful interlude—so out of character with the preceding years of blessing—will quickly lead to the Parousia, the various elements of the Consummation, and the World to Come.

Thus, for most postmillennarians, the true locus of Christ’s victory over the powers of evil is the Era of Proclamation itself, with Christ’s second coming serving largely as a glorious capstone for all that he was able previously to accomplish through the faithful preaching of his people.

Does Scripture justify this optimistic scenario? And does the course of Church History to date confirm it? In the pages ahead we will keep these important questions very much in mind.

4. Dispensational Premillennialism (Dispensationalism)



Dispensationalism is a relatively recent, highly complex, and increasingly controversial form of premillennialism. It was developed in mid-19th century England by John Darby, a prolific writer and the theological leader of the small but influential Plymouth Brethren Movement. In a day when theological liberalism was rotting out the foundations of mainline Protestantism, dispensationalists held loyally to a

high view of Scripture, and so won favor among biblical conservatives. Also, as the murderous 20th century progressed, their interpretation of biblical prophecy—which was decidedly pessimistic about the future of world society—seemed to make good sense of the tumultuous times in which people were living.

For all these reasons, Dispensationalism enjoyed a following. It included a number of devoted apologists—men like C. I. Scofield, Harry Ironside, Wm. Blackstone, and A. C. Gabelein. Meanwhile, evangelist D. L. Moody did much to spread the new eschatology among Christian laymen, as did the popular Scofield Reference Bible and the Prophetic Conference Movement. In time, dispensational Bible colleges and seminaries began to spring up, from which there flowed a continuous stream of teachers, pastors, writers, and conference speakers. Familiar contemporary proponents of Dispensationalism include William Criswell, Norman Geisler, Dave Hunt, Thomas Ice, John Hagee, David Jeremiah, Tim LaHaye, Hal Lindsey, John MacArthur, Joel Rosenberg, Charles Ryrie, Chuck Smith, Charles Swindoll, Jack Van Impe, and John Walvoord.

At the very heart of Dispensationalism lies a novel and highly controversial thesis, namely, that God has always had two separate plans for two separate peoples: Israel and the Church. This conviction is reflected in its picture of Salvation History, which is divided into seven different *dispensations*. Here, a dispensation is defined as a period of time during which God tests people in a particular way. Accordingly, the Era of Promise and Preparation is broken up into four separate dispensations, each of which is characterized by a different test: Conscience (Adam), Human Government (Noah), Promise (Abraham), and Law (Moses/Israel).

Among these, the fourth looms especially large, since it was during this troubled season of Israel's moral failure that God, through his prophets, ever-increasingly promised that he would restore his (scattered) people to their homeland in Canaan, send them a Messianic King, and set up a global theocracy with Israel as the head and the Gentiles as the tail. In other words, dispensationalists interpret OT Kingdom prophecy *quite* literally, and therefore anticipate a future “dispensation of the Kingdom” wherein God's earthly people—ethnic Israel—will again be situated in Palestine, ruling and reigning triumphantly with their Messiah over the nations of the world.

This brings us to the NT era. Here, God finally sends his Son into the world *for the express purpose of offering the promised theocratic Kingdom to Israel*. However, as the NT makes painfully clear, Israel largely refuses to repent and trust in Christ, thereby failing their test and forfeiting the Kingdom. But this does not spell the death of God's Kingdom promises. Instead, God simply postpones the dispensation of the Kingdom until the Millennium (Mt. 11:20f). Meanwhile, about mid way through his earthly ministry, Christ unveils a *new* plan, intended by God to create a *new*, heavenly people, and to introduce a *new*, heavenly dispensation: the Dispensation of the Church (Mt. 13:1f). This dispensation is sometimes called the "mystery form" of the Kingdom, since here Christ does indeed rule over his saints, but only inwardly, by his Spirit. Very importantly, dispensationalists insist that this new plan was a *pure* mystery; that the OT prophets *never* foresaw or spoke of it at all; that Christ introduced it altogether *de novo* during the days of his flesh, when he saw that the Jewish nation would reject him, even unto the death. And that, of course, is precisely what happened, with the result that on the Day of Pentecost the crucified, risen, ascended, and glorified Christ did indeed give birth to a heavenly people, pouring out the Holy Spirit on his own, and seating them—and all who would afterwards believe their report—with him in heavenly places at the Father's own right hand.

This brings us to the most complicated part of the dispensational system, the part dealing with events to occur at—and after—the close of the Church Era. I will sketch it as simply as I can.

First comes *the secret Rapture*. This is "phase one" of the Parousia, the phase in which Christ comes down from heaven *for* his saints, arriving in the air just above the earth. At that time, he raises "sleeping" (i.e., dead) Christians, transforms the living, gathers them to himself in the sky, and takes them to heaven, where, for the next seven years, they enjoy the Marriage Supper of the Lamb. Again, the Rapture is a "secret" event: No (unbelieving) person on earth sees Christ return or gather his saints to meet him in the air. Also, it is an "imminent" event: No one can know when it will occur, since the Bible supplies us with no specific signs by which we might know that the secret Rapture is at hand.

Next comes *the Tribulation*. Based on a unique and quite literal interpretation of Daniel 9, dispensationalists argue that the Tribulation will

last for seven years. During this time 144,000 converted Jews will preach “the gospel of the Kingdom” to all nations—the good news of Christ’s coming millennial reign, and of access to it through faith in him. As they preach, many Jews and Gentiles will believe. However, mid way through the Tribulation, the Antichrist will step onto the stage of history. When he does, the whole world will go after him, believers will undergo fierce persecution, and God will pour out dreadful warning judgments upon the earth. This season of three and a half years—*the Great Tribulation*—will conclude with the Battle of Armageddon, a military conflict centered in Palestine that will scarcely get under way before Christ returns visibly, in power and glory, to rescue his beleaguered (largely Jewish) people and destroy their enemies.

This is “phase two” of the *Parousia* (also called *the Revelation*), in which Christ will come *with* his saints (and all the holy angels). His feet will touch down on the Mt. of Olives. More Jews will be converted. OT saints—and believers who died during the Tribulation—will be raised from the dead, thereafter to return to heaven with the glorified Church. Christ will then judge the living Gentile nations, permitting those individuals who treated his “brethren” (i.e., the Jewish evangelists) well, to enter the Millennium. Likewise, he will also judge between believing and unbelieving Jews. Finally, he will cast Satan into the abyss for 1000 years. At this, the glorified saints return to heaven, and the theocratic Kingdom begins.

Throughout *the Millennium*, Christ will reign *on* earth and *over* the earth from earthly Jerusalem. A glorious, rebuilt temple will become the center of the global worship of God. In commemoration of Christ’s atoning death, priests will again offer animal sacrifices and observe Jewish feast days. Though sin and death will be marginally present, the Millennium will be a time of widespread peace, prosperity, longevity, righteousness, and joy. On those rare occasions when rebels rise up against their King, Christ will swiftly overrule them with a rod of iron, possibly with help from the glorified saints in heaven. At the end of the Millennium, God will permit Satan and his demon hosts to arise from the abyss and deceive the nations once more. A final battle will ensue, wherein a confederacy of rebellious nations attacks the camp of the (largely Jewish) saints. But God (or Christ)

will quickly intervene, destroying his foes, casting Satan into hell, and raising the millennial saints from the dead.

Now comes *the Last Judgment*. Here the focus is upon the unbelieving dead, who will be raised, brought before the Great White Throne, judged according to their works, and cast into the Lake of Fire.

Finally, God creates *new heavens and a new earth*, the eternal home of the redeemed. The Church—God’s heavenly people—descends to the new earth to join Israel, God’s earthly people. Though remaining forever distinct (according to some dispensationalists), both now live and serve together in the eternal Kingdom of God and Christ.

Once again, Dispensationalism is the most complex of all eschatological options. It is easy to see why. It gives us *three* stages of the Kingdom of God (i.e., the Church Era, the Millennium, and the World to Come); *two* seasons of great tribulation (one before Christ’s Parousia *with* the saints, and another at the close of the Millennium); *three* separate Comings of Christ (the Rapture, the Revelation seven years later, and a final Coming at the end of the Millennium); and a bewildering number of different judgments, resurrections, and transformations of nature. If simplicity and sheep-friendliness are marks of truth, then the truth of Dispensationalism is in grave doubt.

Besides being inordinately complex, Dispensationalism radically departs from historic Christian teaching. This is true of its thesis that God has two different plans for two different peoples; of its strictly literal interpretation of OTKP (which many historic premillenarians, especially the earliest ones, do not embrace); of its exotic interpretation of Daniel 9; of its highly literal and futuristic approach to the book of Revelation; and again, of its extraordinarily complicated picture of the Consummation.

Before concluding, we do well here to say a few words about *Progressive Dispensationalism*. Alive to criticisms emanating largely from the Reformed wing of evangelicalism, some dispensational scholars are now seeking to modify their traditional view. Since the 1980’s, men like Craig Blaising, Darrell Bock, and Robert Saucy have labored to set out a more nuanced understanding of Salvation History, one that more faithfully honors the centrality of the New Covenant and the role of the Church in God’s overall redemptive plan.

In particular, these theologians allow that the New Covenant is indeed God's one and only true instrument of salvation; that the New Covenant and the Davidic Covenant (Jer. 31:31-34) are one and the same; that even now, in the Church Age, Christ is seated in heaven upon the throne of David; that the promised Kingdom of God is indeed present in the Church and the Church Age; that the OT prophets did indeed foresee and speak (darkly) of the Church; but that their words also will be literally fulfilled in the coming millennial stage of the Kingdom, when ethnic Israel once again becomes the head and not the tail.

Clearly, progressive dispensationalists are seeking to be more faithful to the "realized eschatology" of the NT, even as they tenaciously cling to the fundamentals of their own system.² Reformed theologians gladly acknowledge these new concessions to Protestant orthodoxy, even as they urge their dispensational brethren to dig deeper still, re-examining the very foundations of their thinking. Most assuredly, this particular tug of war is not over.

I have said that a growing number of evangelical scholars are rethinking, abandoning, and openly challenging Dispensationalism. Uncertainty and controversy now surround a view that for over a century had powerfully captured the evangelical imagination. As a result, some pastors are avoiding eschatological teaching and preaching altogether. Obviously, this is not a healthy situation. And yet it may be a blessing in disguise. Perhaps the Lord is now at work to give his people fresh insight into eschatology; to help them discover the Master Keys to Great End Time Debate; to enable them to behold—with exceeding joy—a simple, glorious, powerful, and unifying vision of Salvation History and the Consummation.

5. Preterism (Full and Partial)

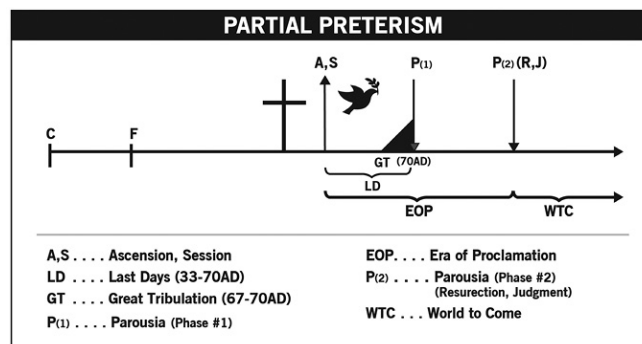
Over the last couple of decades, a small but influential number of theologians in the Reformed wing of evangelicalism have defended a *preterist* approach to biblical eschatology. The name of their school comes from the Latin *praeter*, meaning *past*. It fits well, since preterist interpreters, in varying degrees, argue that events traditionally associated with the Consummation have *already* occurred; that some or all of the eschatological predictions found in the gospels, the epistles, and the

Revelation were actually fulfilled during the Jewish War (66-70 AD), and especially in the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD.

While some modern preterists try to find ancient precedent for their position, most historians agree that identifiably preterist eschatologies first appeared in the 17th century writings of Jesuit priest Luis de Alcazar, Dutch jurist Hugo Grotius, and English Bible scholars Henry Hammond and John Lightfoot. Later on, the English Congregational pastor J. S. Russell became the father of “full preterism,” while in America, Andover College professor Moses Stuart defended a milder version called “partial preterism.”

At the risk of oversimplification, I would say that modern evangelical preterism is largely based upon a sincere desire to do justice to the Olivet Discourse, especially Matthew 24, and most especially verse 34 of that challenging chapter. In this discourse, Christ first speaks at length about the signs that will herald the destruction of Jerusalem and his Parousia at the end of the age (Mt. 24:1-28). Next, he speaks of the Parousia itself (Mt. 24:29-31). Then he declares to his disciples, “Truly, I say to you, this generation shall not pass away until all these things take place” (Mt. 24:34). Taken at face value, this seems to mean that events leading up to the Parousia, the Parousia itself, and the Consummation associated with it (Mt. 25:31ff) will all occur in 70 AD, when Jerusalem is destroyed, and when that particular generation of Jews comes to an end. As we shall see, full preterists teach this very thing. Partial preterists teach much the same thing, but with important qualifications. In what follows, I will briefly describe both views, mentioning some of the major proponents of each.

Partial Preterism



Of the two schools, this is the more complex. Broadly speaking, partial preterists agree with their Reformed predecessors that the OT prophecies of the Kingdom must be spiritually interpreted in light of the New Covenant. Like them, they see the Kingdom as coming in two stages, separated by a single supernatural Parousia of Christ at the end of the Church era. And like them, they look for Christ to effect a single resurrection and a single judgment, after which he will bring in the new heavens and the new earth.

However, on a number of other crucial eschatological doctrines, partial preterists abandon their Protestant forefathers.

For example, they identify “the last days” as the closing years of the Mosaic dispensation, the short season between Christ’s ascension and the events of 70 AD. Similarly, they identify “the end of the age” as 70 AD itself, when the destruction of Jerusalem brought an end to the age of Mosaic ceremonial worship. As for the various signs preceding and heralding the Consummation—wars, rumors of wars, famines, earthquakes, pestilence, persecutions, universal preaching of the Gospel, the coming of the Antichrist (i.e., Nero), and the greatest tribulation—these too, according to partial preterists, all occurred during “the last days” prior to 70 AD.

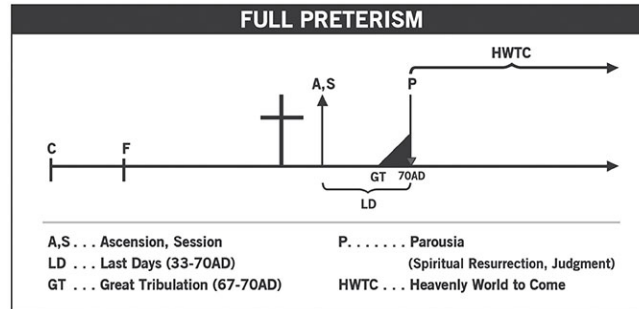
But what of the Parousia itself, and the cosmological events traditionally associated with it: the Resurrection, the Last Judgment, and the creation of new heavens and a new earth? Here, things grow murky indeed. As a rule, partial preterists allow that Christ is yet to come in visible glory to the skies above the earth in order to consummate all things. However, they do *not* allow that in Matthew 24:27-31 he was referring to that particular coming. Rather, they hold that he was using apocalyptic language from the OT to speak symbolically of a providential “judgment-coming” that he himself would soon effect through the Roman general Titus. This is, of course, a dramatic departure from the traditional understanding of Jesus’ words. Traditionally, interpreters have held that here the Lord is giving his people a true picture of the true contours of his (supernatural) Parousia. Yes, it alludes to various OTKP’s, but it does so in order to reveal, at long last, exactly how they will be fulfilled. Preterists, however, departing from this approach, introduce an entirely new hermeneutic (i.e., method of biblical interpretation) by which they would understand this and other NT texts dealing with the Parousia. As I will show later, the result, at best, is exegetical confusion; at worst, it is eschatological heresy.

Partial preterists also bring their new hermeneutic to the Revelation, which, against much good evidence, they insist was written prior to 70 AD. All partial preterists agree that chapters 1-19 mystically picture the events of “the last days,” and especially those of “the Great Tribulation” (i.e., 66-70 AD), when the Church endured much hardship at the hands of Israel and Rome. Regarding Revelation 20, some of these interpreters identify the Millennium with “the last days” (i.e., the days between Pentecost and 70 AD), during which time Satan was bound so that the Church could preach the Gospel to Israel and the nations. Others advance a highly futuristic and postmillennial interpretation, teaching that at some distant point in the Church Era (future even to us) God will grant extraordinary evangelistic success to his people, with the result that ethnic Israel will finally turn to Christ, and the world will become largely Christian. Some in this camp—usually called *theonomists* or *Christian Reconstructionists*—further argue that during this future Millennium global society will become largely *theocratic*; that the nations will now gladly govern themselves by the principles and statutes of the Mosaic Law.

Summing up, partial preterists interpret OTKP figuratively, in terms of the New Covenant; they see the Kingdom as appearing in two phases (the Church Era and the World to Come); they say that many end time events traditionally associated with the Consummation have already occurred (e.g., the rise of the Antichrist, the Great Tribulation); they adopt a new, highly symbolic hermeneutic to interpret Jesus’ own words about his Parousia in the Olivet Discourse; they therefore argue that *that* Parousia was a providential “judgment-coming” that occurred in 70 AD; they bring this hermeneutic to other NT eschatological texts, and especially to the Revelation, which, they say, deals more or less exclusively with the days of the Jewish War; yet they also look for a future, supernatural Parousia of Christ, when he will effect a general bodily resurrection, the last judgment, and a glorious restoration of all things.

With notable differences among them, Greg Bahnsen, (the early) Gary de Mar, David Chilton, Ken Gentry, R.C. Sproul, Hank Hanegraaff, Rousas Rushdoony, and Martin Selbrede all share this understanding of biblical eschatology.

Full Preterism



Full preterism is the natural result of a consistent application of the new preterist hermeneutic discussed above. If Jesus, in the Olivet Discourse, used mystical, symbolic language to describe a Parousia that occurred in 70 AD, who is to say that he and the apostles did not use the same mystical language to describe other events biblically associated with the Parousia: the Resurrection, the Last Judgment, and the Restoration of All Things? Who is to say that these too were not fulfilled in 70 AD?

This is the road that full preterists take. Embracing a strictly preterist interpretation of the Olivet Discourse, they argue that here—and in all the rest of the NT, including the Revelation—Christ is speaking mystically of spiritual events that occurred in 70 AD. Thus, in 70 AD he came again to his people, spiritually rather than physically; he raised the dead, spiritually rather than physically; he judged the world, spiritually rather than physically; for the righteous, he created new heavens and a new earth, spiritually rather than physically; for the wicked he created the Lake of Fire, spiritually rather than physically. You may ask, “What, then, will become of the physical remains of all human beings; and what will become of the sin-cursed physical world that we now inhabit?” No full preterist seems to know.

Needless to say, this eschatology is a dramatic break with historic Christian orthodoxy—a break that men like John Bray, (the late) David Chilton, Max and Tim King, John Noe, Don Preston, and Edward Stevens have openly made. Accordingly, these writers do not hesitate to remind us that the historic creeds of the Church are not infallible; and that the vast majority of past and present theologians can be, have been, and now are, simply wrong.

Will preterist eschatology enjoy a significant following in the modern Church? As for full preterism, I very much doubt it, seeing that it departs so radically from historic orthodoxy and the plain sense of Scripture. However, it is possible that for a season partial preterism will cast its spell over a portion of the evangelical community. For this reason, we shall examine it carefully in the pages ahead.

Future-millennial vs. Present-millennial

Our survey of contemporary options in eschatology has disclosed two interesting and encouraging facts. I want to conclude by highlighting them once again.

First, despite the seeming complexity of the Great End Time Debate, it turns out that the underlying issues are relatively few. Again, they are: (1) The nature and structure of the Kingdom, (2) the proper interpretation of OTKP, (3) the meaning of the Millennium, and (4) the structure of the Consummation. Seeing this is most helpful, since it immediately gives us a good strategy for attaining clarity and conviction about our Blessed Hope. If only we can discover the biblical truth about these four foundational issues, then surely we will make excellent progress in our quest for eschatological clarity and unity.

Secondly, it appears that in the end there are really only two *basic* eschatological options.

On the one hand, there is what I would call a *future-millennial* approach, an approach adopted by classic premillennarians and dispensationalists. As we have seen, future-millennarians are committed to the literal interpretation of OTKP, and therefore to a futuristic interpretation of Revelation 20, without which there can be no literal fulfillment of OTKP. Their view requires at least two Comings of Christ, and two separate Consummations.

On the other hand, there is what I would call the *present-millennial* approach. Present-millennarians interpret OTKP figuratively, in terms of the New Covenant, and place the Millennium of Revelation 20 on this side of the one Coming/Consummation. Amillennarians identify the Millennium with the entire Era of Proclamation, the era between Christ's first and second advents. Postmillennarians and (some) partial preterists see it as yet

future, but as occurring within the present Era of Proclamation. For all these interpreters, there is only one Coming of Christ in glory, and one Consummation.

So again, the issues and options in biblical eschatology are few and relatively easy to understand. The Bible is *not* a fertile field for endless eschatological speculation. By keeping the real issues and the real options before our eyes, we can indeed make good progress towards the truth.³

Conclusion

Years ago, when television westerns were coming into vogue, it was a staple of all fight scenes that the bad guy would throw dirt into the eyes of the good guy. Alas, the good guy, now temporarily blind, would take a terrible beating. And yet, because evil cannot prevail, it did not prevail: The good guy's eyes (miraculously enough) would suddenly clear, the tide of combat would suddenly turn, and the righteous hero would suddenly triumph.

Having diligently fought your way through all these eschatological options, it is quite possible that you yourself feel as though someone has thrown dirt in your eyes; that with all these brainy eschatologists ganging up on you, you haven't the least hope of a victory; that for everyday sheep such as yourself, this is neither a fair nor a winnable fight. Indeed, it may not even be a worthwhile fight.

But what if someone (miraculously) cleared your eyes? What if suddenly you could see your adversaries—and their weak spots as well—with perfect clarity? What if someone put a sword in your hand—or a few very big and very sharp keys—so that now you felt confident enough not only to fight back, but also to win?

“Impossible,” you say.

Read on.

He has the Keys!

WE HAVE COME upon a closed a closed door. Four of them, actually: the Kingdom of God, the proper interpretation of OTKP, the Millennium, and the Consummation. There are locks, bolts, and bars everywhere. Confusion, contention, discouragement—even theological despair—all stand guard like giants arrayed against us. How shall we ever enter in?

In the present chapter, I offer the single most important response to that crucial question. It is this: The only way we shall ever enter in is by recognizing that *he—the Lord Jesus Christ—has the keys*. No one in heaven, on earth, or under the earth can open these three doors. God the Father has ordained it so, having placed the Key of Knowledge on the shoulder of his only-begotten Son. Accordingly, if the Lord Jesus shuts, no one can open; and if he opens, no one can shut. He, and he alone, has the keys (Isaiah 22:22, Luke 11:53, John 5:23. Rev. 3:7).

I am persuaded that in their deep heart all Christians know this. They know that when doctrinal push comes to shove, they must quickly turn back to the Master, humbling themselves at his feet. Why? Because this Man speaks as one having authority, and not like the speculators of the various theological schools. Moreover, in turning quickly to Christ they are obeying the word of the Father himself, who, having descended in glory to the Mount of Transfiguration, diverted the gaze of the trembling disciples from Moses and Elijah, and fastened it upon the luminous One, saying “This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased: Listen to Him (Mt. 17:5)!” By the Spirit of Truth within, all God’s children know they should do this very thing.

And yet we forget. Moreover, in the area of eschatology, we have been badly forgetting for quite some time. “No,” say our dispensational leaders (and their many followers), “Christ does *not* have the keys. Daniel does,

and Ezekiel, and Zechariah, and John the Revelator. For centuries these keys have lain hidden in the deep caves of OT prophecy and apocalyptic, shrouded in mystery. Now, however, in the last of the last days, God has raised up anointed teachers, prophetic experts who can decipher the mysteries and open the books. A good thing, too! How else could we have discovered the true structure of Salvation History in Daniel 9? How else could we have learned to distinguish between God's purposes for Israel and the Church? How could we have realized that the gospels and the epistles speak to a heavenly people, whereas OTKP and the Revelation speak to an earthly? How could we have understood the Jewish focus of the Olivet Discourse, or found the Rapture in 1 Thessalonians 4, or discovered that the real burden of the Revelation is to disclose the ministry of 144,000 Jewish evangelists during a seven year tribulation, evangelists who will proclaim the Gospel of Christ's coming millennial reign?

Brothers and sisters, I say it in love: Such thinking is spiritually disastrous. It is not disastrous simply because it is in error, or because it is a prescription for confusion and controversy. No, it is disastrous—and therefore a prescription for error and controversy—because it so egregiously dishonors Christ. How? *By failing to accord to him—and to the NT truth that he so graciously gave us—their rightful place at very head of divine revelation.* As a result of this, it scandalously abases the divine Teacher himself before the feet of worthy but infinitely lesser servants of God; mere precursors, who, in Old Testament times, spoke in portions, types, shadows, and dark sayings about things that Christ and his apostles actually brought out into the full light of day; things into which the prophets of old—and the angels as well—desired to look (1 Peter 1:11-12)! Our Master said that the least in the Kingdom of heaven is greater than any of “these” who preceded him (Mt. 11:11). Yet we have not only insisted on making “these” greater than the least, but greater than the Master himself!

So again, the all-important message of this chapter is: Christ has the keys! He gives them to us in what I will call the Didactic New Testament (DNT). That is, he gives them to us in the Gospels, the book of Acts, and the Epistles—in those portions of the NT that clearly and explicitly teach us God's definitive truth on all things, including eschatology. Here and here alone is where we learn how to understand the Kingdom of God, the Millennium, and the Consummation.

Once we see this clearly, all things will fall into place. Until we see it clearly, the way will remain shut. We do well, then, to spend a few moments pondering exactly why it is that Christ has the keys, and how it is that we should receive and use them so as to open the door to the truth of biblical eschatology.

Progressive Revelation

Whatever their views on the exact structure of Salvation History, all Christians agree that God, over the course of time, has been working out a plan of redemption that culminates in two fundamental comings of Christ: a first that purchased the redemption of his people, and a second that will consummate that redemption, even as Christ judges the whole world in righteousness. In other words, Salvation History is progressive. God the Father ever directs it towards a single great goal: the display of his glory in the judicial and redemptive work of his Son.

The same is true of *special revelation*, the written disclosure of God's nature, purposes, and plans, graciously given to us through the various authors of his book, the Bible. It too is progressive. Indeed, Salvation History and progressive revelation clearly run on parallel tracks. As God pours forth the pre-determined events of Salvation History into time and space, so too, along the way, does he move upon men to pour forth a written narrative of those events, and to interpret them, thereby giving us an ever more complete picture of who God is and what he is doing in his universe.

Every careful student of Scripture sees that God's special revelation is progressive; that in the beginning he revealed some of his truth, in the middle he revealed more, and at the end—when he finally sent his Son into the world—he revealed all the rest, fully and finally, whether through Christ himself, or through his holy apostles and prophets.

This last—that he has revealed *all* the rest—is exceedingly important. Notwithstanding the claims of our Muslim or B'hai or Mormon neighbors, after Christ divine revelation is no longer progressing. When the apostle John penned the last word of the Revelation, the “cannon” (i.e., the contents) of Scripture was closed. Henceforth, the revelation of ultimate religious and philosophical truth that God (in eternity past) had planned to give to us, was now complete. Like a newborn baby, it was now delivered

once and for all *to* the saints (Jude 1:3). And for this very reason, it is now to be carried *by* the saints to all nations until the end shall come (Mt. 24:14, 28:18ff, Rom. 16:25-27).

NT Texts on Progressive Revelation

Whether explicitly or implicitly, a great number of NT texts teach the idea of a progressive revelation of divine truth culminating in the manifestation of Christ. We have seen, for example, how God, on the Mount of Transfiguration, directed the apostles' attention, not to Moses (who represented the Law) or to Elijah (who represented the Prophets), but to Christ. Why? Because Christ was in fact the secret fountainhead of all OT revelation (John 1:9), its hidden theme (Luke 24:27, John 5:39), and the One who fulfilled it in every particular (Mt. 17:1-12, Luke 9:28-36). How then shall the saints not "listen to him?" How shall they not turn, first and foremost, to the words of the divine Son, who, by fulfilling OT revelation, supplies the indispensable key for understanding it? More on this in a moment.

Or again, we might consider Hebrews 1, where the writer declares: "God, having spoken in time past to the fathers in many portions and in various ways by the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us by *His* Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the worlds" (Heb. 1:1-2). Here we learn that in OT times God spoke to the saints through the prophets in many *portions*; that he gave them *increments* of his truth through inspired but mortal men. However, in these last days he has spoken to us through his Son, who is, among other things, the divine creator, sustainer, redeemer, and heir of the cosmos! And does this Son speak like the prophets of old? Does he also speak in "portions" and increments? Surely not! For how shall he who is very the radiance of the Father's glory bring us anything less than the radiance—the full outshining—of the Father's truth? All who are familiar with rest of this epistle know well that this is precisely what he did.

Finally, we have Paul's letter to the Colossians, where we find him passionately praying that God's people may come to enjoy spiritual strength and assurance through a true knowledge of God's greatest "mystery." That mystery is Christ himself, "... in whom are hidden *all* the treasures of

wisdom and knowledge” (Col. 2:3). It would be hard to say it more concisely or more powerfully: Christ—and the NT Scriptures that he was pleased to bestow upon his people—contain the fullness of God’s revealed truth.

Why Did God Make His Revelation Progressive?

As helpful as such proof texts are, we can best understand the fact and character of progressive revelation by digging deeper still; by asking *why* it pleased God to unveil his truth in this manner. When we do, we find that the NT answers by inviting us to look carefully at God’s overall purpose for his Son. What exactly is this? The answer is found on the lips of Christ himself: God has granted him all manner of divine prerogatives—to perform miracles, to bestow eternal life, to raise the dead, to judge the world, etc.—*so that all may honor the Son, even as they honor the Father* (John 5:23).

Truly, this is the end of all man-centered thinking about Salvation History! Yes, Salvation History is the arena in which God displays his love, purpose, and plan for poor sinners. But if that is all we see in it, we are seeing only half the picture. To get the complete picture, we must also learn to view history as an arena in which he displays his love, purpose, and plan for his beloved Son! On this all the NT writers agree: God’s great desire—and arguably his supreme desire—is that against the vast backdrop of creation, fall, judgment, and redemption, all sentient beings, whether men or angels, should behold the deity, attributes, glory, and beauty of the divine Son; that all should behold and confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Phil. 2:11).

So then, the Father is pleased supremely to honor his Son by bestowing upon him all the divine prerogatives (John 5, Col. 1). *But is not one of God’s greatest prerogatives that he should graciously bestow the full light of truth upon poor benighted sinners?* And is not the gift of such light an integral part of his redemptive work in the world? Therefore, because God loved and desired to honor his Son, he also chose to make him the appointed vessel through whom he would complete his special revelation to the world.

The NT makes it abundantly clear how lavishly the Father did so. Jesus Christ is the Messianic Prophet whom God promised to send into the world

(Deut. 18:15, Acts 3:22ff). He bids his disciples call him Teacher (John 13:13), and forbids them ever to look to another (Mt. 23:10). He speaks as one having authority, and not as the scribes. (Mark 1:22). Indeed, no man ever spoke like this man (John 7:46), for his word is with power (Luke 4:36). He is not only the Teacher (of the teachers) of Israel (John 3:10, 13:13, Acts 3:22), but also a light of revelation to the Gentiles (Luke 2:32; cf., Isaiah 49:6, Mt. 4:16, John 8:12). He is the one who makes known all the things that he has heard from the Father (John 14:26, 15:15, 16:25ff). Henceforth, his words are *the* abiding rock upon which alone people everywhere may safely build their lives (Mt. 7:24-29). Therefore those words shall remain, even until the end of the age, when at last they shall become the judge of all (Mt. 28:18ff, John 12:48).

Shall we not hear such words? Shall we not build our theology upon them? *And shall we not turn to them first and foremost in our search for eschatological truth?*

How Did God Make His Revelation Progressive? (1)

The idea of progressive revelation is profoundly relevant for our study of eschatology. In order to see why, let us take a moment to look more closely at the two main *ways* in which God made his revelation progressive.

First, God made his revelation progressive *by waiting for Christ to come and complete it*. As we have just seen, Christ's (first) coming represents the manifestation, in time and space, of God's eternal plan for the salvation of his people. But if that coming represents the full unveiling of God's eternal plan, then surely it also represents the full unveiling of his truth: the capping off, summing up, and rounding out of all that God is pleased to reveal of himself and his purposes to mankind. I have already cited a number of NT texts that confirm this reasonable deduction.

And there are more.

The apostle John, for example, declared, "The Law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ" (John 1:17). Were the affirmations of the Law "false"? Certainly not! Was the gift of the Law anything other than a demonstration and administration of God's grace? A thousand times no! And yet, in the Law God did not give grace and truth as they were *in and of themselves*; as they were *according to his eternal plan*;

as they were *according to Christ*. Instead, God's OT redemptive acts were mere "shadows" of a "body" that would come later. And the body was Christ (Col. 2:17). So then, just as Christ, by his righteous life and atoning death, brings us true grace, so also by his teaching ministry he brings us "true truth," full and entire. He completes the special revelation of God by bringing true truth into the noonday light of the sun.

In his profound meditation upon the place of the Church in God's eternal plan, the apostle Paul affirms the same thing. He teaches that the Church is "the pillar and support of the truth" in the world (1 Tim. 3:15). Now, in these last days, Christ has come. Now he has unveiled God's (formerly) hidden truth to his holy apostles and prophets (Eph. 1:8-10, 2:20). Now, upon the foundation of their teaching, the Church is being built up as a holy temple in the Lord, a habitation of God the Father by the Spirit (Eph. 2:21-22). Accordingly, the Church does indeed become "the pillar and support of the truth": *the sole repository of the special revelation of God*. And now that this truth *is* out, it can *go* out to the whole world. At long last it can begin its great work among the nations, the work of making a Gospel-believing family of Jews and Gentiles into an eternal habitation for the living God.

So then, God's special revelation was progressive because he was waiting for his Son to complete it. Again, this simple truth is of supreme importance for a proper understanding of eschatology. But to see why, we must delve a little deeper into the exact sequence of events by which God gave his completed revelation to his people.

Happily, the NT that we hold in our hands makes this sequence abundantly clear. First, God spoke directly through Christ, whose teachings are recorded in the four *gospels* (John 14:26). Then, after Pentecost, he again spoke through (the exalted) Christ, this time through his chosen apostles and prophets. Initially, they passed along his revelations in their oral ministry of preaching and teaching, a partial record of which we find in the book of *Acts*. Later, they did the same through their writings, which we find in the *epistles* and the *Revelation*. Notably, all of this was in fulfillment of Christ's words to the apostles while he was yet upon the earth:

I have many more things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. But when He, the Spirit of Truth, comes, He will guide you into all the truth; for He will not speak on his own

initiative, but whatever He hears, He will speak; and He will disclose to you what is to come. He shall glorify Me; for He shall take of Mine, and shall disclose it to you. All things that the Father has are Mine; therefore I said that He takes of Mine, and will disclose it to you.

—John 16:12-15

Here we encounter what I like to call “the great chain of revelation”, the hierarchical cascade by which God’s definitive special revelation flowed down from the Father, through Christ, through the Spirit, through Christ’s holy apostles and prophets, to his (elect Jewish) people and to the whole world (cf. Rev. 1:1-11). Note carefully from our text that *even in NT times* this revelation was progressive. During his earthly ministry, Jesus received and unveiled a measure of truth, the measure his disciples could “bear” at that time. Then, as part of his continuing prophetic ministry in heaven, he received the rest of God’s truth and, in the years immediately subsequent to Pentecost, bestowed it on his writing prophets. When at last they had committed this further truth to writing, “all the truth” was finally delivered into the arms of a waiting world (John 16:13, Jude 1:3).

Again, the fact and sequence of progressive revelation is enormously important for a correct interpretation of the Bible in general, and of eschatology in particular. Obviously, it means that in seeking to resolve all questions and all controversies, we must take our cues from the definitive revelations of the NT, rather than from the preliminary revelations of the OT. Beyond this, it also means that within the NT itself we must take our cues, first from the *gospels*, where the seed of definitive truth was planted; and then from the *Acts* and the *epistles*, where that seed reaches full flower. Again, these three—and especially the epistles—constitute the Didactic New Testament. And based on all we have seen so far, nothing could be clearer than that God means it to be *the highest court of biblical appeal; the supreme biblical arbiter of every theological dispute, eschatological disputes included!*

I will say it again: Here in the Didactic New Testament we find “all the truth”—the definitive disclosure, explanation, and practical application of all that God purposed in Christ before the foundation of the world, and of all that he would have us know and do until the end of the world. In this light we see light (Psalm 36:9). In this light, we behold the deepest layers of biblical truth. In this light, we see and understand all previous light.

Therefore, to neglect NT light, or to subordinate it to (human interpretations of) OT light, is to commit theological suicide.

Budding eschatologists, beware!

How Did God Make His Revelation Progressive? (2)

All of this brings us to our second point, namely, that God made his revelation progressive *by appointing Christ himself to illuminate the true meaning of the OT; by making the Didactic New Testament the key to a proper understanding the Old Testament.* As we shall see in Parts 2 and 3 of our journey, this idea is absolutely essential for resolving the single most important problem of the Great End Time Debate: the proper interpretation of OTKP. I will introduce it here, and then, in the pages ahead, flesh it out more completely.

Let us begin by turning again to that fabulously rich word from the lips of the Master himself: “Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish, but to fulfill” (Mt. 5:17). Here our Lord introduces to his disciples nothing less than *a completely new way of interpreting the Jewish Scriptures.* He refers to these Scriptures as “the Law and the Prophets” (Mt. 7:12, 22:40, Acts 3:15, Rom. 3:21). Lest he needlessly offend his Jewish audience, he stresses that he has *not* come to abolish them. Nevertheless, in the plan of God something new is about to happen. And because of this, something new is about to happen to the Law and the Prophets: They are going to be fulfilled. In other words, they are about to assume a new form, a form that will remain in force until the Consummation and beyond (Mt. 5:18). Though the butterfly appears to be quite different from the caterpillar, the truth is that not a jot or a tittle of the insect has passed away. It is the same creature, *only in its new and final form.*

In speaking thus, Christ was alluding to something that in due season his apostles would declare openly, often at great personal cost: the New Covenant introduced by Christ has turned the Jewish Scriptures into (the record of) an Old Covenant, or an Old Testament. Because of the advent of the New Covenant and the New Covenant Scriptures that articulate it, the Jewish Scriptures have now become old, obsolete, and (in one sense) ready to pass away (Mt. 9:14-17, 2 Cor. 3:14, Heb. 8:13).

Note carefully, however, that neither Christ nor the apostles taught that the OT was now useless. To the contrary, from now on the Law and the Prophets would serve a new purpose: *Along with the words and works of Christ, and along with the eyewitness testimony of the apostles, they would become a powerful witness to the truth of the Gospel.* They would constitute a vast treasury of OT *pictures and prophecies*, all of which were designed by God to further the cause of Christ and the New Covenant in these last days.

In this regard, the Lord Jesus himself pointed the way. We remember, for example, how he taught Nicodemus to see the Person and Work of the Messiah in the ancient story of the bronze serpent that Moses suspended on a pole for the rescue of guilty and condemned sinners (Numbers 21, John 3). Likewise, we recall how he foretold his own death, burial, and resurrection by alluding to Jonah's three days and nights in the belly of the great fish (Mt. 12:40). Or again, we marvel to see him opening up the deep, Messianic significance of the Manna with which God fed his OT people in the wilderness: how it stands for Christ himself, the Bread of Heaven, graciously sent down by God, broken *for* his people, that he might live *in* his people, thereby nourishing and strengthening them for their difficult walk through the wilderness of this present evil world (Exodus 16, John 6, Rev. 12). And beyond all this, we remember the many times in which he taught his disciples that the events of his earthly ministry were in fulfillment of specific OT prophecies about the earthly life of God's Messiah (Mt. 13:14, 26:54, Luke 4:21, John 13:18, 15:25, 17:12).

All of these examples teach us that a vital part of Christ's earthly ministry *was to prepare his disciples to receive the Master Key to the proper understanding of the entire Old Testament.* And indeed, shortly after his resurrection he finally placed that key in their hands, saying:

“This is what I told you while I was still with you, that all things which are written about Me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.” *Then He opened their minds to understand the Scriptures.*

—Luke 24:27, 44-47 (NIV)

What a moment *that* must have been! And what a moment it was in Salvation History! For when our Lord thus opened the disciples' minds, he also opened up, once and for all, *the OT Scriptures themselves.* That is, he

displayed their deep, inmost, Christ-centered meaning. And again, in unveiling them as he did, he actually crowned them, setting them apart for a new and still higher mission in the purposes of God: to bear witness to the Person and Work of Christ; to testify about the New and Eternal Covenant that was mystically prefigured and prophesied in the old.

Since this point cannot be overstressed, let me repeat myself here by saying that at this crucial juncture in Salvation History the risen Christ himself—the divinely appointed Teacher of God’s Church—bestowed upon his disciples a fabulously precious gift, what is arguably the single most important key for resolving the Great End Time Debate. Hereafter, I will call it the *New Covenant Hermeneutic (NCH)*. The word “hermeneutic” simply means “method of interpretation.” So then, at this point in Salvation History the risen Christ gave his disciples the true New Covenant method for interpreting, understanding, enjoying, and proclaiming all of the OT Jewish Scriptures.

They would never be the same—nor will we, once we receive it as they did!

Henceforth, they would read the Law and the Prophets *christocentrically*, asking themselves, “What do these writings teach me about the Person and Work of Christ, the supreme mystery of God?” (John 5:39, Col. 2:2).

Henceforth, they would read the Law and the Prophets *covenantally*, asking themselves, “How exactly do the events, commandments, promises, and warnings of Old Covenant times prefigure the various elements and riches of the New Covenant?” (2 Cor. 3:1ff, Heb. 9:1ff, 13:20).

Henceforth, they would read the Law and the Prophets *typologically*, asking themselves, “How do the events, persons, objects, and institutions of OT times—in which God gave veiled revelations of the things of Christ and the Covenant—mystically picture or symbolize the New Covenant blessings that Christ has now unveiled and brought to light?” (Rom. 5:14, 1 Cor. 10, Col. 2:17, Heb. 8:1-6).

And henceforth, they would read the Law and the Prophets *eschatologically*, realizing that all throughout OT times God was actually working towards—and mystically speaking of—NT times; that the great theme of the OT was in fact the last days, and the people of the last days, upon whom the ends of the ages have come (1 Cor. 10:11, 1 Peter 4:7).

When we read the apostles' writings, we soon begin to see how successful the Master was in turning them into NT scribes, skilled teachers who were well able to bring out of the great treasury of God's revealed truth things both new and old (Mt. 13:52).

On the one hand, they understood that their exalted Lord was now disclosing to them new and eternal "mysteries;" precious truths about God and his redemptive plans and purposes, truths long hidden from generations past, but now, in these last days, revealed to the saints through Christ's own holy apostles and prophets (Rom. 16:25, 1 Cor. 2:7, Eph. 3:9, Col. 1:26).

On the other hand, having now received God's "true truth" in the Gospel, they also came to understand that in OT times God had *already* spoken of these things; that by means of various types, shadows, promises, and predictions, God had richly spoken beforehand of the coming of the Redeemer and the glorious fruits of the New Covenant in his blood (Rom. 1:2, Gal. 3:8, 1 Peter 1:11).

In short, Christ himself had opened their minds to understand the OT Scriptures. He had enabled them to see that the Old Covenant was actually a veiled revelation of the New (2 Cor. 3:12-18); that the entire OT was, as it were, a single great prophecy; and that the spirit (or inner essence) of that prophecy was nothing other than the testimony of Jesus Christ (Rev. 19:10).

Summing up, then, we find that revelation was progressive because when Christ finally appeared at the climactic moment in Salvation History, he "progressed" our understanding of the things of God in two fundamental ways: He gave us new and ultimate truth, and in so doing illuminated old and "penultimate truth," once and for all. In other words, He gave us not only the New Covenant, but also the *New Covenant Hermeneutic*. He gave us the divinely sanctioned method of biblical interpretation by which God's New Covenant people can, at long last, understand the deep, Christ-centered meaning of the Old.

No aspiring eschatologist can do without it!

The Importance of the New Covenant Hermeneutic

Again, the NCH is one of Christ's richest gifts to his Church, and a vitally important requirement for her spiritual health and the good success of her mission. We do well to consider a few of the reasons why.

I have already mentioned, for example, that the NCH is indispensable equipment for effective evangelism. As the apostles affirmed both by precept and example, God has ordained that the Gospel *be made known to the nations through the Scriptures of the prophets* (Rom. 16:25-27). In other words, in her global proclamation of the Good News of salvation, the Church is to make copious use of the OT Scriptures. The NCH enables her to do so. It enables her evangelists skillfully and powerfully to draw from the vast treasury of OT witness; to cite, expound, and press home to the heart of their audience the multitude of OT Messianic prophecies, types, shadows, and christophanies. Gospel messengers are to showcase their abundance, highlight their detail and complexity, remark upon their beauty, and glory in the Sovereign God who has so graciously granted them to us all, both in history and in Scripture. And they are to do this with one great end in view: to exalt the Person and Work of Christ in such a way that men may realize that the Bible is indeed the Word of God, and that Jesus Christ is indeed the Savior of the world, the One whom God has sent to deliver his people from the wrath to come, and to bestow the gift of eternal life on all who believe.

The NCH is also important because it *strengthens the faith of God's elect*. Or, to use Paul's exact wording, it *establishes* them in their most holy faith (Rom. 16:25). What happens when a Christian—well schooled in the NCH—starts seeing the things of Christ in the persons, places, objects, events, and institutions of the OT? What happens when he begins to discern them in Adam, the Tree of Life, Noah, the Ark, Melchizedek, Isaac, Jacob's ladder, the Exodus, the Passover lamb, the Manna from heaven, the Rock that Moses struck, the Water that burst forth from it, the Mercy Seat, the Scapegoat, and so on?

Every saint knows the answer. If he is a new Christian, he is simply bowled over—not only to discover the stunning sovereignty and ingenuity of God, but also to behold the beauty and power of the divine inspiration of his Word. And if he is an older Christian, he is *still* bowled over, in large part because he seems never to get to the bottom of these things! Indeed, with ever-expanding clarity he sees that the OT is an infinite, or at least a fathomless, treasury of “mystical” witness to the Person and Work of Christ. The end result of this is that all Christians, whether new or old, grow deeper and deeper in their conviction that the Bible is indeed the Christ-

centered Word of God. And as a result of this, they grow ever more fervent in their glad and grateful worship of the One who gave it to them.

Finally—and most importantly for our study—*the NCH is crucial for a proper understanding of biblical eschatology, and so for resolving the Great End Time Debate*. Though much remains to be said on this score, the truth of this statement should even now be coming into focus. We have already seen that the single greatest bone of contention in the End Time Debate is the proper interpretation of OTKP. Everything else—our understanding of the Millennium and the Consummation—hinges on this. Are we to interpret OTKP’s prophecies literally, as describing God’s future plans for his Old Covenant people, ethnic Israel; or are we to interpret them figuratively (i.e., typologically), as describing his future plans for his New Covenant people, spiritual “Israel” (Rom. 9:6-8, Gal. 6:16)? By instructing us in the NCH—and by applying it directly to many OTKP’s—the NT addresses this crucial question head on. As we shall soon see, the results greatly amaze and deeply satisfy!

Receiving the Keys

In this chapter, I have been at pains to show that Christ, and Christ alone, *has* the keys that will open the door to “true truth” about biblical eschatology. He has them because God was pleased to make his special revelation progressive; because he desired to exalt his only-begotten Son as the supreme Prophet and Teacher of the whole world; because he desired, through Christ, not only to unveil new and eternal truth, but also to place it in our hands as a Master Key for properly understanding his old and preliminary truth.

How, then, at a practical level, shall we honor the fact that Christ *has* the keys; that he alone can answer all our questions about OTKP, the Millennium, and the Consummation; that he alone can resolve the Great End Time Debate?

We have already touched on the twofold answer to these questions. It is simple, self-evident, and a veritable fountain of confidence, hope, and joy. I would sum it up as follows:

First, with respect to all theological questions and controversies, we must anchor to Christ. Because he is God’s supreme Prophet and Teacher,

because He is the giver and central theme of all Scripture, and because He is therefore the rightful interpreter of all Scripture, we must honor him by bringing all our theological questions and disputes to his feet. In actual practice this means that with respect to any given doctrine we must first consult the Gospels, wherein Jesus *began* to teach (Acts 1:1); where he first planted the seeds of God's "true truth." Next, we must turn to the book of Acts, where he *continued* to teach; where we get to listen in on how he spoke through the apostles as they proclaimed God's true truth in the early days of the Church. Finally, we must come to the epistles, where the Teacher *completed* his special revelation of God's true truth; where he brought all aspects of the redemptive mystery of God out into the blazing light of the noon day sun.

Now apply this to eschatology. If we are seeking God's eschatological truth, surely we must *not* turn first to OT typology, or to OT Kingdom prophecies, or to the Revelation. No, we must turn first to the threefold Didactic New Testament; to the gospels, the book of Acts, and the epistles. Moreover, in thus conferring with Christ, we are wise always to remember that in this, or any other theological quest, *the epistles stand as the final court of appeal in all debates*. For here Christ fully and finally unveils all mysteries *in their didactic form*. Here he speaks plainly, using no figure speech (John 16:29, Eph. 1:8-12, 3:1f). Here he places the key to true truth in his follower's hands, so that henceforth they can understand the more symbolic portions of Scripture, the veiled revelations found not only in the OT, but also in some of Jesus' own sayings, and in the Revelation, as well.

In sum, by anchoring to Christ in the Didactic New Testament—and especially in the epistles—we receive from him the Master Key to all Scripture, thus ensuring that we will not wander far from its true teachings.

Secondly, with respect to eschatology, we must bring this precious Key to the four closed doors presently standing before the modern evangelical Church. That is, we must bring it to the four deep, underlying issues of the Great End Time Debate: the Kingdom of God, the proper interpretation of OTKP, the meaning of the Millennium, and the shape of the Consummation. Moreover, we must be sure to bring it first to the issue of all issues—the Kingdom of God—since, as we have seen over and again, our conclusions on this fundamental theme will profoundly affect every other aspect of our eschatology.

Therefore, let us do so now. Let us approach the first and most forbidding of the four closed doors. Let us consult with Christ and the apostles about the Kingdom of God; and in particular, let us ask them to teach us about its true nature and several stages. Why? Because once we have gotten through that door, surely we will get through the other three as well; surely we will learn how to interpret OTKP, discover the meaning of the Millennium, and come to understand the true purpose, elements, and structure of the Consummation.

Such good news: He *has* the keys!

And here is more good news: Now we have them, too!

Therefore, with the Lord at our side, and with his keys in our hand, let us make our way boldly to “true truth” about the nature and stages of the Kingdom of God.

Part 2
Understanding
the Kingdom of God

The Good News of the Kingdom

IN THE GOSPEL according to Mark, the first words out of Jesus' mouth are these: "The time is fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe the good news" (Mark 1:15). No doubt they fell sweetly upon the ears of all Israel. For centuries their prophets had promised a day when God would send his Messiah, through him launching a sequence of events that would culminate in the redemption and glorification of the whole world. For centuries, Israel had waited for it. And now, said Jesus to his astonished countrymen, the day is "at hand"—very near, and drawing nearer by the moment. The people were to prepare themselves spiritually. The hope of the ages was upon them.

At first, they were with him. Though his teachings—usually couched in parables—were enigmatic, his mighty miracles clearly identified him as a prophet (Luke 7:16). Moreover, he did little to discourage the Messianic speculation and fervor that the miracles aroused (Mt. 9:27, 12:23, John 4:29). And when, on Palm Sunday, he made his triumphal entry into Jerusalem, he openly declared to all—to the Jewish people, their leaders, and Rome itself—that he was exactly what his exultant disciples believed him to be: the eschatological Son of David, the blessed Messianic King who comes in the name of the LORD (Luke 19:37-40)!

In the end, however, the nation turned against him (John 1:11). Why? Because he was not the Son of David they expected or wanted. If he had been, he would not have fallen into Pilate's hands. If he had been, he would have roused the people to war. If he had been, he would have invoked the power of God once again, this time to lead Israel to victory over Rome and to eventual supremacy among the nations. No, the Pharisees had gotten it right after all. Jesus of Nazareth was just another in a long line of false prophets and false messiahs. Therefore, as Moses commanded, he must die,

and the people must resume their long wait for the true King and the true Kingdom of God.

Jesus' View of the Kingdom

If only they had understood. Had not Jesus told Nicodemus that without a spiritual rebirth, no one could see the Kingdom of God (John 3:3)? Had he not told the Pharisees that the Kingdom of God does not come with observation (Luke 17:20)? Had he not told Pilate that his Kingdom was not of this world (John 18:36)? And when the multitudes had tried to make him a king by force, had he not withdrawn from them, and later reproved them for a selfish materialism that blinded them to the true nature of his Messianic mission (John 6)?

Yes, Jesus of Nazareth was the Messianic herald of the Kingdom of God. But as all four gospels make painfully clear, his understanding of the Kingdom was different from that of the people to whom he proclaimed it—profoundly different!

What then *was* his understanding? Having pondered this crucial question for many years, I would argue that in proclaiming, expounding, and manifesting the true character of the Kingdom of God, our Lord always had in mind five main ideas. In the pages ahead, I will briefly examine each one, and then offer a working definition of the Kingdom as I believe Jesus saw it. Later in our journey, we shall discuss many of these ideas in greater depth.

A Direct Reign of God the Father

Above all else, Christ understood the Kingdom to be *the direct reign (or rule) of God the Father over his creation*. We see this truth on display in the Lord's Prayer, where he taught his disciples to say, "Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" (Mt. 6:10). Here we have a virtual definition of the Kingdom: It is the sphere where God's will is being done as it is in heaven. But to understand this saying, we must be clear on two points. First, what exactly does Jesus mean by the Father's "will"? And secondly, what is the difference, at present, between the way this will is being done in heaven and on earth?

Concerning the first question, it is clear that here Jesus has in mind what theologians call God's *will of precept* (or *moral will*, or *will of command*). Revealed in Eden, revealed in Christ, and revealed in his Scriptural promises and precepts, it may be defined as that which God expressly desires his creatures to do and to be, so that they, reflecting both the character of their Creator and his benevolent purpose for their lives, may naturally and joyfully bring glory to him.

Up in heaven, God's will of precept is now being done perfectly. Why? Because up there God rules *directly* over the spirits of the saints and angels, with the result that their wills and his will are one. This is what makes heaven to be heaven. Since there God conforms all things to his will of precept, all things reflect his glory and partake of his joy. In heaven, the Kingdom of God has come.

However, it has not yet come to the earth; or rather, it has not yet *fully* come to the earth, as it has to heaven. Importantly, this does not mean that in our fallen world God's "will" is not being done. For according to the Bible, everything that happens on earth happens according to his *will of purpose*, that is, according to his eternal decrees. Mysteriously enough, this even includes situations and events that are contrary to his will of precept. Thus, we find Jesus asking, "Are not two sparrows sold for a copper coin, and not one of them falls to the ground apart from your Father's will" (Mt. 10:29, John 19:11, Eph. 1:11). Now, it is not God's express desire—his will of precept—that sparrows should fall to the ground. But yes, for wise reasons it is indeed—for the moment—his will of purpose.

We find, then, that God's absolute sovereignty over all events does not mean that his Kingdom has (fully) come to the earth. That's because at present he is largely reigning *indirectly*. In other words, his sovereign rule over all things is mediated by, or passes through, a judicial curse that he himself has placed upon the creation—a curse that terribly distorts the ideal nature of all things (Gen. 3:15, Rom. 8:20). When, however, God's will of purpose for all (redeemed) things has been fulfilled at last, his will of purpose and his will of precept will be one. In that day, his Kingdom will have come to earth, even as it has already come to heaven.

Our Lord commands his saints to pray—and labor—for this very thing. They are to ask the Father to advance his redemptive purpose in the earth; to lift his hand of judgment and to remove all distortions; to cause his "will

of precept” to be done here, even as it is being done among the saints and angels in heaven. In short, they are to pray for the Father to extend his *direct* reign over all his redeemed creatures. They are to pray for the (complete) coming of the Kingdom of God.

A Sphere of Wholeness and Blessing

Secondly, Christ understood the Kingdom to be *a sphere of wholeness and blessing*. This only stands to reason, since wherever God reigns directly over his creatures, those creatures must take on the likeness of their Creator. They must reflect, in their own nature, the integrity, beauty, and blessedness of the One who made them.

Over and over again we see this important truth vividly reflected in the gospels. Consider, for example, this thought-provoking text from Matthew: “Jesus was going about all the cities and the villages, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the gospel of the Kingdom, and healing every kind of disease and every kind of sickness” (Mt. 9:35; 10:7-8, 12:28). Here, the juxtaposition of Jesus’ saying and doing is profoundly revealing. On the one hand, he is proclaiming that the Kingdom is near; on the other, he is healing all manner of disease and sickness. Surely, then, both he and Matthew mean for us to understand that wherever the Kingdom is present, there God himself also is present to do two things: to *rescue* from the manifold effects of sin, and to *restore* to the kind of wholeness and blessedness that he had originally planned for his creatures in the beginning! In other words, wherever the Kingdom is present, God is present to *redeem*.

Unless we completely understand these three key words—*redemption*, *rescue*, and *restoration*—we cannot understand the Kingdom of God. That’s because the Kingdom, in Jesus’ eyes, was exactly what the prophets of old had promised: a sphere of wholeness and blessing *that is the direct result of God’s redemptive activity*. It is the direct result of God *rescuing* his people and his world from the manifold spiritual and physical enemies introduced by Adam at the Fall, and also of his *restoring* them to the manifold “friends” he originally planned for them at the creation. Again, unless we fully grasp these closely related ideas, we cannot understand the Kingdom.

Through God's redemptive action in history, his people and his world are rescued and restored; through his redemptive action, they are brought under the blessedness of his direct reign; through his redemptive action, the Kingdom of God comes.

It is well worthwhile to illustrate these great truths from our Lord's earthly ministry, from the works of Christ during the days of his flesh.

As we just saw, through Christ God rescued the blind (Mt. 9:27f, John 9:1-7), the lame (John 5:1f), the leprous (Luke 17:11f), the paralyzed (Mt. 8:5-13), the sick (Mt. 8:14-15, 9:20-22), the mute (Mt. 9:32f), and the deformed (Mt. 12:1-13), and he restored them all—if only temporarily—to perfect health. Here, then, for all with eyes to see, was a sneak preview of the Kingdom of God, when it will have come benevolently, redemptively, and definitively upon sinful and broken human flesh.

On more than one occasion, God also worked through Christ to rescue the dead from death itself, restoring them not only to life, but also to their loved ones, and to the pleasures of family and friends that were the traditional scriptural earmarks of the Kingdom (Jer. 33:10-11, Zech. 8:2-5; Mt. 8:11, 9:18-25, 22:1f, Luke 7:11-15, John 11:1-44; Zech. 8:2-5, Mt. 8:11, 22:1f).

Moreover, through Jesus, God seemed even to put his healing touch on inanimate nature itself, "rescuing" the raging waters of the Sea of Galilee from a deadly windstorm, thereby restoring them to peace (Mt. 8:23-27); or rescuing the multitude of his followers from a dangerous lack of food in the wilderness, and restoring them to abundant provision and the satisfaction of a full stomach (Mt. 14:15f, 15:32f).

Through Christ, God also rescued many poor souls tormented by evil spirits, restoring them to soundness of mind and body (Mt. 8:28f, 12:22, 15:21f, 17:14f, Mark 1:23f, Luke 13:11f). Very notably, when the Pharisees accused him of casting out demons by the power of Satan, Jesus vigorously contested their flawed reasoning. Then, in a direct challenge of his own, he concluded his argument by saying, "But if I drive out demons by the Spirit of God, then surely the Kingdom of God has come upon you" (Mt. 12:28, Luke 11:20). This powerful text teaches us that it belongs to the very essence of the Kingdom that the Spirit of God should arrive upon the scene, rescue people from every power of evil, and restore them to the mental and physical wholeness that will always characterize life under his direct reign.

Finally, and most importantly, through Christ, God rescued sinners from their terrible burden of guilt and shame, forgiving the sins of all who turned to Jesus in repentance and faith, thereby restoring them to the peace, love, joy, gratitude, and hope of eternal life that ever marks the community of the redeemed (Luke 7:36-50, 15:1f, 18:9-14, 19:1f).

We find, then, that Jesus' miraculous ministry was designed to do something more than confirm his status as a prophet, or as the Messiah, or even as the Son of God. Beyond all these, it was designed to give Israel—and all mankind—a glimpse and foretaste of the Kingdom of God itself; of the redemptive rescue and restoration by which God enables every believer in Christ to experience the blessedness of life beneath his direct rule.

Mediated by the Son of God

This brings us to our third point, namely, that *the direct reign of God the Father is always mediated by God the Son*. Later we will explore in greater depth the divine rationale for this crucial characteristic of the Kingdom. Here, however, it suffices to say that this important characteristic is on display all throughout Christ's earthly ministry. How were the people healed? How were they delivered? How were they supplied, or raised, or pardoned, or filled with renewed faith, hope, and love? The answer shines on every page of the gospels: All these things happened when Jesus reached out and touched them; or when they reached out and touched him; or when he taught, or prayed, or issued a mighty word of command. Yes, in the end it was God the Father who was doing the works. But in the end, it was always through Jesus that he did them!

This is a recurring theme in the most profoundly christological gospel, the Gospel of John. Over and again we hear Christ saying, "Truly, truly I say to you, the Son can do nothing by himself, unless it is something he sees the Father doing" (John 5:19, 30, 6:38, 8:28, 12:49, 14:10). But the more we consider the work of God in the gospels, the more we see that the reverse is also true: The Father will do nothing by himself, unless it is something he is pleased to do through his Son! Why? Because he desires that all should honor the Son, even as they honor the Father (John 5:23). For this reason, it is the Father's good pleasure to rescue and restore his

people and their world through Christ; it is his good pleasure to bring in the Kingdom of God through his only-begotten Son.

Jesus himself affirmed this very thing as a matter of principle. Thus, in a midnight conversation with master Nicodemus, he declared, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a man is born again, he cannot see the Kingdom of God” (John 3:3). Now Nicodemus had definitely seen Jesus’ miracles, and he had also seen that God was behind them (John 3:1). Nevertheless, because he was not yet born again, he could neither see—nor enter—the Kingdom of God (John 3:5). Why? *Because he could not see the King, or the nature of the Kingdom over which God had placed him!* Soon, however, he would be able to. For as Jesus himself intimated that very night, in time he (Christ) would die, rise, and ascend to heaven; and in time he would pour out the Holy Spirit on Nicodemus, renew him inwardly, and open his eyes. *Then* he would be able to see the King, high and lifted up: not only upon the Cross (John 3:14-16), but also at the right hand of God (Acts 2:33). *Then* he would be able to see Christ’s deity, and the meaning of his redemptive work on earth. And *then*, coming to the one Mediator between God and man—the high Prophet, Priest, and King of Heaven—he would be able to experience, at long last, the direct rule of God the Father over his whole being. In short, through Christ—and through a Spirit-wrought faith in him—Nicodemus would enter the Kingdom of God.

Later in our study we will explore these crucial themes more deeply. However, as we begin to grapple with the great question of the nature of the Kingdom, let us even now resolve always to remember this: Jesus explicitly taught that the direct reign of God the Father is *always* mediated by God the Son. Said he, “The Kingdom of God belongs to such as these” (Mark 10:14). And who are “these”? They are all who, like little children, simply come to him (Mt. 11:28f, 18:1-5, 19:14).

Effected by the Holy Spirit

The Lord Jesus consistently portrayed the coming of the Kingdom as a trinitarian event. For him, the direct reign *of* the Father comes *through* the Son, and is implemented or effected *by* the Holy Spirit. The OT prophets had predicted this very thing, closely associating the last days with the gift and outpouring of the Spirit upon all of God’s people (Isaiah 44:3, Ezek.

36:27, 37:14, 39:29, Joel 2:28). In his midnight discourse to Master Nicodemus, Jesus did the same, juxtaposing the coming of the Kingdom with the coming of the Spirit, and the coming of both with his own life, death, and resurrection (John 3:1-12f). Also, we have seen that the Lord explicitly declared that where the Spirit is at work to rescue and restore, there the Kingdom has come upon the creature(s) that the Father is pleased to redeem (Mt. 12:28, Luke 11:20). Moreover, throughout his entire Upper Room discourse, we find him preparing his disciples for the coming of the Spirit, through whom, in due season, they will be able to declare the coming of the Kingdom (John 13-16, Acts 1:4-8, 8:12, 19:8, 20:5, 28:31). So then, in Jesus' eyes the coming of the Kingdom is a gracious gift and accomplishment of the Holy Trinity. It is the coming of the Father to reign directly through the Son, by the Holy Spirit, over all his redeemed creatures.

A Realm Beneath a Reign

Finally, Jesus not only viewed the Kingdom as a reign, but also as a realm; as *the totality of redeemed persons, places, and things that blessedly dwell beneath the direct rule of God.*

In the gospels, this idea appears prominently in his explanation of the parable of the wheat and the tares. Speaking of the Judgment that will occur at his Parousia, he says:

The Son of Man will send forth His angels, and they will gather out of His kingdom all stumbling blocks, and those who commit lawlessness, and will cast them into the furnace of fire; in that place there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

—Mt. 13:41-42

Here we catch a glimpse of the realm of the completed Kingdom. At the end of the age, Christ will come again. When he does, he himself will create a perfect world. But in order to do this, he must first remove all stumbling blocks, everything that “scandalizes” or offends against the holiness that will mark the new creation. Therefore, the devil must go, the devil's followers (the tares) must go, and indeed every mark and vestige of the fallenness of the old order of nature must go. When this occurs, the perfect

reign of God will have created a perfected realm of God. And that realm is properly called the Kingdom of God.

As we shall see later, even now, during the present Church era, this realm exists. Even now God is transferring a chosen people from the Domain of Darkness into the Kingdom of his beloved Son (Col. 1:13). Even now, these people are subjects of the High King of Heaven, citizens of the Jerusalem above (Phil. 3:20). Even now they are a Kingdom and priests to his God (Rev. 5:10). So then, the Church on earth is an invisible realm, an outpost of the Kingdom of heaven, dwelling and laboring amidst the kingdom(s) of this present evil world. And again, at his return Christ will perfect this realm—not only his people, but also the physical world that they will ever inhabit—and then deliver it up, as a supreme gift, to his Father (1 Cor. 15:20-28). In that Day, say the Scriptures, all the kingdoms of the earth will have become the Kingdom of our Lord, and of his Christ; all things will dwell blessedly under his direct reign; all things will belong to his holy realm (Rev. 11:15).

The Essence of the Kingdom

Though much more remains to be said, we are now in a good position to give an extended definition of the nature, or essence, of the Kingdom of God as Jesus revealed it to us. I would frame it as follows:

In essence, the Kingdom of God is the direct reign of God the Father, through the Son, by the Spirit, over his redeemed creatures; creatures who have been rescued from every spiritual and physical enemy, and restored to every spiritual and physical friend that God planned for them in the beginning. Also, the Kingdom is the blessed realm that this redemptive reign creates, and over which it forever rules.

The Kingdom and the New Covenant

Did Jesus embrace what we earlier called the Representative OT Idea of the Kingdom? That is, did he join with his Jewish contemporaries in thinking of the Kingdom as an ideal Mosaic theocracy? From all we have learned so far, clearly not. Yes, during the days of his flesh the Law was in effect. And yes, for important reasons he obeyed it implicitly. Nevertheless, even a cursory reading of the gospels shows that during Jesus' earthly

ministry God the Father was not performing his redemptive work through any person or ordinance associated with the existing religious system, but simply through his incarnate Son. In other words, the Kingdom was not coming through the Law, but through the One who was in the process of fulfilling the Law: the Lord Jesus Christ (John 1:17).

We have already touched on this crucial theme several times. Here, however, in our discussion of the good news of the Kingdom, we must explore it more deeply. Three crucial points may be made.

First, in his teaching ministry, Jesus closely associated the Kingdom of God with a New Covenant. We remember that in OT times Jeremiah had promised one (Jer. 31:31). Throughout the NT we learn that Jesus himself brought it into the world, sealing it with his own blood (Luke 22:20, 1 Cor. 11:25, Heb. 8:8).

The story here begins with the Sermon on the Mount (Mt. 5-7). Ascending as he did to a mountaintop, and there giving his disciples a new (evangelical) law, he is clearly emulating Moses; indeed, he is acting as “a greater than Moses,” as God’s eschatological Moses, as the mediator of a new and eternal covenant, of which the OT Law was a type or picture. Very importantly, in his articulation of this new evangelical Law, Christ repeatedly refers to the Kingdom of God (Mt. 5:3, 10, 19-20, 6:10, 13, 33, 7:21). The implication is clear: The Kingdom he is proclaiming and demonstrating in his earthly ministry *will enter the world in conjunction with a new covenant*, a covenant expounded (here and elsewhere in his teaching ministry) by the Messianic Prophet, and in the end to be ratified by the blood of the Messianic Priest and Sacrifice (Luke 22:20).

Secondly, Jesus explicitly taught that the Mosaic Law was about to pass away, *permanently*. Earlier, we discussed the reason why: The Old Covenant must pass away because the New and Eternal Covenant *fulfills* it (Mt. 5:17). The elements and institutions of the Old Covenant were in the nature of a promise: Mystically, they pointed ahead to the Redeemer, and to the elements and institutions of the New Covenant that he would bring. Now, however, the Redeemer has come. Therefore, the temporary and promissory institutions of the Old Covenant are obsolete. They must forever pass away, in order to make room for those that will remain forever.

Let us hear the Lord himself on this:

No one puts a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old garment; for the patch pulls away from the garment, and the tear is made worse. Nor do people put new wine into old wineskins, or else the wineskins break, the wine is spilled, and the wineskins are ruined. But they put new wine into new wineskins, and both are preserved.

—Mt. 9:16-17 (NIV)

The message of these memorable tropes is quite simple: The Old Covenant and the New Covenant are incompatible. The disciples cannot live under both at the same time. Everyday objects and events make this truth clear. If people hope to enjoy the blessings of a new garment or a new wineskin, they must not try to combine the new with the old; that will only make a mess of both. Rather, they must discard the old and completely invest themselves in the new. Similarly, if the disciples hope to enjoy the blessings of the New Covenant, they cannot mingle them with the trappings of the Old. Because the Old is now obsolete, they must let it pass away completely, once and for all.

Jesus spoke of the end of Mosaic Law in other ways, as well. During the last week of his life, when he publicly offered himself to Israel as their Messiah, the spiritually hungry Christ came up to a fig tree, found no fruit on it, and cursed it, saying, “Let no one eat fruit from you again” (Mark 11:14). The tree represented national Israel, destitute of spiritual fruit (Luke 3:8, 13:6f). But more than this, it also represented the Law, which was largely incapable of producing such fruit (Jer. 31:31f). And once Christ fulfills the Law through his life, death, and resurrection, it will become utterly devoid of any vital connection with him, and so *completely* dead and fruitless. Consigned by God to obsolescence, it will fall like so much religious chaff into the “elementary principles of the (religious) world” (2 Kings 18:4, Gal. 4:3, 9).

Similarly, we remember that when Jesus exited Jerusalem on the afternoon before his crucifixion, the disciples asked him to comment on the grandeur of Herod’s temple. Solemnly, he replied, “Do you not see all these things? Truly, I say to you not one stone shall be left here upon another that shall not be thrown down” (Mt. 24:2). This was a shocking word. The temple was the very heart of the nation, the hub of the Jewish ceremonial Law, the locus of all Israel’s sacrifices, and the destination of her pilgrims on all the high holy days. In effect, its destruction would be the destruction of Judaism, the end of the Mosaic Law. But this is precisely what Jesus

declares. God, by his supernatural Power, is about to tear down the veil of the temple at the hand of his Holy Spirit (Mt. 27:51). And God, by his Providence, is about to tear down the temple itself at the hand of Rome. Like the Law itself, neither emblem of the Law will ever rise again.

We conclude, then, that Jesus could not possibly have thought of the Kingdom as an ideal Mosaic theocracy, since he clearly believed that in fulfilling the Mosaic Law he was making it forever obsolete.

This brings us to a final and closely related point: Jesus taught that in fulfilling the several institutions of the Mosaic Law, he was *replacing* them with new ones, once and for all. The anti-type fulfills the type, and so replaces it. The greater fulfills the lesser, and so supplants it. The heavenly body, shaped in eternity past, fulfills the earthly shadow, and so floods the room with a light that expels all shadows (Col. 2:17). There is no going back.

In order to understand this idea of replacement better, let us consider a few examples, drawn more or less exclusively from the teaching of the High King himself.

We have just seen that Jesus presented himself as the supreme Mediator, a greater than Moses, bringing in a new and greater covenant. Christ and his covenant are therefore replacing Moses and his.

Jesus is also the supreme Prophet, a greater than Moses, Elijah, or John the Baptist, and so replaces *all* former prophets as the authoritative spokesman of God and teacher of his people (Mt. 17:1f, Mt. 23:10, Mark 8:28, John 9:17, Acts 3:22).

He is the supreme Priest, a greater than Levi, and so replaces Levi as the one who intercedes for God's people (Luke 23:34, John 17), offers sacrifice for their sin (John 10:11, 17:19), and assures the penitent of God's mercy and forgiveness (Mt. 9:2, Luke 7:48, 24:43, John 20:23).

He is the supreme Sacrifice, a greater than all the animal sacrifices offered under the Law, and so replaces them as the one Lamb of God who gives his life a ransom for many, thereby taking away the sin of the new world for which he died (Mk. 10:45, John 1:29).

He is the true Temple, a greater than Herod's, and so replaces Herod's with his own Body, which is the true and eternal Tabernacle of God (Mt. 12:6, John 2:19, John 10:38).

Moreover, because of this, his people no longer worship the Father on earthly Zion, but on the Zion above, in spirit and in truth, whenever they wish and wherever their physical bodies happen to be. In short, NT worship in spirit and truth replaces OT worship in Jerusalem (John 4:21f, 14:20, 17:23, Gal. 4:26, Heb. 12:22, Rev. 14:1f).

He is the true Sabbath, a greater than the Israelite Sabbath, and Lord over it, with authority from God to give his people true spiritual rest, as well as the Spirit-led worship and work that properly arise from it (Mt. 11:28, 12:48, John 6:29, 15:1f, 19:30).

He is the true Passover Lamb—and his death the true Passover sacrifice—so that henceforth the Passover Feast is replaced with the Lord’s Supper, wherein Christ’s people remember, celebrate, and re-appropriate their spiritual rescue from the world, the flesh, and the devil, and their spiritual restoration to God (Mt. 26:17-30, Mark 14:12-26, Luke 22:7-23, John 5:24).

Very importantly, his is the true nation (Mt. 21:43), the true flock (John 10:16), the true household (Mark 13:34, Luke 14:23, John 8:35), and the true city (Mt. 5:14) of God, so that henceforth Christ’s Church of called out Jews and Gentiles replaces ethnic Israel (who are still beloved for the sake of the fathers, Romans 11:28) as the true people of God (Mt. 16:18).

And over this nation he rules as the supreme King, a greater than David (Mt. 22:41-46) and Solomon (Mt. 12:24), and so replaces Israel’s many earthly kings with a single heavenly king: the High King of Heaven and Earth, the divine Lord of the “Israel of God” (Mt. 28:18f, Luke 19:12, John 18:36, Gal. 6:16).

Much more could be said on this point, and in their letters to the early Christian churches the apostles say it. However, from what we have seen so far, it is quite clear that the Lord Jesus viewed the institutions of the Mosaic Law as temporary physical “types” pointing forward to the permanent spiritual realities of the New Covenant. Accordingly, his own teaching on these matters completely rules out the notion that the Kingdom of God, in any of its stages, can ever again take on the trappings of a Mosaic theocracy.

Conclusion

In the present chapter we have listened hard to the Herald of the Kingdom, endeavoring to discern from the words and works of Christ the true nature of the Kingdom of God. Thus far we have seen that he viewed it as a direct reign of God the Father, through the Son, by the Spirit; a reign that falls upon redeemed creatures who have been rescued from every spiritual enemy, and restored to every spiritual friend; a reign that creates a realm, the Kingdom of God.

Now if we had learned nothing more than this, we would be strongly inclined to conclude that the Kingdom has little or nothing to do with a Mosaic theocracy. But we did learn more. We learned that Jesus viewed the events and institutions of OT times as temporary physical “types” of permanent spiritual realities that he himself was introducing under the New Covenant. We learned that he saw himself and the New Covenant as *fulfilling* OT institutions, *replacing* them, and *rendering them forever obsolete*.

Obviously, this has important implications for eschatology. In particular, it raises grave doubts about theocratic ideas of the Kingdom. In other words, it raises grave doubts about the various schools of premillennialism, all of which posit a future thousand year revival of OT institutions (e.g., a temple, priests, sacrifices, feasts, etc.) *following* the New Covenant era and the second coming of Christ.

Nevertheless, despite all we have learned so far, we cannot make a final decision about a future millennial stage of the Kingdom until we take the next logical step in our investigation; until we ascertain what Christ and his apostles taught, not only about the *nature* of the Kingdom, but also about the *coming* of the Kingdom.

To get to the bottom of this crucial subject, we must ask ourselves a number of important questions: Did Jesus think of the Kingdom as being present in his earthly ministry? Did he think of it as yet to come, say on the Day of Pentecost? If so, did he think of it as coming all at once, or as coming in several stages? If in several stages, how many would there be? And if in several stages, what would the distinctive characteristics of each stage be? In short, we must try to determine Jesus’ exact view as to *when* and *how* the promised redemption of the universe, life, and man is to occur.

I have said that addressing these fascinating questions is the next logical step in our journey. And yet, much as I would love to take that step, I find

that I cannot. Why? Because I have found that in order to do so, we must be fully prepared; and that in order to be fully prepared, we must be thoroughly conversant with all that God did in Salvation History *prior* to the coming of the Kingdom. Only thus shall we be able to think and speak of the coming of the Kingdom in deeply biblical terms; only thus shall we be able to form *a clear picture, and a deep understanding, of the inward heart and outward structure of Salvation History as a whole.*

Permit me then to test your patience by asking you to take with me a rather circuitous route to our destination; to take a somewhat longer, but infinitely more fruitful, journey to a complete understanding of the Kingdom of God. Assuming your good will, I therefore propose that we go back to the beginning; indeed, that we even go back to a “time” before the beginning. Then, with Christ and the apostles close at our side, we will make our way forward through the various OT stages of Salvation History, learning everything we can about the amazing events that paved the way for—and richly illumine the meaning of—the coming of the Kingdom of God.

And what shall be your reward for all this historical wending and winding? Eyes to see. Eyes to see all eschatological things clearly: the heart and structure of Salvation History, the nature and stages of the Kingdom of God, the proper interpretation of OTKP, the meaning of the Millennium, the true character of the Consummation, and the victor in the Great End Time Debate!

Shall we head out?

The Beginning and the Kingdom

OUR JOURNEY TO Kingdom clarity begins at the beginning, in Genesis. There, in chapters 1-11, we learn of the Creation, the Probation and Fall of Adam, the Flood, and the Division and Dispersion of the family of man at Babel. With Christ close at our side, let us briefly examine each one, learning from him how to discern important truths about the Kingdom of God even in the earliest stages of the great drama of Salvation History.

The Kingdom in Creation

In the beginning the LORD God created the heavens, the earth, the seas, and all that is in them. On the sixth day he created a man, Adam, out of the dust of the ground. Then he planted a Garden toward the East, in Eden, from which there flowed a great river that watered the Garden, divided into four streams, and went forth into the earth. He placed Adam in Eden, commanding him to cultivate the Garden and freely enjoy its fruits. However, he strictly forbade him to eat of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, lest he should die. Then the LORD brought the animals and the birds to Adam, to see what he would call them. However, among such creatures Adam found no companion and helper corresponding to him. So the LORD God cast him into a deep sleep, extracted a rib from his side, fashioned it into a woman, and brought her to him to be his wife. And God blessed them, commanding them to be fruitful and multiply, to fill the earth and subdue it, to rule over the fish, the birds, and every living thing that moves upon the earth. Finally, as the sixth day drew to a close, God looked upon all he had made, declared it to be “very good,” and rested from his creative work (Gen. 1-2).

In the beautiful new world that God created, we catch a glimpse of the Kingdom of God. Indeed, we behold it, as it were, in seed form. A seed,

though not yet a mature plant or tree, nevertheless contains within itself the properties of what it is destined to become. So it was here: the Edenic world of our first parents displayed the properties of the eternal Kingdom of God, but it was not yet the Kingdom itself.

We have seen that the essence of the Kingdom is God's direct rule over his creation, a rule that by its very nature involves wholeness and blessing. Certainly this was the experience of our first parents in Eden. God ruled directly over their minds, their bodies, and their whole world. As a result, he said all things were "very good." There was not—nor, in the creative process, had there ever been—the least speck of chaos, evil, brokenness, pain, or sorrow. Indeed, so pure and so undefiled was this world, that God himself walked within it, eager to meet regularly with Adam and Eve in the Garden, and to fellowship with them there.

Notably, this is precisely how the OT Prophets pictured the future Kingdom of God. When the LORD's eschatological rule finally breaks into the world, he will comfort all the waste places of Zion, making her wilderness like Eden, and her desert like the Garden of the LORD (Is. 51:3). From beneath the eastern threshold of the House of the Lord, a River will flow forth, bringing life to all it touches; on either side of the river there will be trees whose fruit is good for food, and whose leaves are for the healing of the nations (Ezek. 47:1-15, Rev. 22:22). Nothing shall hurt or destroy in all God's holy mountain, for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD, even as the waters cover the sea (Isaiah 11:9; Rev. 21:10). As for John the Revelator, he writes that when the Kingdom fully comes the saints will freely eat from the Tree of Life, and the tabernacle of God shall be among men. They shall be his people, and he himself—in the cool of an everlasting Day—shall dwell among them (Rev. 2:7, 21:3, 22:2, 14). So then, in Eden we do indeed catch a glimpse of the Kingdom in seed form.

And yet, with the benefit of NT hindsight we understand that this primordial world was not (yet) the Kingdom itself. We know, for example, that man and nature were not yet *sealed* in goodness; that despite their innocence and wholeness, they both were all too capable of falling into sin; that while Adam and Eve did indeed enjoy fellowship with God in the Garden, they had not yet come to know him in the way or the measure that he ultimately intended; that while he occasionally showed himself to them

outwardly (presumably by way of theophany), they did not yet dwell in him, or he in them, permanently, by the Holy Spirit (Gen. 3:8, John 14:23, 15:5). And perhaps most importantly, we know that they had not yet entered into the mystery of the Holy Trinity; that they had not yet encountered the Son of God, or come under his headship, or known him as King—this One for whom all things had been made, and whom the Father desired to make the “firstborn” over all his creation (Col. 1:15-16, Heb. 1:1f). So again, in Eden we glimpse the Kingdom *only* in seed form. On condition of Adam’s obedience, it was indeed *poised* to become the Kingdom, but it had not yet been transformed into all it was meant to be.

The Mystery of Marriage and the Kingdom

Fascinatingly, a close look at Genesis 2 supplies yet another glimpse of the future Kingdom. We find it in God’s method for creating the man and the woman; a method that, according to the apostle Paul, contained a great mystery. The first Adam represented the Last—Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 15:45). The woman represented the Church, Christ’s Bride (Eph. 5, Rev. 12:1f). Just as Eve came from Adam’s side, so too the Church, figuratively speaking, comes from Christ’s side—from his very body—which God cast into the sleep of death at Calvary for the redemption of a sinful but beloved people (John 19:34). And just as the LORD God brought Eve to the freshly awakened Adam, so too God the Father, even now, is bringing a specially prepared people to his risen and ascended Son, that he (the Son) might not be alone (Gen. 2:18); that he might have Her as his eternal companion, helper, lover, and (spiritual) mother of his children (Gen. 2:18, John 6:44, 65).

And there is more. God’s method for creating the woman reflected his will for the character of her relationship with her husband: He created her *after* him, *from* him, and *for* him, with the result that she is always to live *under* him in a hierarchy of benevolent rulership (1 Cor. 11:1f, Eph. 5:22f, 1 Tim. 2:13). Therefore, as for Adam and Eve, so for Christ and the Church: He is her Head, and she is his Body—bone of his bones, and flesh of his flesh (Gen. 2:23). Or, to change the metaphor only slightly, *he is her King, and she his Kingdom*. Thus, way back in Eden, even before the Fall, we glimpse the mystery of the Kingdom in the mystery of marriage. Just as

God is pleased lovingly to rule over woman through Christ and her husband, so too, in the Kingdom, he will be pleased to rule over his chosen people through his royal Son (Mt. 22:2f).

Summing up, we find that the biblical narrative of “the good beginning” (i.e., creation in six days) gives us two precious glimpses of the Kingdom. We see the first in the direct and blessed rule of God over man and nature; we see the second in the creation of man and woman, whereby God placed man over woman, thus supplying a perennial picture of Christ as the Head and King of his Bride, the Church.

Importantly, here we also see that the *idea* of the Kingdom predates the Mosaic Law by thousands of years; that the biblical idea of the Kingdom is separable from, prior to, and more fundamental than, the idea of a Mosaic theocracy. While such a theocracy may indeed serve to picture the Kingdom, the Kingdom is something other than a theocracy. It is simply God’s direct rule, through His Son, by His Spirit, over his (redeemed) creation, with all the wholeness and blessing that such a rule implies.

The Kingdom and the Probation in Eden

We have seen that in the beginning God placed Adam on probation, giving him free access to all the trees in Eden, including the Tree of Life, but commanding him never to eat of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. As in the creation, so in the probation: Here too we can discern something of the Kingdom, if only we allow Christ to give us eyes to see it. Therefore, with the Lord close by our side, let us briefly consider four crucial facts about the state of Adam in the Garden of Eden.

First, he was *innocent*. That is, he had no knowledge of good and evil. This does not mean he was *experientially* ignorant of goodness, since everything he experienced in his short existence before the Fall was good: God, the world, and himself (Gen. 1:31). It does mean, however, that he was *conceptually* ignorant of goodness: He had no *idea* of goodness, because he had no idea—or experience—of its opposite, evil. In evil, he was a babe (1 Cor. 14:20, Isaiah 7:15-16). And in this case, ignorance truly was bliss.

Secondly, he was *on probation*. That is, God was pleased to test Adam’s love for him by requiring obedience to a simple command concerning the

Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Though Adam, in his innocence, knew nothing of death, he did know God as his creator and rightful ruler. He also knew the difference between “may” and “may not,” and may well have trembled to hear the latter. Therefore, he knew that he must freely choose to believe and obey God by staying away from the forbidden tree.

Thirdly, Adam was *mutable*. This means that if he ate from either of the two trees in the Garden, he would immediately change, whether for the better or the worse. If he ate of the Tree of Life, he would live forever in intimate spiritual union with the triune God (Gen. 3:22, John 17:3, 23). If he ate of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, he would die—and, as time would prove, in more ways than one.

Finally—and quite importantly—Adam, throughout his probation, stood before God as the *head* or *representative* of both man and nature. In other words, whatever his decision vis-à-vis the two trees, it would affect not only himself, but also the whole family of man and the whole natural world that God had created to be their home. If he passed the test, he would lift up all things—the very universe itself—into eternal life. If he failed, he would drag them all down with him into death and destruction. Thus, in the days of his probation Adam was like a door through which great good—or great evil—would soon enter the universe, life, and man (Rom. 5:12f, 8:18-25).

In a moment, we will consider at length some of the terrible consequences of Adam’s failing this simple test. Here, however, I want to linger over an important but oft-neglected aspect of his probation, namely that in Eden *God offered the fullness of his Kingdom to Adam and his family at the Tree of life.*

We do not, of course, find this explicitly stated in Genesis, or elsewhere in the Old Testament. We do, however, in the New. There we learn that the Tree of Life was a “type” or symbol of the eternal life that God offers to sinful man in the Gospel (John 17:3, Rev. 2:7, 22:2, 14). And how, in NT times (i.e., in “these last days”) does one receive eternal life? The answer is clear: by receiving Christ (Mt. 10:40, John 1:12, 13:20).

This fundamental NT truth helps us richly to understand the true situation in Eden. The Tree of Life represented eternal life—the *kind* of life ever enjoyed by the triune God, and that life lived *forever*. The fruit of the Tree represented Christ, or more accurately, God the Son—the “receivable” part of God.¹ Adam had only to eat of that fruit, and he and his family

would have entered immediately, once and for all, into the great trinitarian mystery; they would have come to know the Father, through the Son, by the Holy Spirit (John 14:16-23, 17:3).

And that would only have been the beginning. For now, in full possession of the Trinity, Adam and his family also would have fulfilled God's original purpose for his creation *by coming under the direct headship of his Son*. How do we know this? Again, we know it from NT revelation. In particular, we know it from Paul's letter to the Ephesians, where he writes that God's purpose in redemption was, among other things, "... the heading up of all things in Christ, things in the heavens, and things upon the earth" (Eph. 1:9-10). Similarly, we know it from his letter to the Colossians, wherein he taught us that all things were created *for* the Son, and that the Son now is, and was ever meant to be, "the head, the first-born over all creation"—its rightful heir and ruler (Col. 1:14-18, Heb. 1:2). In short, through redemption in Christ, God is now fulfilling his original purpose in creation and probation.

Not only does the NT illuminate what *did happen* in Eden, it also strongly suggests what *would have happened*, if only had Adam passed his probation. The thought is a sobering one: Upon condition of obedience, Adam (and his family), in due season, would have come to know the Son of God, and also to experience eternal life under his benevolent rule (John 5:26, 1 John 5:11). Or, to say the same thing using the preferred NT metaphor, he and his family *would have entered the Kingdom of the High King of Heaven*. This would have meant unspeakable blessings for the universe, life, and man. For now—with all creativity, fruitfulness, and joy—the Sovereign Son, pursuant to his Father's plans for the cosmos, would have shepherded both man and nature down the long corridor of universal history (John 10:1-30), brought them faithfully to their appointed ends (Phil. 1:6), exalted them to a state of glory (Rom. 8:18-25, 1 Cor. 15:50-58), and then—in a cosmic *grand finale*—handed them all back over to the Father, that God might be all in all (1 Cor. 15:20-28)!

What a world, what a journey, and *what a Kingdom* awaited Adam and Eve at the Tree of Life! And again, this Kingdom had nothing whatsoever to do with a Mosaic theocracy. It did, however, have everything to do with the High King of Heaven, and with him ruling directly—in love and blessing—over their world, their bodies, and their God-intoxicated souls.

Summing up—and using the language of Reformed theology—we may say that throughout his probation in Eden Adam stood in a *Covenant of Works* with God. In order to receive eternal life for himself, his family, and his world, he had only to fulfill two simple works: steer clear of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, and draw near to the Tree of Life. As we know all too well, it was a covenant that he broke.

The Kingdom and the Fall

Biblical cosmogony, as found in Genesis 1-11, may be divided into two parts: the Good Beginning and the Bad Beginning. As we have just seen, the Good Beginning was creation in six days, resulting in a “very good” world (Gen. 1-2). The Bad Beginning spans a considerably longer time (some 1750 years), and includes three events—three divine judgments—of great cosmological significance: the Fall, the Flood, and the Division and Dispersion of Mankind at Babel (Gen. 3-11). As we are about to see, there can be no deep understanding of Salvation History or the Kingdom of God without a correspondingly deep (i.e., NT) understanding of the Bad Beginning. Therefore, let us join our Teacher once again in venturing onto OT ground, and let us begin by looking at the first and most solemn element of the dark triumvirate that makes up the Bad Beginning: the Fall.

The Fall before the Fall

The biblical story of the Fall actually begins in heaven, where, presumably on the first or second day, God created the angels. Among them was a cherub of extraordinary wisdom, beauty, and rank: Lucifer (Hebrew: ***shining one, son of the dawn***, Isaiah 14:12). Like Adam, Lucifer and the other angels were on probation. The Bible says nothing about the nature of their test, only that Lucifer was the first to fail it, since shortly after his creation there came a dreadful moment when “unrighteousness was found in him” (Ezek. 28:15). This cryptic phrase marks the entrance of evil into the universe. Henceforth, the entire course of Lucifer’s existence would be determined by a sinful twofold animus: pride and hatred. In his pride, he would seek to supplant God by usurping both his worship and his sovereignty (Isaiah 14:12-15, Mt. 4:8-11). In his hatred, he would seek to wound God, primarily by using his formidable spiritual resources to injure

his most beloved creations (John 10:10). Thus did Lucifer become Satan (Heb., *adversary*): the adversary of God, and the adversary of all God loves, especially the race of men.

Moved by his new and evil nature, Satan immediately undertook to build a counterfeit kingdom of his own. His first prey were the other angels, a large minority of which quickly succumbed to his temptations (Rev. 12:4). Through their sin, they too corrupted their original nature, transforming themselves into demons (Mark 5:1f). Some of them were cast into *Hades*, a place of darkness and torment immediately created by God for the punishment of his angelic foes (Mt. 25:41, Luke 8:31, 2 Peter 2:4, Jude 6). Others, for wise reasons, were permitted to remain “in the heavenly places” where Satan, their overlord, arranged them into a hierarchy of evil rulers (Eph. 2:2, 6:10-12). Thus was born the kingdom of Satan, an alien domain of spiritual darkness eager to extend its sway over the rest of God’s good creation, but unable to do so at any place but one (Mt. 12:25, Col. 1:13, 1 John 5:19).

Temptation and Fall

Satan’s next target was Adam, whom he would tempt through his wife, whom he would tempt through a serpent (Gen. 3:1f). Unfortunately, we cannot linger here to explore the nuanced record of Adam’s temptation and fall. Suffice it to say that in that hour Satan did what came most naturally to him: he lied. Or, to be more precise, he spoke numerous half-truths with an intent to deceive (John 8:44, 2 Cor. 11:14, Rev. 20:3, 8). In Eve’s case, the deception worked: Filled with doubts about God’s goodness—and enflamed with illicit desires to free herself from his rule, become his equal, and make her way forward in life independently of him—she ate. Adam, on the other hand, was not deceived (2 Cor. 11:3, 1 Tim. 2:14). Why, then, did he eat? The Bible does not say. Yet this much is sure: Because he was not deceived, he had nothing like Eve’s excuse for his disobedience, and was therefore guilty of the more egregious rebellion against his benevolent creator and king. All too well, then, do the words of the apostle apply to the guilty pair, even as they serve to explain to modern skeptics the seriousness (and deadly consequences) of one man eating a piece of forbidden fruit:

Although they knew God, they did not honor him as God, nor were they thankful, but became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened ... (They) exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen.

—Rom. 1:21, 25

Consequences of the Fall: Friends That Went Out

Genesis 3:7-24 recounts some of the consequences of Adam's fall. When supplemented with NT teaching, we realize that they were indeed cosmic in scale, extending up into heaven, out across the whole face of nature, down through the generations, and deep into the recesses of the human heart. To form a complete picture of them, we must remember that the Bible likens Adam to a door (Rom 5:12). When he sinned, many dear friends went out the door, even as many deadly enemies entered in.

As for the departed friends, the dearest was no doubt Adam's *easy relationship with God*. Though this was not yet full spiritual sonship, it was certainly friendship. When Adam sinned, that friendship was broken, God withdrew his soul-sustaining presence, and—in immediate fulfillment of his earlier warning—Adam died, spiritually speaking (Gen. 2:17).

With this there necessarily followed a loss of his *original integrity*, both spiritual and physical. Henceforth, Adam's faculties, his body, and his manifold relationships were weakened, twisted, broken, and polluted beyond human repair (Gen. 3:7-8, 14-19). Death, like sin, was at work in his members.

With these two losses there came also a third: the loss of his *original freedom*. In biblical perspective, freedom is never autonomy, a metaphysical impossibility for any creature of the sovereign, all-sustaining God. Rather, it is the simple ability to be what one was created to be. When Adam sinned—and when sin wrought its devastating effects upon his nature—he lost that ability. Henceforth, he was no longer free to be his normal godly self. Indeed, he was no longer even *inclined* to be his normal godly self (Rom. 3:9-18, 8:7). Instead of being a slave to God and righteousness, he had now become a slave to sin and Satan (John 5:42, 8:44, Rom. 6:1ff).

Finally, and very importantly, Adam lost *access to the Tree of Life* (Gen. 3:22-24). As we have just seen, this tree represented eternal life in union with the triune God. There, God offered to make Adam and his family children of God through the Son of God, and also citizens of his Kingdom

through glad submission to the High King of Heaven. In his innocence, Adam might so have “worked” as to receive these blessings. He had only to pass his test—to eschew the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, and to eat first from the Tree of Life—in order to live forever. However, having disobeyed, he instead became guilty and polluted with sin, so that God could no longer grant him access to the Tree of Life (Gen. 3:22-24). To do so would have been for God to break his word (i.e., the threat of death), compromise his justice, and stain his honor by joining himself to a rebel. No, some provision had first to be made for Adam’s sin, both to forgive it and to eradicate its manifold consequences. Only then could Adam eat from the Tree of Life. Only then could he regain all he had lost.

In sum, when Adam transgressed, he forfeited his easy relationship with God, his original integrity, his freedom, and his access to the Tree of Life. And—because he had acted as head over all—he also lost them for his wife, his children, and the universe itself.

Consequences of the Fall: Enemies That Came In

While many precious friends were going out the door, many deadly enemies were coming in. Moreover, they did not enter simply to harass the sons of Adam, but rather to take them captive and, if possible, drag them down to eternal destruction. Under four broad categories, I will here touch on the most important.

First, there were *interior spiritual enemies*, enemies that took hold of the spirit (or soul) of man. Chief among them were *sin* and *guilt*. As for sin, the Bible depicts it as an indwelling force; a complex of dark, powerful, and unnatural passions (or lusts) that effectively bend every human faculty towards self: self-satisfaction, self-exaltation, and self-rule over and against the rule of God. The NT finds all people (save Christ) in this state, and traces it to Adam, who “sold” his posterity “under” sin, so that henceforth all would be born in sin’s chains (Mark 7:21-22, John 2:25, Rom. 7:14; Psalm 51:5). As for (true) guilt, it is a subjective awareness of an objective fact: the fact that we have fallen short of God’s glory (i.e., of his moral perfection) in who we are and what we have done (Rom. 3:23). Typically, this shortfall involves fear (of divine punishment) and shame (Gen. 3:7-8, 1 Tim. 4:2, Eph. 4:19, 1 John 4:18). With great compassion the Bible attests

that true guilt is a formidable enemy indeed, well able to darken the entire sky of a man's existence, crush his spirit, and even sicken his flesh (Psalm 5, Mark 2:1-12, Luke 7:36-50).

Secondly, there were *physical enemies*. These entered when God cursed the whole realm of nature. In a measure, Genesis itself tells us how. God cursed the ground (along with the entire plant kingdom) so that henceforth it would yield its treasures reluctantly, barring the way with thorns and thistles (Gen. 3:17). He cursed the serpent, the cattle, and the beasts of the field (i.e., the entire animal kingdom), thereby introducing a dreadful new economy of violence and predation (Gen. 3:14-15, Lev. 26:22, Isaiah 11:6-9). He cursed Eve's body, so that she and her daughters would give birth in pain (Gen. 3:16). He cursed man's body, so that it would return to the ground from which it had come (3:19). In sum, God subjected *the entire physical creation* to a principle of *decay, futility, and suffering*; to a principle that manifests itself in the whole dark spectrum of *natural evils*. These include drought, famine, plague, pestilence, earthquake, storm, flood, mutations, extinctions, accident, injury, sickness, pain, fatigue, old age, and physical death, (Rom. 8:18-25). The Bible well understands that suffering people often reckon such judgments to be a sign of God's indifference, cruelty, or non-existence (Prov. 19:3). It responds, however, by framing them instead as severe mercies, wisely designed by a loving Creator and Judge to show fallen man the ugliness of his sin, warn him of its dangers, and (along with the far more numerous tokens of God's goodness) lead him to repentance, faith, and salvation from a much worse judgment waiting up ahead (Deut. 28, Psalm 107, Luke 13:1-5, Acts 14:17, Romans 2:4).

Next, there were *Satanic enemies*. These entered when Adam repudiated the rule of God and obeyed the devil instead. In other words, through his sin, Adam effectively rejected the spiritual headship of God's Son, fell under the spiritual headship of the devil, and thereby incorporated himself and his family into Satan's growing kingdom of darkness (Luke 4:5-7, John 8:44).

Very importantly, this aspect of the Fall marked the beginning of what the Bible calls "the world" or "the world-system." It may be defined as *human society, insofar as it is alienated from God, and organized, energized, and directed by its unseen "prince" or "ruler"—the devil and his demonic hosts* (John 12:31, 14:30, 16:11, Eph. 6:10f).

While the NT does indeed style Satan as the ruler of this world, it also assures us that his rule is not absolute. From the very beginning God has graciously poured out manifold blessings on all his creatures, his enemies included (Mt. 5:45, Acts 14:17, 17:28). Moreover, all along the way he has been taking a chosen people *out of* the world (Gen. 3:15, 21, John 15:19, 17:6, 15) and gathering them back *to* himself. Nevertheless, Satan remains a profoundly dangerous enemy to saint and sinner alike, prowling about like a ravenous lion, seeking whom he may devour (1 Peter 5:8, Rev. 12:12-17).

Though the modern mind often scoffs at the idea of invisible spiritual enemies, the NT writers regard them with utmost seriousness. At any given moment the majority of mankind are their (unwitting) slaves (Rev. 12:9). The ungodly are ensnared by the devil, having been taken captive by him to do his will (2 Tim. 2:24-26). The fallen world is Satan's "domain," a prison-house of darkness (Mt. 12:22-30, Col. 1:13). It lies in the power of the evil one, so much so that (under God's ultimate sovereignty) he can summon entire empires onto the stage of history (1 John 5:19, Rev. 13:1). Though Satan is the prince of this world, he nevertheless hates it, for he hates the God who created and loves it. Therefore, whether by deception, temptation, oppression, or persecution, his great goal is first to feed his own pride by usurping the obedience of God's human creatures (Mt. 4:8-9), and then to wound God by destroying as many of those creatures as he can (John 10:10, 1 Peter 5:8). Jesus reckons this enemy to be a "strong man" from whom none can deliver themselves. Their only hope is that "a stronger than he" will appear to invade Satan's dark prison house, spoil his goods, and makes those goods his own (Mt. 12:22-30).

Finally, Adam's sin brought upon the world a dark trinity of *divine enemies: condemnation, wrath, and the peril of eternal punishment*. Though hidden in God, there are none more dangerous. Because Adam represented all, his sin condemned all. All are reckoned transgressors of God's law, worthy of death in every form: spiritual, physical, and eternal (Rom. 5:12, 16, 18). Similarly, Adam's disobedience exposed his sinful children to God's *wrath*. This is not to be understood as an impersonal spiritual principle, like the *karma* of the Hindus and Buddhists. Rather, it is a true passion in a true Person. Sinners awaken God's wrath each and every time they "suppress the truth in unrighteousness" (Ex. 32:11, Deut. 29:28, 31:17, Psalm 5:5-6, 7:11-13, Romans 1:18f).

This brings us to the most fearsome enemy of all: *the peril of eternal punishment*. It is twofold, involving eternal separation from every life-giving blessing of God, and with that eternal subjection to his wrath under painful retributions throughout the Age to Come (Mt. 25:46, 2 Thess. 1:9, Rev. 14:11). No biblical figure speaks of this enemy more often or more forcefully than Jesus of Nazareth: “Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell” (Mt. 10:28). Just as condemnation and wrath loom from above, so too the peril of hell lurks beneath. For the moment—amongst the living, at least—these enemies stand strangely at bay. Yet they will not do so forever. If, then, God has made a way of escape, men must do all they can to find it, now. They must seek the God-appointed door through which they may safely “flee the wrath to come” (Mt. 3:7, 7:13, 1 Thess. 1:10).

The Domain of Darkness

Clearly, the cosmological effects of the Fall were stupendous. Summing them up, we may say that Adam’s sin gave us *Adam’s World* or the *Domain of Darkness*. It is all-inclusive, taking in “the heavens and the earth”—the universe, life, and man. Though the world God created in the beginning was very good, the transgression of its human head and representative profoundly marred it. On the one hand, Adam alienated the world from its original innocence, and also from God’s benevolent purpose for it, which was that it should become the Kingdom of his beloved Son. On the other hand, he subjected it to the tyranny of a deadly host of dark enemies: interior spiritual enemies, physical enemies, Satanic enemies, and divine enemies. Moreover, because of his fallen state, Adam could do nothing whatsoever to rescue his world from his enemies; nor could he do anything to restore himself, his family, or his once beautiful home to the health and joy of union with God. In and of themselves, Adam and his sinful family were henceforth without strength (Rom. 5:6), without hope (1 Thess. 4:13), and without God in the world (Eph. 2:12). A Domain of Darkness indeed!

The Fall, Salvation History, and the Kingdom of God

I have written at considerable length on this solemn subject, firmly believing that any failure to recognize the origin, elements, and unspeakable

dangers of the Domain of Darkness will immediately preclude a proper understanding of the Kingdom of God.

Why is this so? I offer three answers.

First, the Domain of Darkness is nothing less than *the spiritual dipole* of the Kingdom of God. It is the negative, of which God's Kingdom is the positive. It is the dark background against which the brightness of the Kingdom shines, and against which it was meant to shine at its brightest. It is the counterfeit of the real, to which God responds with the real itself, for the praise of the glory of his grace.

In light of this basic fact, I feel compelled to say it again: We must never think of God's Kingdom in terms of theocratic institutions, Mosaic or otherwise. Rather, we must think of it as *the spiritual mirror image of the Domain of Darkness*. It is the realm over which God, forgiveness, love, and spiritual and physical wholeness reign, rather than Satan, condemnation, wrath, and spiritual and physical brokenness. Therefore, to behold the dreadful, manifold elements of the Domain of Darkness is to prepare oneself properly to behold the blessed, manifold elements of Kingdom of God.

Secondly, the massive extension of the Domain of Darkness occasioned by Adam's fall *sets the stage for Salvation History*, and therefore displays its true meaning. Because of the Fall, man and nature must be rescued from their manifold enemies. Because of the Fall, they must be restored to the manifold friends originally offered at the Tree of Life. Therefore, a redemptive plan, devised before the foundation of the world, must now be set in motion; phase by phase, a History of Salvation must now unfold. And when at last the plan has been fully administered—when the saints safely enter the World to Come and look back upon the long and winding course of this History—what will they see? They will see (and forever sing) that through the redemptive work of Christ the Holy Trinity invaded, looted, and finally destroyed the Domain of Darkness, replacing it with the eternal Kingdom of God (Col. 1:13, Rev. 14:2-4).

This brings us to our third and final point, namely that a good understanding of the *origin* of the Domain of Darkness *prepares us to understand the heart of God's redemptive plan*, the astonishing means by which he was pleased to create and bring in his Kingdom. What exactly is that means? Christ and the NT authors reply richly: The Kingdom will come

just as it was lost, *through the redemptive action of a Representative Man*. That is, it will come through another Adam, a last Adam, and an altogether holy Adam. It will come through an Adam who, like the first, will stand before God as the Head and Representative of his people and their world; an Adam who will undo for his people all that the first Adam had done, and will do for them all that the first failed to do; an Adam who is therefore their Redeemer, since he will *rescue* them from all their enemies, *restore* them to all their friends, and thus bring them into the eternal Kingdom of God.

According to the NT, this is the single greatest mystery of God, the single greatest mystery of Salvation History, and the single greatest mystery by which we will rightly understand the Kingdom. In the pages ahead we will examine it with great care.²

The Kingdom and The Flood

The second element of the Bad Beginning is the Flood (Gen. 6-9). In its own way, this epic judgment of God further darkens the Domain of Darkness. Yet here too, we see glimpses of hope—glimpses of a coming Kingdom, and of the mighty King who will bring it in.

The story is a familiar one. For some 1600 years, the sinful sons of Adam had corrupted themselves, until the day came when every intention of the thoughts of men's hearts was only evil continually (Gen. 6:5). Therefore, God determined to destroy all flesh—everything that drew the breath of life (Gen. 6:13). He chose a global Flood as the instrument of his judgment, a flood to be effected by two closely related events: the opening of the windows of heaven, and the breaking up of the fountains of the great deep (Gen. 7:11). Between the both of them, God would altogether cleanse the face of the earth (Gen. 6:7).

Yet righteous Noah found favor in the eyes of the Lord, and so received a plan from heaven, a plan for an Ark of salvation that would protect him, his family, and a remnant of living creatures from the devastation of the Flood, and would carry them all in safety to a new world.

Precisely how did this universal judgment further darken the Domain of Darkness? In two ways. First, it left a vast imprint upon man's homeland, the physical earth. According to many Christian geologists, this imprint

would include such phenomena as salinized oceans, infertile deserts, uninhabitable mountain ranges, volcanoes, lava flows, frozen tundra, enormous arctic ice caps, a geological column full of animal remains, and—likely as not—the four seasons themselves, with their unwelcome and often deadly extremes of heat and cold.³ Such terrible scars on the face of nature only added to the burdensomeness of the curse, darkening the Domain of Darkness still more.

Secondly, these other natural evils stood as further reminders of man's sin, and of the judgment that God must always visit upon sin. In other words, they were meant not only to weigh upon man's body, but also upon his conscience; to move him to turn back to his Creator, Judge, and Redeemer; to remind him that there is One, and One alone, who can deliver the children of Adam (and the descendants of Noah) from the flood of divine wrath that is yet to come upon the world (2 Peter 3:5-7).

But how exactly does the Flood speak of the Kingdom of God? Very fulsomely! Alas, the discussion of that must wait for chapter 8. Suffice it to say here that in Noah, the Ark, and the new world he bequeathed to his children, we catch precious glimpses indeed of the Person and Work of heaven's King, of him who sits as King over the greatest Flood of all, and of him who covenants with his people to bestow upon them new heavens and a new earth, a Kingdom thoroughly purged of the guilt, burden, presence, and scars of sin (Psalm 29:10).

The Kingdom and the Division of Mankind at Babel

The third and final element of the Bad Beginning was the confusion of language at Babel, resulting in the ethnic division and dispersion of the family of man (Gen. 9-10). This story is included in biblical cosmogony because it answers a question sure to be raised by any monotheistic worldview: If there really is one true God, and if he really did create one human race, why don't the peoples of the earth live together as a single family? Why do they speak different languages, live in different lands, develop different cultures, and even have different religions? Why must there be so much linguistic, ethnic, cultural, and religious diversity, when surely mankind could accomplish so much more without these barriers to family unity?

The Bible responds to these thoughtful questions in no uncertain terms: Linguistic and ethnic division was *not* God’s original purpose, but presently stands as a divinely imposed restraint upon sin, and also as yet another reminder that God will indeed judge sin, especially the sin of pride and rebellion. Accordingly, it too is an element of the Domain of Darkness, waiting to be overruled and abolished in the days of the Kingdom of God.

To understand all this better, let us briefly recall the story itself. Shortly after Noah exited the Ark, God again commanded Man to be fruitful, multiply, and fill the earth (Gen. 1:22, 28, 9:1). He intended that Shem, Ham, Japheth, and their respective families should spread abroad throughout all the Earth. It is even possible that God, through Eber’s son Peleg, gave them specific instructions concerning their proper destinations (Gen. 10:25). In any case, the growing, sojourning seed of Noah—now led by the powerful and charismatic Nimrod—were not inclined to obey. Indeed, in words savoring of open rebellion, they declared:

“Come, let us build for ourselves a city, and a tower whose top will reach into heaven, and let us make for ourselves a name, *lest we be scattered abroad over the face of the whole earth.*”

—Gen 11:4

The great city was to become a rallying point, a center of gravity to hold the people together. So too was the tower, visible even from the outermost bounds of the growing metropolis. Furthermore, in naming the city, they would in effect be *renaming* themselves—and thus, in time, forgetting not only their own family names, but the name of the LORD as well.

So God stepped in. Surveying the situation, seeing their unity, *and seeing its potential for still greater evil and rebellion*, the triune LORD “went down” and confused their language, dividing their one tongue into many, according to their respective families (Gen. 10:20, 31). The result: The people immediately stopped building, glumly memorialized the bewildering event by calling the city Babel (the Hebrew *balal* means *to confuse*), and then—no doubt quite reluctantly—began to spread abroad. By confusing their language, God had confounded their purpose, and also successfully established his own (Deut. 32:8, Prov. 19:21, Acts 17:26).

In addition to explaining the origin of ethnic divisions in the family of man, this story is clearly designed to warn and instruct the descendents of

Noah of all times and places. It warns against rebellion. It warns against pride. It warns against the deceptive powers of charismatic leaders and mass psychology. In particular, it warns against utopianism, against mankind's perennial quest for global unity—whether political, economic, or religious. The message of Babel is: Global unity is something you had in Eden, and something you forfeited at the Fall. It is a good thing, but a lost thing. Because of sin in the human heart, it is too hot to handle. So don't even try!

And yet, we know that this is not the whole story; that the ethnic and linguistic division of mankind is not the last word. For a day is coming, said the OT Prophets, when God will step in to overthrow this painful element of the Domain of Darkness. It will occur when he sends his Messiah, the appointed King of the nations. In that day, he will speak peace to the divided family of man, and his dominion will be from sea to sea (Zech. 9:10). All nations will call him blessed, and they will bless themselves by him (Psalm 72:17). Accordingly, all the ends of the earth will remember and turn to the LORD his God, and all the families of the nations will worship before him (Psalm 22:27). Then the LORD will be King over all the earth, and his name the only name (Zech. 14:9). In that day the curse that fell at Babel will be lifted, for God will give the peoples a pure language, so that all of them can call upon the name of the LORD, and serve him shoulder to shoulder (Zeph. 3:9). Even the cities of Egypt will speak the language of Canaan (Isaiah 19:18)!

It is, of course, only in the NT that we come to understand the meaning of these mysterious prophecies. There we learn that Jesus Christ is the Messiah; that he is the King of God's new spiritual nation, a nation comprised of redeemed Jews and Gentiles (Gal. 3:28, 6:16, 1 Peter 2:9); that he is the Head of the Body, the Church, the one New Man, whose members are drawn from every tribe, language, people, and nation (Col. 1:8, Eph. 2:15, Rev. 5:9, 7:4). Here then, in Christ, is where God overthrows the curse of Babel. Here is where he reunites confused and scattered humanity into one Body, having one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God and Father over all, through all, and in all (Eph. 4:1-6). Here alone is where the quest for unity is both lawful and safe, for here alone the unifying Spirit of God is at work to replace pride

and selfish ambition with love, humility, and a servant's heart (John 17, Eph. 4:1-7, Phil. 2:1f).

Students of biblical eschatology understand that the spirit of Babel is inveterate; that it belongs essentially to the fallen world-system; that in the continuous succession of world empires it has repeatedly raised its ugly head; and that it will continue to do so until the very end, when indeed the ruler of this world (Satan) will finally succeed in incorporating all of (unredeemed) humanity into the one global kingdom that he has ever sought: into the City of Man, "Babylon the Great", "the great city that reigns over the kings of the earth" (Rev. 13:8, 16:19, 17:8).

But again, such a kingdom is a mere counterfeit; a dark, reverse image of the real; a chimera that can never truly satisfy. No, to enjoy the reality, one must dwell in the City of the Great King, where even now the spiritually hungry of the earth can glimpse the soon-coming Day when God will *perfectly* join the family of man together in one mind, one judgment, one tongue, and one eternal Kingdom (Psalm 48:2, Acts 2:1-5, 1 Cor. 1:10).

Conclusion

On this leg of our journey to Kingdom clarity we have seen that the mystery of the Kingdom of God, like light filtered through a prism, shines in many different hues through the cosmogony of Genesis 1-11. To begin with, the Kingdom is *glimpsed* in Eden, and that in two important ways: in the beauty and wholeness of God's reign over the pre-fall world, and also in the mystery of marriage, which pictures the ultimate rule of the Royal Christ over his Bride, the Church. Then the Kingdom is *offered in fullness* at the Tree of Life, where mankind might have met—and joyfully begun to serve—the Son of God, the High King of Heaven. Then, at the Fall it is both *forfeited* and *supplanted* by the Domain of Darkness, an evil counterfeit kingdom that holds its willing citizens captive to a host of deadly enemies, whether spiritual, Satanic, physical, or divine; a counterfeit kingdom whose painful grip upon man and nature is *further strengthened* by divine judgments introduced at the Flood and at the Division and Dispersion of mankind at Babel.

What a mixture of light and darkness, good and evil, grace and judgment, hope and despair! However, those who know the Scriptures

know full well that here the biblical accent decidedly falls upon grace and hope, if for no other reason than that God—who might justly have destroyed the universe, life, and man at the Fall—did nothing of the kind. To the contrary, being full of unconditional love for his own, he immediately went in search of his errant children, meeting them not only with words of judgment, but also with words (and deeds) of mercy and grace (Gen. 3:15, 21).

In other words, the subsequent story of Scripture makes it clear that God willed for His Story to go on; that a new kind of history—Salvation History—was about to begin; that like a mighty river it would flow on between the banks of time until, at long last, it reached its appointed destination in the Kingdom of God; and that at all times it would have at its heart an exquisitely crafted Plan of Salvation, centered around the Person and Work of the Savior himself.

If, then, we are to understand Salvation History at its depths—as well as the eternal Kingdom towards which that history is ever flowing—it is certain we must first understand the Savior who lives at its very heart.

On the next leg of the journey—again with Christ close by our side—we will seek to do this very thing.

The Covenant and the Kingdom

IN ORDER TO go forward, we must now go back. Way back! Our ultimate goal is to behold the true shape of Salvation History, and the true structure of the Kingdom towards which it is ever tending. We have just learned, however, that Salvation History is the embodiment and outworking of a divine plan, a plan formulated before the foundation of the world. Prior to the first advent of Christ, no one could examine that plan; no one could look behind the closed door that the Bible calls “the Beginning,” in order to see what God had purposed in eternity past, and what he had planned for eternity future. Therefore, no one could understand the true meaning of time and history. Shut up to the dreary cycle of life and (inevitable) death under the sun, even the wisest of men were forced to conclude, “Vanity of vanities! All is vanity and grasping for the wind!” (Eccles. 2:11, 4:11).

Now, however, Christ has come. Now he has placed the Master Key to the door of the Beginning in our hands. Now he has enabled us to glimpse the divine Architect at his drafting table before the foundation of the world. Now he has enabled us to understand the Great Story that unfurls in time and space like a scroll, with one end held firmly in the Father’s hand. Let us therefore avail ourselves of this precious gift. Let us return with our Lord to “times eternal” (Titus 1:2). Why? So that afterwards we may wisely go forward through all of Salvation History to a more perfect understanding of the Kingdom of God.

The Mystery of God

Like the sons of Issachar, Christ’s holy apostles and prophets were men who understood the times in which they lived—and who stood ravished at the privilege of being called to serve God in such a special season (1 Chron. 12:32, Eph. 3:8). Slowly but surely, as “the Spirit of wisdom and revelation

in the knowledge of God” performed his work, it dawned upon them that they were among the chosen few to live in “the fullness of time”, to stand in awe as the great door of Salvation History swung mightily upon its hinges, forever leaving behind the Era of Promise and Preparation, and forever entering the Era of Fulfillment.

As we saw earlier, they expressed this dawning awareness in many NT texts, not a few of which contain that most NT of words, *mystery*. We have already cited one of the richest of them, Romans 16:25-26. Now let us look at two more, both of which breathe the same spirit.

The first is found in Paul’s letter to the Corinthians, where, in defending his apostleship, he numbers himself among the “us” privileged by God to see, expound, and proclaim his supreme mystery of God, the Gospel:

Yet we do speak wisdom among those who are mature; a wisdom, however, not of this age, nor of the rulers of this age, who are passing away. But we speak God’s wisdom in a mystery, the hidden wisdom which God predestined before the ages to our glory; the wisdom which none of the rulers of this age understood; for had they understood it, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. But just as it is written, “Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor have entered into the heart of man the things which God has prepared for those who love Him.” But to us God has revealed them through His Spirit; for the Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God.

—1 Cor. 2:6-10

The second text is found in Paul’s letter to the Ephesians. Here his burden is much the same, but with this added element, that he identifies himself as an apostle *especially* sent to the Gentiles:

To me, the very least of all saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unfathomable riches of Christ, and to bring to light what is the administration of the mystery which for ages has been hidden in God, who created all things; in order that the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known through the Church to the rulers and the authorities in the heavenly places. This was in accordance with the eternal purpose that He carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord, in whom we have boldness and confident access through faith in him.

—Eph. 3:8-12

My purpose here is not to undertake an exposition of these texts, but simply to give you a feel for the mind-set of Christ’s founding apostles, and also for the nature of the “mystery” which God had revealed to them, placed in their custody, and commanded them to steward and proclaim with infinite care. What can we say about this “mystery of God” that so

intoxicated Paul and his companions? Based on these two texts—and a number of others closely related to them—we can say that this mystery is:

1. *A plan* (or purpose) for the redemption of sinners (Rom. 8:28, Eph. 1:7, 3:11, 2 Tim. 1:9) ...
2. *Devised* in eternity past (Eph. 1:11, 2 Tim. 1:9, Titus 1:2) ...
3. *Hidden* for long ages from the sight of men and angels (Rom. 16:25-26, Col. 1:25-27) ...
4. *Manifested* at the (first) coming of Christ and in the Good News about his redemptive work (Rom. 3:21, Titus 1:3, 3:4, 1 Peter 1:20, Heb. 9:26, 1 John 1:2, 3:5, Rev. 13:8, 17:8) ...
5. *Administered* by God and Christ to men and women through the preaching of the Gospel (Eph. 1:10, 3:9, 1 Tim. 1:4) ...
6. *Fulfilling* manifold OT promises (Mark 1:15, Rom. 1:2, Titus 1:2, Heb. 11:39) ...
7. And *enabling* the saints to see those promises as veiled revelations of Christ and the Gospel, unveiled once and for all by his appearing in history and the subsequent work of the Spirit of revelation (2 Cor. 3:7-4:6, Col. 2:16-17, Heb. 8:5, 10:1).

Now if we knew nothing more about the mystery of God than what we learn in these seven points, we could still see clearly why the apostles regarded it as such a stupendous affair—and why they were willing to sell everything they had in order to possess a pearl of so great a price (Mt. 13:46)!

Nevertheless, helpful as the points are for alerting us to the *importance* of the mystery, they do not really enable us to understand its *substance*, its inner essence. They do not enable us deeply to understand the true *character* of the Good News, the redemptive plan unveiled by Christ: its elements, how it works to save sinners, how it relates to Salvation History, and how it introduces the (further mystery of the) Kingdom of God. Therefore, in order fully to understand all these things, we must dig deeper still in the mines of NT truth, discovering all we can about the fabulously ingenious and nuanced plan that is the substance of “the mystery of God.” In other words, we must let Christ and his apostles teach us about the Eternal Covenant, and also about how that Covenant is administered

progressively in Salvation History so as to bring in the eternal Kingdom of God.

The Eternal Covenant

We have learned that the mystery of God is a Christ-centered redemptive plan, formulated before the foundation of the world and administered in history. Seeking to explain to wavering Jewish believers that the entire OT was nothing other than a vast foreshadowing of this plan, the writer to the Hebrews called it the Eternal Covenant (Heb. 13:20). In doing so, he put his finger on the one biblical theme—the one conceptual key—that, according to many theologians, most fruitfully empowers us to understand and articulate the inner workings of God’s plan of salvation, the heart of Salvation History, and the nature and coming of the Kingdom of God.

But what exactly do we mean by “the Eternal Covenant”? Based upon the overall teaching of the NT—and emphasizing the *purpose* of this covenant—I would define it as follows: *The Eternal Covenant is the redemptive plan, devised in eternity past, by which God the Father determined to rescue a chosen people and their world from the Domain of Darkness, and also to restore them to the direct spiritual reign (or Kingdom) that he had offered mankind at the Tree of Life; a plan that would fulfill—with the largest possible display of his own glory—the totality of his original purposes for his Son and his creation.*

Before exploring some of the nooks and crannies of this lengthy definition, a few preliminary remarks are definitely in order.

First, observe from the text in Hebrews—and also from the definition I have built around it—that the Eternal Covenant is *one*. There is—and always has been—but a single plan of salvation, no matter when, where, or to whom it has been revealed and administered in history. It is *the* Eternal Covenant: formulated in eternity past—and ever prevailing in eternity future—for the redemption of the saints of God. Just as there is no salvation apart from the Person and Work of Christ, so too there is no salvation apart from the Eternal Covenant. There is only one Covenant, just as there is only one Christ who lies at its very heart.

Secondly, in order best to understand the Eternal Covenant, we must follow the NT in contemplating it from two different perspectives. Indeed, theologians intent on exploring its fabulous riches insist that, for all practical purposes, we must think of this Covenant as having two sides; *as involving two separate but closely related sub-covenants*.

The first is customarily called the *Covenant of Redemption*. In essence, this is a covenant between the Father and the Son, according to which the Son agrees to fulfill the Father's plan for the redemption of a chosen people and their world, even as the Father agrees to enable him to do so, and also to reward him richly for his costly labors.

The second sub-covenant is called the *Covenant of Grace*. In essence, it is a covenant between the triune God and sinful men. Here, God graciously agrees to give sinners the gift of eternal life under his direct reign (i.e., in his Kingdom) upon condition of simple repentance and faith in Christ.

Clearly, the two sub-covenants are closely related: God works out the Covenant of Redemption by administering the Covenant of Grace in history. Yet just as clearly, the covenants differ. For example, God's Son entered the Covenant of Redemption in eternity past, whereas penitent sinners enter the Covenant of Grace all along the highway of Salvation History. Also, the Covenant of Redemption highlights the sovereignty of the triune God in bestowing redemption upon a chosen people, whereas the Covenant of Grace highlights the responsibility of all people to receive the proffered gift during the days of their probation on the earth. So again, there is only one arrangement for the salvation of sinners, yet two different perspectives through which we may contemplate it. To be aware of both perspectives, and to keep them in balance, leads us to the fullest possible appreciation of God's redemptive plan.

Having said this much by way of introduction, let us now look a bit more closely at these two covenants.

The Covenant of Redemption

It is fascinating to discover in Scripture that the journey of the Son of God into our world was according to a pre-arranged agreement between him and his Father. For example, speaking through the Psalmist, the Son declares his willingness to take on the body that his Father has prepared for

him, and thus to become the one and only effective sacrifice for sin (Psalm 40:6, Heb. 10:5-10). In Psalm 2, we hear the voice of the Father responding to such eager and costly obedience with this lavish challenge: “Ask of me, and I will give the nations as Your inheritance, and the ends of the earth as Your possession” (Psalm 2:8). Similarly, through Isaiah the Father promises the Suffering Servant that he will “divide him a portion with the great” (Isaiah 53:10-12). All of this accords perfectly with the words of Jesus, who said that he had not come down out of heaven to do his own will, but the will of him who sent him, to the end that the Father might glorify the Son, and the Son might glorify the Father (John 6:37-39; cf. Psalm 2:7-9, 89:1-37, Luke 22:24, John 17:4-12, Phil. 2:9-11)! So then, the ministry of Jesus Christ was (and is) in accordance with a covenant between the Father and the Son, into which both Persons entered before the creation of the world.

While the Covenant of Redemption is doubtless an agreement between all three persons of the Trinity, the above texts suggest that in strictness the *parties* of this covenant are the Father and the Son, with the Father promising to anoint his incarnate Son with the Spirit, so that all the terms of the covenant may be fulfilled (Isaiah 42:1, Luke 1:35).

As for the *purpose* of the Covenant of Redemption, we have seen that in the beginning God desired to honor his Son by making him Head over the entire creation, an event that would have occurred as soon as Adam had passed his probation in the Garden and eaten of the Tree of Life (John 5:23, Col. 1:16). However, foreseeing Adam’s sin—and realizing that it threatened to frustrate his original purpose—God, in response, devised a further and distinctly redemptive plan. This too was in accordance with his eternal purpose, with the result that the Covenant of Redemption would not only fulfill God’s original desire for his Son and his creation, but also fulfill it in a manner that secured an even *larger display* of the manifold glory of the triune God. The display would include, on the one hand, his dreadful holiness, justice, wrath, and power; but also, on the other, the glories of his sovereign grace, mercy, wisdom, and steadfast love.

But how exactly does God achieve this great end? What, in essence, is his strategy for redeeming sinners enslaved to the Domain of Darkness? If I had to answer these questions in a single NT word, that word would be “recapitulation.” It comes to us through the apostle Paul, who identified God’s supreme goal in Salvation History as “... the re-heading up (Greek:

anakephalaio) of all things in Christ, things in the heavens and things upon the earth” (Eph. 1:10). He means that the thrust of Salvation History is nothing less than to transfer a chosen people and their world out from under Adam’s headship (and from all the spiritual and physical enemies to which he subjected them), and thereafter to place them under Christ’s headship (and under all the spiritual and physical friends that his benevolent rule represents).

However—and this is of great importance—God cannot simply do this at will. No, first he must provide, as it were, a legal basis for the great transfer. In particular, he must find a way lawfully to bestow upon his people the prize of eternal life that their father Adam forfeited in Eden. Similarly, he must find a way lawfully not only to forgive their sin, but also the sin of Adam that was imputed to them. Here, then, is where the *recapitulation* enters the picture. So that a lawful redemption may be accomplished, the Father determined to send his Son into the world as a man, in order that he (the Son) might become *another* Adam, a *better* Adam, and the *Last* Adam; the Last Adam who, in behalf of his people and their world, not only does what the first Adam failed to do, but also manages to undo all that the first Adam (and his chosen seed) had done (1 Cor. 15:45, Gal. 4:4f). Thus, God’s redemptive strategy was, as it were, to start from scratch, to create a new and better Head for a new and better humanity and their world. In short, he decided to “recapitulate” the universe itself!

With this great goal in view, the Father—who stands as the supreme authority within the Godhead—set forth the *proviso* (or demand) of the Covenant of Redemption. In particular, he required of his Son a perfect twofold obedience, in order that he might accomplish a perfect, full-orbed redemption (John 10:18).

The first part would be an *active* obedience. Here the Son *must do what the first Adam (and his elect offspring) failed to do*. That is, acting as a substitute on behalf of God’s chosen people, the incarnate Son must successfully recapitulate the probation that the first Adam had failed on behalf of all. Moreover, he must also fulfill the righteous requirement of God’s Law written on sinful Adam’s heart, and also on the hearts of all his children (Rom. 2:12-16, 8:4). In sum, through a perfect conformity to all the will of the Father, the God-Man must fulfill the terms of the Covenant

of Works instituted in Eden, thereby earning for his people and their world the prize of eternal life (Rom. 5:12ff).

Let us pause for a moment to observe how richly this idea illumines various facets of Jesus' earthly ministry. It explains, for example, why Jesus said to John the Baptizer that he (Jesus) "must fulfill all righteousness" (Mt. 3:15). It explains why the Spirit thrust him into the wilderness to be tested by the devil, much as Adam was tested by the devil in the Garden, and Israel in the wilderness of Sinai (Mt. 4:1f). It explains why he was "born of a woman, born under the Law," and why he scrupulously obeyed that Law in all particulars (Gal. 4:4; Mt. 5:19, 8:4, 26:18). In these and like passages, we plainly see that Jesus was a man on probation, a man who was actually retracing the steps of the first Adam. For man and nature to receive the eternal life forfeited in Eden, Christ must not fail the test.

The second obedience would be *passive*. Here the Son *must undo what the First Adam (and his elect but sinful seed) had done*. Strictly speaking, this alone is the redemptive part of his mission, since here alone he pays his people's debt to the justice of God, thereby purchasing them back for him. In other words, it will not be enough for the incarnate Son to earn the gift of eternal life for God's elect through his active obedience. Why? Because the sin of the first Adam has been imputed (i.e., credited) to them (Rom. 5:12ff), and because their own sins, flowing from their own sinful nature, condemn them further still. Therefore, until those sins are forgiven, until the certificate of debt that stands against them is marked "paid" (Col. 2:14), and until God's people are legally reconciled to the holy and sovereign Judge (Rom. 5:10), they remain ineligible to receive the great gift of life. So then, the Last Adam must passively represent his people in judgment. He must take their place and endure the due penalty for their sins, which is death (2 Cor. 5:21, 1 Peter 3:18). Only thus can the Father be both just and the "justifier" of those who will one day put their trust in Jesus (Rom. 3:21-26). Only thus can he bestow upon them the gift of eternal life under his glorious reign.

Both in word and deed, Jesus showed himself to be keenly—and sometimes painfully—aware of this aspect of his mission. He has come to give his life a ransom (i.e., an atoning sacrifice) for many (Mark 10:45). He will lay down his life for his friends, and give up his life for the sheep (John 15:13, 10:11). He must be lifted up from the earth, so as to draw all of

God's people to himself (John 12:32). Anticipating the cruel death by which he will accomplish these things, he said, "I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how distressed I am until it is accomplished" (Luke 12:50)! And yet, as his final Passover drew near, he fixed his eyes like flint upon the city of his imminent demise, knowing that a prophet cannot perish outside of Jerusalem, and that the appointed hour for him to do that very thing had come at last (Isaiah 50:7, Mark 10:32f, Luke 13:33).

Here, then, is something of the costly obedience that the Father set before the Son in the Covenant of Redemption. And what reward did he offer him in exchange for it; what *promise* did he give to his Son? The Bible is not shy in replying. Among other things, the Father promised to supply him with every gift and grace necessary in order to become a triumphant Redeemer; in order to serve victoriously as his Spirit-anointed (Messianic) Prophet, Priest, and King (Psalm 2:2, Isaiah 61:1, Luke 4:18). He also promised that the Son himself, throughout the course of his heavenly reign, would have the honor of *applying* the redemption that he purchased on earth, personally gathering in, sanctifying, and preserving God's elect by the secret work of the Holy Spirit (Gen. 2:22, Psalm 2:8, John 6, 10, 17, Acts 2:33, Titus 2:14). Moreover, he granted that the Son also should consummate his plan for the universe—both in final judgment and final redemption—at his Coming in glory at the end of the age (Mt. 24-25, John 5:19f).

In sum, the Father's promise to his Son in the Covenant of Redemption was that he (Christ) should bestow upon his (the Father's) beloved children the life-giving gift of the knowledge of the glory of God, and that in doing so he (Christ) should infinitely please and glorify the One who had planned this great work and sent him to it (John 5:24-30, 17:3, Phil. 2:5-11, Heb. 1:1f, 12:1-3, Rev. 5). To read the NT is to learn that the Son very much liked the terms of this agreement, and that he did indeed take up his Father's command with holy obedience, zeal, and joy (John 4:34, 10:18, 12:49, 17:1-4, Heb. 10:5-7, 12:2).

The Covenant of Grace

We have seen that in formulating the Covenant of Redemption the Father also had in view a *Covenant of Grace between God and men*. The

agreement made with the Son in eternity past must be played out upon the stage of world history. As we will soon see, in OT times God administered this covenant in a veiled manner on several different occasions. In NT times, he unveils and administers it on many different occasions. The idea of unveiling is crucial. Once Christ had entered the world, lived, died, risen again, returned to heaven, and sent forth the Holy Spirit, the mystery of God became an *open* secret: the Eternal Covenant was on full display before men and angels, so that all the elements of the Covenant of Grace—the terms of eternal salvation—could go forth as Good News to all the nations of the earth.

The Covenant of Grace is, then, none other than the Gospel, which Christ commands his Church to proclaim and teach to all creation (Mt. 28:18ff). She is to explain that the *parties* of the covenant are God and believing sinners. The gracious *provision* of the covenant is the Lord Jesus Christ: the Son of God and the Last Adam, the One whose active and passive obedience secure a full redemption, thereby making the covenant relationship itself possible. The *promise* of the covenant is eternal life with (and in) God; a life that begins with the gift of the Holy Spirit to each believer; a life that is consummated at Christ's Parousia, when he himself introduces the Kingdom in its fullness to all believers.¹ The *proviso*, or condition of entry into the covenant, is not any combination of human works, but simple faith in the all-sufficient work of Christ (John 6:29, Acts 16:31, Eph. 2:8-9). Finally, the *penalty* for all who disobediently spurn the provision of the covenant is eternal punishment.

Again, through the preaching of the Gospel, God invites—indeed, commands—all who hear it to consider the claims of Christ; to weigh the manifold evidence graciously given to confirm those claims; to turn and come to the divine Prophet, Priest and King; and thus to enter into the Covenant of Grace with him (Mt. 11:28, John 5:40, 7:37, Acts 10:35, 17:30, 1 John 3:23, Rev. 22:17). Here, in the Church's evangelistic thrust into the Domain of Darkness, is where the accent falls upon man's obligation to respond: to receive the love of the truth (2 Thess. 2:10), to search diligently for it (Acts 17:11), to pray over it (Mt. 7:7), to inquire about it (Acts 8:31), and, in the end, to choose whom we will serve (Josh. 24:15, Luke 19:27, Heb. 13). And in thus inviting all, God will surely fulfill his commitment to his Son in the Covenant of Redemption, infallibly bringing his people to

Christ, through whom they will indeed enter into an eternal covenant with him (Isaiah 8:18, John 6:37, 10:16, 17:6, Rom. 8:30, Heb. 2:13).

The Eternal Covenant and Salvation History

Now we are ready to begin our journey through Salvation History. Why? Because now we understand from the NT what Salvation History is: It is a progressive administration of the Eternal Covenant. *Before* the Fall, there was no need of Salvation History. God was administering a Covenant of Works, a covenant of simple obedience to the word of God by which Adam might have placed himself once and for all under the headship of Christ, and by which he might have earned the reward of eternal life, ushering himself and his family into the Kingdom of God. However, *at* the Fall, Adam instituted—and subjected the whole world to—the Domain of Darkness. Therefore, *after* the Fall a different kind of history—a Salvation History—begins, with God over and over again graciously coming to men and offering them the promise of the Covenant of Grace: eternal life in his Kingdom, receivable not by works, but upon condition of simple faith in the divine Person and finished Work of the Redeemer: the Provision of the covenant, the Lord Jesus Christ.

In previous chapters we have gotten a feel for how the administration of the Covenant of Grace progresses through time. Here it will be useful to summarize what we have learned so far, add a few important details, and then offer a preliminary picture of Salvation History as a whole.

At its most fundamental level, Salvation History is divided into two parts: the Era of Promise and Preparation, and the Era of Fulfillment. Let us briefly survey each.

The Era of Promise and Preparation

The Era of Promise and Preparation spans the time between the Fall and the first coming of Christ. The scriptural record of God's acts during this period begins in Genesis 3 and concludes with Malachi 4. As we shall see later, it includes at least four OT administrations of the Covenant of Grace. They all share three important characteristics.

First, they are *preparatory*. That is, they pave the way for the first coming of Christ and the universal proclamation of the Gospel, largely by

creating and sustaining a chosen people through whom the Messiah would be given to the world, and also by creating a body of OT Christophanies and Messianic types, shadows, and prophecies, all of which would be vital for the proclamation and advance of the Gospel in NT times.

Secondly, they are *promissory*. That is, in one way or another they look forward to the coming of the Promise of the Covenant: Eternal Life, receivable through faith in the Person and Work of Christ. Sometimes the promises are explicit: God tells his people outright—by way of predictive prophecy—that in days ahead he will be sending a Redeemer to bring in the manifold blessings of life in his Kingdom. Other times, the promises are implicit, being thickly veiled in the fabric of OT history itself, as God speaks mystically and symbolically of the things of Christ through “typical” persons, places, objects, events, and institutions. Again, he does this so that when Christ comes at last, there will be a body of supernatural signs to elicit and confirm faith in him. Still other times—as in the case of many explicit OT prophecies of the Kingdom—he uses a blend of both. That is, he uses predictive prophecy couched in typological language in order to arouse faith and hope among his Old Covenant people, yet does so in such a way as to retain for the coming Messianic Prophet the privilege of graciously unveiling the mysteries of the Kingdom to his own (Mark 4:11). More on this later.

Finally, the OT administrations of the Covenant are *temporary*. This conclusion flows logically from the fact that they are merely preparatory; that they are awaiting the actual unveiling of the Covenant in history, an unveiling that fulfills the OT administrations of the Covenant, and therefore (as to their external form) renders them forever obsolete (Heb. 7:18, 8:13). As we saw earlier, there is only one insect. Nevertheless, when the butterfly emerges from the cocoon, the caterpillar is forever gone.

In classical Protestant theology, almost all agree that there were *four* distinct OT administrations of the Covenant of Grace. The first came to Adam and Eve (and their seed), the second to Noah (and his seed), the third to Abraham (and his seed), and the fourth, through Moses, to the nation of Israel. Though the essential message always remains the same, in each successive administration God is pleased to reveal more and more about the Person and Work of the coming Redeemer; more and more about the several elements of the one Covenant of Grace. Nevertheless, it remains

true that in the aggregate all the OT revelations are heavily veiled, with the result that Jew and Gentile alike must await the appearing of Christ, the completion of his redemptive work, and the gift of the Holy Spirit, before the Lord removes the veil, thereby enabling his people to see the Eternal Covenant in the New Covenant, and the New Covenant in the Old (Luke 24:45, 2 Cor. 3:1ff). In other words, without Christ's twin gifts of the Spirit and the New Covenant Hermeneutic, no one can even begin to understand the OT Scriptures for what they really are: a record of the administration of the Eternal Covenant in an Era of Promise and Preparation.

The Era of Fulfillment

The Era of Fulfillment begins with the incarnation of the Son of God and extends into eternity future. Its central events, stages, and characteristics are revealed by Christ himself through his holy apostles and prophets, and are recorded in the New Testament from Matthew to the Revelation. The essential characteristic of this Era is that the preparatory, promissory, and temporary administrations of the Eternal Covenant now give way to a once-for-all administration of the Covenant *as it is in itself*. God's redemptive plan, formulated in eternity past, now appears in broad daylight. The eternal Son of God actually enters the stream of history. The Last Adam actually takes on human flesh, slipping, as it were, by night into the Great City—the very Domain of Darkness, mystically called Sodom and Egypt—that he might rescue and restore his Father's chosen ones (Rev. 11:8). In the vast apparatus of his Messianic work—in his humiliation and exaltation—the Last Adam does this very thing. Though the Consummation is still to come, the elements of the Covenant are now unveiled, the terms of the Covenant are now proclaimed, and—among all who believe—the Promise of the Covenant is now experienced and enjoyed: Eternal Life in the eternal Kingdom of God.

As for the stages of the Era of Fulfillment, I will show in chapter 9, from the teachings of Christ and the apostles, that they are basically two. Let me sketch this idea now, and defend it at length later on.

The first stage may be called the Era of Proclamation and Probation. Fundamentally, it begins on the Day of Pentecost and continues until Christ's Parousia at the end of the age. Throughout this era, the elements

and terms of the Covenant of Grace are proclaimed as Good News to all nations, with the result that all who hear are placed on probation concerning their love of the truth about the one true God, and their obedience to him. During this time, and in this process, the heavenly Prophet, Priest, and King draws near to his own, granting them repentance and faith, so that they may trust in him, enter the Covenant, receive the gift of eternal life, and know the joys of his distinctly spiritual reign.

The second stage of the Era of Fulfillment may be called the Era of Reward and Retribution. It begins at Christ's return in glory and continues forever. Here the penalty of (rejecting) the Covenant falls upon the wicked: everlasting retribution in hell. Here the promise of the Covenant descends in fullness upon all who are righteous by faith in Christ: eternal life under new heavens and in a glorious new earth. Later we will look at some of the biblical texts underlying this picture. Here, however, we do well to note how the structure of the Era of Fulfillment reveals both the urgency of preaching the Gospel, and the urgency of men responding to it in obedience. As Christ himself said, presently we live in "the year of the Lord's favor"—the year in which honest seekers may find the grace of God unto salvation through faith in his Son (Luke 4:19). Soon, however, that year will come to an end. Therefore, let all men everywhere "work the work" of him who now speaks to us in the Gospel, for the night is coming when—in this particular and eternally decisive way—no one can ever work again (John 6:29, 9:4).²

The Eternal Covenant and the Kingdom of God

Here in Part 2 of our journey our great objective is to understand the Kingdom of God. Having now mined the depths of the NT, having now discovered the precious diamond of the Eternal Covenant, and having now seen that this diamond is the heart and soul of Salvation History, we are in a much better position to do so. Therefore, in bringing the present chapter to a close, we must ask an important question: In our study of the Eternal Covenant, what exactly have we learned about the Kingdom of God?

In response, I would offer three main answers.

First, we have learned that *the Kingdom, at its heart, is the Promise of the twofold Eternal Covenant*. We can best appreciate this foundational

truth by looking at the Kingdom through both sides of the Covenant. Let us do so now, beginning with a look at the Kingdom vis-à-vis the Covenant of Redemption.

In the Covenant of Redemption, God the Father promised his Son that as a consequence of his obedience unto humiliation, he (the Father) would highly exalt him, making him *Head* or *High King* over all, thereby fulfilling his original purposes for his creation. In other words, according to the Father's promise, it would fall to the High King to bring in the Kingdom; to extend the direct spiritual rule of God over the (new) cosmos. According to the NT, this will occur in two basic stages. Throughout a long Era of Proclamation, the exalted Christ, through the preaching of the Gospel, will extend his reign over the spirits of God's people. Then, at the Consummation, when he raises the dead and creates new heavens and a new earth, he will further extend it over their bodies and their world, thus bringing in the Kingdom in its full and final form; thus making the entire creation his glorious realm. Again, in chapter 9 we will discuss the (stages of the) coming of the Kingdom in greater detail. But for the moment, this much is clear: *In accordance with the Father's promise in the Covenant of Redemption, the privilege of creating, extending, and consummating the Kingdom of God falls to the High King of the Kingdom, to the exalted Son of God.*

Now let us consider the Kingdom vis-à-vis the Covenant of Grace. Here, the Kingdom is the promise of God the Father *to the parties of the Covenant*; to all who fulfill the proviso (or demand) of the Covenant simply by trusting in Christ. These are the ones whom he rescues from the Domain of Darkness and from thralldom to its evil king. These are the ones whom he transfers into the Kingdom of his beloved Son. These are the ones who even now enjoy eternal life under the exalted Christ's direct and benevolent reign, with all the spiritual blessings this entails. And these are the ones who wait eagerly for his soon return, so that he may further extend his reign over their bodies and their world. In sum, these are the ones in whom God fulfills his eternal purpose for his Son, making him High King over all, to the praise of the glory of God's mercy and grace (Eph. 1:6, 12, 14, Phil. 2:9-11). So then, relative to the Covenant of Grace the Kingdom of God is the promise of the Covenant to his elect; to all who are willing to receive Christ as their Redeemer and King.

Secondly, our study of the Eternal Covenant teaches us that *the (advent of the) Kingdom of God is inseparable from (the advent of) the New Covenant*. We have seen this in our preliminary discussion of Salvation History. Before the foundation of the world, God devised the Eternal Covenant, by which he would bestow eternal life—a direct spiritual reign of God, through Christ, by the Spirit—upon his redeemed people and their world. In OT times—in the Era of Promise and Preparation—he gave a veiled revelation of the Eternal Covenant and the spiritual Kingdom it would create, using various types and shadows to picture them. But in NT times—in the Era of Fulfillment—he administers the Eternal Covenant as it is in and of itself, actually sending Christ into the world and instituting the Eternal Covenant as the New Covenant.

This truth is unspeakably important for a sound understanding of biblical eschatology, and for resolving the End Time Debate. It means that the New Covenant is not just another covenant in an endless series of covenants. No, it is the end of the line. Because it is the Eternal Covenant—God’s one and only plan of salvation—it is the last covenant in Salvation History. The Kingdom it creates, the spiritual life it bestows, and the manner of worship it inaugurates, are all *eternal and fundamentally unchanging*, for they are exactly as God planned them when he planned the Eternal Covenant. OT theocratic institutions do indeed mystically prefigure the spiritual reign, life, and worship that Christ introduced. But now that he has introduced them, there is no going back to the Old Covenant forms, for the New Covenant forms are eternal. Thus, to see that the New Covenant is the Eternal Covenant is to see that the Kingdom it creates is the *eternal and unchanging* Kingdom of God.

This brings us to a third and closely related point, namely that a good understanding of the Eternal Covenant *helps us arrive at the proper interpretation of OTKP*. In understanding the Eternal Covenant, we also come to understand the very heart—the true spiritual character—of Salvation History: that it is *a progressive administration of the one Eternal Covenant in time and space*. As we shall see in chapter 8, in OT times (i.e., in the Era of Promise and Preparation) God did indeed administer the Eternal Covenant, but *not* as it was in and of itself. Rather, he administered it in a series of *veiled* revelations; veiled revelations that promised, pictured, and prepared for the actual administration of the Eternal Covenant in NT

times. This implies, however, that God's OT revelations of the *promise* of the Eternal Covenant—of a coming Messianic Kingdom—were also veiled; that in those revelations he used (theocratic) language and imagery drawn from the Mosaic Law to speak symbolically of the spiritual Kingdom that Christ would create, extend, and consummate under the New Covenant. For this reason, a good understanding of the Eternal Covenant and its relation to Salvation History strongly militates against a literal reading of OTKP. Rather, it invites us to examine OTKP in NT perspective, to see if Christ and the apostles used a New Covenant Hermeneutic for interpreting OTKP, and to see if they would have us look for the things of Christ and the Covenant hidden away beneath the “mysterious” imagery of OTKP.

In Part 3 of our journey we will spend a considerable amount of time hearing them teach us this very thing.

Conclusion

On the present leg of our journey we have followed Christ backward so that we might go forward. He has taken us through the door of the Beginning and guided us back to a time before the foundation of the world. There we beheld the great mystery of God: the Christ-centered plan of salvation, the Eternal Covenant. There we laid our hands upon the pulsing heart of Salvation History: the Person and Work of the Last Adam, the Lord Jesus Christ, doing in behalf of God's elect children what the First Adam (and they themselves) failed to do, and undoing what the First Adam (and they themselves) had done.

There we also reached the heart of the Kingdom of God, learning that it is nothing other than the Promise of the Eternal Covenant, both to Christ and to his people; that it is God's redemptive response to the alien and usurping Domain of Darkness; that it is the fulfillment of his original purpose for his Son—the heading up of all things in him—in a manner more glorious and more worthy of adoration than if there had been no Domain of Darkness at all; that it is the direct reign of God, through Christ, by the Spirit, over a chosen and redeemed people, with all the life, blessing, and eternal thanksgiving that such a reign must ever bring.

Fully equipped with a good understanding of these mysteries, we are now ready to resume our journey through Salvation History. Let us

therefore step into the dark but lovely woods of the Era of Promise and Preparation. And once there, let us cling more closely than ever to our Christ, so that with his help we may understand the most vexing of all issues in the Great End Time Debate: the OT promise of a coming Kingdom of God.

The OT Promise of the Kingdom

WE HAVE SEEN that Salvation History may be divided into two basic stages: the Era of Promise and Preparation, in which God administers the Eternal Covenant in a veiled manner; and the Era of Fulfillment, in which he administers the Eternal Covenant as it is in itself; in which he unveils what was hidden in times past, so that all the world may see and understand his eternal plan of salvation and respond accordingly (1 Cor. 2:6-13).

Our goal in this chapter is to walk, hand in hand with Christ, to the four great OT oases of Salvation History; to four holy terrains where God graciously descended and lovingly administered the Eternal Covenant to Adam, Noah, Abraham, and Moses and Israel, thereby entering into redemptive relationship with them and their believing children. While much could be said about these administrations, our focus here will be upon what concerns us most at the present stage of our journey: the way in which God revealed the promise of the Covenant—the Kingdom of God—in each of these four visitations. Moreover, in maintaining this focus we will pay especially close attention to the fourth and final OT administration—the Mosaic—through which God established the family of Abraham as a nation, or a *kingdom*, before him. This, as we shall soon see, will prove invaluable for learning how to unravel the mysteries of OTKP.

A final word of encouragement: If the road ahead seems at all to meander, please hang in there! We're definitely going somewhere, and with the Lord at our side we shall surely reach our destination!

The Kingdom and the Covenant with Adam (Genesis 3-4)

The first administration of the Eternal Covenant occurred in the days of Adam and Eve, immediately after the Fall. Though God might justly have

inflicted upon them a sentence of eternal spiritual and physical death, he did not. In fact, immediately after the account of their fall, we read of God walking through the Garden in the cool of the day, searching out the guilty pair with great purpose of heart.

Was it to judge them? Yes and no. Yes, because henceforth they, their seed, and their world must groan under manifold chastisements for sin. But no, because he did not strike them dead or cast them into hell. In other words, the accent in the post-fall narrative heavily falls upon God's mercy and grace. The world will continue. The family of man will continue. Moreover, in the case of Adam, Eve, and certain of their children, the family of man will continue in a personal relationship with God. Why? Because in mercy and grace *he will call them into a covenant with himself*.

We see this precious truth reflected in a number of texts. If we approach them with NT eyes, we shall see the light of the Eternal Covenant shimmering over them all, and the mystery of the Kingdom of God glowing from deep within.

The Protoevangelium (Gen. 3:15)

The most important of these texts is Genesis 3:15. It is sometimes called the *protoevangelium*, since here we find the first biblical prophecy of the Gospel, albeit thickly veiled in typological language. With all the guilty parties assembled before him, God speaks first to the serpent—and to the evil spirit that stands behind it—saying, “And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed. He will crush your head, and you will bruise his heel.”

As is the case throughout the OT, so here: the physical points to the spiritual, and the present to the future. God's pregnant words do indeed have a near physical fulfillment, but they also have a vastly more important spiritual fulfillment in a time far off.

Physically, his words are fulfilled in the perennial enmity between humans (especially female humans), and snakes (especially venomous snakes). Until the end of time, serpents lurking in the grass or coiled by the wayside will strike at the heel of human passersby, who in turn will swiftly crush their heads under foot.

However, this is but a picture of the larger spiritual fulfillment, a fulfillment that we now can understand because the mystery of the Gospel has been revealed. Let us therefore explore our text phrase by phrase, to see what we can learn about its fulfillment in Christ and the New Covenant.

To begin with, God says that he himself will put enmity between the serpent and the woman. The serpent represents Satan (2 Cor. 11:3). Eve represents the Church, she who is not only the Bride of Christ, but also the Mother of the Living (Eph. 5:22f). That is, she will give birth to Christ, and also to all who will trust in him through the preaching of the Gospel (Rev. 12:1f). Mercifully and graciously, God will draw the Woman into a new (covenant) relationship with himself, giving her a new nature that causes her to love and trust him, even as she learns to hate and disbelieve the master she formerly chose to obey (John 5:42, Rom. 5:5).

The text also says that God will put enmity between the seed of the serpent and the seed of the woman. The seed of the serpent is Satan's children—children like Cain, Korah, Ahithophel, Ahab, Herod, Judas, Caiaphas, Pilate, and Nero (Mt. 13:38, John 8:44). The seed of the woman is Christ. He will be born of Mary, the woman who embodied all of God's OT saints, through whose corporate faithfulness the OT Church finally gave birth to the world's Lord and Savior (Gal. 3:19, Rev. 12:1f). But by extension, the seed of the woman is also the Body of Christ: the saints, the human parties to the Covenant, all who trust in the Lord for salvation. These will indeed share in his warfare and humiliation, but also in his ultimate triumph and glory (Rom. 4:16, Gal. 3:29).

Finally, we learn that the Seed of the Woman will crush the serpent's head, and the serpent will bruise him on the heel. These are astonishing words. On the one hand, they point to Christ's death, which Satan himself will effect through the agency of hostile Jews and Gentiles (John 14:30-31, Rev. 12:4). This will be a true death, as it must be; yet because of the resurrection, it will only be a bruise. On the other hand, these words also point to the overthrow of Satan's evil kingdom: Christ will strike a crushing blow to his head, a mortal blow to his authority (Psalm 110:6, John 12:31, Col. 2:15, Rev. 12:7-12). Paradoxically enough, Christ cannot accomplish this redemptive purpose apart from his own death, so that Satan, in effect, will be destroying Satan! Moreover, as illuminated by the NT, our text makes it clear that his destruction will be complete: Along with all his evil

hosts, both human and angelic, the Serpent of Old will be cast into the Lake of Fire by Christ himself, through the agency of his (Christ's) elect seed (Rom. 16:20, Rev. 20:10).

We see, then, that this is a fabulously rich prophetic and eschatological text. Why? Because it speaks with fabulous depth and nuance of the things of the Eternal Covenant; the covenant that God will unveil in the last days, and the covenant that is the sum and substance of the last things.

But how exactly does it speak to us about the Kingdom? Quite powerfully, and quite picturesquely. It tells us that the LORD (the divine *party* of the Covenant) will send a Seed (the divine *provision* of the Covenant) who will live, die, and rise again, so as to rescue the Woman and her seed (the *human parties* of the Covenant) from the Domain of Darkness, and restore them, through faith (the *proviso* of the Covenant), to a life of eternal friendship with God (the *promise* of the Covenant). Moreover, it tells us that in the end God will destroy Satan, his unbelieving people, his works, and his entire evil kingdom (the *penalty* of spurning the Covenant), and thereafter bring in the greater Eden, the eternal home of the redeemed (the *promise* of the consummation of the Covenant).

In short, the message of Genesis 3:15 is this: The *redemption* of God will bring the *reign* of God over a new and perfected *realm* of God. One day, through Christ, the Kingdom of God will come.

Will this Kingdom be an ideal Mosaic theocracy? Not according to Genesis 3:15. According to Genesis 3:15 it will be a direct spiritual reign of God, through Christ, who will be the Head of his redeemed Bride, and whose loving rule will return them both to Paradise, where they shall live together forever in matrimonial joy.

And who is sufficient for these things?

Further Post Fall Texts

Let us briefly note several other post Fall texts in which we can glimpse both the Covenant and the Kingdom.

Genesis 3:21 reads, "Also, for Adam and his wife the LORD God made tunics of skin, and clothed them." When interpreted typologically, we find that this passage is both theologically rich and deeply affecting. Previously, Adam and Eve had sought to cover their guilt and shame with fig leaves,

the work of their own hands (Gen. 3:7). This is a picture of fallen man, trying to justify himself before God through his own good works; through “the works of the law” written in his heart (Rom. 2:15). Knowing, however, that all such efforts are in vain (Gal. 2:16), the LORD God himself steps in, and works in their behalf: He himself kills an animal, fashions its skin into tunics, and drapes the holy garments over the slumping shoulders of the guilty pair—who, to their great surprise and joy, now find that they can walk before him and with him once again. That is, they can walk *in covenant* with him from whom they formerly were estranged!

Here then is still another type, this time of God the Father, who, by his own hand of Providence (and also by the lawless hands of evil men), kills his own Son (Acts 2:23, 4:28). And why does he do this? So that having imputed the sins of his elect to Christ—and having punished Christ for them—he may then impute the righteousness of Christ to his elect (2 Cor. 5:21)! In the words of Isaiah the prophet, he does this in order to adorn eschatological Israel with a “robe of righteousness,” so that henceforth and forevermore wedding bells may ring (Isaiah 61:10, Rev. 7:14)!

Can you see the elements of the Eternal Covenant in this amazing OT type? If so, you can also see something of the Kingdom. For it is because of the slain animal (the *provision* of the Covenant) that the merciful and gracious God (the *divine party* of the Covenant) can rescue his dear children (the *human party* of the Covenant) from their guilt and condemnation, thereafter restoring them to a life of friendship under his benevolent rule (the *promise* of the Covenant). In short, because of Christ he can usher them into his Kingdom of redeeming love.

Interestingly, we see the provision of the Covenant yet again in Genesis 4:4, which reads, “Abel also brought of the firstlings of his flock, and of their fat. And the LORD respected Abel and his offering.” This verse suggests that God, by slaying an animal to clothe Adam and Eve (3:21), had thereby inaugurated a chosen pattern of worship for those who desired to be in covenant with him. Cain, who was not of the (spiritual) seed of the Woman, but was of his father the devil, did not follow God’s pattern, and therefore did not meet with God’s favor (Gen. 3:5f, 1 John 3:12). Abel, by following the established pattern, did. Therefore, he, Seth, Enosh, and all the other “sons of God” who would later call upon the name of the LORD, stand together as a picture of the Church: the eternal covenant community,

the citizens of God's Kingdom, the brotherhood of all who put no confidence in the flesh, but worship God through Christ, and so dwell blessedly beneath His redemptive reign (Gen. 4:4, 26, 6:2; Phil. 3:3).

Do any of these texts portray the Kingdom as an ideal Mosaic theocracy? Not at all. But they do portray the Kingdom as an intimate covenant relationship with God, made possible by a Sacrifice. So too did Jesus, when he brought the New and Eternal Covenant into the world.

The Kingdom and the Covenant with Noah (Genesis 6-9)

The biblical narrative of Noah and the ark is one of the great OT pictures of redemption (Genesis 6-9). As such, it abounds with nuanced allusions to the Eternal Covenant and the Kingdom of God. Let us briefly explore them here.

God's covenant with Noah and his family flashes like lightning against the darkest of backdrops: a world almost wholly given over to depravity, and therefore a world over which God has pronounced a sentence of complete destruction:

And behold, I myself am bringing floodwaters on the earth, to destroy from under heaven all flesh in which is the breath of life; everything that is on the earth shall die. But I will establish my covenant with you; and you shall go into the ark—you, your sons, your wife, and your sons' wives with you.

—Gen. 6:17-18

Here, and in the rest of this solemn account, God implicitly administers a covenant with Noah and his physical family that will ensure their physical survival in a new and different physical world to come. As we are about to see, the various elements of this covenant picture future spiritual (as well as physical) realities; realities planned before the foundation of the world; realities that will be manifested only in the last days: the days of Christ and the New Covenant.

Noah, whose name is biblically associated with the word "comfort" (Gen. 5:29), is manifestly a type of Christ, the One who gives ultimate redemptive comfort to his people. Note carefully from our text that God enters into a covenant *directly* with Noah for the salvation of his household

(Heb. 11:7). Here is a beautiful picture of the Covenant of Redemption, in which God the Father covenants directly with his Son for the redemption of his human family.

But there is more. Noah also typifies Christ as the *provision* of the Covenant of Grace. How were the members of Noah's family saved? By looking in faith to a mediator, to the one who had received instructions from God and built an ark of salvation for them. And how are the parties of the Covenant of Grace saved? By looking believably to Christ, who throughout his earthly ministry received instructions from his heavenly Father, so that through his active and passive obedience in behalf of his people he might craft for them a perfect righteousness, a perfect vessel of redemption (Gen. 6:13-16, John 8:26-30).

In passing, we should note that the provision of the Covenant of Grace is also prefigured in Noah's building an altar and offering animal sacrifices upon it. Here again we meet Christ, this time as a Priest and a Sacrifice: as a priest in Noah, who offers the sacrifice, and as a sacrifice in the animals that he offers. Moreover, just as Noah's sacrifices were "a soothing aroma" to God—moving him to promise that he would never again destroy the earth by water—so too was Christ's sacrifice, which satisfied God's justice and propitiated his wrath, thereby securing for his own the promise of eternal life together with him in the new heavens and the new earth (Gen. 8:20-22, Rom. 3:21-6, Heb. 2:17).¹

Concerning the *proviso* of the Covenant, which is faith, we have already seen it on display in Noah's family, who believably followed him into the ark. Importantly, a number of NT texts make it quite clear that Noah—a herald of righteousness—offered redemption to the world around him for 120 years, a redemption that they spurned unto their own condemnation (Heb. 11:7, 2 Peter 2:5). Here again we see Christ, who, in the days of his flesh, reared up a great, beautiful, and unavoidable ark of salvation. What's more, even now, through the Gospel preaching of his Church, this same Christ calls all men everywhere to get on board (Mt. 11:28, John 3:16, Acts 17:30). Comfortingly, the Flood narrative assures us that, despite the natural depravity and rebellion of man, God will indeed have a family. For just as God himself brought both man and beast safely into the ark, sealing them inside by closing the door with his own mighty hand, so too will the Father

draw all his elect to Christ, and seal them once and for all in him (Gen. 7:13-16, John 6:44, 1 Cor. 1:30-31, Eph. 1:13, 4:30).

As for the *promise* of the Covenant, we remember that it is *restoration* to eternal life under God's direct rule, a restoration graciously granted to those whom he has *rescued* from the Domain of Darkness. The Flood narrative pictures both. On the one hand, God rescues all who are willing to board the ark from destruction by water; similarly, God rescues all who are willing to come to Christ from destruction by fire, which is the *penalty* of (spurning) the eternal covenant (2 Peter 3:6-7). On the other hand, God restores Noah's family to life in a new world cleansed of unrepentant sinners. This calls to mind the Parousia and the Consummation, when Christ himself will restore his people to life in the eschatological Eden; to life in the new heavens and the new earth (2 Peter 3:13).

In all of this, we therefore catch precious glimpses of the coming of the Kingdom. For example, the world of Noah's day clearly pictures the dark backdrop of the Kingdom, the Domain of Darkness; a Domain that will once again more or less completely go over to Satan at the end of the present evil age—and therefore perish in the end time conflagration (Mt. 24:12, 37, Luke 17:26). Similarly, the new world into which Noah and his family descended corresponds to the Kingdom in its consummated form, wherein God reigns directly, not only over his people's spirits, but also over their bodies; it corresponds to the new heavens and the new earth onto which the glorified Church will descend after the Judgment and the creation of the World to Come (1 Thess. 4:13f, Rev. 21:1-3).

But what of the ark, and of the year or so that Noah's family spent within it, safely floating upon the waters? Again, the ark represents the Person and Work of Christ, God's one and only vessel of salvation. As for the year of their "pilgrimage" over the waters, this appears to correspond to the time between Christ's first and second advents, the time when God's wayfaring people are safely shut in with their Comforter and King (Eph. 2:6). It is the time when he lovingly nourishes them from his heavenly stores (Rev. 12:6), and when he bids them patiently serve and wait until the happy Day when he himself will descend with them onto the eschatological mountain of God (Gen. 8:4, John 5:24, Rev. 21:1f).

In sum, by richly picturing the several elements of the Eternal Covenant, the Flood narrative also pictures the coming of a two-staged

Kingdom of God—and the coming of the One whom God has seated as King over every flood (Psalm 29:10).

The Kingdom and the Covenant with Abraham

(Genesis 12-25)

In the Adamic Covenant, God promised to send a Seed who would do battle with the serpent, overthrow his evil works, and create a spiritual family loyal to the LORD and hostile to his perennial foe. In the Abrahamic Covenant, he republishes this promise, albeit in a more elaborate manner. In particular, he now creates a *chosen family*—soon to become a *chosen nation*—through which the Seed and Redeemer will one day be born, and which itself is a picture of the eternal family that God will create through the Redeemer’s work. Moreover, for the first time in Salvation History, God *formally* enters into covenant with this family in the person of father Abraham, its physical and spiritual head. In short, with Abraham God once again administers the Eternal Covenant (EC) in type and shadow, even as he formally creates a chosen family through whom he will one day bring that covenant into the world.

To understand all this better, let us again look briefly at the elements of the Abrahamic Covenant, and also at the many ways in which it promises and pictures the Kingdom of God.

In this covenant, the *divine party*, and the one who sovereignly initiates it, is the LORD. The *human party* is Abraham and his seed, yet only those of Abraham’s seed whose descent is through the elect son, Isaac (Genesis 17:1f, 21:12). Until the coming of Christ, God will stand in a formal covenant relationship with this new family: with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob/Israel, and the twelve tribes flowing from Israel’s loins. Very importantly, in the NT we learn that Abraham’s physical family was actually a picture of God’s spiritual family, of which some, but not all, of Abraham’s physical family were members (Rom. 9:6-8). It is a picture of the eternal Church, the “called out” ones of all time, both Jew and Gentile. Like their father Abraham, they encounter God, believe his promises, and walk with him in faith until they finally enter and dwell in the Promised Land (Mt. 8:1-11, Rom. 4, Gal. 3, Heb. 11:8-16).

In the days of Abraham, the *provision* of the Eternal Covenant—which is Christ—was pictured in many different ways. Above all, we see it in Isaac, the miraculously conceived son of Sarah, through whom all the nations of the world will one day be blessed (Gen. 15:4, 17:15-22, 18:1-16, 22:2). We see it in Melchizedek, the priest-king of Salem, who not only blessed Abraham on his victorious return from war, but also his seed, who were “still in his loins” (Gen. 14:18-20, Heb. 7:10). We also see it in the heifer, the goat, and the ram that God told Abraham to kill and cut in two, thereby providing a sacrifice that would enable the LORD to manifest his covenant commitment to his chosen family, Israel (Gen. 15:9-21). Finally—and quite impressively—we see it in the ram caught by his horns in a thicket on top of Mt. Moriah, a mountain where Isaac (at this point in the story a type of the Church) was spared, and where the ram (a type of Christ) was sacrificed in his place. Notably, it is the very same mountain upon which, in due season, the LORD himself would provide the one true and eternal sacrifice for the redemption of his worldwide family (Gen. 22, John 5:61, Heb. 11:17-19).

The *proviso* of the EC—which is faith—appears very prominently in God’s covenant dealings with Abraham. Well aware of this—and also of its significance—the NT writers repeatedly probe and extol it. By faith Abraham obeyed God and went out from Ur of the Chaldeans, and from Haran as well (Acts 7:2-4, Heb. 11:8). By faith he sojourned in the land of promise (Heb. 11:9). By faith he—and Sarah—found strength to conceive seed (Heb. 11:11). By faith he waited for a city whose builder and maker was God (Heb. 11:10). By faith he was justified (Gen. 15:6, Rom. 4:3); and by faith the reality of his justifying faith was vindicated (Gen. 22, James 2:20-23). Because of all this, the NT writers, following Genesis, crown Abraham as “the father of the faithful.” He is the prototype of all who believe in the promised Seed unto justification, and who thereafter walk with him faithfully, as strangers in a strange land, making their pilgrimage through a dark and dangerous world until the Seed himself comes again and makes all things new (Gen. 17:4-5, Rom. 4:11ff, Heb. 11:13).

Many indeed are the *promises* that God gave to Abraham: to be his God (Gen. 17:17-18); to give him victory over all his enemies (Gen. 22:17); to give the land of Canaan to him and his seed forever (Gen. 12:7); to bless him with great wealth (Gen. 12:2, 22:17); to make him a great nation (Gen.

12:2, 13:16, 18:18); to make him the father of many nations (Gen. 17:4); and to make him a blessing to all the nations (Gen. 12:3, 18:18).

Very importantly, all these promises have a double fulfillment. They were historically fulfilled among Abraham's physical seed (i.e., the family and nation of Israel), first in Joshua's conquest of Canaan (Joshua 21:43-44) and then in David and Solomon's conquest of the surrounding nations (1 Kings 4:21). However, the physical and the historical were preparing for, and pointing to, something greater, something spiritual and eschatological. In the NT we learn what it is: The promises to Abraham are **fully** fulfilled only in his spiritual Seed, which is Christ and the Church of all time. We see this even now, as God, through the preaching of the Gospel, calls, rescues, justifies, sanctifies, equips, guides, and otherwise prospers his pilgrim family of faithful sons and daughters, who, at Christ's return, will become **heirs of the world**, the very world he pledged to believing Abraham and his seed (Romans 4:13, Gal. 3:15-4:7)!

All of this and more the omnipotent Redeemer of Israel had in mind when he promised his servant Abraham: "I will be your God" (Gen. 17:17-18). It is hardly surprising, then, to find this very expression cropping up over and over again throughout the course of Salvation History, until, at long last, it is revealed as the classic biblical formula for the promise of the Covenant of Grace: Eternal Life, through Jesus Christ our Lord (Ex. 19:5, Jer. 31:33, Ezek. 37:27; John 3:16, Rom. 5:21, Heb. 8:10, Rev. 21:3).

As for the **penalty** of (failure to enter) the EC, it is pictured quite dramatically in the fiery destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. 18:16-19:1ff). Our Lord himself, in preparing his disciples for the vicissitudes of the last days, identified this episode as a figure of the Last Judgment at his Coming, and also as a figure of the eternal fire that awaits his enemies (Luke 17:28-30, 2 Peter 2:6, Jude 1:7). Accordingly, we see in Sodom a type of the fallen world-system, especially at the end, when its iniquity is complete (Gen. 15:16, Mt. 24:12). Lot and his family picture the Church as those of the fallen sons of Adam who, by God's mere good pleasure, are "scarcely saved" (1 Peter 4:17-18). Meanwhile, Abraham seems to picture Christ himself (and/or the Church) as intercessor for the salvation of sinners, while the two angels picture the Church as evangelist to those sinners. In short, we glimpse here the twin the twin instrumentalities (i.e., intercessory prayer and Gospel proclamation) by which God, in the fullness

of time, will be pleased to rescue a chosen people from the wrath to come (Mt. 3:7, 1 Thess. 1:10).

How, then, has the Spirit portrayed the Kingdom of God in the Abrahamic Covenant? Doubtless in several ways, but most prominently in the overall arc of Abraham's life itself.² We first meet him as a citizen of Babylon, dwelling among idolaters, serving other gods (Josh 24:2). This pictures God's elect prior to their conversion, living as slaves of Satan in the Domain of Darkness. Then we hear the call of Abraham, a call that comes with lavish promises, all of which he heartily embraces by faith. This corresponds to the effectual call of God who, through the preaching of the Gospel, brings his chosen people to faith in Christ, seals them with the Spirit, places them under Christ's heavenly reign, and bids them walk with him in holiness and obedience, as citizens of his spiritual Kingdom, all the days of their life.

Finally, we observe Abraham sojourning in the land of promise, serving his friends, eluding his enemies, continually growing in wealth, often meeting with God—and always worshiping God—here and there along the way. All of this richly pictures the Church militant making her own pilgrimage through the world, a world that God has promised to give her, in glory, at Christ's return. It is a world whose kings and peoples often hate her, but who sometimes join her, catching the vision of father Abraham, the vision of a City and a heavenly homeland still to come: the consummated Kingdom of God (Heb. 11: 8-16).

If the Kingdom were an ideal Mosaic theocracy, we certainly could not see it in the life and times of father Abraham. But according to Christ and the apostles, it is not a theocracy. Rather, it is a Christ-centered, two-staged, redemptive reign of God. New Covenant theology enables us to understand this, and the NCH enables us to see it—with eyes opened wide—in the life and times of father Abraham. Thanks be to God for his indescribably wonderful gift!

The Kingdom and the Covenant with Israel

The final OT administration of the EC occurred in days of Moses, when God visited the enslaved family of Abraham in Egypt, delivered them from cruel bondage, and drew them into the wilderness of Sinai, there to renew

the covenant he had made with Abraham. Amidst a great (and significant) show of darkness and storm, he gave them a “fiery Law” beneath which they were called to live as a holy nation, forever planted in the land he had promised to their fathers. He himself would be their God, and they his redeemed people, his own special treasure, chosen from among all the nations of the earth (Exodus 3:4-8, 6:2-8, 19:4-6, 32:13).

As we shall see below, the Mosaic Law intricately displays the two essential characteristics of all the OT administrations of the EC: It actively *prepares* for the coming of the Promised Seed, even as it richly employs typological events and institutions to *picture* the fruits of his redemptive work. In other words, the Mosaic Covenant was one with the preceding covenants, and all of them were one with the New and Eternal Covenant that is the Gospel (Psalm 105:8-10, Gal. 3:8, 15-22, Heb. 4:2, 13:20, 1 Peter 1:12, 4:6).

When studying the Mosaic Covenant, we must ever keep these truths in mind, seeing that its unique characteristics have often led to confusion. Yes, it introduced a new and detailed body of moral, civic, and ceremonial law. Yes, the first two of these seem often to stand in the foreground of this covenant. And yes, here Israel was continually reminded that obedience would bring blessing, but disobedience cursing (Lev. 26, Deut. 28). Accordingly, for some (e.g., Scofield) the Law was “a conditional covenant of works,” and no covenant of grace at all.

But the OT itself disagrees. To the contrary, it declares the Law to be an expression of the lovingkindness (or gracious covenant love) of the LORD, and therefore a blessing and a delight to the saints who lived under it (Ex. 15:13, 34:6, Deut. 4:6-8, Psalm 1, 19:7, 119). The NT explains why: The moral law was never meant to promote justification by works, but rather to define, arouse, and condemn sin in the flesh, thereby guiding conscience-stricken sinners to the one true source of righteousness, Christ himself, hidden away under the several elements of the ceremonial law. Skillfully handled, it can still serve this purpose today (Rom. 3:20, 7:1f, 10:4, Gal. 3:19-25, 1 Tim. 1:9-11). Thus, the moral law was, and is, designed by God to promote his gracious purposes in Christ.

We can understand all of this better by briefly examining the elements of the Mosaic Covenant itself.

The *parties* to this covenant were God and the family of Abraham, now constituted as a nation living in their new homeland; though again, we must remember that not all in the covenant were of it (1 Cor. 10, Heb. 4).³ Importantly, the human parties are repeatedly referred to as a *chosen* people, a *holy* nation, and God's *own special treasure* among all the peoples of the earth (Exodus 19:5, Deut. 7:6-8, 14:2). These expressions identify physical Israel as a type of spiritual Israel; as a type of all whom God chose before the foundation of the world, makes holy in Christ, and now regards as his treasured sons and daughters (Gal. 6:16, Eph. 1:6, 1 Peter 1:1-3, 2:9-10).

Notably, the *promise* of the Mosaic Covenant is identical with that of the Abrahamic. Through Moses, God said to Israel, "I will take you as My people, and I will be your God . . . And I will bring you into the land that I swore to give to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; and I will give it to you as an inheritance. I am the Lord" (Ex. 6:7-8; cf. 3:17, Lev. 20:24, Deut. 6:3). Later, God will elaborate, specifying the manifold *temporal* blessings that his obedient people may expect to enjoy (Lev. 26:3-13, Deut. 28:1-14). Again, the NT teaches that all these blessings were meant to picture the promise of the EC, the *spiritual* riches enjoyed by all who are in Christ, both now and in the "Land" to come (Rom. 4:13, Gal 3:14, Eph. 1:3f).

The Mosaic Covenant lavishly pictures the *provision* of the EC. *At its founding* it was prefigured in the man Moses, who is a type of Christ as the Mediator of the covenant; and also in the Passover lamb, which is a type of Christ as the one true sacrifice for sin that makes the covenant relationship and blessings possible (Exodus 12, 1 Cor. 5:7). *Within its manifold institutions*, we can see the provision of the EC prefigured in the three offices occupied by Israel's leaders: prophet, priest, and king. Let us take a moment to look at each.

God used prophets to bring his law to Israel, and thereafter to urge them to cling to it. This points to Christ, who fulfilled the work of his prophetic predecessors by bringing God's Greater Law—the ordinances of the EC—to spiritual Israel, and who also gave them gifted leaders to urge them to cleave to it (Deut. 18:15, Mt. 5-7, Acts 3:22, Eph. 4:7f).

God ordained Israel's priests to offer up, in behalf of the people, gifts and sacrifices for sin. This too points to Christ, who fulfilled the work of his priestly predecessors by offering up the only possible sacrifice for sin:

himself (Exodus 28, 29, Lev. 1-9, Heb. 5:1, 8:3, 9:9, 26). It also points to the Church, which the NT casts as a holy priesthood offering up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God (Rom. 12:1f, 1 Peter 2:5)

Interestingly, in the Law God did not mandate the royal office, since the LORD regarded himself as King over the nation (Deut. 33:5, 1 Sam. 8:7, 12:2). Nevertheless, even as he issued the Law, he foretold the rise of Israelite kings, regulated their behavior, and thereafter used some of them—especially David and Solomon—as types of Christ and his heavenly reign (2 Sam. 7, Psalms 2, 45, 89, 110, Jer. 23, Ezek. 34, 37). Thus, both at Israel's founding and in her ongoing institutions, God abundantly pictured the one true Provision of the EC: Israel's Messianic Prophet, Priest, and King—the Lord Jesus Christ.

As under the covenant with Abraham, so here: The *proviso* of the Mosaic Covenant was faith—though at first glance, it may seem otherwise. This is because in articulating a large body of moral, civic, and ceremonial law, God placed great emphasis upon implicit obedience; obedience that would indeed secure *temporal* blessings for the nation, and safeguard against *temporal* curses (Lev. 26, Deut. 28). Discerning theologians argue that all this was intentional; that the temporal blessings and curses did indeed *picture* eternal life and eternal death; and that by placing a close connection between obedience and (temporal) blessing at the forefront of the Mosaic Law, God was supplying Israel (and us) with “a positive reminder of the Covenant of Works.”⁴ However, along with the apostle Paul, these same theologians rush to add that this was never meant to promote the idea of salvation (i.e., justification) by works, as so many of the Jews later came to believe. To the contrary, it was designed to teach poor sinners, who could not possibly fulfill the Covenant of Works (i.e., the righteous requirement of the Law), that they must flee, in faith, to Christ, who alone could and did on their behalf (Rom. 3:20, 7:1ff, 8:1-4, Gal. 3:19-25, Heb. 12:18-24)!

Yes, the proviso of the Mosaic Covenant was faith. We see this not only in the days of the Exodus itself, but also throughout the 1500 years during which the Law remained in force. For example, God repeatedly required the Israelites to exercise faith in Moses (a type of Christ), whether at his arrival in Egypt (Exodus 5), on the night of the Passover (Exodus 11, 12), at the Red Sea (Exodus 14), in need of food (Exodus 16), in need of water

(Exodus 17), in need of healing (Num. 21, John 3), and, years later, at Israel's entrance to the Promised Land (Deut. 31).

Also, Israel was to show faith in God's promise of forgiveness by coming faithfully—especially on the Day of Atonement—to their priests (a type of Christ), through whom they might offer sacrifices for sin (a further type of Christ). And finally, in the ever-growing canon of OT Scripture, God called all Israelites to trust in his perennial promise of a coming Redeemer: the Seed of the woman (Gen. 3:15) and the Seed of Abraham (Gen 22:18), who, it turns out, will also be a Seed of David: a Spirit-anointed Prophet, Priest, and King (i.e., Messiah) who will bring the promised Kingdom of God to the whole world (Psalm 2, 110, Jer. 33:17-18, Daniel 9, Ezek. 34, 37).

It was, then, by faith in all these different types of Christ that godly Israelites (and some Gentiles) were saved. Moreover, it was that same faith that moved them to obey all of God's commandments, just as their believing father Abraham had done; who, having been called and justified, always sought to walk in holiness, blameless before the LORD (Gen. 17:1, Luke 1:6, Heb. 11:1ff, James 2:14ff).

The Mosaic Covenant pictures the *penalty* of (disobeying) the EC in at least three different ways. We first see it in the supernatural destruction of Egypt, not only by the ten plagues that fell upon the land and its inhabitants, but also and especially at the Red Sea, where the collapsing walls of water engulfed Pharaoh and his chariots (Exodus 7-15, Psalm 136:15). The Revelation repeatedly alludes to these events, putting them forth as types of the Last Judgment and the eternal punishment of the wicked to follow (Rev. 8, 11, 12, 15, 16, 20).

Secondly, we have the ghastly physical curses with which God threatened Israel (one of which was expulsion and exile from the land); curses that picture "the curse of the Law" (i.e., death), and which therefore typify "the second death," which is eternal punishment away from the presence of the Lord and the glory of his power (Lev. 26, Deut. 28; Mt. 25:46, Gal. 3:13, 2 Thess. 1, Rev. 2:11, 20:14, 21:8).

And finally, we have the entire spectrum of "offerings made by fire," offerings that point darkly to the sufferings of Christ, who on Calvary endured the fires of God's wrath on behalf of his sinful people, so that they, through faith in his sweet-smelling sacrifice, might escape the everlasting

fires of Gehenna (Leviticus 1-7, Rom. 3:21-26, Mt. 10:28, 18:9, Heb. 10:11-12).

Three Reflections of the Kingdom

Our brief look at the elements of the Mosaic Covenant—a look designed to demonstrate yet again the great importance of bringing the NCH to Old Testament interpretation—has prepared us to discuss some of the ways in which the idea of the Kingdom appears in the Law. I will focus on three.

Israel's Founding as a Nation

First, we have *Israel's founding as a nation*. Among the many typological events of Salvation History, this one is of special significance, since it so vividly portrays not only the redemptive rescue and restoration that is the essence of the Kingdom, but also the two-staged coming of the Kingdom into history.⁵

Israel's founding included three basic elements: their exodus from Egypt, their 40-year sojourn in the wilderness of Sinai, and their entrance by conquest into Canaan, the land of promise. All have rich Kingdom significance.

With regard to the exodus, Egypt clearly represents the Domain of Darkness, the fallen world-system portrayed as a place of bondage to sin. Accordingly, Pharaoh represents Satan, “the ruler of this world” and the spiritual oppressor of God's elect prior to their regeneration. Moses, in the initial stages of the exodus, represents Christ as Savior, sent by the Father into the darkness of the world-system to rescue a chosen people and deliver them from the terrible judgments soon to befall it.

As for Israel's sojourn in the wilderness of Sinai, this depicts the Church Militant during the first stage of the Kingdom, the days of Christ's heavenly mediatorial reign. Like Israel at Sinai, the Church, by faith, enters into covenant with God through a Mediator who meets them at Mt. Zion. Like Israel, she also must make her way through the wilderness, which once again represents the fallen world-system, this time as a place of testing, hardship, and persecution, wherein a faithful God, through Christ (typified

by Moses as fellow-sojourner), graces his pilgrim people with the divine presence, power, provision, and protection.

Finally, we have Israel's entrance by conquest into Canaan. This represents the appearing of the second stage of the Kingdom, wherein the returning Christ (this time typified by Joshua) leads his victorious host of warriors into the new heavens and the new earth, the eschatological Land of Promise that the Lord himself will create and bestow on his people on the Last Day.

Many NT texts—some of which we will examine more closely in the pages ahead—richly support this deep, spiritual understanding of Israel's founding as a nation (Mt. 2:14-15, 4:1-11, Acts 7, Rom. 4:13, 1 Cor. 10:1-11, Heb. 3:7-4:10, 11:23-30, 12:18-24, Rev. 12:1ff, 20:7-10).

Israel's Dwelling in the Land

Moving forward in Salvation History, we next observe a discreet and quite lengthy season that may be called the time of *Israel's dwelling in the land*. Beginning in the days of the Judges (ca. 1400 BC), it stretches through the United and Divided Monarchies, and ends with the fall of Jerusalem and the deportation of the Southern Kingdom to Babylon (ca. 600 BC). Throughout this period, the LORD himself sat as King over the Israelite theocracy, dwelling *among* his people—whether in the tabernacle or the temple—and ruling over the nation through mediators: judges, priests, prophets, and kings. But though he had indeed given Israel the land, throughout this period much of it remained unconquered and unsettled, largely owing to sin in the twelve tribes. Moreover, many enemies, both domestic and foreign, not only surrounded the Israelite kingdom, but also warred against it. Thus, despite their promotion to nationhood, Israel, during this entire period, remained much like their fathers Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob: a pilgrim people dwelling in a land *still* to become fully theirs.

With important qualifications, we may say that the season of Israel's dwelling in the land pictures the first stage of the Kingdom of God, during which the Church Militant dwells in the earth. The points of correspondence are many. Once again God is King, though here he dwells *within* his people, and thereby rules over a strictly *spiritual* theocracy, the Church. Here he again rules through mediators: preeminently through the

High King of heaven—the Lord Jesus Christ—but also through the Spirit of God, the Word of God, and the leaders of the people of God. Like Israel of old, the Church dwells in a world that even now belongs to her, but which she has yet fully to possess (1 Cor. 3:21-23). Like Israel, she lives under a divine mandate to take up the weapons of her warfare—prayer and the preaching of the Gospel—in order to conquer as much of the land as she possibly can for her King. And like Israel, she is also surrounded by many enemies, both within and without; enemies that she must engage with the mighty weapons of prayer, truth, purity, kindness, perseverance, and great longsuffering (Mt. 5:43-48, Eph. 6).

We must, however, take note of the “important qualifications” mentioned above. One of them is this: Because of the inherent weakness of the Old Covenant, Israel in the land was, as it were, doomed to be cast out of the land (Deut. 32, Jer. 31:31f). The Church, on the other hand, because of the inherent strength of the Gospel (i.e., the New and Eternal Covenant), is destined to triumph over every foe, and to remain in the earth forever (Romans 8:31-39, Heb. 8). Also, the writing prophets often used images of Israel dwelling in the land to picture the *second* stage of the Kingdom; to picture God’s glorified Church dwelling in the new heavens and the new earth (Isaiah 60, Ezek. 40-48, Micah 4, Zech. 8). In other words, the Spirit was pleased to use Israel’s life under the Law to depict *both* stages of the Kingdom of God. And he did so, not only in the OT, but also in the New (2 Cor. 6:6, Eph. 2:19-22, 1 Peter 2:9-10 Rev. 20-21). More on this later.

Israel’s Exile and Return

This brings us to the third—and arguably the most important—OT depiction of the Kingdom, *Israel’s exile and return*.

As to its history, the exile itself actually began in 722 BC, with the fall of the Northern Kingdom (then called Israel) to the Assyrians, who deported and scattered the captives throughout their empire. Later the exile was consummated by the fall of the Southern Kingdom (then called Judah) to the Babylonians, who, after three separate deportations, razed Jerusalem to the ground in 586 BC. This inaugurated 70 years of captivity in Babylon, after which, in fulfillment of biblical prophecy, a remnant of much-chastened and penitent Jews returned to their ancestral homeland in three

waves, the final one occurring in 432 BC (2 Chron. 36:22-23, Isaiah 44-45, Jer. 25:1-14, 29:1ff).

Very importantly, Moses himself, under the influence of the prophetic Spirit, spoke of this turn of events, *and of a good deal more besides*. In a farewell discourse delivered to Israel just prior to his death and their entrance into Canaan, he fully enunciated the rewards of obedience to the Law (Deut. 28:1-14), as well as the perils of disobedience. Prominent among them was exile from their new homeland (Deut. 28:15-68). In his discourse, Moses went on to lament Israel's hardness of heart, a hardness that he predicted would lead to future idolatry, judgment, and expulsion from Canaan (Deut. 29:22-28). However, in one of the Old Testament's earliest and most important Kingdom prophecies, he also encouraged the LORD's faithful saints with this expansive promise of return and restoration:

Now it shall come to pass, when all these things come upon you, the blessing and the curse which I have set before you, and you call them to mind among all the nations where the LORD your God drives you, and you return to the LORD your God and obey His voice, according to all that I command you today, you and your children, with all your heart and with all your soul, that the LORD your God will bring you back from captivity, and have compassion on you, and gather you again from all the nations where the LORD your God has scattered you. If any of you are driven out to the farthest parts under heaven, from there the LORD your God will gather you, and from there He will bring you. Then the LORD your God will bring you to the land that your fathers possessed, and you shall possess it. He will prosper you and multiply you more than your fathers. And the LORD your God will circumcise your heart, and the heart of your descendants, to love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live. Also, the LORD your God will put all these curses on your enemies and on those who hate you, who persecuted you. And you will again obey the voice of the LORD and do all His commandments which I command you today. The LORD your God will make you abound in all the work of your hand, in the fruit of your body, in the increase of your livestock, and in the produce of your land for good. For the LORD will again rejoice over you for good as He rejoiced over your fathers, if you obey the voice of the LORD your God, to keep His commandments and His statutes which are written in this Book of the Law, and if you turn to the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul.

—Deut. 30:1-10

These pregnant words contain levels of meaning discernible only to those who live in "the fullness of time", to those who have actually entered into the Covenant and Kingdom of which Moses here mystically spoke. By way of explanation, three brief points may be made, with more on this subject in the pages ahead.

First, a close reading of our text makes it clear that Moses is not simply speaking of an historical return and restoration, such as the one experienced under Ezra and Nehemiah. Yes, that is partly in view, but only in the foreground, and only as a type of something far greater. Rather, he is primarily speaking of a spiritual and eschatological return; a return that will occur, not through physical migration, but through the proclamation of the Gospel, resulting in a circumcision of human hearts, love for God, and (in the end) eternal restoration to the eschatological Promised Land—the new heavens and the new earth. In other words, here Moses is catching a glimpse of all the saints—both Jews and Gentiles—entering the Kingdom of God.

Secondly, these words (and others like them in Deut. 32) are prototypical. That is, they are the seed from which the mighty oak of all OTKP will grow; they are the foundation and framework upon which the entire edifice of OTKP will be built. Here, at the beginning of ethnic Israel's residence in the land, the divine promise is rudimentary. Later—as their sins engulf them in judgment, as the faithful cry out for comfort, and as the time of restoration draws near—it will become more elaborate. In other words, as Salvation History progresses the writing prophets (whether pre-exilic, exilic, or post-exilic) will add crucial details: The coming restoration will involve a Messianic Prophet, Priest, and King; an atonement that he will make for his people; a New Covenant that will transform their hearts; an outpouring of the Holy Spirit; the forgiveness of sins; the spread of the King's righteous reign; and, in the end, a resurrection of the dead, final judgment upon "Israel's" enemies, new heavens and a new earth, and eternal life with the God of glory. Thus, in his farewell discourse Moses sets forth the supreme motif of OTKP: exile and return. And the return of which he and all the OT prophets ultimately spoke was the entrance of the Church (i.e., eschatological "Israel") into the two-staged Kingdom of Christ (Isaiah 11:10-16, 56:6-8, 49:1-13, Jer. 23:1-8, 30-31, Ezek. 34, 36-37, Hos. 1:10-2:1).

This brings us to our final point, namely that ethnic Israel's exile and return—much like the other OT events we have been discussing—is rich with typological significance. The NT helps us see it. On the one hand, Israel's expulsion from Canaan bespeaks a far greater expulsion: the expulsion of all mankind from Eden through the sin of Adam (Luke 4:6,

Rom. 5:12ff, 8:18-25). On the other, their return prefigures the saints' restoration to Paradise, and to the God who will walk with us there—all because of the righteousness of Christ (Rom 5:12ff, Rev. 2:7). Or, to use a slightly different biblical metaphor, Israel's captivity pictures the saints' (pre-conversion) bondage to the Domain of Darkness, while Israel's return pictures their liberating entrance into the Kingdom of God (Luke 4:18, Rom. 8:18-25, Gal. 5:1, Col. 1:13). Though Moses himself did not understand all these things, he—and the prophets who followed him—spoke of them, with much longing and curiosity, “in a mystery.”

Conclusion

In our survey of the OT promise of the Kingdom, we have covered a lot of ground: some 4000 years of Salvation History, and four separate administrations of the Eternal Covenant! I know it was a challenge; I hope it was a blessing.

Perhaps above all, we learned—or relearned—how to read the OT with NT eyes. That is, we learned how to apply the NCH to OT Scripture; to look for Christ and the several elements of the Eternal Covenant on each and every page of the Law, the Writings, and the Prophets. Though our journey through the Era of Promise and Preparation was brief, hopefully it was long enough for you to feel the golden Key of the Eternal Covenant turning powerfully in your hands, opening up the OT as never before, and disclosing the treasures of Christ deep within.

Beyond this, we have also acquired some important tools for grappling with the most vexing eschatological question of all: the nature and stages of the Kingdom of God.

Concerning the former, we saw that in all four administrations of the Eternal Covenant, God was pleased to use richly typological events and institutions to picture what the Lord Jesus himself identified as the essence of the Kingdom: rescue from every enemy of the Domain of Darkness, and restoration to every spiritual and physical friend under the direct reign of God, all through the divine Person and redemptive Work of Christ.

Concerning the latter, we have seen that in the various OT administrations of the Covenant, God does indeed seem repeatedly to depict the Kingdom as coming *in two simple stages*. Whether we think of the life

experience of Adam, Noah, Abraham, or Moses and Israel, the pattern is always the same: First a (redemptive) call, then a (difficult) sojourn, and finally a (glorious) entering in. As we are about to see, this pattern conforms perfectly to NT teaching on the coming of the Kingdom: First Christ comes to redeem his people by means of his righteous life and atoning death; then, throughout the course of his heavenly reign, he leads them on a pilgrimage through the wilderness of this world, even as he continues to gather in his elect through the Church's preaching of the Gospel; and finally he returns in glory to grant them all abundant entry into the eschatological Eden; into a brand new world washed of sin and evil; into the true and eternal Promised Land.

So then, having made our way back to the beginning—indeed, back to a time *before* the beginning, when God formulated his purposes and plans for the cosmos—and having then made our way through the entire Era of Promise and Preparation, we are ready at last to find out if the NT really does teach, as classical Catholic and Protestant theology has almost always taught, that the one Kingdom of God enters history in two simple stages, and two only.

If we find that it does, we are home free. For then we will also find something else, and something of inestimable value: that the Herald of the Kingdom has put still more keys into our hands; keys that finally resolve all our questions about OT Kingdom prophecy, the Millennium, and the Consummation; keys that therefore *dissolve* all the confusion and controversy presently swirling around the Great End Time Debate!

The Coming of the Kingdom

EARLIER IN OUR journey, we heard the Herald of the Kingdom teach on the *nature* of the Kingdom. Now, after plumbing his answer to the biblical depths, we are ready to sit at his feet once again and hear him on the *temporal structure* of the Kingdom. That is, we want to learn how Jesus saw the *coming* of the Kingdom. Did he think of the Kingdom as being present in his earthly ministry, or as yet to come? And if yet to come, did he see it as coming in stages? And if in stages, how many? And if in many, what are the distinctive characteristics of each?

Along the way we have touched on these matters. In particular, I have suggested that Christ and his apostles understood the Kingdom as coming in two simple stages. Now, however, we must find out if this is so. And as we begin our investigation, I would invite you to pay the closest possible attention, for unless I am very much mistaken, the question of the coming of the Kingdom is *decisive* for a proper understanding of biblical cosmic eschatology as whole. It is the one question whose answer will fling open the doors to all eschatological truth, and so determine the victor in the Great End Time Debate.

The Mysteries of the Kingdom of God

(Mt. 13:1ff, Mark 4:1-34)

We begin with what I regard as the single most important body of eschatological teaching in the entire NT: Jesus' discourse on the mysteries of the Kingdom of God. Its importance is evident from several key characteristics. First, it is a *didactic* bloc of teaching: Here Christ is not simply referring to the Kingdom, but pointedly instructing his NT scribes as to its very nature and structure. Secondly, it is a *lengthy* bloc of teaching (the second of five such lengthy blocs found in Matthew's gospel). Thirdly,

it is a *focused* bloc of teaching, devoted entirely to the theme of the Kingdom. Fourthly, it is a *foundational* bloc of teaching, clearly setting the stage for all further NT revelation about the Kingdom and the Consummation. And finally, it is a *dominical* bloc of teaching, flowing from the lips of the incarnate Christ himself, and therefore worthy of special attention. Here then we need to listen hard if ever we hope to arrive at a sound NT understanding of the Kingdom of God.

Much as I wish we could devote an entire chapter to these rich texts, limitations of time and space preclude it. We can, however, get to the heart of things with a short survey. Therefore, in what follows I will briefly introduce Jesus' teaching, take a close look at what I believe is the single most important parable of the Kingdom, give the gist of all the rest, and then conclude by summarizing the key mysteries of the Kingdom here unveiled. Before plunging in, you may wish to read these passages once again. After that, please keep your Bible open, as we dig into these rewarding texts together.

Mysteries and Parables (Mt. 13:1-17, Mk. 4:10-12)

The Lord's instruction on the mysteries of the Kingdom began with his telling the assembled multitudes a parable, the Parable of the Sower (Mt. 4:1-9, Mk. 4:1-9). Since all alike were mystified as to its meaning, his disciples later came to him privately, asking him to explain the teaching, and also why he chose to clothe it in parabolic language. His response should be deeply affecting to all Christians: "To you it has been given to know the mysteries of the Kingdom of Heaven; but to them it has not been given" (Mt. 13:11). Since this brief word sets the stage for all that is to come, we do well to spend some time with it. Two key points may be made.

First, in this special season of teaching on the Kingdom, Christ's main purpose was to initiate his disciples into the "mysteries" of the Kingdom of heaven. As we saw earlier, throughout the NT a mystery is defined as "an open secret," a divine truth formerly hidden or veiled, but now brought out into the open by divine revelation. Such is the case here. As Matthew himself remarks, Jesus was "... uttering things kept secret from the foundation of the world" (Mt. 13:34-35).

Thus, with respect to the truth of the Kingdom, Jesus knows his disciples are in the dark. Yes, from their youth they have read and heard about the Kingdom in their Scriptures, but they have not yet understood it. Why? Because they have not yet received certain special truths about the Kingdom; truths that will enable them to understand its nature and structure; truths that in due season will empower them to shout the good news of the Kingdom from the rooftops (Mark 4:21-23). But now, says Jesus, something great is happening. Through his Messianic Son and Prophet, God the Father, at long last, is graciously giving these precious truths to his people. To them and them alone he is unveiling the mysteries of the Kingdom. Moreover, in doing so, he is also putting into their hands a set of keys, keys that will open up and unveil the true meaning of all OT Kingdom prophecy.

This brings us to our second point, namely that this precious set of keys is a gift of the sovereign God. In other words, for wise reasons he is pleased to give it to some and not to others. We see this in Jesus' day, and we see it in our own. In the days of the Lord's flesh, God was pleased to give his Kingdom truths to Jesus' disciples, but not to "those who (were) outside," to the majority of Israelites (Mark 4:11). True, he did, in one sense, give it to the outsiders. But he gave it *only* in parables, and did so as a judgment and a testimony against them, because their hearts were dull, their ears deaf, and their eyes closed (Mt. 13:13-15, Mk. 4:10-12). However, in the case of the disciples—all whom Christ chose, all who followed him, all who humbled themselves to seek truth from his lips—he gave not only the parables, but also their meaning; a meaning they partially understood prior to his passion, but fully understood only after his exaltation (Mk. 4:10-12).

Importantly, it is much the same today. Though the NT canon is now complete; though Christ's own interpretation of (many of) the parables is contained therein; and though his holy prophets and apostles have repeatedly instructed the world as to the true nature and structure of the Kingdom ... still, all men everywhere remain in darkness unless and until God, by his Spirit, graciously grants them to understand these things. Only thus shall the veil over their eyes be taken away; only thus shall the veil over the OT be taken away (2 Cor. 3:ff); and only thus shall they behold the saving truth about God's heavenly Kingdom and his divine Messianic King (John 3:3f).

It is for this reason that our Lord pronounces so great a blessing upon his disciples, saying:

But blessed are your eyes, for they see; and your ears, for they hear. For truly I say to you that many prophets and righteous men desired to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it.

—Mt. 13:16-17

How is it that Jesus' disciples become "scribes"—master teachers—of the Kingdom (Mt. 13:52)? How is it that henceforth they surpass the OT prophets themselves in Kingdom wisdom and understanding? How is it that they can bring out of their treasury things old and new, confidently opening up both OTKP and NT Kingdom teaching (Mt. 13:52)? It is because the gracious God has been pleased to open their eyes to see, and their ears to hear. This is quite practical for every modern seeker of Kingdom truth. It means that we too must humble ourselves before the sovereign God, beseeching him for the heavenly light by which alone we can see and understand these great mysteries (Luke 24:45, Eph. 1:15f). Moreover, if and when we do receive this light, it is certain we must just as passionately thank him for so great a gift; a gift that might not have come to us, but did, because of the surpassing riches of his sovereign grace (Eph. 1:6-7, 2:7).

The Parable of the Wheat and the Tares (Mt. 13:24-30, 36-48)

In search of the mysteries of the Kingdom, we turn first to the Parable of the Wheat and the Tares. It is one of two parables for which Matthew and Mark give us the Lord's private interpretation. The other, the Parable of the Sower and the Soils, deals largely with the *nature* of the Kingdom, especially in its first stage. This one, however, deals not only with its nature, but also with its *structure*. Accordingly, Mathew devotes more attention to this particular parable than to any other. And this is fitting. Yes, it is only a *seminal* teaching, and therefore requires some fleshing out. But it is also an astonishingly *substantial* teaching, supplying, as it were, the very skeleton upon which the flesh of all NT eschatology will grow until the whole body reaches full stature. It is for these reasons that I regard it as the most important parable of all.

As for its meaning, the Lord is almost punctilious about opening up the symbolism involved, obviously desiring his disciples fully to understand every word. This makes it a much-needed bastion of eschatological clarity. Accordingly, there is little need for me to comment at length on what he has already said so well. I do, however, want to comment on the rich eschatological implications of this text by pointing out several of the key mysteries it contains.

1. The one Kingdom of God comes in two stages: The Kingdom of the Son, followed by the Kingdom of the Father.

That there is but *one* Kingdom is clear from verse 38, where Jesus speaks of “the sons of *the* Kingdom.” As in verse 11, so here: the article is significant, revealing that in the end there is but a single Kingdom of God. How then can Christ speak of two kingdoms: the Kingdom of the Son and the Kingdom of the Father? The answer is simple: *The two stages of the one Kingdom share a common essence.* Both are spheres of redemption. Both are spheres of rescue and restoration. Both are spheres in which God is directly ruling over his redeemed children. As our study proceeds, we will discuss how the two spheres differ. Here, however, the important point is that in essence the two Kingdoms are simply phases of the one Kingdom. This implies, of course, that in all essentials, the second phase of the Kingdom is the same as the first.

Though the phrase *Kingdom of the Son* occurs only once in the NT (Col. 1:13), the idea is pervasive. Here, it appears in verse 41, where Jesus states that at the end of the age he, the Son of Man, will send forth his angels to gather out of *his Kingdom* all things that offend. In the pages ahead, we will have much to say about the characteristics of this (stage of the) Kingdom. Yet even confining ourselves to the present parable, we learn much: it is growing (v. 30), it is temporary (vv. 30, 40), and it will endure until the end of the (present evil) age, when its righteous human subjects shall be rescued from wrath and from “all things that offend” (vv. 41-43).

As for the Kingdom of the Father, Jesus speaks of it here only glancingly. Nevertheless, even from his few words, it is clear enough that this (stage of the) Kingdom is co-extensive with the Age to Come, and is therefore eternal (v. 40). Moreover, in this Kingdom the Father clearly has

supreme authority over the righteous subjects of his Son, who are now *fully* rescued from evil, and *fully* restored to the glory of God, so much so that they, like him, shine as the very sun in its strength (v. 43)!

Important as this mystery is, it was not really too mysterious to the disciples. Having wrestled for centuries with the prophetic scriptures, most of the Jews of Jesus' day thought of the Kingdom as coming in two stages. The first was usually called "the Days of the Messiah," a period of unknown duration in which the LORD's Messiah would lead Israel to military victory over their enemies, thereafter spearheading a worldwide revival of faith in Israel's God. The second, which would be ushered in by the Day of the LORD (i.e., the Day of Judgment upon all nations), was called "the Age (or World) to Come." This was the final state, the Kingdom in its full and final form. Later we will discuss these ideas at length. For the moment, I would simply stress that in giving his disciples the mysteries of the Kingdom, Jesus did indeed affirm a two-staged Kingdom of God. However, as we are about to see, his view of the *nature* of its two stages was *radically* different from that of his Jewish contemporaries!

2. During the first stage of the Kingdom, the Messianic Son of God reigns from heaven, not earth.

This is without doubt the most mysterious of the mysteries of the Kingdom! Though the OT did indeed contain a few hints of a heavenly Messianic reign, the figurative and typological language of OTKP gave rise, naturally enough, to the expectation of an *earthly* Messianic reign centered in physical Jerusalem and Zion. Indeed, so strong was this expectation, and so impenetrable the mystery that Jesus here begins to reveal, that the disciples were still expecting an earthly kingdom even after their Lord's resurrection (Acts 1:6)! It was, then, not until the coming of the Spirit that the heavenly Teacher fully opened their minds to see the truth about the purely spiritual reign of him to whom the Father had given all authority in heaven and on earth (John 16:13, Acts 2:22-36)!

In our parable, Christ's revelation of his soon-coming heavenly reign is given only in seed form. Indeed, it would be difficult for us (not to mention the disciples) to spot it, were it not for a host of other NT texts that supplement and illuminate it, many of which we will discuss below.

Nevertheless, with the benefit of NT hindsight, we can see it here clearly enough.

Our first glimpse of a distinctly heavenly reign comes in the fact that Jesus here refers to his kingdom as the kingdom of *the Son of Man* (v. 41). This title was designed to remind the disciples of the Messianic figure of Daniel 7:13-15. As a close look at that passage will show, the Personage there celebrated is manifestly a *heavenly* being, ushered upon clouds of glory into the *heavenly* presence of the Ancient of Days, after which, *in heaven*, he receives from God dominion, glory, and a universal Kingdom. Soon, Jesus himself will fulfill this prophecy (Acts 2:29-36). Therefore, in what is admittedly opaque language, he begins here to prepare his disciples to understand *his own forthcoming heavenly reign*.

The case for this truth is much strengthened when we read in v. 41 that at the end of the age the Son of Man will send forth his angels to effect a final separation of the wheat and the tares (v.30). In the gospels alone there are quite a number of texts that make explicit what remains implicit here: At the end of the age the glorified Christ will *descend from heaven* with all his holy angels to accomplish the final Judgment of all sentient beings (Mt. 24:29-31, 25:31, 26:64; Mk. 8:38, 14:62). And with this solemn truth the epistles and the Revelation agree (1 Thess. 3:13, 4:16, 2 Thess. 1:7, Jude 1:14, Rev. 19:11-16).

It would be hard to overemphasize the importance of this particular mystery. In one form or another, the Messiah's heavenly reign pervades the entire NT. All the other parables presuppose and elaborate upon it. Many gospel texts reference and illuminate it. It is first preached and celebrated in the book of Acts. Whole blocs of the epistles plumb its hidden depths. The Revelation is structured around it. Moreover, after finally coming to terms with it, the NT writers find it spoken of in the OT as well!

Why does Christ's heavenly reign loom so large in Biblical revelation? We learned the answer in our earlier discussion of the Eternal Covenant: It looms so large because *it is so integral to God's eternal purpose and plan*. Think, for example, of God's eternal purpose to honor his Son. How better to accomplish this than to make him the Redeemer of a whole new world, raise him from dead, take him up into heaven, seat him at his own right hand, *and then place the whole universe under his authority and control*, thereby making him the High King of heaven and earth?

Or again, think of God's eternal plan: the heading up of all things in Christ, by which he means to achieve his eternal purpose. How better to accomplish this than by placing the Holy Spirit under Christ's authority, so that Christ himself, by the Spirit, and through the preaching of the Church, might *apply the redemption* that he accomplished during the days of his humiliation; might gather God's chosen people under his wing, under his spiritual headship; and might lovingly prepare them for the Day of his return, when at last he will place *all* things in subjection to himself, thereby creating a new humanity, new heavens, and a new earth—all for the pleasure and glory of God the Father (Eph. 1:10, Phil. 2:11)!

Yes, the doctrine of Christ's heavenly mediatorial reign is important, so important that it must rank as one of the two or three main keys to all biblical theology. To neglect it is eschatological suicide. To understand it at its depths is to resolve once and for all the Great End Time Debate.

3. During the days of the Messiah's heavenly reign, the world will be a field of battle upon which two opposing kings, and two opposing kingdoms, vie for the souls of men.

In explaining this parable, Jesus spoke of two opposing kingdoms dwelling side by side in the world. Such imagery would not have been too surprising for the disciples. After all, had not Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Israel and all her kings dwelt in the Promised Land, surrounded by hostile enemies for centuries on end? And even now, was not Israel occupied and oppressed by Roman governors and garrisons, whom most Jews viewed as willing (if unsuspecting) instruments of "the wicked one"? Surely then there was no great mystery here!

But indeed there was. For in speaking as he did, Jesus had something far different in mind; something beyond his disciples' wildest imagination; something profound, ultimate, and spiritual; something of which Israel's physical warfare in the flesh was but a type and a shadow. What he had in mind—and what he here unveils in seed form—was nothing less than a whole new cosmological paradigm; a whole new way for God's (NT) people to look at their experience in the earth; and a whole new way of thinking about the earthly consequences of his heavenly reign.

This new paradigm is the third mystery of the Kingdom, just cited above: *From Pentecost until the Parousia, the world will be a field of battle upon which two opposing kings (Christ and Satan), and two opposing kingdoms (the realm of the world and the realm of the Church) do fierce battle for souls of men.*

In chapter 6 we discussed these central NT truths at some length. In seed form, they all appear in this parable. Here, Jesus is saying that the exalted Son of Man will soon pour out the Holy Spirit, send his Church into the world to preach the Gospel, and begin to bring his elect to faith, thereby planting them in the field of the world as a growing crop of wheat (vv. 25, 37-38). Meanwhile, the wicked one—the devil and Satan—will continually use false religions, philosophies, and ideologies to gain a following of his own, thereby planting them in the field of the world as a crop of tares (vv. 39-39). Though barely distinguishable physically, these two seeds have completely different and antithetical natures. Yet Christ forbears to judge the tares; indeed, for a season, he very much desires the two realms to interact. In particular, he desires the growing crop of wheat to keep on carrying the Gospel to the tares, so that he himself—from heaven and by his Spirit—may put the tares to the test; may enter the Strong Man’s field and plunder his goods (Mt. 12:29); may give the tares a new wheat nature (Mt. 7:15-20, 2 Cor. 5:17); and may transfer them from the Domain of Darkness into his own Kingdom of light and love (Col. 1:13). In other words, in order to have the largest possible crop, the High King of Heaven has ordained a lengthy Era of Proclamation and Probation, during which the two crops (realms) will coexist, grow, and interact. However, at the end of the age there will indeed be a harvest: Christ will return to separate the wheat from the tares, and to transform *the whole world* into the glorious Kingdom of God. Then an Era of eternal Reward and Retribution will begin, wherein the righteous will shine forth like the sun in the Kingdom of the Father (vv. 40-43).

4. The two stages of the Kingdom are separated by a single Consummation at the Parousia of Christ.

With all Israel, the disciples followed the OT prophets in looking for the Day of the LORD; the Day when Yahweh, Israel’s God, would

supernaturally break into history, judge the nations, and usher in the Age to Come (Isaiah 2, 13, Joel 2, Zeph. 1, Mal. 4). In our parable, Jesus confirms this expectation, but also supplements it with at least three new mysteries; three fresh revelations about the true character of the Consummation and the Age to Come.

First, we learn here that the Day of the LORD is actually the Day of the Son of Man; the Day of the Lord Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 5:5, 2 Cor. 1:14, Phil. 1:10, 16, 2 Peter 3:10). In other words, Jesus here lays a foundation for one of the great “mysteries” of NT eschatology: namely, that it has pleased the Father to appoint his Messianic Son as the Agent of all the great eschatological acts and events that will bring Salvation History to its glorious, Christ-exalting close. For example, here in vv. 41-42 we learn that Christ himself will execute final judgment upon all men and angels; and indeed that he himself will lift the curse from all nature, thereby casting out of his Kingdom *all* things that offend (Phil. 3:20-21). As we will see later, other NT texts flesh out this picture, portraying Christ as the divine-human Agent of the resurrection, the transformation of the living saints, and more.

Secondly, we see here that the Day of the LORD will occur at the Parousia of the High King of Heaven; at the close of his heavenly reign, when he *descends from heaven* in power and great glory to consummate Salvation History. Yes, in our present text there is only a hint of this mystery. But as we have just seen, many other NT texts confirm this very scenario.

Finally, our text unveils a precious trinitarian truth, namely, that the Age to Come is, in fact, *the Kingdom of the Father*. Throughout the first stage of the Kingdom, the Father exalts and supremely honors the Son. Then—in the second, final, and eternal stage of the Kingdom—it is the Son’s turn supremely to exalt the Father. Later we will go into this subject in greater depth. Here it suffices to conclude by saying that in Jesus’ mind the NT mystery of the Holy Trinity obviously lies quite close to the heart of NT eschatology!

The Gist of the Other Parables of the Kingdom

To fully grasp the meaning of the Parable of the Wheat and the Tares is, I believe, to receive a precious key to all the rest. Let us therefore take that

key in hand and look, ever so briefly, at the other parables of the Kingdom. My goal here is simply to give the gist of each one. Hopefully, these few remarks will move you to further meditation upon these precious eschatological gems.

The Parable of the Sower appears in all three synoptic gospels, a sign of its great importance (Mt. 13:1-9, 18-23; Mark 4:1-9, 13-20, Luke 8:4-15). Indeed, Jesus himself identifies it as crucial for a proper understanding of all the other parables (Mark 4:13). The great mystery unveiled here, and elaborated in the rest, is *the distinctly spiritual character of the first stage of the Kingdom*. During the days of Christ's heavenly reign, the Kingdom will not come with observation (Luke 17:20). Rather, it will be purely spiritual, completely invisible, and therefore entered spiritually and invisibly. How will this happen? As we have already seen, it happens by hearing with faith. Christ, the heavenly Sower, will send his Spirit-led Church into the world to scatter the seed of the Word of God, the Gospel. Satan, the wicked one, will oppose her efforts, sometimes successfully (Mt. 3:15). Nevertheless, some seed will fall on good soil: the noble hearts of God's elect, who, amidst much tribulation, will bring forth good spiritual fruit with perseverance.

This parable is rich with instruction, warning, and encouragement. It teaches Christ's pilgrim Church the centrality and indispensability of "the foolishness of preaching" for the advance of his Kingdom. It prepares them for the hard fact that not all who hear the Gospel will believe or persevere. But it also assures them that some definitely will (John 17:17, Col. 1:3-6, 1 Peter 1:23).

In a similar vein, the Parable of the Mustard Seed assures the saints of the *infallible, worldwide growth* of the High King's earthly realm, the Church. Yes, it starts out very small, with the body of a single carpenter from Nazareth being planted, seed-like, into the depths of the earth. But in the end it will sprout and grow to enormous size, extending its branches upward and outward to all nations, providing spiritual shelter and rest for untold multitudes the world around (Rev. 5:9). Thus, in parabolic imagery drawn from OT prophecy, the Lord affirms once again, "I *will* build my Church" (Ezek. 17:22-24, Mt. 16:18, John 10:16)!

Much the same message is conveyed in the Parable of the Leaven. Like yeast spreading through a lump of dough, Christ's spiritual reign will infallibly push its way through the earth until it permeates the whole world

(Mt. 13:33). Here, however, we meet a further nuance: Not only does the Kingdom spread infallibly, but also, like the workings of leaven, *secretly* and *mysteriously*. On this score, the Parable of the Leaven is virtually identical with the Parable of the Growing Seed, found in Mark's Gospel (Mark 4:26-29). In both of them, Christ is emphasizing that, despite necessary human labors, his global community of faithful believers is *not* a creation of man, but of the Spirit of Truth, whom the world cannot receive because it neither sees him nor knows him (John 14:17). The saints are to take comfort and courage from this, faithfully scattering the seed of the Word, then trusting the sovereign Spirit to do his secret, mysterious, and infallible work in human hearts until the appointed Day of Harvest (Mark 4:29).

The parables of the Hidden Treasure (Mt. 13:44) and the Pearl of Great Price (45-46) are both designed to communicate the exceedingly great *value* of the Kingdom for those who find it; a value that will quite naturally be reflected in their willingness "to sell all"—to make every necessary earthly sacrifice—in order to receive and retain it. Note also, especially from the Parable of the Hidden Treasure, how Christ again portrays his Messianic Kingdom as being *invisible*; as being *hidden* in the earth, or tucked away like a rare book in the stalls of the great marketplace of ideas that is the world-system. Clearly, this Messianic Kingdom has nothing to do with mountains, cities, temples, priests, sacrifices, or any other institution of the Mosaic Law. Rather, it is *an invisible realm of spiritual rescue and restoration*; a realm that does not even appear on the radar screen of the world-system; yet a realm profoundly valued and cherished by all who, through God's sovereign grace, have heard, seen, and entered in.

Finally, we have the Parable of the Dragnet. This appears only in Matthew's gospel, where, fittingly enough, it brings Jesus' discourse on the mysteries of the Kingdom to a close (Mt. 13:47-50). It is one of three parables picturing the Last Judgment as a definitive separation, whether of wheat and tares (13:30), sheep and goats (25:31-46), or good fish and bad (13:49). Here again Christ speaks of the holy angels. This time, however, we receive more truth about their mission in that Day. First, they will *gather in* both good and bad; then they will *gather out* (*lit.* throw away) the bad. Later we will examine a number of other NT texts that shed more light on this one eschatological "rapture" of the saved and the lost. Here, however, I

would conclude by observing yet again that Christ clearly anticipates a *single* Consummation. At the end of the age he will come again one final time (13:41). He will send forth his angels to assemble all men and all angels before him (Mt. 25:31-32, 2 Cor. 5:10). He will turn away the wicked into hell (13:42, 50). And then, in a glorious new Age to Come, he will cause the righteous to shine forever in the eternal Kingdom of their Father (13:43).

A Summary of the Mysteries of the Kingdom

We are seeking Jesus' view of the *coming* of the Kingdom: how it enters and unfolds in Salvation History. Our starting point has been his Discourse on the Mysteries of the Kingdom. Though clothed in parabolic language, it is fabulously rich. Indeed, with a little assistance from later NT texts, we find that it actually contains the whole of Christ's cosmic eschatology; that *in seed form* it actually unveils *all* the essential mysteries of the nature and temporal structure (or coming) of the Kingdom. Let us summarize our findings so far.

The fruit of God's ongoing redemptive action in history, the Kingdom is essentially *a spiritual sphere of divine rescue and restoration*, a sphere in which the evil sons of Satan have been supernaturally transformed into the holy and righteous sons of God. This one Kingdom comes in two stages, separated by a single Consummation at the Parousia of Christ at the end of the present evil age. The first stage is called the Kingdom of the Son. During this time, the Messianic Son of God reigns from heaven, by the Spirit, over his earthly subjects. His benevolent rule is spiritual, invisible, redemptive, infinitely valuable, and worthy of all self-sacrifice. Amidst perennial conflict with the kingdom of the evil one, it advances spiritually and invisibly by "the foolishness of the message preached." For this reason, sinners enter it spiritually and invisibly by hearing the Gospel message with faith. When at last the Kingdom of the Son has permeated the whole earth—when the Gospel has reached all nations, and a believing people has been gathered out of them—the end will come. The High King of Heaven will descend to the earth in power and great glory to raise the dead, transform the living, judge the world in righteousness, send the wicked into hell, and cause the righteous to shine like the sun in the Kingdom of their Father. The

Kingdom of the Father is the second, last, and eternal stage of the Kingdom. Here God's benevolent redemptive rule extends to the physical side of the creation, as well. Here all things—both spiritual and physical—become perfectly whole. Here, all things are forever filled with the glory of God.

Crucial Confirming Texts

In our journey so far, I have repeatedly stated that a great many NT texts confirm the view of the Kingdom unveiled in the Lord's Discourse on the Mysteries of the Kingdom. We have touched on a few already. Now we must look more closely at some of the choicest. My strategy here will be to cite (but not reproduce) the text, and then make some brief observations. Please remember that my remarks will be limited to the topic at hand: the coming, or temporal structure, of the Kingdom. My goal is simply to show that *all throughout the NT* Christ and the apostles envision the Kingdom as coming in two stages only, with the spiritual Kingdom of the Son being separated from the spiritual and physical Kingdom of the Father by a single Consummation at the end of the present evil age.

With this in mind, let us begin.

The Parable of the Minas (Luke 19:11-27; cf. Mt. 25:14-30)

The Lord spoke this parable to his disciples in anticipation of his imminent departure to heaven. His goal was to secure their faithfulness in Gospel ministry during the entire period of his coming physical absence. In Luke's version, we read as follows:

He spoke another parable, because He was near Jerusalem, and because they thought the Kingdom of God would appear immediately. Therefore He said, "A certain nobleman went into a far country to receive for himself a Kingdom and to return."

—Luke 19:12

These introductory words provide an eschatological framework for the disciples' thinking, a theological paradigm that will enable them to persevere in service throughout the long and difficult days ahead. Each word is significant. The *nobleman* is Christ. The *far country* is heaven. When he arrives there, he will *receive for himself a Kingdom*. This is the Messianic Kingdom that the disciples mistakenly thought was about to

appear on earth, in Jerusalem. But strange to tell, it is actually a *heavenly* Kingdom; a reward that God the Father will grant to his Messianic Son of Man; a core element of the great exaltation that God will bestow on him as a result of his humiliation, his arduous obedience to the point of death (Daniel 7:14, Mt. 28:18ff, Phil. 2:5f, Rev. 5:1f). Importantly, the High King will remain in heaven for a long time. The Kingdom of God (in its fullness) will not appear *immediately* (Luke 19:11). The High King will indeed *return* (Luke 19:12), but only *after many days* (Mt. 25:19). Nevertheless, his coming is sure. Therefore, the disciples must not lose heart or grow lazy. For when the King does return, he will handsomely reward his faithful servants, but slay all the rebels who refused to have him reign over them (Luke 19:27). The former will enter into the joy of their Lord (Mt. 25:21, 23); the latter will experience only weeping and gnashing of teeth (Mt. 25:30).

We have seen all this before, especially in the Parable of the Wheat and the Tares. Here, Christ once again clearly affirms the central mystery of the Kingdom. The one Kingdom comes in two stages: a temporary heavenly reign, followed by an eternal earthly reign, the two being separated by a single Parousia when the High King descends from heaven to consummate all things in final reward and retribution.

The Upper Room Discourse (John 13-17)

Subtly, but quite substantially, Jesus' thinking about the structure of the Kingdom is again on display in his Upper Room Discourse to the disciples. Notably, it fits in perfectly with all we have seen so far.

His hour has come. His earthly ministry—his humiliation—is nearly complete. Only the Cross—the final earthly work of God's great High Priest—remains (17:19). When it is accomplished, his exaltation will begin. Following his resurrection, he will depart from this world to the Father who sent him, to his home in *heaven above* (13:1, 33, 16:5). However, he will not enter heaven as he left it. Rather, he will return home, not only as the Son of God, but also as the Son of Man; as the Messiah, God's Spirit-anointed Prophet, Priest, and King. When he arrives, the Father will glorify him in heaven, even as he so faithfully glorified the Father on earth (17:1, 4). Indeed, the Father will place all things in his hand, giving him authority

over all flesh (13:3, 17:2). With that mighty scepter in hand, he will therefore embark on the next stage of his redemptive work, sending the Holy Spirit down to his disciples on earth (14:15-18, 15:25, 16:7). By the Spirit, he will indwell them (14:19-24), sanctify them (15:1f), and empower them to bear witness to the truth of the Gospel (15:26-16:15). Moreover, as they do so, he himself, by that same Spirit, will bestow eternal life upon as many as the Father has given to him (17:2, 20).

Here then is the saints' manner of life in the entire forthcoming Era of Proclamation and Probation. Laying hold of these great provisions by prayer, obedience, and meditation upon God's Word of Truth (14:21, 16:23-28, 17:17), the High King's disciples of every time and place will abide joyfully in him (15:1f), serve one another in love (13:1-17), and bravely endure inevitable persecution (15:18-25)—all the while eagerly waiting for their Lord's return. And they will not be disappointed. For in that Day the heavenly King will be to them as a Bridegroom to his Bride: In a glorious new World to Come—an eternal dwelling place that he himself will prepare for his Beloved—he will receive her to himself, that where he is, she may be also (14:1-3).

The Early Sermons of the Apostle Peter (Acts 2:14-39, 3:11-26)

As in Jesus' Discourse on the Mysteries of the Kingdom, so here: Peter's first two sermons to his Jewish brethren in Jerusalem give us *the entire NT eschatology in a nutshell*. The marvel is that he so clearly "gets it," whereas only weeks before he most assuredly did not. Before, both he and his comrades were wondering if the risen Christ would immediately expel the Romans and restore the promised Davidic monarchy to national Israel (Acts 1:6-8). Now, however, his thinking has completely changed. Now the Spirit has filled him, opened his understanding, and illumined the Scriptures. Now he understands, from those same Scriptures, that the Christ had first to suffer, and then to enter into his glory (Luke 24:26); that it was necessary for him to die, rise from the dead, and be exalted to God's right hand in heaven, so that repentance and remission of sins could be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem (Luke 24:45-49). In short, Peter now understands that the Messiah's kingdom—the very Kingdom promised in all the OT scriptures—is heavenly in origin, spiritual in nature,

and redemptive in purpose. It is exceedingly abundantly unlike anything that Israel could ever have asked or thought (Eph. 3:20).

But let us pause to explore these things a little more closely. We will do so by taking a brief look at each of the two sermons. In the first, the focus is exclusively upon the mystery of the Messiah's heavenly reign. In the second, Peter again speaks about this reign, but gives us further light on the Consummation that will occur at its end, when Christ returns from heaven to "restore all things." Thus, between the two sermons, we do indeed behold again the nature and temporal structure of the Kingdom of God; the entire NT eschatology in a nutshell.

1. The Sermon on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:14-39)

This majestic sermon came in response to a question. Beholding the spiritual fireworks of Pentecost, the amazed and perplexed onlookers asked one another, "Whatever could this mean" (2:12)? Peter was well pleased to explain.

His answer was straightforward: "This is what was spoken of by the prophet Joel" (2:16). In other words, his hearers were to understand that the events of Pentecost mark the onset of the last days: the days of the coming of the Kingdom; days of the Spirit outpoured; days of the saints prophesying; days of final judgment looming; and days when men may—and must—call upon the name of the Lord to be saved (Joel 2:28-32, Acts 2:14-21).

But what was not so straightforward—and what was so totally unexpected—was Peter's explanation of *how* and *why* these events were occurring. His discourse was actually quite lengthy, and had to be, since here, for the very first time, the apostle undertook to introduce his Jewish brethren to *the great NT mysteries of the Person and Work of their Messiah*. Let us follow him carefully as he does.

Peter begins by pointing to Jesus' miracles, explaining that God himself granted them by way of divine attestation, seeking to mark out Jesus of Nazareth as his Messiah; indeed, as the (Messianic) Prophet promised by Moses, the Prophet appointed by God to bring the light of his (redemptive) truth to all his people, both Jew and Gentile (Acts 2:22, 3:22-23).

Next he reminds them of Jesus' death by crucifixion, affirming that it was indeed divinely foreknown and predestined to occur, yet a sin of

unspeakable magnitude and gravity; a sin for which they themselves were personally responsible (2:23). Here then, in seed form, Peter introduces the Messiah as Priest and Sacrifice for the people of God.

Then, at considerable length, he speaks of the *fact* of Jesus' resurrection. First, he shows that it too was in accordance with the prophetic Scriptures (Psalm 19:8-11). Then he explains that it *had* to occur, since God could not permit death—the penalty for sin—permanently to hold his Holy One in its grip (2:24-28). Here the apostle unveils the perfect holiness—and, indeed, something of the divine nature—of Israel's Messiah.

In speaking further on this subject, Peter now unveils yet another reason for Jesus' resurrection (2:29-32). As all Israel well knew, in the writing prophets God had promised that of the fruit of David's body he would raise up One to sit upon his throne; a latter-day King of the lineage of David who would rescue and restore Israel; in short, the Messiah himself. Peter declares that Jesus is that man. And for this very reason, God has not abandoned his soul to Hades, nor permitted his flesh to see corruption. Rather, he has raised him from the dead. *And he has raised him from the dead so that he could raise him up to heaven and seat him on David's heavenly throne!* Here again we encounter the greatest eschatological mystery of the NT; the mystery that Jesus himself had spoken of in his parables and in the upper room. It is the mystery of the Messiah's heavenly reign; the mystery that the Messiah does not rule on earth over Israel according to the flesh, but in heaven—and from heaven—over Israel according to the Spirit; over the New Covenant "Israel of God" (Gal. 6:16).

Now Peter reaches the climax of his sermon. In his grand peroration, he accomplishes two things: He *fully* answers their question about the meaning of the Pentecostal manifestations, and he does so by *fully* unveiling the (most unexpected) mystery of the Person and Work of Israel's Messiah:

Therefore, being exalted to the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this which you now see and hear. For David did not ascend into the heavens, but he himself says, "The LORD said to my Lord, 'Sit at My right hand, till I make your enemies your footstool.'" Therefore, let all the house of Israel assuredly know that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ.

—Acts 2:32-36, 5:29-31

In these inspiring final words, Peter's great goal is to supply his audience with all the remaining NT truth they need to do exactly as Joel desired and foretold: call upon the name of the Lord and be saved (2:21). But what exactly is "the name of the Lord"? Peter knows, and has already unveiled it. He has told them that God bore witness to Jesus by various signs and wonders; that he foreordained and brought to pass his atoning death; and that in fulfillment of the prophetic Scriptures, he also raised him from the dead.

Now Peter sets the capstone. He tells them that God has *exalted* Jesus to his own right hand. As the text itself makes clear, this means far more than simply ascending into heaven. Rather, it means ascending into heaven so as to sit down at God's own right hand; so as to receive from him all authority in heaven and earth (Mt. 28:18f); so as to receive from him (authority over) the promised Holy Spirit; so as to pour out the Spirit on the nascent Church; so as to move the Church to preach the Good News of salvation, and thereby move sinners to call upon the name of Jesus for that salvation; so as to indwell the Church by the Spirit, and rule over her as her royal Head from heaven above; and so as to *continue* ruling until, on the Day of the Lord, he returns to put *all* his (remaining) enemies under his feet, just as OT prophecy had predicted (Psalm 110:1). In short, God has exalted this Jesus, whom they crucified, to be the divine-human *Lord* of the entire universe, and to be the Spirit-anointed *Christ*—the redeeming Prophet, Priest, Sacrifice, and King—of all his people.

In his concluding remarks, Luke comments on the effect of Peter's sermon, and it is well worth noting what he says (2:37-39). Because the High King of heaven was much at work by the Holy Spirit, men were cut to the quick and cried out, asking what they must do to be saved. With the words of Joel still in mind, Peter directs them to the Lord Jesus, urging them to repent and be baptized in his name for the forgiveness of their sins and the full reception of the gift of the Holy Spirit. Here again we see the distinctly redemptive and spiritual character of Christ's kingdom: All who believe are *rescued* from the Domain of Darkness, *transferred* into the (spiritual) kingdom of God's beloved Son, and *restored* to eternal life in the triune God (Col. 1:13). Importantly, this precious promise is not only for Jews, but for Gentiles as well; for all who are far off, as many as the Lord God of Israel is pleased to call (2:39). Well remembering his Master's

words about One Shepherd and one (new) Flock (John 10:16), Peter here speaks of the one new Israel of God, over which David's Greater Son, seated upon his heavenly throne, will continue to rule until he comes again at the end of the age to restore all things (Acts 5:29-31).

2. The Sermon at Solomon's Portico (Acts 3:11-26, 2 Peter 3)

In spirit, content, and purpose, this sermon is much like the one delivered on Pentecost. By supernatural gifts of faith and power, Christ, through Peter, has healed a lame man (3:1-10). The amazed bystanders are inclined to look to Peter and John as the agents thereof, but Peter directs their attention instead to Jesus (3:11-12). Even in the days of his flesh, God glorified him (13). Yet Israel denied him, delivering him up to Pilate and killing the very Prince of Life (14-15). But God raised him from the dead, this Living One whose spiritual rule now gives life and perfect soundness even to the lame (16). Yes, this Jesus is the Christ, who, according to God's predetermined plan, suffered and rose again, all in fulfillment of the OT Scriptures (17-18).

At this point, Peter reaches his goal, and in doing so gives his audience further precious light on the Messiah and the course of his heavenly reign:

Repent therefore and return, that your sins may be blotted out, so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, and that he may send Jesus, the Christ appointed beforehand for you, whom heaven must receive until the times of *the* restoration of all things, about which God has spoken by the mouth of all his holy prophets since the world began.

—3:19-21

Once again Peter bids his Jewish brethren to look upward to Christ, penitently and believingly, so that they may enjoy forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit (2:38-39). Note, however, that in this sermon he speaks for the first time about *the course and conclusion of the Messiah's heavenly reign*. So long as God is calling Jews and Gentiles to Christ (2:39, 3:25), heaven must "receive" him: hold him there, keep him there. Happily, throughout this period of physical separation, the High King of Heaven will faithfully refresh his pilgrim people on earth with continuing visitations of his Spirit. When, however, the appointed time comes for the restoration of *all* things—a restoration spoken of by *all* the OT prophets—God will send him again to the earth. Why? Later on, Peter will give the answer that here

he has in mind: so that Christ himself may fulfill the great promise of the Covenant by creating new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells (Isaiah 65:17, 66:22, Acts 1:11, 2 Peter 3:13, Rev. 21:1)!

Here, then, is Peter's eschatology. Though in need of further fleshing out, it is quite clear and completely in line with his Master's: The one Kingdom of God comes in two stages—a heavenly and an earthly—with the two being separated by a single Consummation at Christ's coming again, when he will *finally* judge, redeem, rescue, and restore all things (1 Peter 1:3-9, 4:7, 2 Peter 3).

The remainder of the sermon contains two or three further points of eschatological interest. In verses 22-23, Peter identifies Jesus as the (eschatological) Prophet promised by Moses of old (Deut. 18:15). His point is that the entire OT prophetic institution finds its fulfillment in Christ, the Messianic Prophet of whom all former prophets were mere types and precursors. Very importantly, this Prophet is speaking right now, from heaven, through the Church, admonishing all men everywhere to repent, believe, and turn to him. In other words, the High King of heaven is also the High Prophet of heaven, preaching his Gospel to all nations, and urging all to hear him, lest, at the Judgment, they should be “destroyed from among the people” (3:23).

Also, observe in verse 24 Peter's confidence that *all* the prophets, from Samuel onwards, “foretold these days.” What days? The days of the High King of heaven; the days of the Messiah's heavenly reign; and the days with which he will bring it to a close at his coming again. This point cannot be overemphasized. As for Peter, so for all the writing apostles: *The sphere of fulfillment of all OTKP is the twofold Kingdom of God: the Kingdom of the Son, followed by the Kingdom of the Father; the Era of Proclamation and Probation, followed by the Era of Eternal Reward and Retribution.* Most assuredly, therefore, the OT prophets do not anticipate an ideal Mosaic theocracy in a future Millennium.

Finally, we note again from verses 25-26 that the subjects of Christ's Kingdom are not Jews only, but Jews and Gentiles. Yes, God sent Jesus to the Jews first, for the Jews a great privilege and a great responsibility (v. 26, Mt. 10:5-6, 15:24, Rom. 1:16). But from the very beginning he purposed and planned that in Abraham *all the families of the earth should be blessed* (v. 25, Gen. 22:18, 26:4, 28:140). Soon, Peter himself will watch them

come to the Messiah (Acts 8, 10-11). Indeed, soon he himself will be speaking of them as a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, and God's own special people (1 Peter 2:10). Dwelling as they do beneath the benevolent rule of David's Greater Son, they—along with their elect Jewish brethren—constitute the very Israel of God (Gal. 6:16).

Paul's Teaching on the Two Stages of the Resurrection (1 Cor. 15:20-28)

For clarity, conciseness, and comprehensiveness, this may well be the single most important NT passage dealing with the structure of the Kingdom of God. Many regard it as a bastion of amillennial eschatology, and also as the bane of every premillennial scheme. For this reason, it merits close examination.

A few words about the context are in order. Certain members of the Corinthian church have been denying the bodily resurrection of the dead (15:33-34). Realizing that this heretical tendency strikes at the very heart of the Gospel (15:1-11), Paul mounts a vigorous defense, exploring the resurrection from many different angles (15:12ff). In so doing, he is at pains to provide a chronological framework within which the saints at Corinth are to think about the resurrection. He does so in our text (15:20-28), after which he goes on to speak of other mysteries, including the nature of the resurrection body (15:35-49), the transformation and glorification of the living saints at Christ's coming (15:50-53), and the glorious finality of Christ's victory over death in that day (15:54-58). Thus, on the theme of the resurrection—and on the eschatological framework within which we are to contemplate it—there is no more important chapter in all of Scripture.

Let us work our way through this passage step by step, focusing once again on the matter that concerns us most: the coming and structure of the Kingdom.

In verse 20, Paul identifies the risen Christ as "the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep." Just as Israel under the Law was to offer two harvest sacrifices to God, one at the beginning and one at the end of the harvest season, so here: Christ is the first of all God's saints to rise from the dead, and the One whose own resurrection anticipates and guarantees the full harvest of resurrected saints at the end of the age (Leviticus 23:10f).

In verses 21-22 we learn *why* the saints' resurrection is guaranteed: Just as surely as Adam's sin was imputed to his children, with the result that they all died, so surely shall Christ's righteousness (in virtue of the merits of his atoning death) be imputed to those who are his, with the result that they, like him, will certainly rise from the dead. As the Last Adam, Christ is Head over a whole new humanity; God will deal as faithfully with the Body as he did with its Head (Rom. 5:12ff)!

In the crucial verses 23-24, Paul now elaborates, explaining the two simple stages in which the full resurrection harvest is to be brought in. Three discrete events are involved, after which *all* the saints will have been glorified, *and all Salvation History will have reached its ultimate goal*.

The first event is the resurrection of Christ himself, stage one of the harvest. The second event is the resurrection of those who belong to Christ, stage two of the harvest—*the stage that brings the harvest to completion*. Importantly, this occurs at Christ's Parousia, when he also will change and glorify the living saints in the twinkling of an eye (15:50-52). Then, because Christ has now gathered the full harvest of the redeemed to himself, the third and final event will occur. Paul calls this "the end" (15:24). In our text, it involves two elements. First, Christ "puts an end to all rule and power and authority." This is the final judgment, when all human and satanic foes are brought down and banished forever. Next, he delivers up the (completed) Kingdom to the Father. This is *Christ's Kingdom*, the Kingdom of the Son. As we shall see in a moment, it includes not only his *right to rule* (i.e., the sovereignty delegated to him by the Father), but also the *realm* that he created by means of that rule: his resurrected and glorified saints, along with the beautiful new glorified world they are to inherit. All this reminds us of Jesus' own teaching in the Parable of the Wheat and the Tares, where he spoke of the Son of Man coming again and casting out of his Kingdom *all* things that offend, so that in the end the righteous may shine forth like the sun in the Kingdom of the Father (Mt. 13:41-43).

Mindful that this material is breaking new ground, and desiring that the Corinthians better understand the delivering up of the Kingdom to the Father, Paul now backtracks, and in verses 25-28 explains things in greater detail. Observe from what follows how brightly the classic structure of NT eschatology shines forth from this passage!

In verse 25, Paul declares that Christ must reign till he has put all his enemies under his feet. As we learn from other NT Scriptures that cite Psalm 110, he has in view Christ's heavenly reign, and not, as some assert, a future millennial reign subsequent to his Parousia (Acts 2:34f, Heb. 1:13, 10:13). Throughout this period, Christ—from heaven, by the Spirit, through the preaching of the Gospel—will himself gather in his chosen people, turning former enemies into present friends by the miracle of regeneration. At the same time, he will also judge his impenitent adversaries, placing them under foot in *Hades*. And he will continue to do this until the Parousia, at which time he will finally destroy all remaining rule, authority, and power antithetical to his reign (15:24, Luke 19:27). This includes the last enemy, which is death itself (15:26), for God the Father has put all things—even death—beneath Christ's feet (15:27, Psalm 8:6). Please consider carefully: If Christ destroys the *last* enemy at his Parousia, how then shall other enemies arise in a millennium subsequent to it, as premillenarians assert?

In passing, we should note that the reference to Psalm 8 is quite significant (15:27, Psalm 8:6). The Psalm itself is a cry of wonder and praise that God has exalted man so highly as to give him dominion over the work of his hands. However, lifting his eyes a little higher, the apostle finds here an ultimate reference to the divine-human Messiah (Eph. 1:22, Heb. 2:8). As we saw earlier (and learned from Paul), in the beginning God purposed to make his Son the spiritual Head over all creation (Eph. 1:10, Col. 1:15-20). When sin entered the equation, he then set about to fulfill that purpose by making the Son of God into the Son of Man; making him the divine-human Redeemer, under whose headship he would place a new humanity and a new creation. Thus, in verse 27, Paul affirms that at Christ's return God will fulfill his eternal purpose for his Son, placing all remaining enemies under his feet, and all remaining friends under his headship, with the result that all creation will be renewed, perfected, and glorified.

There is, however, one exception: the Father himself. *He* cannot come under Christ's authority, since it is by his supreme authority that Christ received the (heavenly) authority that he now has (15:27). Accordingly, it is only fitting that in the end Christ should deliver up to the Father, not only his delegated sovereignty, but also all the (redeemed) things that the Father so lovingly delivered over to him, so that once again God (the Father)

becomes the supreme authority over all (15:25). Note carefully from this amazing verse that Christ will deliver up *all* (redeemed) things to his Father. This is none other than the consummated Kingdom of the Son—a new glorified humanity and a new glorified universe—freely and lovingly surrendered up to the Father, so that in the eternal Kingdom of the Father, he may be in all and over all, supremely.

Summing up, we have found that in this decisive NT text Paul once again represents the Kingdom as coming in two simple stages, separated by a single Parousia of Christ at the end of the age. Moreover, we have seen that this single Parousia is closely associated with a single resurrection of the dead, a single transformation of the living saints, and a single judgment of Christ's foes. The Parousia is therefore the hub, the fixed center around which all the other elements of the Consummation revolve. For this reason, in 1 Corinthians 15 the classical Reformation eschatology finds an excellent friend indeed. [1](#), [2](#), [3](#)

Paul's Prayer for the Ephesians (Eph. 1:15-23)

Paul's letter to the Ephesians is an extended meditation upon the mystery of the Church, and upon its place in God's redemptive purpose and plan for the universe. To read it is to see immediately that the mystery of Christ's heavenly reign lies at the heart of both; indeed, that it has always been one of the great goals of Salvation History, a goal that has finally been reached, and is presently being fulfilled, now that Jesus Christ is seated at the right hand of God.

Our text—Paul's majestic prayer for a spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of God and his purposes—throws considerable light on these things, supplying yet another NT confirmation of the centrality of the Messiah's heavenly reign, and of the true structure of Salvation History.

In the preceding verses (1:3-14), Paul has laid a foundation, using a trinitarian framework to unveil the great mysteries of redemption, the core elements of the Eternal Covenant. Before the foundation of the world, God the Father elected a people (to be) in Christ (1:3-6). In the fullness of time, God the Son came forth, taking on human flesh and making provision for their redemption through the shedding of his own blood (1:7). Now, through the preaching of the Gospel, God the Holy Spirit is gathering this people in,

sealing them for God's own possession, and teaching them about the greatness of their inheritance in Christ (1:11, 13). In all of this, God is fulfilling his eternal purpose for his Son: the heading up of all things in Christ, the placing of all (redeemed) things beneath his direct and benevolent rule (1:10). But there is more. The full inheritance is yet to be received. For when at last his Church is fully gathered in, Christ himself will return to complete the redemption of the purchased possession at the resurrection of the dead. When he does, the curse will finally be lifted, and the whole creation will be delivered from its bondage to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God (1:14, Rom. 8:18-21)!

With all of this as background, Paul's prayer begins. He is deeply grateful for their faith (15-16), but he is also keenly aware of their need of further understanding, hope, and strength. So he prays, asking that God will open the eyes of their hearts to see three things: the hope of their calling, the riches of the glory of God's inheritance in the saints, and the exceeding greatness of his power—the very power that will one day cause them to inherit all he has promised (17-19).

By way of conclusion, he illustrates that power. If ever they are inclined to doubt God's ability to raise them from the dead or to recreate the universe, let them consider Christ: how God raised him from the dead, lifted him up into heaven, seated him at his own right hand, gave him authority and power over all men and all angels, placed the very cosmos itself "under his feet" (i.e., under his control), and—best of all—made him Head (or King) over his Church, and over all things pertaining to her welfare (20-23). Yes, in mighty power the High King of Heaven is ruling even now, and will continue to do so until his return, when at last the heading up of all things in Christ will be complete, and the glorious new Age to Come will begin (1:10, 21, 2:7). Let all the saints take heart!

Here, then, is a truly majestic portrait of the exaltation of Christ. Though the language of the Kingdom does not appear prominently, the idea of the Kingdom surely does. It comes in two stages. The first is the Kingdom of the Son, during which time the Messiah rules over all—both the Church and the world—from heaven on high. The second is the Kingdom of the Father, the glorious Age to Come. The partition between the two is the Parousia, when Christ himself will accomplish the full

redemption of the purchased possession, to the praise of the glory of the triune God (1:12, 14).

Paul's Teaching on the saints' Citizenship in Heaven (Phil. 3:20-21)

Short as it is, this little passage packs an eschatological wallop. Paul is exhorting the Philippians to walk after the example of the godly, and not like those “who set their mind on earthly things,” whose end is destruction (3:17-19). Eager to secure their obedience, he therefore concludes by supplying the spiritual rationale for a holy life, a rationale that is full of eschatological truth and encouragement:

For our citizenship is in heaven, from which we also eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform the body of our humiliation into conformity with the body of his glory, by the exertion of the power that he has even to subject all things to himself.

Keeping our theme of the Kingdom before us, let us briefly spotlight three important points reflected in this text.

First, *the saints are citizens of a heavenly Kingdom*. As Paul taught in his letter to the Ephesians, God, by the miracle of regeneration, has brought the saints to life together with Christ, raised them up with him, and seated them with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus (Eph. 2:5-6; John 18:36). Physically, they may be citizens of Rome, but spiritually they are subjects of the High King of Heaven, citizens of his heavenly realm who should live as such. Here again we encounter the Messiah's heavenly reign, the distinctly spiritual Kingdom of the Son.

Secondly, *the saints are eagerly awaiting the return of the Savior*. That is, they are looking forward to his Parousia, when the spiritual salvation they presently enjoy will be enlarged to include the physical side of creation, and in particular, their very bodies.

This brings us to our third and final point, namely, that *at his coming, Christ himself will effect a complete transformation and glorification of the cosmos, thus bringing in the Kingdom of God in its full and eternal form*. We see this in verse 21, where we learn that Christ, at his Parousia, will effect two majestic eschatological acts. First, he will conform the humiliated natural bodies of the saints to his own glorified body; that is, he will resurrect and glorify the dead saints, and transform and glorify the

living. But secondly, he will also exercise that same power to “subject all things to himself.” That is, *he will banish every spiritual and physical enemy from the creation, and create a glorious new cosmos (Mt. 19:28, 1 Cor. 15:20-28, 50-58)*. Again we are reminded of the Parable of the Wheat and the Tares, wherein our Lord taught that at his return he would cast out of his Kingdom *all* things that offend: not only the wicked themselves, but also the physical pain, deformity, and brokenness that so terribly burden the natural world (Rom. 8:18-21). We conclude, then, that Paul, like his Master, envisioned the Kingdom as coming in two simple stages, separated by a single Parousia of Christ at the end of the age.

Eschatological Nuggets in Paul’s Letter to the Colossians (Col. 1:13-14, 3:1-4)

Not surprisingly, the eschatological outlook of Paul’s letter to the Colossians is identical with that of his letters to the Corinthians, Ephesians, and Philippians. It appears with special brilliance in two nuggets that are short enough to cite in their entirety. The first is a familiar friend:

He (the Father) has delivered us from the Domain of Darkness, and transferred us to the Kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

—Col. 1:13-14

The second complements the first, and caps it off:

If then you were raised with Christ, keep seeking the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your mind on things above, not on things on earth. For you died and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is our life, is revealed, then you also will be revealed with Him in glory.

—Col. 3:1-4

Here—and in the letter as a whole—we again find the classic NT eschatology. Having chosen a people for his own possession, God the Father has sent forth his Son to live and to die for them, thereby providing a just basis for their redemption (2:14, 3:12). In fulfillment of his eternal purpose (1:16), he has also raised Christ from the dead, received him into heaven, and seated him at his own right hand, where he will henceforth serve as cosmic Head, not only over the Church (1:18), but also over all

rule and authority, whether human or angelic (2:10). In short, God has made the Lord Jesus to be High King of Heaven and Earth.

In the exercise of this delegated cosmic sovereignty, Christ now sends forth the Spirit into the Church, and by that same Spirit sends forth the Church into the world, to proclaim “the word of the truth of the Gospel” (1:5). As the Colossians—and all of God’s elect in all creation under heaven (1:23)—hear that word, God performs his miracle of regeneration, rescuing them (through faith and repentance) from Satan’s evil kingdom, and transferring them (through that same faith and repentance) into the spiritual Kingdom of his beloved Son (1:13). Because of this gracious spiritual miracle, they come to life with Christ, rise with him, and sit down with him in the heavenly places (2:11-14, 3:1; Eph. 2:4-6). They now share in the Messiah’s triumphant heavenly reign.

This calls for holiness. Henceforth, their physical life on earth must reflect their spiritual life in heaven. Strengthened by prayer and biblical meditation, they must turn away from earthly things, and keep on seeking the things that are above, where Christ is seated at God’s right hand (3:1). Thus shall they become fully pleasing to the Lord, bearing fruit in every good work, and increasing in the knowledge of God (1:10). Does the world scorn their preoccupation with spiritual things? Does it scoff at an invisible King and an invisible Kingdom? To be sure. But let the saints rest assured: One day soon, their faith—and their message—will be vindicated! At his coming, Christ will be revealed from heaven in power and glory. When he is, they too—whether by resurrection or transformation—will be revealed with him in glory (3:4). And when they are, the whole creation itself will be revealed in glory with them (Romans 8:18-21)! As their Master himself had said, in that day, the righteous will shine forth like the sun (and like the Son) in the glorious, never-ending Kingdom of the Father.

The Writer to the Hebrews on the Heavenly Reign of God’s Royal High Priest (Heb. 1:1-5, 13)

The anonymous author of the epistle to the Hebrews sought to warn, instruct, and encourage wavering Jewish Christians who, for various reasons, were tempted to return to Judaism. Recognizing that a rejection of Christ and the New Covenant would rob them of eternal salvation, he drew

upon his vast knowledge of the OT to press home two relevant truths: 1) In and of itself, the OT service of worship, centered around the Tabernacle and the Temple, was altogether inadequate to make sinners right with God; 2) the OT service of worship was typological in nature, pointing forward to the Person and Work of Jesus Christ, who has now fulfilled it and therefore rendered it obsolete. Accordingly, to go back to Judaism is to go against the very flow of Salvation History; it is to repudiate the very Christ and the very Covenant towards which that history ever tended, and from which it ever borrowed whatever efficacy it had. In sum, now that Christ has come they *should not* go back, for now that Christ has come they *cannot* go back!

Very importantly, in making his case, the writer sheds a great deal of light on our theme: the heavenly mediatorial reign of Christ. Here, however, the emphasis is less upon Christ's Messianic Kingship, and more upon his Messianic Priesthood. Nevertheless, this extended treatise on the High Priest of Heaven is most useful to us, since it clearly displays the writer's total eschatological outlook, the very same outlook we have discovered in our previous texts.

In a highly condensed form, we encounter it at the outset, especially in the first five verses of chapter 1. Here the writer's clear purpose is to display the deity of Christ, thereby sharply distinguishing him from the angels, with whom some of the Jewish Christians were apparently confusing him. To this end, he identifies Christ as "the Son," and the Son as the (co)-creator of the world (1:2), the sustainer of the world (1:3), and the express image of the Father's person (1:3). No angel here!

Importantly, he also speaks of the Son as the *heir* of all things (1:2), the One by whom and *for* whom all things exist (2:9). But how exactly does the Son inherit all things? Our text addresses this as well: He becomes a man, purges the sins of God's people, and *sits down at the right hand of the Majesty on high* (1:3). Yes, in so doing, he inherits a more excellent name than the angels (1:4). But he inherits that most excellent name *because he inherits the universe as well!* As our text implies, through the humiliation and exaltation of his divine-human Son, God has "begotten" the Messiah: He has fitted him for, and set him in, his great ministry as the High King (and Priest) of Heaven and Earth (1:5). In one form or another, his throne—his universal sovereignty—will endure forever (1:8). In the present stage of his rule, he will sit at God's right hand until he makes all his (remaining)

enemies a footstool for his feet (1:3; Psalm 110:1); until he himself comes again, and folds up both the heavens and the earth like a cloak, changing (i.e., glorifying) them once and for all (1:10-12). Again, let no Christian think of this One as an angel! Rather, let them worship him as the all-sovereign God-Man—and let the angels do so, as well (1:6)!

We find, then, that the standard NT eschatology—the simple two-staged view of the Kingdom—appears in the very first chapter of this epistle. Moreover, it appears repeatedly in the rest of the book. A brief overview will make this important point clear.

As the writer makes his case for the superiority and finality of the New Covenant, he begins by showing that the incarnation of the holy Son of God was absolutely necessary for the salvation of sinful men (2:10-18, 10:5-10); that animal sacrifices—which were mere pictures of Christ—had no intrinsic power to redeem (10:1-4).

But to what purpose was this great sacrifice? The answer must surprise and thrill every godly Jew: Christ died to give *all God's people* direct, ongoing access to himself; to give them entrance, once and for all, into the Holy of Holies! How exactly can Christ grant this supreme blessing? First, by laying down his life as a sacrifice for sin, and then by entering heaven itself as the High King—and *the eternal High Priest*—of his people (2:17-3:6, 4:14-5:11). Fully adorned with the infinite merit of his own life and death, he now appears in the Presence of God for the saints (9:24). And wonder of wonders, in doing so, *he brings them in with him!* Henceforth, they may come boldly to the throne of grace (4:16). Henceforth, they may enter the Holiest of All by the blood of Jesus, drawing near with the full assurance of faith and a clear conscience (10:19-22). Henceforth, they have come to the Zion that is above; they dwell in the Jerusalem that is above; they worship in the Temple that is above (8:2, 12:18-24).

But this is not the end of the Good News. For even as the pilgrim Church enjoys refreshing communion with God and Christ in heavenly places, she also eagerly anticipates a Day that is fast approaching (10:25); a Day when he who is destined to come, will come (10:37); the Day when God, through Christ, will *once* again shake not only the earth, but also the heavens (9:28, 12:26); the Day in which he will remove *all* that can be shaken, so that *only* what cannot be shaken will forever remain (12:27). On that Day, Abraham will enter the better country that he ever sought (11:16);

Moses will receive the reward for which he gladly sacrificed the treasures of Egypt; and all the other saints, like God himself at the creation, will enter into their everlasting rest (3:7-4:10).

Thus, in Hebrews as well, we find that the one Kingdom comes in two stages—a “mysterious” heavenly stage, followed by a glorious earthly stage—with the two of them separated by a single, all-consummating return of the High King of Heaven.

John’s Vision of the Lamb Receiving and Unsealing the Testament of God (Revelation 5)

Here I offer a teaser, but one well suited to wrapping up our survey of key NT texts dealing with the Kingdom. It is found, not in the Didactic NT, but in the Revelation. Later in we will look more closely at the astonishing structure of this book. As we do, we will see that chapters 4 and 5—John’s vision of the Sovereign Creator and Judge upon his throne, followed by his vision of the Sovereign Redeemer at the Father’s right hand—constitute the core, the theological center of gravity, of the entire prophecy. In particular, chapter 4 establishes the dreadful fact that sinful man stands in desperate need of a Redeemer. Chapter 5 establishes a corresponding—and very comforting—fact, namely that the holy God has graciously provided a Redeemer, One who now stands before him in heaven.

Under deeply affecting imagery, all three of Christ’s offices are on display. On the one hand, he stands *as a Lamb*: alive indeed, but with the marks of having been slain (5:6). This is Christ as Priest and Sacrifice; as the High Priest of Heaven, whose work on earth was to *secure* the redemption of God’s people, and whose work in heaven is now to plead the merits thereof in their behalf (5:9-10). On the other hand, he also stands before God as a Lamb *having seven horns and seven eyes* (which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth) (5:6). This is Christ as *royal* High Priest; as the High King of Heaven, with all authority in heaven and earth; as sovereign Lord over the omnipotent Holy Spirit, sent forth from his throne above to *apply* the redemption that he (Christ) secured on earth for his people. By the Spirit outpoured, the High Prophet of Heaven will teach his disciples the way of salvation (John 6:45).

In order to communicate all this, the Revelation also gives us a powerful motif by which it depicts the High King's redemptive work throughout the Era of Proclamation and Probation: He (Christ) will *unseal the Father's last will and testament* (Rev. 5:1, 7-10, 6:1f, 8:1). In other words, he will take all necessary judicial and redemptive steps in order to gather in his elect and prepare them for the grand unveiling of their eternal inheritance: the fullness of the promise of the Covenant, receivable only through the death of Christ. As we will see later, John beholds this unveiling over and over again, an unveiling that is set to occur at the Parousia, when the High King of Heaven descends to the earth, once and once only, to consummate all things in final judgment and final redemption; to bestow upon the saints their full inheritance, which is eternal life with their covenant-keeping God in the new heavens and the new earth.

At the outset of our journey we saw that the Revelation is the one NT book upon which premillenarians base their distinctive eschatology, and by which they challenge the eschatological outlook uniformly appearing throughout the entire Didactic NT. However, in Part 4 of our study we will see that, far from overthrowing this outlook, the Revelation supplies what is arguably its single most extensive, intricate, beautiful, and powerful biblical confirmation! In short, we will find that the Revelation is a glorious capstone that crowns, once and for all, the temple of NT truth concerning the coming of the Kingdom, the true shape of biblical eschatology, and the winner in the Great End Time Debate.

The Coming of the Kingdom

It involves, I believe, three basic stages: (1) the earthly ministry of Christ, when the Kingdom is *founded*, (2) the heavenly reign of Christ, when the Kingdom is *continually coming* into the world, and (3) the Parousia of Christ, when the Kingdom is *consummated*. Let us look briefly at each one.

Earthly Ministry: The Kingdom Founded

By *earthly ministry* I mean the full scope of Christ's work during the days of his flesh, from the moment of his incarnation to the moment of death and burial; in other words, the entire spectrum of events and activities

proper to the *humiliation* of the Son of God. As we saw earlier, this humiliation was part and parcel of the Covenant of Redemption, into which the Son entered with the Father before the foundation of the world. In essence, its great purpose was to make *provision* for the promise of the Covenant of Grace; or, to use the biblically favored metaphor of the Kingdom, *to lay a proper (legal) foundation for the coming, building up, and consummation of the Kingdom of God*. We can get a better feel for all of this by touching very briefly on certain key aspects and events of the Lord's earthly life.

Everything begins, of course, with the incarnation of the Son of God as Jesus of Nazareth. Here, God the Father sends the Covenant Provision into the world as the Last Adam, the new Head of a new, elect humanity. Since he is destined to become the Messiah—the Spirit-anointed Prophet, Priest, and King of the people of God—Jesus' birth is (as Zachariah, Simeon, Anna, and the Magi all well understood) the birth of a great King, the King of the coming Kingdom of God (Mt. 2:1-12, Luke 1:67-69, 2:25-38).

Next is Jesus' water baptism beneath the hands of John, at which time, in fulfillment of OT prophecy, God the Father anoints the Messiah with the Holy Spirit (Isaiah 42:1f, Mt. 3:13-17). This too is in fulfillment of the Covenant of Redemption, since here the Father equips and empowers the Last Adam for every aspect of his earthly work. Importantly, this anointing neither crowns Christ as King, nor launches his Messianic reign. Yes, from his birth he is already the Messianic King; but, as we shall see in a moment, the actual commencement of his reign awaits his exaltation. So then, the anointing of the Spirit at the Jordan is meant to equip Christ to *prepare a people* for the eventual coming of his Kingdom, and also to *lay a proper foundation* for it.

This brings us to his three and a half years of ministry, wherein Jesus lived, taught, worked, and finally died as a sacrifice for the sins of his people. If we stand back and survey these years from the point of view of the Covenant of Redemption, we behold their essential meaning quite clearly. They are the years in which the Last Adam fulfills all righteousness on behalf of his people; in which—by obeying the Father's every command, passing his every test, and complying with his every precept in the Mosaic Law—he (Christ) fulfills the Covenant of Works, thereby earning the prize of eternal life for his own. However, included in these works is the single

greatest work of all: his atoning death, by which he satisfies God's justice and propitiates his wrath, thus making the imputation of his righteousness possible, and the regeneration, justification, and reconciliation of his people sure (Romans 3:21-26, 4:1f, 5:1f, 8:29ff, 2 Cor. 5:21). In sum, by his active and passive obedience throughout the days of his humiliation, Christ fulfills the Mosaic Law and renders it obsolete, introduces the New and Eternal Covenant, and secures its great promise: eternal life under God's direct, benevolent rule. By all that he did in the days of his flesh, Jesus laid a perfect and eternally abiding foundation for the coming of the Kingdom of God.

Not surprisingly, we therefore find this same Kingdom at the very heart of his earthly ministry. We observe it in several different ways.

As we have seen, he *heralded* the Kingdom, proclaiming to all Israel that it was *at hand*: near and drawing nearer by the moment, both temporally and spatially (Mt. 4:17, 10:7, Mark 1:15).⁴

He *previewed* the Kingdom, miraculously rescuing multitudes from various spiritual and physical afflictions, and also restoring them to a measure of the perfect wholeness that would characterize Kingdom life in its fullness (Mt. 9:35, 10:6-8, 12:28, 17:1f).

He *explained* the Kingdom, introducing his disciples to the mysteries of its true nature and temporal structure; mysteries they would fully understand and enjoy only when, after Pentecost, the Kingdom had indeed come into the world, and they into the (first stage of the) Kingdom (Mt. 13:1ff, John 16:13, 1 Cor. 2:6f, Eph. 1:8-10).

And finally, he *offered* the Kingdom, directly and primarily to Jews, but also indirectly and secondarily to Gentiles (Mt. 10:6, 15:21-28, 21:1-23:38, John 4:1-42). Importantly, in making this offer Jesus never projected himself as a temporal king who, in the manner of his forefather David, would rise to the throne by military might (Mt. 12:14-21, John 6:15). Rather, he simply called upon Israel to repent of their sin and to follow him in faith (Mt. 8:22, 11:25-30, 16:24, 19:21, 23:37-39, John 6:29). In other words, the Kingdom Jesus offered to Israel was always and only spiritual; it was always and only a direct, benevolent rule of God and Christ, *in days ahead to be made possible by the completion of his redemptive work upon the Cross* (Luke 17:20-21, John 6:3, 18:36).

Here we meet one of the great mysteries of God's redemptive purpose and plan: The spiritual Kingdom that Christ sincerely and urgently offered to the Jew first, but also to the Gentile, could not be entered until both Jew and Gentile had rejected both him and it. Only upon the solid foundation of his righteous life *and atoning death* could the High King's heavenly City of light and life arise in the earth, and its mighty gates swing open to all (Mt. 23:37-38, John 3:14-15, 12:31-34, Romans 11:33-36).

Heavenly Reign: The Kingdom Coming

The coming of the Kingdom is part and parcel of the *exaltation* of the Last Adam, the divine/human Messiah, the eternal Prophet, Priest, and King of God's people. As we saw earlier, this exaltation was a key element of the Covenant of Redemption, according to which God the Father, upon condition of his Son's obedience unto death, would highly exalt him by means of his resurrection, ascension, session, heavenly reign, and Parousia. Again, it is through this great exaltation—and especially through Christ's heavenly reign and Parousia—that God fulfills his eternal purpose for his Son, making him Head (or High King) over a new humanity and a new creation (Eph. 1:10, Col. 1:16-18, 2:19); it is through this exaltation that the saints experience the Promise of the Eternal Covenant; it is through this exaltation that the Kingdom of God actually comes into the world.

The NT is quite clear in designating the Day of Pentecost as the *beginning* of the coming of the Kingdom. As Jesus himself told Nicodemus, no one can see or enter the Kingdom unless he is born from above, born of the Spirit (John 3:3, 5). But no one could receive the Spirit until Christ had been glorified (John 7:39, 17:1,5): until he had finished his redemptive work on earth (John 19:30), risen from the dead (Rom. 4:25), entered heaven as the High Priest and Advocate of his people (Rom. 8:34, Heb. 9:24, 1 John 2:1), removed the legal veil separating God the Judge from man the sinner (Mt 27:51, Heb. 6:19-20, 10:19-22), received the promised Holy Spirit from the Father (Acts 2:33), and poured out the same upon his own, as he did on the Day of Pentecost (Luke 24:49, Acts 2:33). Therefore, Pentecost was, as Peter himself affirmed, *the beginning*: the beginning of the Church, the beginning of the Era of Proclamation and Probation (Acts

2:14-39), the beginning of Christ's heavenly reign (Acts 2:36), and the beginning of the coming of the Kingdom into the world (Acts 11:15).

We receive a picturesque and dramatic confirmation of this important truth in Revelation 12:1-12. In a vision, John beholds a Woman who gives birth to a Male Child who will one day act as a shepherd with a rod of iron towards all (disobedient) nations. For now, however, he is caught up to God and his throne (12:5). As soon as he is, war breaks out in heaven between Michael (and his angels) and the Dragon (and his angels). But the Dragon—who has hitherto successfully deceived the whole world—cannot prevail, and is cast down to the earth, along with his angels. At this, John hears a loud voice in heaven, saying:

Now salvation and strength and the kingdom of our God and the power of His Christ have come, for the accuser of our brethren, who accused them before our God day and night, has been cast down.

—Rev. 12:10-12; John 12:31-32

What a powerful picture this is! Christ, as High Priest and Sacrifice, has entered heaven, removing every legal barrier to the redemptive rescue and restoration that is the essence of the Kingdom. Henceforth, Satan has no legal grounds upon which to accuse God's people, or to hold them captive by means of his various deceptions. Therefore, by the Spirit, Christ sends out his Church to preach this Good News; and by the same Spirit, he also enables his elect of every nation to believe it. In other words, through the preaching of the Gospel, Christ lawfully rescues God's people from every deceiving shackle of the Domain of Darkness, transfers them into the spiritual Kingdom of the Son, and restores them to eternal life in union with the triune God (Col. 1:13). As a result, ever since the Day of Pentecost the Kingdom of Satan has been *continually falling*, for which reason he rages in fury against the Church Militant, knowing that his time is short (Rev. 12:12-17). But the saints are not to fear. Indeed, they are to rejoice! Because of their High Priest in heaven, the accuser cannot (successfully) condemn; and because of their High King in heaven, the tempter cannot retake and control. Accordingly, throughout the Era of Proclamation and Probation, Christ *will build* his Church, and *will keep* his Church (Mt. 16:18, John 10:16, John 10:28-30). The Kingdom of our God and the power of his Christ have come, *and they will infallibly continue to come*, until that happy

Day when they come in glorious fullness at the High King's return (Rev. 12:11, 14, 16).

Parousia: The Kingdom Consummated

As we have seen in text after text, the third and final stage of the coming of the Kingdom is the Parousia: the return to earth of the glorified Lord Jesus Christ at the end of the present evil age, in order to raise the dead, transform the living, judge the world in righteousness, purge the present cosmos by fire, and create a glorious new world, the eternal home of the redeemed.

Here, all of God's purposes in the Covenant of Redemption and the Covenant of Grace are finally fulfilled. Here the exalted Christ fully and finally places all (redeemed) things under his cosmic headship. Here he fully and finally *rescues* those things from every spiritual and physical enemy. And here he fully and finally *restores* them to every spiritual and physical blessing of the direct reign of God. In short, here Christ himself brings in the Kingdom in its full and final form, the form in which he is pleased to deliver it up to the Father, so that God—throughout the endless ages to come—may be all in all.

Conclusion

Our theme in this chapter has been the coming of the Kingdom. Earlier we saw that the OT did indeed speak truly of a coming Kingdom, yet in veiled, symbolic language. In his Discourse on the Mysteries of the Kingdom, Jesus declares that the disciples cannot understand this language without the proper keys; and that the keys they need are none other than the mysteries that he himself is now placing in their hands.

These mysteries—repeatedly affirmed in the book of Acts, the epistles, and the Revelation—pertain both to the nature and structure of the Kingdom.

As to its structure, we have seen that Jesus consistently represents the one Kingdom as coming in two stages: the Kingdom of the Son, followed by the Kingdom of the Father, the two being separated by one Parousia of Christ at the end of the present evil age.

As to its nature, we have seen that *in essence* both stages of the Kingdom are the same: Both are spheres of redemption, in which God reigns directly over his blessed subjects in virtue of the work of the Redeemer, a Redeemer who rescues his subjects from every spiritual and physical enemy, and restores them to every spiritual and physical friend.

Nevertheless, there are significant differences between the two stages of the Kingdom, differences that are vital for a full and proper understanding of biblical eschatology. We do well to linger over them briefly.

As for the Kingdom of the Son, it is *temporary*, extending from Pentecost to the Parousia. It *emanates from heaven*, and in particular from the High King of Heaven, who is seated at the Father's right hand. It is altogether *invisible* to the naked eye, being a creation of the Christ who himself is hidden in heaven, and who himself works secretly in men's hearts by his Spirit, whom the world can neither see nor receive. Infallibly, this Kingdom *spreads abroad*, advancing throughout the earth by the foolishness of preaching. Miraculously, it *grows* to its appointed fullness, as the Spirit of God graciously bestows upon his people the gift of hearing with faith. For the world, its days are *days of probation*, in which, beneath the preaching of the Gospel, men are tested concerning their love of the truth about God. For the Church, its days are *days of opposition, struggle, and humiliation*. Yet they are also days of *hope*, as the saints, following in the footsteps of their persecuted Master, make their pilgrim way through the wilderness of this world to the Land of Promise waiting up ahead.

When, however, Christ returns in power to consummate all things by the full spectrum of his great eschatological acts, he will usher in a Kingdom that is identical in essence, yet different in many particulars.

It is the Kingdom of the Father. Here, the divine reign is no longer partial, but *complete*; no longer temporary, but *permanent*. Here it no longer emanates from heaven above, for here heaven has descended to earth, so that *earth and heaven are one*. Here the Kingdom is no longer spiritual only, but *spiritual and physical*, extending not only to the saints' bodies, but also to the new and glorified world in which they will live. Here the Kingdom is no longer invisible, but fully *manifest*, for here the pure in heart see God. Here it is no longer growing, but *full-grown*, for the harvest of the earth has been reaped, once and for all. Here, there is no longer a brief season of proclamation and testing, but an *eternal* season of *reward or*

retribution. And here there is no longer a short night of struggle and humiliation, but an endless *day of rest and glory* for all who have believed, served, and overcome.

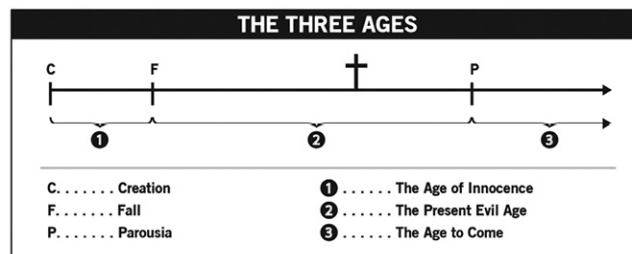
Now, if indeed we are reading Christ and his apostles correctly—if indeed the contents of this long chapter give us “true truth” about the nature and coming of the Kingdom of God—then it is clear we have reached a very special moment in our journey. For having received from our Teacher such precious keys as these, what is there to prevent us from using them to meet head on one of greatest challenges of biblical eschatology? What is there to prevent us from using all we have learned to *draw up a biblically sound Timeline of Salvation History*, a Timeline that not only displays its true chronological structure, but its heart and soul as well?

Sound interesting? If so, please meet me in chapter 10!

Salvation History: A Journey to the Kingdom

MY PURPOSE IN this chapter is to help you visualize and better understand the nature and course of Salvation History. To this end, I have worked up four different timelines. Though they all cover the same temporal span, each depicts Salvation History from a slightly different angle, using slightly different biblical terms and concepts. In the fifth, I simply consolidate material from the other four, in order to achieve the richest possible representation of the heart, soul, and structure of Salvation History.

1. The Three Ages of Cosmic History



This Timeline gives the simplest, most fundamental biblical representation of Cosmic History. It is based largely upon NT teaching, where we repeatedly find Christ and the apostles speaking of this history in terms of two vast and fundamental ages, *this age* and *the age to come* (Greek, *aion*). For example, Jesus declares that blasphemy against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, “... either in this age, or in the age to come” (Mt. 12:32). Again, he says of those who willingly sacrifice everything for him and the Gospel that “in this time” they will receive many temporal blessings, “... and in the age to come, eternal life” (Mark 10:30). And

again, speaking of the resurrection of the dead, he says that “the sons of this age” marry and are given in marriage, but that “those who are counted worthy to attain that age” will neither marry nor be given in marriage, since they are like the angels, being sons of the resurrection and sons of God (Luke 20:35-36).

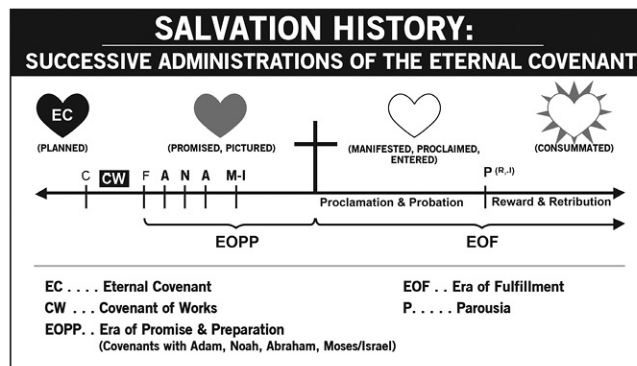
From these passages, it is quite clear that the Age (or World) to Come is the final state, the ultimate goal towards which Salvation History is tending. Inaugurated by the resurrection (Acts 26:6-7, Phil. 3:8-11), it is the eternal age of the new heavens and the new earth, wherein the glorified saints receive their full reward for lives well lived, and shine like the sun in its strength in the Kingdom of their Father.

But what of “this age”? When does it begin, and how long does it last. The texts cited above show that it definitely includes the Era of Proclamation, wherein the saints now toil for the advance of the Kingdom. Indeed, from Luke 20:35-36, one could argue that it goes all the way back to the beginning, when God created man and woman, and instituted marriage. However, other NT texts supply the final solution. Chief among them is Galatians 1:4, where Paul declares that Christ gave himself for our sins, “. . . that he might deliver us from *this present evil age*.” Obviously, for Paul the salient characteristic of “this age” is that it is evil. This in turn implies that it must have begun at the Fall. As we will see below, other NT texts confirm this view.

Adopting, then, the biblical paradigm of successive ages, we may divide cosmic history into three distinct stages. The first was a very brief *age of innocence*. Spanning the time between God’s creation of the universe and Adam’s fall, it was essentially a season of divine testing. The second is *the present evil age*. It began with Adam’s fall, has already lasted some 6,000 years, and will continue until the Parousia (Titus 2:12f). As we have seen, throughout this lengthy era God has been about his redemptive work, especially since the first coming of Christ, which inaugurated the spread of the Kingdom to all nations. Nevertheless, according to the NT, this age has been, and will remain, fundamentally evil, since the bulk of humanity remains dominated by “the god of this age” (Satan) and “the rulers of the darkness of this age” (2 Cor. 4:4, Eph. 6:12). However, in the Gospel, God gives believers hope, a hope that will be fully realized in the Age to Come. Beginning at the Parousia, it will extend throughout eternity future. As we

just saw, it is the age of eternal life; the age in which the Kingdom appears in its full and final form. Jesus and his apostles exhort all who hear the Gospel to turn to Christ, abide in him, and live for him, so that they may attain the resurrection of the righteous, and the eternal glories of the Age to Come (Luke 20:34-36, John 6:44, 54, 11:25-26, Phil. 3:8-11).

2. Salvation History: Successive Administrations of the Eternal Covenant



This Timeline is based on the material we covered in chapter 7. It is designed to portray Salvation History in terms of its inmost essence: the Eternal Covenant, and the successive administrations thereof in time and space. As we will see in a moment, it is both easy and fascinating to depict Salvation History in terms of the (coming of the) Kingdom of God. But to do so—and to leave matters there—is indeed to behold the body, but to miss the heart and soul that animates the body. What, after all, *is* the Kingdom? Is it not simply the Promise of the Eternal Covenant of Grace, a Promise made possible to the Parties of the Covenant (and the citizens of the Kingdom) by the Provision of the Covenant, who is Christ? So then, above all else, let us be sure to understand and enjoy Salvation History from the inside out, from the heart, from the point of view of the (successive administrations of the) Eternal Covenant.

Having already discussed the various elements of this timeline, I will not again delve into them here. I will, however, offer a brief review so as to give the sense of the diagram.

The Eternal Covenant

As our Timeline indicates, the Eternal Covenant was planned in eternity past; it lay hidden in God even before the foundation of the world. It is the greatest of all NT mysteries: the one *redemptive* arrangement by which God the Father, for the greater glory of himself and his Son, purposes to redeem a chosen people for eternal life with him in his glorious Kingdom.

This is a two-sided Covenant. In the first side—the Covenant of Redemption—the Father and Son agree that by his incarnation the Son will become the Last Adam. His twofold mission will be to do what the First Adam failed to do (i.e., fulfill the Covenant of Works), and to undo what the first Adam had done (i.e., subject the race to a Domain of Darkness). Since this redemptive mission will involve a profound humiliation on the part of the Son, the Father also covenants highly to exalt him as Head over all, vesting him with all authority in heaven and earth, so that he himself may apply and consummate the redemption that he secured at so great a cost.

In the second side—the Covenant of Grace—the Father purposes graciously to enter history, time and time again, to interface with sinful men, offer them the redemption that is found in Christ, and unfailingly draw his elect into a covenant of life, the eternal life found in his Son and offered to man in Eden. In speaking of the several administrations of the Eternal Covenant, our Timeline primarily has in view the Covenant of Grace.

The Covenant of Works

Between the Creation and the Fall, Adam—and the entire family of man that he represented—dwelt in Eden under a Covenant of Works. With the benefit of biblical hindsight, we can see the terms of this temporary probation quite clearly. Negatively, Adam had only to obey God's word by refusing to eat of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Positively, he had only to eat from the Tree of Life, thereby entering into eternal communion with the Triune God and beginning his walk through history beneath the divine headship of the Son. His sin, however, plunged him (and his family and his world) into complete captivity to a host of deadly physical and spiritual enemies, thereby cutting off all access to the Tree of Life. Henceforth, there was but one hope for Adam and his kin: that God, in mercy and grace, would supply another, better Adam, who could undo what the first Adam had done, and do what he failed to do; who could rescue a

believing people from the Domain of Darkness, and restore them to all the blessings of the direct rule he offered them in Eden; who could redeem them; who could bring them into the Kingdom of God.

The Era of Promise and Preparation

Next on our Timeline comes the long Era of Promise and Preparation. Stretching from the Fall to the first advent of the Last Adam, it is a season some 4,000 years long, during which God specially administered the Covenant of Grace on four separate occasions: to Adam, Noah, Abraham, and Moses/Israel. Importantly, in all four cases the administrations were *veiled*. That is, the several elements of the Covenant were not revealed as they are in and of themselves, but rather under a wide of variety *types* and *shadows*. Accordingly, all the OT administrations of the Covenant had a *promissory* character: They looked ahead to something greater, more enduring, and more substantial; something of which they themselves were merely passing shadows; something that the NT writers call the Mystery of God, and the New Covenant; something that we are calling the Covenant of Grace and the Gospel.

The promissory character of this Era is especially visible in the phenomenon of OT Kingdom prophecy, a body of divine revelation predicting the advent of a coming King and a coming Kingdom, by which a new world of God's own making will be redeemed and re-created. As we have seen, many of these prophecies employ imagery drawn from the institutions of the Mosaic Law (e.g., Israel, Canaan, Jerusalem, the Temple, Priests, Sacrifices, Feasts, etc.) in order to picture the coming Kingdom, and to awaken hope in the coming King. Others, however, associate the Kingdom with a New Covenant; with new institutions and new blessings; with things that eye has not seen, that ear has not heard, and that have not even entered into the hearts of men—until the days of Christ and the Gospel (1 Cor. 2:9-10). For this reason, the OT itself hints at what the NT explicitly affirms: OT Kingdom prophecy uses typological language, rooted in the typical institutions of the Law, to represent the substantial and eternal verities of the Covenant of Grace. More on this in the next chapter.

Did the OT saints actually enter the Eternal Covenant? Yes and no. Their sincere faith (the *proviso* of the covenant) in priests and sacrifices

(types of the *provision* of the covenant), or in the promised Messiah himself, was certainly reckoned to them as righteousness. Moreover, on the basis of that faith—and the holy life that necessarily flowed from it—they enjoyed many divine blessings, both spiritual and physical. Nevertheless, whatever blessings they experienced under the Law were strictly derivative, borrowed, as it were, from the greater reality yet to come (Rom. 3:21-26, Heb. 9, 10). And indeed, for this very reason, they were not as fulsome as the blessings actually introduced by that reality. This is why our Lord did not hesitate to say, even of so great a prophet as John the Baptist, that he who is least in the Kingdom of God is greater than he (Mt. 11:11). As for the disciples prior to Pentecost, so for the OT saints: The Spirit was with them, but not yet in them; for the Spirit had not yet been given, for Christ had not yet been glorified (John 7:39, 14:17). The writer to Hebrews said much the same, declaring of the OT saints:

All these, having obtained a good testimony through faith, did not receive the promise, God having provided something better for us, so that they should not be made perfect apart from us.
—Heb. 11:39-40

So then, living faithfully in a land of shadows, the saints of the OT Era of Promise and Preparation did indeed enter into the Light. But when the Light himself finally entered the world, the shadows were fulfilled ... and forever passed away (John 1:17).

The Era of Fulfillment

Finally, we have the Era of Fulfillment. Its essential characteristic is that here God administers the Eternal Covenant as it is in itself, exactly as he planned it before the foundation of the world. In other words, here he *unveils* Christ and the Covenant in the sight of all nations.

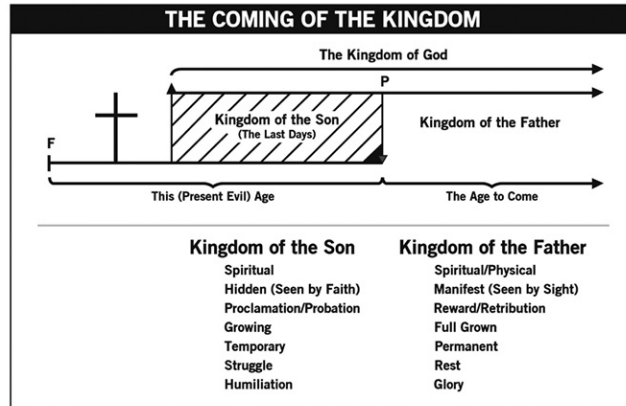
As the Timeline shows, this era unfolds in two stages. The first may be called the Era of Proclamation and Probation. At its beginning, the *provision* of the Covenant—the divine/human Messiah, the Redeemer, the Last Adam—enters the world. By his righteous life and atoning death (i.e., by his humiliation) he makes lawful provision for the enjoyment of all the Covenant blessings. Throughout the remainder of this season, the exalted Christ, seated in heaven at God's right hand, applies the redemption that he

purchased through his work on earth. This involves both proclamation and probation. In particular, he continually sends forth both the Spirit and the Church into the world, to preach the Gospel; to proclaim the *promise* of the Covenant (i.e., eternal life), the *provision* of the Covenant (i.e., Christ, his Person and Work), the *proviso* of the Covenant (i.e., faith in Christ), and the *penalty* for spurning the Covenant (i.e., eternal punishment). In this process, all who hear are put on probation, all are tested with respect to their love of the truth about God; and in this process, all of God's elect are drawn to Christ, rescued from the Domain of Darkness, and restored to the manifold blessings of his direct rule. Thus, the parties of the Covenant (i.e., God and his elect) are fully reconciled, with the result that both enjoy together all the blessings of the promise of the Covenant, which is eternal life.

The second stage of the Era of Fulfillment begins at the Parousia, when Christ himself returns to earth to consummate all things in final judgment and final redemption. Accordingly, this may be called the Era of Reward and Retribution. It is eternal, being comprised of endless "ages to come" (Eph. 2:7). Here the several elements of the Covenant are fully and finally unveiled. For unbelieving sinners, the penalty for spurning the Covenant will be displayed in Gehenna, or the Lake of Fire. As for the saints, the promise of the Covenant will be displayed in new heavens and a new earth. There they no longer behold God and Christ by faith, but by sight. There, the Covenant blessings are no longer partial, but complete. There, the blessings are no longer simply spiritual, but also physical. In short, there the great, age-old promise of the Eternal Covenant is fully fulfilled: God is with his people, and they with him, in unimaginable purity, intimacy, and perfection, world without end. Amen.

Again, we have called this the Era of Fulfillment, because here every OT promise, type, shadow, and predictive prophecy is at last fulfilled. In other words, every OT promise, type, shadow, and predictive prophecy was *actually* speaking of the elements and stages of the Eternal Covenant, so that when the Covenant was *actually* revealed, men could, at long last, understand what they *actually* meant. Therefore, to receive all this truth from our Master is indeed to receive a Master Key that opens up the OT in general, and OTKP in particular.

3. The Coming of the Kingdom



How do we know that the Era of Fulfillment is comprised of two stages, and two only? We know it because of NT teaching on the coming of the Kingdom, teaching we examined in chapter 9. I have sought to picture our conclusions here. Since we have already discussed these matters at some length, the diagram is, I think, self-explanatory. However, on one key point, a few further remarks are in order.

The shaded rectangle in our Timeline represents the first stage of the Kingdom, the Kingdom of the Son. But as the verbiage indicates, it also represents *the last days*. What exactly are the last days, and how can our diagram help us better to understand them?

As we saw earlier, this rich eschatological expression first appears in the OT, where we find the prophets speaking of an appointed season when God will break into history and enter into sharp, protracted, but ultimately triumphant conflict with the kingdoms of this world, and with their invisible spiritual ruler, the devil (Isaiah 2:2, 27:1f, Ezek. 38-89, Dan. 2:28, Hos. 3:5, Joel 2:28). Importantly, these same prophecies also assure us that the last days are none other than the Days of the Messiah, the anointed Agent through whom God will bring his redemptive purposes to pass (Psalm 2, 110, Ezek. 36-39, Micah 2:13).

In the NT, all of this is fleshed out and clarified. There we learn that the last days began with the first advent of the Messiah, when God spoke to us in his Son (Heb. 1:2); and also when, through his (exalted) Son, he poured out the long-promised Holy Spirit upon his eager servants in Jerusalem (Acts 2:14-39). But why did Christ pour out the Spirit? We have heard the answer many times: So that he might bring the Gospel—the good news of the Eternal Covenant—to all nations; so that they might hear, consider, and

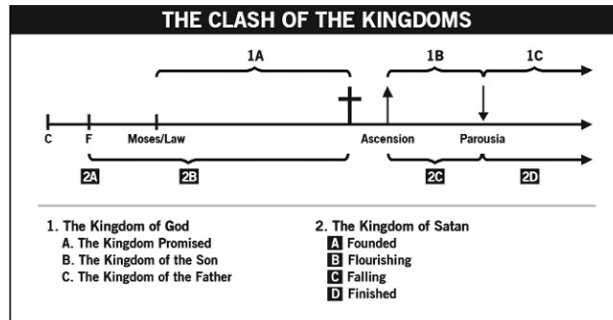
respond; so that he himself might apply the redemption that he purchased on earth; so that he might transfer a believing people from the Domain of Darkness into his own spiritual kingdom of light and life (Mt. 13:36-43, Luke 19:11:f, Acts 2:14-39, 1 Cor. 15:20f, Titus 2:14). In sum, the last days are clearly co-extensive with the Kingdom of the Son, the lengthy Era of Proclamation and Probation in which, through the evangelistic ministry of his Church, Christ's heavenly rule reaches down into the hearts of men, even as it overspreads the entire earth (Mt. 25:19, Luke 19:12, 2 Pet. 3:1-9).¹

Here is why the last days are called *last*. Because of Christ's ongoing redemptive work, the present evil age is being *invaded* by "the powers of the age to come" (Heb. 6:6). This explains the shading in our timeline, which is designed to portray the intermingling of light and darkness that characterizes this particular season of Salvation History. As a result of this intermingling, the present evil age *is coming to an end*. Yes, since the very beginning, the seed of the Serpent and the seed of the Woman have been at enmity with one another. Now, however, through his humiliation, Christ has exploded the legal foundation of Satan's global kingdom. And now, by his exaltation, he is actively plundering his goods: the very souls of men (Mt. 12:29, John 12:20-32, Acts 26:17-18, Col. 1:13, Eph. 6:10-20, Titus 2:13-14, Rev. 12).

So again, the advent of the last days spells big trouble for Satan. But it also spells considerable trouble for the Church, which henceforth is the target of Satan's desperation, fury, and cunning (Rev. 12). Accordingly, for the saints the last days are days of unavoidable conflict, peril, and difficulty (2 Tim. 3:1f, 2 Pet. 3:3). In the mystical language of the Revelation, they are days of "great tribulation" (Rev. 7:14). But the holy army can take heart: Their King is in complete control of this war, its outcome is certain, and the Day of its end—the Last of the Last Days—is soon to come (Rev. 3:11, 22:7, 12, 20).

Oh yes, one final thought: The last days are also "the thousand years" of Revelation 20. But since that is a most challenging and controversial thought, I will wait to develop it at length in Part 4.

4. The Clash of the Kingdoms



This Timeline captures the behind-the-scenes drama of Salvation History, a drama that is best cast as *a clash of two kingdoms*. Let us take a moment to examine them both.

On the one hand, there is the kingdom of Satan. As we learned earlier, it was *founded* at the Fall, when Adam effectively surrendered the family of man into the hand of God’s adversary (Mt. 4:8-11). Prior to Christ’s advent, Satan’s kingdom *flourished* worldwide, though throughout this period—and especially in Israel—God preserved a redeemed remnant of humanity beneath his own (limited) spiritual rule (Ex. 19:6, Isaiah 14:12-21). Now, however, Christ has come, lived, died, and been exalted to God’s right hand. As a result, Satan’s kingdom is *falling*. Again, this happens as the Gospel goes forth into the world, and as multitudes of believers from every tribe, tongue, people, and nation are transferred from the Domain of Darkness into the spiritual Kingdom of Christ (Luke 10:18, John 12:31, Col. 1:13, Rev. 7:9f, 12:7-12, 14:6). Satan’s fall will be complete on the last Day, when Christ, at his Parousia, casts him into the Lake of Fire. At this point, his kingdom is *finished* forever (Rev. 11:15, 12:12, 20:10).

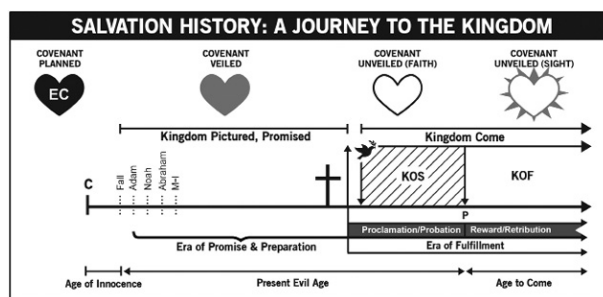
Locked in mortal combat with Satan’s Domain of Darkness is the Kingdom of God. As we saw earlier, in OT times this future redemptive reign was *foreshadowed* in all administrations of the Eternal Covenant, but especially in the covenant with ethnic Israel, a people whom God himself called “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Ex. 19:6). Though God, in those days, did not reside permanently in the hearts of his people, he did dwell in their midst, governing them through various laws and institutions, and visiting them by his Spirit. In this way, the Israelite theocracy prefigured God’s coming spiritual rule, and also the chosen people who would be blessed to live beneath it (Num. 35:34, Jer. 31:31f, Ezek. 36:22-32, Joel 2:28). And again, it was during this era that the OT prophets—with

ever-increasing frequency, specificity, and zeal—began to *promise* a coming Kingdom of God.

In NT times, that promise is fulfilled. On the Day of Pentecost the exalted Christ pours out the Holy Spirit, with the result that the Kingdom has come at last (John 7:39, Acts 2:14f, Rev. 12:10). We have seen, however, that it does not appear all at once, but rather in two stages. First there is the *Kingdom of the Son*, in which the exalted Christ reigns invisibly, by the Spirit, through faith, over the hearts of his redeemed people in heaven and on earth (Mt. 13:36-43, Luke 19:11f). This partial reign continues until the Parousia when, in fulfillment of God’s redemptive plan, Christ transforms and glorifies all (redeemed) things, thereby inaugurating the second and final stage of the Kingdom, the eternal *Kingdom of the Father* (1 Cor. 15:20-28).

This representation of Salvation History speaks probingly to saints and seekers alike. Despite occasional appearances to the contrary—and despite our fervent wishes that things might be otherwise—the vast plain of human history is, and will remain, a spiritual battlefield, all the way to the Consummation. By divine decree, our world is a cosmic arena in which two spiritual kings and two spiritual kingdoms are destined to clash. From the point of view of God’s sovereignty, the end is not in doubt. But from the point of view of the test of life, each man—each saint and each seeker—has an inescapable decision to make: Which king is he going to serve, and in whose army is he going to fight?

5. Salvation History: A Journey to the Kingdom



In this timeline , I have attempted to consolidate most of the material pictured in the preceding diagrams. For this reason, it too is fairly self-explanatory.

We do well, however, to note again from this Timeline the close correlation between the progressive revelation of the Eternal Covenant and the progressive revelation of the Kingdom. We see, for example, that in the Era of Promise and Preparation there is a veiled revelation of the several elements of the Covenant. But for this very reason, there is also a veiled revelation of the coming Kingdom, since the Kingdom is, in essence, the Promise of the Covenant: eternal life beneath the direct reign of God, a reign introduced by the redemptive rescue and restoration of Christ, who is the Provision of the Covenant and the King of the Kingdom!

Again, in the Era of Proclamation and Probation, the Covenant has been unveiled, but only to the eye of faith. Likewise, the Kingdom of the Son has been unveiled, but only to the eye of faith.

The same parallelism holds true for the Era of Reward and Retribution. Here, the elements of the Covenant are all unveiled, in glory, to human sight. Likewise, in the Kingdom of the Father, all things—including God and Christ themselves—will be unveiled, in glory, to the wondering eyes of the glorified saints.

We see, then, that Salvation History is indeed a great journey, a journey to the Kingdom of God, wherein there is a full unveiling of the Eternal Covenant of God, wherein there is a full unveiling of the glory of God, wherein we find the theme of the eternal worship of the saints.

These are the Keys!

WE HAVE COMPLETED Part 2 of our journey to a sound biblical eschatology. With Christ and the apostles at our side, we approached the first and most intractable issue of the Great End Time Debate; the tallest, thickest, and most forbidding door blocking our entry to full assurance about the true shape of Salvation History: the biblical doctrine of the Kingdom of God. Knowing, however, that our Lord had the keys, and knowing that a diligent application of NT truth to this or any other problem of eschatology would secure for us the admission we desired, we were not intimidated. Nor have we been disappointed. Anchoring to the NT, we knocked, and having thus anchored we watched the door fling open wide, casting a flood of precious light upon true truth about the Kingdom of God.

Now that we have completed this leg of the journey, I would invite you to look in your hand. Do you see them there? Do you see how valuable they are? Do you feel their weight and power—these four golden keys that Christ has so graciously given us? He had them all along. And because, in our search for truth about the Kingdom, we turned first to him—to the One Teacher come from God—we now find them in our custody. These *are* the keys! These are the four great truths that open all doors and solve all problems; that enable us to grasp both the nature and structure of Salvation History, and so to resolve each and every issue of the Great End Time Debate.

But what exactly are these keys? Before embarking on the next leg of our journey, it will serve us well to review them one final time.

Key # 1: NT Teaching About the Nature of the Kingdom

This was our focus in chapters 5 and 6. There we learned that, contrary to Jewish expectation, our Lord did *not* view the Kingdom of God as an

eternal Mosaic theocracy. Rather, he viewed it as something quite unexpected, something “mysterious.” He viewed it as *a direct spiritual reign of God the Father, through the Son, by the Holy Spirit, with all the spiritual and physical blessedness that such a reign necessarily implies.*

In search of a better understanding of this reign, we traveled back to the beginning. There, in God’s “very good” creation, and especially in Eden, we caught our first glimpse of the Kingdom. We also saw that at the Tree of (Eternal) Life God *offered* the Kingdom *in fullness* to Adam, our head, and through him to the entire family of man. Finally, we saw that that at the Fall Adam *forfeited* this Kingdom, subjecting himself, his family, and his world to a kind of anti-kingdom; to a dreadful Domain of Darkness made up of a host of deadly spiritual and physical enemies, the most terrible of which was the wrath of God himself.

But this was not the end of the story. The wise, loving, and mighty God would not permit his purposes to be frustrated, whether for his Son, his people, his world, or his own glory. Accordingly, in the fullness of time he sent his Son into the world, through whose redemptive work he would indeed bring in the Kingdom that he had planned from all eternity and promised all throughout OT times. Therefore, the Kingdom that Jesus heralded, manifested, and founded by his total work on earth was—and is—a distinctly *redemptive* Kingdom. It is none other than the Kingdom offered to mankind in Eden, forfeited at the Fall, but now regained by the redemptive work of Christ. As such, it involves two great gifts, gifts that correspond to sinful man’s two great needs: *rescue* from every spiritual and physical enemy of the Domain of Darkness, and *restoration* to every spiritual and physical friend enjoyed in Eden and promised in fullness at the tree of life.

Here, then, is the deep NT idea of the *nature* of the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom was never meant to be an eternal Mosaic theocracy, though the Mosaic theocracy was indeed meant to be a picture of the Kingdom. Rather, it is, and always will be, a sphere of spiritual and physical wholeness and blessing; a sphere entered by God-given faith in Christ, through whom the saints are transferred, once and for all, from the Domain of Darkness into the Kingdom of God and his Beloved Son.

Key # 2: NT Teaching About the Structure of the Kingdom

This was our theme in chapters 9 and 10. Looking first at Christ's foundational teaching on the Mysteries of the Kingdom, and then at a host of confirming texts found in the book of Acts, the epistles, and the Revelation, we determined that the one Kingdom of God enters history in two simple stages; stages that are separated by a single Consummation at the coming again of Christ in glory at the end of the present evil age.

The first stage we called the Kingdom of the Son. Many indeed are the NT "mysteries" that describe it. It is, in essence, an invisible and spiritual reign. It was founded by Christ's redemptive work on earth, by his humiliation. It flourishes by his redemptive work in heaven, and is a central element of his exaltation. It began on the Day of Pentecost, and will draw to a close at the Parousia. Throughout this time, it emanates from above, from the High King of Heaven who is seated at the Father's right hand, having all authority in heaven and earth. Its central purpose is the *application* of the redemption that Christ accomplished for his people. Therefore, it is co-extensive with what we called the Era of Proclamation and Probation; an era in which the exalted Christ, by the Spirit, and through the Church, sends out the word of the truth of the Gospel to all nations. In this process, God puts men's love of the truth to the test. In this process, he gathers his chosen people, transferring all who believe from the Domain of Darkness into the spiritual Kingdom of his dear Son. Thus does Christ's invisible Kingdom grow—infallibly—until, like leaven in a lump of dough, it pervades the whole earth; until he himself returns at the end of the age to separate the wheat from the tares, and to gather the full-grown crop of wheat into his barn.

The Parousia of Christ is, then, the great transitional event; the one eschatological hinge upon which the Kingdom of the Son and the present evil age swing into the Kingdom of the Father and the eternal Age to Come. At his return in glory, Christ himself will be the Agent of all the great eschatological acts by which the Father's purpose and plan will be consummated. These will include a single resurrection of the dead, a single transformation of the living saints, a single judgment, a single destruction of the present heavens and earth by fire, and a single "restoration of all things," by which Christ will create new heavens and a new earth, the everlasting home of the redeemed.

Then, when the all-triumphant Christ has delivered up his fully redeemed and glorified world to his Father, the everlasting Kingdom of the Father (and the Son) will begin. Here the reign of God is physical, as well as spiritual. Here it is perfect, and no longer partial. Here the saints walk by sight, and no longer by faith. Here heaven and earth are one, and no longer separated by a veil of sin or judgment. Here, in a single unending Day illuminated by the glory of God himself, the promise of the Eternal Covenant will be fulfilled. The saints will be God's people, and he will be their God: fully, finally, and forevermore.

Key #3: NT Teaching about the Covenant and the Kingdom

We first touched on this crucially important theme in chapter 5, where we saw that Christ closely associated the Kingdom with a New Covenant; a Covenant that he himself was introducing; a Covenant that would bring new, abiding institutions, and new, abiding spiritual blessings; a Covenant that was indeed foreshadowed and predicted in the Old, but would soon *fulfill* the Old, *replace* it, and render it *forever obsolete*.

Seeing, then, that this New Covenant was of such tremendous eschatological importance, we devoted chapters 7 and 8 to investigating it thoroughly. Leaning heavily upon the NT epistles, we discovered three fundamental truths about this, the very heart of Salvation History.

First, *the New Covenant is the Eternal Covenant*. That is, the New Covenant that Christ introduced by means of his work on earth was none other than the great *mystery* of God: the one Christ-centered Plan of Salvation, formulated before the foundation of the world. Again, it was the heart and soul of all Salvation History.

We saw that this Covenant is two-sided, being comprised of a Covenant of Redemption between the Father and the Son, and a Covenant of Grace between God and his believing people. Having studied the elements of each in some detail, we realized that the Kingdom of God is none other than the Promise of the Eternal Covenant. With respect to the Covenant of Redemption, it is the Promise of the Father to his Son; namely, that in virtue of his obedience unto all humiliation, God will highly exalt him, making him "... Head (and King) over all things to the Church" (Eph. 1:22). With respect to the Covenant of Grace, it is the direct reign of God through

Christ, offered in Eden to the first Adam (and his kin) in the Covenant of Works, forfeited by the first Adam through his great transgression, but regained for God's people by the Last Adam through his perfect obedience in life and death (Rom. 5:12ff). Therefore, because the Promise of the Eternal Covenant and the Kingdom of God are one and the same, there is an indissoluble connection between the divine administration of the Covenant of Grace in history, and the coming of the Kingdom of God.

Secondly, *Salvation History is properly conceived as a progressive administration of the one Eternal Covenant.*

Our survey of God's actions in biblical history clearly revealed a God with a goal. Throughout OT times, he had a plan, formulated in eternity past: the Eternal Covenant. He was eager to manifest that plan, to unveil it as it really is in the (twofold) Era of Fulfillment. In other words, God was eager for history to reach the fullness of time, the last days, the appointed season in which he would send his Son into the world in order to manifest—both in Scripture and historical experience—the true parties, provision, promise, proviso, and penalty of the Eternal Covenant.

Here, then, is the great goal of Salvation History. However, for wise reasons, God determined to reach that goal progressively, in stages. More particularly, he determined to reach it by a series of administrations of the Eternal Covenant. There are six of them, each of which affected (or will affect) the generations of men subsequent to them: the administrations to Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses/Israel, the Church in the Era of Proclamation and Probation, and the Church at the Parousia, when Christ administers the Promise of the Covenant in fullness to his people and their world. The biblical revelation of these serial administrations gives us Salvation History as a whole; it unveils what might be called the Body of Salvation History. The heart of the Body is the Eternal Covenant itself; the skeleton is the six administrations of the Covenant; the flesh is all who have ever encountered and responded to the Covenant, whether in faith or unbelief, obedience or rebellion.

Thirdly, *the several administrations of the Covenant fall into two broad categories.* On the one hand, there are four administrations that occur *prior* to the coming of Christ: the covenants with Adam, Noah, Abraham, and Moses/Israel. These belong to the Era of Promise and Preparation. Here the several elements of the Covenant were not (fully) revealed as they are in

and of themselves. Rather, they were revealed under types and shadows; under a vast network of physical persons, places, things, events, and institutions that all point mystically to the “substance” that will fulfill them: the things of Christ and the Covenant (Col. 2:17). They are also revealed in various predictive prophecies, prophecies that regularly draw upon the physical types and shadows of OT times in order to point ahead to the spiritual blessings of NT times. This is why all OT history was promissory and preparatory. It was ever looking forward to that which would fulfill it: the coming of Christ and the manifold Promise of the Eternal Covenant, the Kingdom of God.

On the other hand, we have the two administrations of the Covenant that occur at—and subsequent to—the two comings of Christ. These belong to the Era of Fulfillment. As we have seen, this Era is twofold. In the Era of Proclamation and Probation, the Promise of the Covenant is partially administered by the High Prophet, Priest, and King of Heaven, who does so by the Spirit and through the evangelistic ministry of his Church. At the Parousia—and thereafter in the eternal Kingdom of the Father—the Promise of the Covenant is administered in fullness, as Christ welcomes his resurrected, transformed, and glorified Bride to the new heavens and the new earth, the eternal home of the redeemed.

Key # 4: The New Covenant Hermeneutic

This brings us to our fourth and final key, and to a truth of special importance for our study. As we have just seen, the NT divides Salvation History into two broad categories: one in which the administrations of the Covenant come by way of Promise (OT), and another in which they come by way of Fulfillment (NT). Since, however, the OT administrations of the Covenant were veiled beneath types and shadows, the biblical motif of Promise and Fulfillment requires and creates something of extraordinary eschatological importance, *a New Covenant Hermeneutic*; a new, covenantally aware method for interpreting the OT in general, and OTKP in particular.

We first encountered this fascinating subject in chapter 4, where we discussed the biblical phenomenon of Progressive Revelation. We encountered it again in chapter 5, where we learned that the Kingdom

Christ proclaimed was closely associated with a New Covenant; a New Covenant that fulfilled the Old, rendered it obsolete, and opened up its (formerly) hidden spiritual meaning. Then, in chapter 7 we sat at the feet of Christ's apostles, who explained all things; who unveiled the heart of Salvation History (i.e., the Eternal Covenant), its dynamic (i.e., the successive administrations of the Covenant), its basic twofold structure (i.e., an Era of Promise and Preparation, followed by an Era of Fulfillment), and the "mysterious" relationship between the Old and New Covenant administrations (i.e., that, *per* Augustine, the Old Covenant is the New concealed, and the New Covenant is the Old revealed). In all this, we finally understood the deep NT rationale for the NCH, the NT method of OT interpretation taught and practiced by Christ and the apostles.

In chapter 8, we began to put this method to work. Carefully surveying God's redemptive interactions with Adam, Noah, Abraham, and Moses/Israel, we discovered the elements of the Eternal Covenant—and therefore the idea of the Kingdom—everywhere, hidden away like jewels in the underbrush, glimmering beneath an astonishingly rich, complex, beautiful, and powerful body of types and shadows. This helped us to see the *promissory* character of OT revelation, its orientation towards the future. It helped us to see the *mysterious* character of OT revelation, its veiling under types and shadows. It helped us to see the *christological* and *covenantal* character of OT revelation, its rootedness in the one Eternal Covenant that has Christ for its living center. Finally, it helped us to see the purpose of God in creating this vast body of mystical OT revelation; his desire to use it, in the fullness of time, as a powerful witness to Christ and the Covenant, thereby engendering and confirming a reasonable and adoring faith in his chosen people as they go forth to bring the Gospel to the nations.

The NCH is one of Christ's most precious gifts to the Church. Without it, she cannot understand the OT in general and OTKP in particular. However, with it a feast of fat things is suddenly spread before our wondering eyes, and the Great End Time Debate is fully resolved once and for all.

Inserting the Keys!

I want to close this short chapter as I began, affirming the great value of all we have discovered in Part 2 of our study.

We set out to scale the most challenging eschatological mountain of all: the nature and structure of the Kingdom of God. But when at last we reached our goal, we found—to our amazement and delight—that in a very real sense *we had already reached the end of our journey!* That is, in thinking with Christ about the Kingdom, we discovered four keys; but in discovering the four keys, we somehow came upon the Holy Grail of Cosmic Eschatology itself: the one true picture of Salvation History. Moreover, we beheld not only the structure of Salvation History—the stages and sequences involved—but its Christ-centered heart and soul, as well.

What a boon! For now—having arrived at this rich NT understanding of the Covenant, the Kingdom, and the nature and shape of Salvation history—we hold in our hand the keys to every other flashpoint of eschatological controversy, as well.

Consider: Simply by looking at the timelines found in Chapter 10—and simply by thinking through their implications—we can see immediately that we must not interpret OTKP literally; instead, we must interpret it covenantally, christologically, typologically, and eschatologically. Similarly, we can see immediately that there will be no third stage of the Kingdom, and therefore no future thousand year reign of Christ on the earth. And we can see immediately that the Consummation is a single, multi-faceted (and therefore most glorious) event, centered on the Parousia of Christ at the end of the present evil age. So again, by giving us four golden keys and one true picture of Salvation History, the High Prophet of Heaven has implicitly resolved for us all the core issues of the End Time Debate.

Is our journey therefore over? No, it is not. For though we have now arrived at a clear Timeline of Salvation History, it still remains deliberately to insert these precious keys into each of the three great flashpoints of eschatological controversy. How shall we interpret the many OTKP's that have confused and divided the Church for many years? How shall we understand that most controversial of all biblical chapters, Revelation 20? How, drawing upon all of Scripture—OT as well as New—shall we arrive at a clear, detailed picture the Consummation?

There is one simple answer to all three questions: We must insert the keys!

Here, then, are our marching orders for Parts 3, 4, and 5. And please note: Though our journey is far from over, it is all downhill from here! Therefore, let us head out and head home!

Part 3
Understanding
Old Testament Kingdom Prophecy

The Nature and Stages of the Kingdom in Old Testament Prophecy

OUR GOAL IN Part 3 of our journey is to address the vexed question of the proper interpretation of OT Kingdom prophecy. We have seen that premillenarians favor a basically literal approach, an approach that requires a three-staged Kingdom and a future return to (certain institutions of) the Mosaic Law. However, in examining NT Kingdom theology, we realized that Christ and the apostles do not sanction this view; that their instruction concerning the (spiritual) nature and (twofold) structure of the Kingdom implicitly rules out the premillennial understanding of OTKP.

Nevertheless, an obvious and important question remains: How exactly *would* the Teacher have us interpret OTKP? In particular, what specific NT principles would he have us bring to these texts, so that we might arrive—confidently and in complete unity—at the full meaning intended by the Spirit of God? In our journey thus far, we have touched on these principles. Our goal in Part 3 of the journey is to plumb them to the depths.

Three fundamental steps will be involved.

To begin with, here in chapter 12 we will get better acquainted with the object of our study: the great body of OT Kingdom prophecy. Our approach will be twofold . On the one hand, we will examine the *nature* of the Kingdom as the OT prophets represented it. Among other things, this will require a closer look at what we called the Representative Idea of the Kingdom, as well as certain anomalies—certain “odd” characteristics of OTKP—that hint at the necessity of a non-literal, covenantal, and typological interpretation. On the other hand, we will also examine the *coming* of the Kingdom: the stages in which it appears, and the key persons and events that introduce those stages. Along the way, we will see that

certain characteristics of OTKP make this task exceedingly difficult; but also that in speaking as enigmatically as he did, God had his reasons; that he was purposely setting the stage for his Son to enter the world in the last days, and to grant us a much-needed, far clearer, and definitive revelation of the nature and coming of the Kingdom.

In chapters 13 and 14 we will return to the NT itself, drawing upon all we have learned in Part 2 to discern and set forth a comprehensive list of NT principles by which we may confidently interpret OTKP. In other words, we will seek to develop a *detailed* New Covenant Hermeneutic for the proper interpretation of OTKP. Here we will also carefully consider how Christ and the apostles actually applied these principles in their own handling of specific OT texts.

Finally, in chapters 15-18 we will settle down to enjoy the rich fruit of our labors. With Christ and the apostles again at our side—and with the NCH firmly in hand—we will visit a largish number of specific OT prophecies, and watch them open up like flowers in full bloom before our eyes. Importantly, my goal in this chapter will be to tackle some of the more difficult Kingdom prophecies, prophecies that are currently bastions of premillennial faith, but that beneath the light of the NCH can be seen actually to confirm amillennial eschatology. In other words, we will see that OTKP speaks powerfully to Christians, especially to those who understand that even now, as well as in the Age to Come, they are the privileged citizens of the Kingdom of God.

In sum, my goal in Part 3 is to place some very special tools in your hands—and some very special illustrations before your eyes—so that when you have completed this stage of our journey, you will be able to enter, understand, and enjoy the world of OTKP as never before!

The Nature of the Kingdom As Portrayed by the OT Prophets

In this section we will take a closer look at what I have called the Representative OT Idea of the Kingdom of God. However, before plunging in, two introductory remarks are in order.

First, let us recall again that the enormous body of OTKP *arose out of the Law*. That is, it was based upon, and flowed from, the Israelite constitution, the Torah. In particular, OTKP was a highly detailed

elaboration of the original promise of God, first given through Moses, to the effect that Israel—the nation over which God then reigned as king—would indeed wander into sin, fall victim to the covenant curses, and go into exile. Nevertheless, because of his steadfast covenant love and mercy, God, in “the latter-day s,” would graciously grant his people repentance, rescue, restoration, and eternal blessedness in the Promised Land (Lev. 26, Deut. 30, 32). As we saw earlier, these early predictions and promises constitute the framework for all OTKP. Later OT prophecies would add more details to this portrait, *but, unlike NT revelation, these prophecies would not alter it in any fundamental way.*

Secondly, the massive body of OTKP *appeared in the days of the Law.* Yes, Adam, Noah, and Abraham give us OT *pictures* of the Kingdom; but it was only Moses and the writing prophets who gave us explicit *predictions* of an eschatological Kingdom. Moreover, God not only gave OTKP *through* men who lived under the Law, but also *to* men who lived under the Law. The Law was, as it were, the *lingua franca* of the time; the common tongue of that unique portion of the Era of Promise and Preparation in which God was pleased to grant explicit promises of his coming eschatological rule. It is hardly surprising, then, that he clothed those promises in the language and imagery of the Mosaic Law.

These two points are extremely important. Indeed, they pave the way for a statement of our thesis in the chapters ahead. It is this: *In essence, OTKP is God’s promise of the future, twofold , redemptive reign of God through Christ, clothed in the language and imagery of the Mosaic Law, and also of world conditions that existed in the days of the Law.* In other words, OTKP is “covenantally conditioned,” and therefore typological and christological at its heart.

“But why,” you may ask, “would God do such a thing? Why would he not speak plainly? Why would he expose himself to charges of deceiving his OT people? Why would he risk confusing his NT people, as indeed many of them clearly have been? Why would he not simply say what he meant, instead of ‘mystically’ meaning what he said?”

These are all excellent questions, questions that we will address in due time. First, however, we must become convinced that in OTKP God has indeed clothed NT truth in OT language. Once we are thoroughly satisfied on this point, we can then go on to ask why he did what he did.

Let us begin, then, by taking a closer look at the Representative Idea of the Kingdom.

The Representative OT Idea of the Kingdom

By my rough count, there are approximately 150 OT prophecies of the coming Kingdom of God.¹ As we saw earlier, a straightforward, literal interpretation of most (but not all) of them yields the following picture: *The coming Kingdom will be an eternal, universal theocracy, mediated by ethnic Israel and her Messiah, administered in accordance with the Mosaic Law, and set in a spiritually and physically redeemed cosmos.* In what follows, we will look briefly—and critically—at each element of this definition. We'll begin by citing a number of texts that give rise to the element under discussion. Then we will pause to consider various (OT) phenomena that discourage a strictly literal interpretation, and that therefore raise serious doubts about the standard premillennial view. Finally, we'll begin to employ the NCH in order to suggest viable NT interpretations.

Eternal

Whether explicitly or implicitly, all OTKP portrays returning, eschatological Israel as dwelling in her homeland forever. Through Amos God promises that he will replant his people in the land, and that they shall *never again* be pulled up from it (Amos 9:11-15). Joel declares that Israel will *never again* be put to shame, and that Jerusalem will be inhabited *forever* (Joel 2:18-27, 3:20). Concerning the coming Messiah, Isaiah says that of the increase of his government and peace there shall be *no end* (Isaiah 9:6-7). When the ransomed of the Lord return to their land, *everlasting joy* shall be upon their heads (Isaiah 35:10, 61:7). When God renews the heavens and the earth, Israel will be glad and rejoice *forever* in what he creates (Isaiah 65:17). Ezekiel promises that in the latter-day s the mountains of Israel will *no more* devour men or bereave God's nation of her children (36:13-15); that Israel will dwell in their homeland *forever*; that God's servant David will be their Prince *forever*; and that God will set his sanctuary in their midst *forever* (Ezek. 37:15-28, 43:7,9). Again, these texts only make explicit what is implicit in *all* OTKP: In the days of Israel's return from captivity, God will make her redemption complete. Fully

rescued from all her enemies, and fully restored to all the blessings of the covenant, she will dwell *eternally* with the LORD and his Messiah in the Promised Land (Obadiah 1:21, Micah 4:1-8).

Now it is obvious that the temporal perspective of these texts does not support premillennialism. They say nothing at all of a temporary thousand year reign of God or Christ. Rather, they explicitly picture the *eternal* blessedness of the people of God. Does this create a problem for the NT interpreter? It could, but only if he insists on reading the texts literally, rather than typologically; only if he is not willing to consider that here the prophets give us NT truth clothed in OT language and imagery; only if he refuses to let “Israel” dwelling eternally in the Promised Land be a “mysterious” type of God’s Church—comprised of Jew and Gentile—living with him forever in his twofold Kingdom.

Universal

A great many OTKP’s depict the coming Kingdom as being universal: as including not only Jews, but also Gentiles converted from their idolatry to a vital faith in the LORD, the Creator of heaven and earth. This characteristic has its roots in the Abrahamic covenant, wherein God declared that through Abraham’s seed all the nations of the earth would one day be blessed (Gen. 22:18). Moreover, it is grounded in the Law itself, where, despite stern warnings against contamination by pagan depravity, God himself makes explicit provision for the participation of believing Gentiles in the covenant community (Exodus 12:48, 22:21, Lev. 19:33-34, 23:22, 24:22, Num. 15:14-16, Deut. 10:18-19, 24:14f). Subsequent OTKP’s offering the hope of eternal life to Gentile nations all bear the stamp of these ancient legal texts.

OT prophecies of the universality of the Kingdom are numerous and pervasive. As far back as the Song of Moses, we hear God, amidst dreadful warnings of final judgment against Israel’s foes, urging the Gentiles to rejoice with his people (Deut. 32:43; Rom. 15:10). The Psalmists declare that all the ends of the earth will remember (their Maker and Redeemer) and turn to the LORD; and all the families of the nations will worship before him (Psalm 22:27; Psalms 72, 89, 96). Isaiah promises that in the days of Israel’s Messiah the nations will resort to the Root of Jesse; that the peoples

will rally to him as to a banner flying in the wind (Isaiah 11:10, 42:1-4, 49:1-7); that aliens will attach themselves to Jacob when the LORD restores them to the land (14:1-2); that Egypt and Assyria will be reckoned among God's people (19:16-24); that upon his holy Mountain he will prepare a feast of fat things for all peoples (25:6-9); that the nations will come to the light of Zion (60:1ff); that they will build up its walls and beautify its sanctuary, so that Jerusalem will be an everlasting pride, a joy from generation to generation (65:17ff). Likewise, Micah foresees the nations flowing to the Mountain of the House of the LORD (Micah 4:1-5).

Jeremiah, another pre-exilic prophet, agrees, promising that in that Day men shall call Jerusalem the Throne of the LORD, and that all nations will be gathered to it (Jer. 3:16-17; 12:14-17). Zephaniah announces that God will purify the speech of the peoples, so that all may call on the name of the LORD and serve him shoulder to shoulder (Zeph. 3:9). According to Zechariah, many peoples and mighty nations will come to seek the LORD of hosts in Jerusalem, there to entreat his favor (Zech. 8:23; 2:1-13). When they do, says Haggai, they will bring with them the wealth of the nations, and so fill God's house with glory (Haggai 2:7, NAS). In these and many other such texts, the OT prophets picture Jew and Gentile dwelling together in peace in an eternal global Kingdom, united by a common faith in the LORD, and a common enjoyment of his redemptive work through Israel's Messiah.

But while this is indeed the representative picture of the Kingdom, it is important to note that the OT prophets give us other pictures as well; pictures that raise serious hermeneutical problems. For example, some of the prophets say little or nothing at all about the conversion of the Gentiles, offering instead a purely nationalistic picture of the Kingdom, rather than a global one. Here, the Kingdom is more or less identical with Israel restored to her homeland and fully enjoying the covenant blessings of her God. Amos portrays the Kingdom in just this way, mentioning the Gentiles only as defeated and occupied foes, subjects of the resurrected dynasty of David (Amos 9:11-15). In Hosea's five Kingdom prophecies, he does not mention the conversion of the Gentiles once, but instead depicts the Kingdom in terms of a second Exodus of captive Israel and Judah, who, under David their King, will live in holiness, peace, and prosperity in the land (Hosea 1:10-11, 2:14-23, 3:5, 11:10-11, 14:4-7).² As for Ezekiel, he does indeed

affirm that the surrounding nations will recognize the hand of the LORD in Israel's restoration to Canaan (36:36, 37:28). Nevertheless, it is God's people alone who will enjoy the gift of the Spirit and the blessedness of life under David their King (Ezek. 36, 37).

In other Kingdom prophecies we come upon a still different picture of Israel's relation to the Gentiles. Here too restored Israel is dwelling in the land, but now the surrounding nations—all presumed to be hostile—have been destroyed! Such is the case with Obadiah, in whose great Kingdom prophecy we find Edom and “all the nations” drinking down God's judgment in the Day of the LORD. Jacob, on the other hand, enjoys deliverance on Mount Zion, and goes on to “possess his possessions”—including the territory of his defeated foes—in the eternal Kingdom (vv. 15-21).

The situation is much the same in Joel's final Kingdom prophecy, where we learn that in the end all nations will gather themselves against a fully restored Israel. However, when they do, the LORD will roar from Zion and utter his voice from Jerusalem. In that Day, Israel's enemies will perish in the Valley of Decision, but the LORD will be a refuge for his people. And thereafter, Egypt and Edom will be a perpetual waste; whereas Judah and Jerusalem will abide forever in a land of Edenic peace and bounty, a land where the mountains drip with sweet wine and the hills flow with milk (Joel 3:9-21; cf. Zech. 12:1-9).

What are we to make of these things? How shall we reconcile these competing pictures of Israel's relation to the Gentiles? As we have seen, the premillennial solution is no solution at all, since in each of these three portraits the situation envisioned is fully eschatological; it is *ultimate and eternal*. There is, however, a way of escape. What if we did not read the prophecies literally? What if we did not read them as prerecorded history? What if we read them as prophetic “snapshots” of the twofold Kingdom of Christ? In that case, it would be fairly easy to see the different meanings intended by the prophetic Spirit, and thereby to resolve the apparent contradictions.

For example, OTKP's that depict the Kingdom *globally*—i.e., under the imagery of Jew and Gentile united in a common, worldwide faith in the LORD—would be understood to picture the *universality* of the New (and Eternal) Covenant; the inclusion of formerly alienated Gentiles in “the

commonwealth of Israel” and “the blessing of Abraham,” all through the redemptive work of Christ (Gal. 3:14, Eph. 2:11-13). On the other hand, OTKP’s that depict the Kingdom *ethnically or nationalistically*—i.e., under the imagery of Israel dwelling alone in the land, triumphant over all her foes—could be said to picture the *people (or parties)* of the New Covenant: Christ’s Church, “the Israel of God” (Gal. 6:16), “the holy nation” (1 Peter 2:9), and “the one new man” comprised both of Jew and Gentile (Eph. 2:15), all living with God forever in the “land,” whether in the Zion (and Jerusalem) above (Gal. 4:26, Heb. 12:22), or, after Christ’s return, the new heavens and the new earth.

Such an approach rescues us from the maddening task of trying to arrange and harmonize the disparate events described in these OTKP’s. Moreover, since their sphere of fulfillment is now understood to be Christ’s Church, Christians can henceforth see *themselves* in all such prophecies. And in that they can greatly rejoice—especially if they happen to be Gentiles!

Theocracy

We may define a theocracy as a people or nation over which God rules, usually through human mediators such as priests, prophets, or divinely appointed kings. In the pages ahead we will encounter a great many OTKP’s that represent the Kingdom in this manner: as a spiritually renovated *world order* over which God rules through appointed (Israelite) mediators, in accordance with the precepts of the Mosaic Law. Undeniably, this notion of a global Mosaic theocracy belongs essentially to the representative OT idea of the Kingdom, and therefore figures prominently in premillennial visions of the future. Nevertheless, we have just seen that quite a number of OTKP’s do *not* foresee a global theocracy, but instead depict eschatological Israel dwelling by herself with God and her Messianic King in a spiritually and physically renewed homeland. Moreover, we shall soon see that still other OTKP’s—as well as explicit NT teachings—raise grave questions about how literally we are to interpret OT prophecies of a coming theocratic Kingdom.

Mediated by Ethnic Israel

When God gave the Law to Israel, he also gave them a mission. Yes, they were a chosen nation (Deut. 7:7-8), his special treasure among (or above) all peoples (Deut. 10:15). But with this privilege came a responsibility: They were to be a *holy* nation before the face of *all* nations. This belonged to the very essence of the Mosaic covenant: God would give Israel his Law, Israel would obey it, God would bless Israel, the surrounding nations would *see* him blessing Israel, *and the surrounding nations would be drawn to the LORD*. In this matter, Moses was explicit:

So keep and practice (these statutes and judgments), for this is your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples, who will hear all these statutes and say, “Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people!”

—Deut. 4:6; 28:10

Here we discover one of the central purposes of Israel’s election. Yes, God was eager to make Israel the head and not the tail (Deut. 28:13). He was eager to set his people high above all other nations for praise, fame, and honor (Deut. 26:19). Indeed, he was eager for Israel to rule over many surrounding nations (Deut. 15:6, 28:7). But *why*? Moses has given us the answer: so that through Israel’s greatness he might provoke the nations to jealousy; so that ten men from the nations of every language might grasp the garment of a Jew, saying, “Let us go with you, for we have heard that God is with you” (Zech. 8:23). In giving Israel his Law, God declared them to be *a kingdom of priests* (Exodus 19:6). Now we understand what he meant: Through their life of public worship, obedience, and blessing, Israel—God’s priestly nation—was to *mediate* the knowledge of God to all other nations.

This premise permeates OTKP. Yes, divided Israel has wandered into sin, fallen under judgment, and gone into exile. And yes, she has failed in her mission to the nations. But God is not done with her. For in the latter days, he will again remember his covenant mercies and restore his people: to their homeland, to their (Davidic) king, to a life of holiness in the Spirit, and to their former glory. Therefore, in those days Israel will also fulfill her mission: ***She will mediate the knowledge—and the rule (or Kingdom)—of God to the nations.***

The OT prophets offered this rich hope under a wide variety of imagery, and none more profusely than Isaiah. In the days of the Kingdom, he said,

Israel will joyously draw water from the springs of salvation, exhorting one another to make known the deeds of the LORD among the peoples (12:3-6). When the glory of the LORD appears over Zion, the nations will come to her light, and kings to the brightness of her rising (60:3). Because of Zion's glory, the flocks of Kedar and the rams of Nebaioth will go up with acceptance on God's altar (60:7). The ships of Tarshish will bring Zion's (Gentile) sons from afar, and their silver and gold with them (60:9). Indeed, many foreigners will come and build up Zion's walls, and the nation that will not serve her will perish (60:10, 12). Strangers will pasture Israel's flocks, and foreigners will be their vinedressers; but Israel herself will be called the priest of the LORD, the minister of her God (Isaiah 61:6). Zion's far-flung sons and daughters will be known among the nations, and her seed amidst the peoples: All who see them will recognize them as the offspring whom the LORD has blessed (61:9). Indeed, in those days God will no longer wait for the nations to come to Zion, but will send the restored remnant of his people to distant lands: to Tarshish, Put, Lud, Meshech, Rosh, Tubal, and Javan—to all who have neither heard of his fame nor seen his glory. And they will bring their new Gentile brethren back to Zion, and into the house of the LORD, where he will take some of *them* for priests and Levites (66:18-21)!

Now, how are we to interpret these prophecies, wherein eschatological Israel appears as the head and not the tail; as a holy nation and a Kingdom of priests; as a chosen nation mediating God's truth and blessing to all nations? The literalist response of our premillennial brothers is clearly impossible, unless we are prepared to grant that in a future millennium God will resurrect such extinct nations as Tarshish, Put, Lud, Meshech, Rosh, Tubal, and Javan; and that for a thousand years he will be sending Jewish evangelists to Assyria (Isaiah 19:25), Moab (Jer. 48:7), Ammon (Jer. 49:6), and Elam (Jer. 49:39)!

No, the NT solution is far simpler, and far more engaging to the Christian interpreter. In all these majestic prophecies, God is speaking of his NT Israel, his NT Zion, his NT Temple, and his NT priesthood. He is speaking of Christ's Church. In language and imagery that the OT saints could relate to, he is saying that in the last days the New Covenant people of God will fulfill ethnic Israel's priestly mission to the nations. Like Zion of old, she will be a glorious city set upon a hill—and a Temple as well—to

which God will draw believers from every nation (Mt. 5:14, Eph. 2:19-22). Like Levi of old, she will be a priestly people, a messenger of the LORD of hosts, from whose mouth the peoples will indeed seek instruction (Mal. 2:7, 1 Peter 2:5, 9). Therefore, how beautiful upon the mountains will be the feet of those NT priests who bring the good news of the Gospel to foreign lands (Isaiah 52:7, Mt. 28:18f, Rom. 10:15)!

We conclude, then, that OTKP's portraying Israel as the mediator of God's redemptive reign have a double fulfillment, both elements of which pertain to Christ's Church and her mission in the present Era of Proclamation. More narrowly, they depict the Jewish NT remnant—Peter, John, Paul, and all their Jewish successors—triumphantly carrying the Gospel to the Gentiles (Acts 10, 17). More broadly, they depict the Church as a whole—both Jew and Gentile—carrying the Gospel to unbelievers everywhere; mediating to men of every tribe, tongue, people, and nation the truth, knowledge, and blessing of God offered to them in Christ. It is, then, in Christ, in the Church, and in the Gospel that the “Israel” of OTKP mediates the Kingdom of God to the nations.

And Her Messiah

According to a great many OTKP's, God will institute, administer, enlarge, and preserve his coming Kingdom through the Messiah, a Spirit-anointed descendant of king David, under whose wise, just, and powerful reign he (God) will deliver Israel from all her enemies, restore her to all the covenant blessings, and enable her to fulfill her priestly vocation by extending the rule of the LORD to the nations. In short, God will mediate his universal reign through his Anointed. This is the Representative OT idea of the Person and Work of the Messiah.

Importantly, the headwaters of this particular stream of Kingdom prophecy are found in 2 Samuel 7:1-17, where we read of God's covenant with king David (cf. Psalm 89). Speaking not only of Solomon, but also—and primarily—of David's greater Son (the Messiah), God promises that he will establish his Kingdom and his house (dynasty) forever. Moreover, in those days he (the Messiah) will build a Temple for God's name, give Israel rest from all her enemies, and plant them once and for all in their land, so that they will “move no more.”³

Most (but not all) subsequent Messianic prophecies build upon this prototype, the main addition being predictions of the universality of the Messiah's future Kingdom. Broadly speaking, the picture is this: After he delivers his people from captivity and exile, God will raise up a chosen Son of David (Isaiah 9:6-7, Jer. 30:9, Hosea 3:5, Ezek. 34:23-24). Born in Bethlehem, and therefore of the tribe of Judah (Micah 5:2), he will be a mighty warrior king, commanding the fierce loyalty of his followers, just as David did in former times (Psalm 110:3, Micah 5:5-7, Zech. 9:9-17). Under his leadership, Israel and Judah (Ephraim and Joseph) will be joined together as one, just as they were in the glory days of the united monarchy (Jer. 23:6, Ezek. 37:24-25). He will secure his people and his land against all enemies (Psalm 2:5, 9, 12, Isaiah 9:2-7, Jer. 23:1-7, Micah 5:1-9). In his days, God will also send the Holy Spirit, thereby giving his people a heart to obey him; therefore, there will be showers of (covenant) blessings (Isaiah 4:2-6, Jer. 30:9, 18-22, Ezek. 34:23-31). Moreover, the Messiah's dominion—and the LORD's as well—will spread from sea to sea, from the River to the ends of the earth (Psalms 2:8, 72:8, 17, Micah 5:4, Zech. 9:10). In those days, he will punish the wicked and rebellious (Psalm 2:9, Isaiah 11:4), rescue the oppressed (Psalm 72:4, 12-14, Isaiah 11:4), maintain the cause of the poor (Isaiah 11:4), and establish justice throughout the earth (Isaiah 9:7, 42:1-4). Both man and nature will enjoy peace, prosperity, and the presence and glory of God (Psalm 72:3, 16, Isaiah 9:7, 11:6-9, Amos 9:11-18, Micah 5:4). For all these reasons, men will praise God's anointed King every day, and his name will be great to the ends of the earth (Psalm 72:11, 15, Micah 5:4).

Again, this is the Representative, or customary, OT idea of the Messiah and his reign. If, however, we carefully examine the *complete* body of Messianic prophecy, we discover a number of fascinating anomalies, anomalies that press upon us the urgency of turning to the NT for a more perfect understanding of this crucial stream of OT revelation.

Of first importance are the anomalous texts describing the *person* of the Messiah. In these, we learn that he is not only a human being, but also—in a way that requires further (NT) explanation—a *divine* being. Thus, David, speaking by the Spirit, calls him his Adonai, or Lord (Psalm 110:1, Mark 12:36). Isaiah refers to him as the Mighty God and the Everlasting Father (Isaiah 9:7). In two other passages with definite Messianic overtones, he

also calls him Immanuel, or God With Us (Isaiah 7:14, 8:8). In two prophecies that tell us much about the Messiah's redemptive work, Jeremiah declares that men will call him Yahweh-Tsidkenu: the LORD-Our-Righteousness (Jer. 23:6, 33:16). Daniel, referring to the Messiah as One like a Son of Man, depicts him as a heavenly being (Dan. 7:13). The Messiah's deity is also reflected in his eternity: He will rule till the moon is no more (Psalm 72:7); of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end (Isaiah 9:7); he will be Israel's Prince forever (Ezekiel 37:25); his dominion will be an everlasting dominion (Daniel 7:14); his goings forth (i.e., to reveal himself in OT times by way of Christophany) are from of old, even from everlasting (or, from ancient days) (Micah 5:2). Small wonder, then, that all peoples, nations, and languages will serve and worship him (Psalm 72:9-11, Daniel 7:14)!

Secondly, we have anomalous texts concerning the Work of the Messiah. In these, we learn that he will be something unprecedented in Israel: not simply a king, but a prophet and a priest, as well.

Regarding his prophetic mantle, Moses himself hinted at it in the Law, indicating that in the last days God would raise up a supreme Prophet (Deut. 18:15, Acts 3:22). Isaiah confirms our suspicions, characterizing the Messiah as one who will bring the light of God's saving truth not only to Israel, but also to the nations (Isaiah 9:1-2, 49:5-6).

As to his priestly mantle, the OT testimony is quite prolific. The royal Messiah will also be a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek (Psalm 110:2, 4). He will sit as a priest upon his throne, so that the counsel of peace (i.e., harmony) will be between both offices (Zech. 6:12-13, NIV). In the exercise of his priestly functions, he will remove the iniquity of the land of God's people in one day (Zech. 3:1-10).

In this connection, chapter 53 of the book of Isaiah is of special importance. In a passage saturated with priestly ideas and imagery, the prophet here declares that in fulfillment of his ministry, God's Anointed Servant will offer the ultimate sacrifice—his own life—in order to provide atonement for the sins of his people:

Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities; the punishment for our peace was upon him, and by his stripes we are healed. All we

like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

—Isaiah 53:4-6

Very importantly, in thus describing the Messiah's priestly work, Isaiah goes on to affirm what we just learned from David and Zechariah: As a consequence of the Messiah's obedience unto death, God will exalt him to be a King.

By his knowledge My righteous servant will justify many, for he will bear their iniquities. *Therefore I will divide him a portion with the great, and he will divide the spoil with the strong,* because he poured out his soul unto death, and was numbered with the transgressors, and bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.

—Isaiah 53:11-12

Because the Representative Idea of the Messiah had so thoroughly captured the imagination of the Jews of Jesus' day, they had little or no expectation of this, his priestly work. More or less exclusively, they looked for a national deliverer like king David of old. Only the actual death and resurrection of Christ—along with the apostolic proclamation of their meaning—could awaken an interest in, or make sense of, the Messiah's role as the eternal High Priest of his people. When, however, that interest was truly awakened, they soon saw exactly what we have seen in previous chapters: Apart from his priestly work, the Messiah's reign as High King of Heaven would be impossible.

Thirdly, we have anomalous texts dealing with the *people* of the Messiah. As a rule, the prophets foresee the Messiah reigning over the Gentiles. However, as we saw above, there are a number of texts in which the Gentiles are not mentioned at all, or are foreseen as having been judged and destroyed. Here, the Messiah reigns over Israel alone.

Also, it is very important to note that while most OTKP's represent the Messiah's own people as enthusiastically loving and serving him, others, mysteriously enough, predict that they will disbelieve, oppress, despise, abhor, and forsake him (Isaiah 49:7, 53:1, 3, 7-8). Similarly, while most OTKP's portray the Messiah as happily ruling over a nation bathed in God's covenant blessings, Zechariah ominously predicts that God will awaken a sword against his own (Messianic) Companion and Shepherd, and that two thirds of his flock will be cut off and perish (Zech. 13:7-9).

Fourthly, we have a few OTKP's in which it is not the eschatological David himself who rules over the Kingdom, but rather a resurrected Davidic *dynasty* and a restored Levitical *priesthood* (Jer. 33:19-22, cf. Amos 9:11-15). Here, the Messiah appears to be neither divine nor eternal. His eternal reign is strictly through an eternal seed.

Finally, concerning the *career* of the Messiah, we have seen that most OTKP's envision him as arising in Israel *after* their return from exile. However, Micah 2:12-13, puzzlingly enough, seems to have him leading Israel *out* of captivity and *back* into her homeland. The same is true of Hosea 1:11, which portrays the "one leader" of a unified Israel as bringing the victorious nation "up from the land," presumably the land of their captors.

How can we make sense of all these anomalies? How are we to reconcile these apparent contradictions? The answer, I trust, is clear. On pain of endless confusion and controversy, we cannot adopt the literalism of our premillennial brethren. Rather, we must look to the NT—and to the NCH—to explain and harmonize all.

For example, concerning the manifold work of the Messiah, we have seen that the NT gives us a richly detailed picture of how Jesus Christ did fill, does fill, and eternally will fill all three of his offices; how his priestly work on earth lays the foundation for his kingly work in heaven; and how his prophetic work (by which he gave us the NT) enables us to understand them both. Once we do, there can be no question of a literal fulfillment of the Representative OT Idea of the Kingdom in a future millennium.

What of the anomalous OTKP's portraying the Messiah as ruling only over Israel in her homeland? Applying the NCH, we see immediately that these are simply OT pictures of Christ ruling over his (universal) Church, both now and in the new heavens and the new earth. They focus on the *unity* of God's coming eschatological Nation, rather than on the ethnic *diversity* of its constituency.

Again, why do some OTKP's have the eschatological David himself ruling forever, while others envision only a perpetual Davidic dynasty and Levitical priesthood? With help from the NCH, the answer is easy: The former focus on the divine Head of the Kingdom, the exalted Lord Jesus Christ; the latter focus on his Body—the Church—and upon the fact that it

is indeed a royal priesthood that will forever reign in life through Christ and with Christ (Rom. 5:17, 1 Peter 2:9, Rev. 20:4-6).

Or again, how can the same prophet have the Messiah born in Bethlehem (Micah 5:2), yet also portray him leading captive Israel out of Babylon (Micah 2:12-13)? Here again the NCH dispels the mystery, affirming that the Messiah was indeed born in Bethlehem, so that afterwards, having accomplished his great redemptive work, he could lead spiritual Israel out of her captivity to spiritual Babylon—the Domain of Darkness—and back into her true homeland: the living God himself (Rev. 18:4).

Along these lines much more could be said, and in chapters 15-18 I will try to say it. I hope, however, that these preliminary examples give you a feel for how marvelously the NCH resolves all anomalies; how it rescues tortured minds from the wrack of prophetic literalism, from trying to imagine what cannot be imagined, and to harmonize what cannot be harmonized. In these preliminary examples I hope you can see how the NCH brings OTKP to life, because it brings OTKP into *our* lives: into our real-life Christian experience of the Kingdom of God.

In Accordance with the Mosaic Law

Earlier we touched on one of the most striking, troubling, and controversial aspects of OTKP, namely that in the vast majority of cases it pictures God and the Messiah as *eternally* governing the Kingdom in accordance with the various ordinances of the Mosaic Law. In particular, these prophecies envision the perpetuity of the *morals* of the Law, the *offices* of the Law (e.g., prophets, priests, and kings), and the *ceremonies* of the Law (e.g., temple worship in Jerusalem). And again, they envision the Gentiles as well as the Jews living under the Law, so that the Kingdom is, in effect, *an eternal, global, Mosaic theocracy*.

Let us get a feel for this thread of OTKP by looking at a number of illustrative texts. As we have already seen, in the days of the Kingdom the Law will go forth from Zion, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem (Micah 4:2). The coastlands will wait for the Messiah's law (Isaiah 42:4). Israel, under David's Greater Son, will keep all God's ordinances and statutes, and will faithfully observe them (Ezek. 37:24). All God's sons and

daughters will prophesy (Joel 2:28). God will never break his covenant with the purified Levitical priesthood (Jer. 33:14-26, Mal. 3:3). He will install his Messianic King—and/or a Messianic dynasty—in Zion (Psalm 2:6, Jer. 33:26). Then all nations will resort to God’s holy mountain (Isaiah 25:6f, 56:7), to Zion (Isaiah 60:1-16), and to Jerusalem (Zech. 8:22-23). There they will worship him in his Temple (Isaiah 2:1-5, Haggai 2:7-9). There he will make them glad in his House of Prayer (Isaiah 56:7). And there he will dwell in the midst of the children of Israel *forever* (Ezek. 43:7). In righteousness, his priests will *continually* (Heb., *all the days*) offer burnt sacrifices and peace offerings upon God’s altar (Jer. 33:18, Ezek. 43:18-27, Mal. 3:3). So too will the Egyptians, as they worship the LORD in their own land (Isaiah 19:19-25). Indeed, in every place men will offer incense to God’s Name, as well as grain offerings that are pure (Mal. 1:11). Vows will be performed (Isaiah 19:21), pilgrimages made (Zech. 14:16), regular fasts observed (Zech. 8:19), and annual Feasts celebrated (Isaiah 33:16-24, Ezek. 45:17, Nahum 1:15, Zech. 14:16-18). From new moon to new moon, and from Sabbath to Sabbath, all flesh will come and bow down to the LORD, *for as long as the new heavens and the new earth shall endure* (Isaiah 56:1-8, 66:22-24, Ezek. 45:17).

Such texts teach us that OTKP’s envisioning the perpetuity of the Mosaic Law are numerous and, in some cases, highly detailed (e.g., Ezek. 40-48). Naturally enough, this has inclined many interpreters—both Jewish and premillennial—to receive them literally. However, for a great many reasons, this is highly problematic, especially for Christians saturated in the NT. Let us take a moment to see why, and why the biblical data as a whole persistently invite us to take a figurative, covenantal, and typological approach.

We begin by stating the obvious: Here, premillennialism offers us no help whatsoever, since there is not a single OT prophecy limiting the coming rule of the Mosaic Law to a thousand years. On the contrary, many texts state—and *all the others imply*—that this rule will be eternal; that Israel alone, or Israel and the nations, will live under the Mosaic ordinances forever (Psalm 132:14, Isaiah 25:5-8, Jer. 33:18, Ezek. 43:7, Joel 3:18-21). We must, then, find a better solution than the one offered by our premillennarian brothers.

Secondly, these prophecies, taken at face value, are not internally consistent. That is, in a number of cases, specific predictions contradict one another, or the Mosaic Law itself. For example, concerning the eschatological priesthood, Malachi declares—with the Mosaic Law—that the tribe of Levi will fill it (Mal. 3:3). However, Ezekiel says that God will disbar most of the Levites from drawing near to him, his holy things, and his holy place. Only the faithful Zadokites will enjoy this privilege (Ezek. 44:10-16). Meanwhile, Isaiah promises, contrary to the Law, that in the days of the Kingdom *all* Israelites will be called priests; indeed, that God will even admit Gentiles to the priesthood (Isaiah 61:61, 66:21). Taken literally, it is hard to reconcile these statements. Taken figuratively and covenantally, it is easy to see the way of escape: The Spirit is using OT language to speak of our Great High Priest (Ezek. 44:10-16), and also of the royal priesthood that he will create under the New Covenant, a priesthood in which *all* of God's people—both Jew and Gentile—are privileged to participate (Isaiah 61:61, 66:21, 1 Peter 2:9).

Again, Jeremiah tells us that after Israel's restoration men will make no mention of the (hidden, destroyed, or confiscated) Ark of the Lord; indeed, that it will not even come to mind, nor will anyone try to make it again (Jer. 3:17). Here is a truly dramatic departure from the ceremonial Law, according to which the Ark of the Covenant was the holiest object in the Holiest of All; the very heart of the Tabernacle and Temple, before which the High Priest must appear annually, on the Day of Atonement, so that Israel may be forgiven her sins! Thus, the development Jeremiah envisions is completely at odds with the customary idea of the perpetuity of the ceremonial Law. If, however, we view these days as the days of the New Covenant, then immediately the prophecy makes perfect sense, since in NT times the typology of the Ark is fulfilled in Christ (Heb. 9:1-28). Importantly, Jeremiah himself hints at just such a change in God's covenant dealings, since in the days of the Kingdom it is no longer the Ark, but Jerusalem itself (i.e., the City of God, the Church, the custodian of the message of atonement and reconciliation) that will be his throne, the Meeting-Place to which God himself will gather the (elect of all) nations (Exodus 25:22, 30:6, 36, Jer. 3:17).

Again, Isaiah tells us that “in that day” there will be an altar to the LORD in Egypt, that God will make himself known to the Egyptians, and

that they will even worship him with sacrifice and offering (19:19-25). Here we meet a further departure from the Mosaic Law, according to which God required that all Israelites and all foreigners worship him only in the place of his choosing, a place *in* the land, a place *to which* they must make a pilgrimage at least three times a year (Deut. 12:1-14). If, however, we interpret the passage figuratively, the contradiction disappears, since under the New Covenant believers worship not in this mountain, nor in Jerusalem, but in spirit and in truth, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through the Lord Jesus Christ.

This brings us to our third point, namely that these OTKP's themselves hint at a figurative and spiritual fulfillment, rather than a literal. For example, Joel tells us that in the days of the Kingdom a spring will flow out from the house of the Lord (3:18). Ezekiel agrees, adding, mysteriously enough, that it begins as a mere trickle, but somehow turns into a mighty river that heals the Dead Sea and brings life to everything it touches (47:1-12)! Finally, Zechariah makes his own contribution, affirming that the torrent of living waters emanating from Jerusalem will heal the Western Sea, as well (Zech. 14:8). Do not these beautiful pictures call to mind the rivers of living water that Jesus spoke of; the healing streams of the Spirit that flow down to us from the crucified and risen One, now seated in the Jerusalem (and Eden) above (John 7:38-39, Acts 2:33, Gal. 4:26)? And is not such a spiritual interpretation far more plausible and edifying than the literal one?

Another example concerns the eschatological temple. Next to Ezekiel, no prophet speaks of it more extensively than Isaiah. Yet as he reached the end of his course, he received this startling word for God's people:

Thus says the LORD, "Heaven is My throne, and the earth is My footstool. Where then is a house you could build for Me? And where is a place that I may rest? For my hand made all these things, and thus all these things came to be. But to this one I will look: to him who is humble and contrite of spirit, and who trembles at my word."

—Isaiah 66:1-2

The LORD's rhetorical questions speak volumes. Seeing that the Creator is infinitely vaster than his creation, how could a mere man-made temple ever house him? Moreover, as he said to David, so he (obliquely) says to Isaiah: It is not man who will build him a house, *but he himself who*

will build his own house, and will do so in the hearts of all who are humble and contrite in spirit; of all who tremble at his word of salvation in the Gospel (2 Sam. 7:11, Acts 2:37, 16:30, Eph. 2:22). These are the ones he will bring to his Holy Mountain (Heb. 12:22); who will rejoice as living stones in his House of Prayer (Isaiah 56:7, 1 Peter 2:5); who are holy vessels in the House of the LORD (Zech. 14:20-21); who are the Temple around which he will encamp, lest at any time an oppressor should pass through again (Zech. 9:8).

Finally, we have a number of biblical texts, found both in the corpus of OTKP and in the NT, to the effect that the Mosaic Covenant will *not* last forever, but instead will be supplanted by another covenant that fulfills it and renders it obsolete. With respect to the OT testimony, Jer. 31:31-34 is decisive, as indeed the NT is faithful to point out (Heb. 8:8-12). In that text, Jeremiah explicitly states that the New Covenant—in a number of important ways—is unlike the old: God will write it on the heart, and not on clay tablets (v. 33); under it, *all* will know God, and not just some (v. 34); under it, God will put away sin once and for all, not periodically (v. 34). In short, because this covenant will succeed in doing, once and for all, what the Law could not do, *it* is the covenant that will endure forever (Jer. 32:36-44, 50:4-5).

Importantly, other OT texts allude to a New Covenant, as well. Isaiah says of the coming Servant of the LORD that God will give him as a covenant to the people, as a light to the nations (42:6, 49:5-13). Also, God invites those who hunger and thirst to come to him, so that he can make an everlasting covenant with them: It is as sure and eternal as the one he made with David; it is a covenant by which they can eat, drink, and be satisfied forever (55:1-5, 61:8). Ezekiel follows suit, predicting that when God remembers his Old Covenant with wayward Israel, he will graciously draw them back again into an *everlasting* covenant (Ezek. 16:60). Elsewhere, he elaborates, declaring that God—with a mighty hand, an outstretched arm, and wrath poured out—will bring his people out of the nations where he scattered them, cause them to pass under the rod, and bring them *into the bond of the covenant*, with the result that God will reign as King over them in their eternal homeland (Ezek. 20:33-44). What a picture of the Christian's redemption! The mighty God—stretching out his arm to give us Christ—pours out his wrath on his own Son, so that he (God) might

graciously cause his people to pass beneath the rod of conviction, into the bond of the New and Eternal Covenant, and so into Immanuel's land, where they live with their Royal Prince, both now and in the endless age to come (Ezek. 37:24-28)!

As for NT testimony on this subject, we have already heard Christ teach us that the New Covenant *fulfills* the old, and so renders it obsolete, like an old wineskin or an old garment (Mt. 5:17, 9:16-17, etc.). As we shall see later, this is precisely the teaching of his apostles, who explicitly state that the things of Christ and the Eternal Covenant are the substantial body, of which the things of Moses and the Old Covenant were mere foreshadowings (Col. 2:17). In other words, the things of the New Covenant, being the things of the Eternal Covenant itself, are permanent; whereas the things of Old Covenant, being only preparatory and promissory, are temporary and therefore destined to pass away (Heb. 8:13). Thus, in Christ, God has abolished the Mosaic Law. But since the advent of the New Covenant rules out a return to the Old (Mosaic) Covenant, OTKP's that *seem* to promise the perpetuity of the Law *must* be interpreted figuratively, covenantally, and typologically, in terms of Christ. Unlike Orthodox Judaism or Christian premillennialism, this is precisely the approach of the classic amillennial eschatology, an approach that preserves the unity of Scripture, even as it offers us rich insight into the meaning of OTKP, and fully resolves the problem of the apparent perpetuity of the Mosaic Law.

Set in a Spiritually and Physically Redeemed Cosmos

The great purpose of OTKP is to give ultimate hope. It is to say that when God brings in his Kingdom, he will do far more than rescue his people from captivity, or restore them to their homeland. Rather, he will rescue them from *every* enemy (both spiritual and physical), and restore them to *every* friend (both spiritual and physical). In other words, in the days of the Kingdom God will redeem his people, his land, and *his entire creation* from every effect of sin, thereby paving the way for his direct reign over the cosmos, the very presence of his glory, and all the eternal blessings that these will bring.

To get a feel for this, let us consider a particularly rich OTKP found in Hosea. Speaking of Israel's latter-day restoration, God says:

“Therefore, behold, I will allure her, bring her into the wilderness, and speak kindly to her. Then I will give her her vineyards from there, and the Valley of Achor as a door of hope. And she will sing there as in the days of her youth, as in the day when she came up from the land of Egypt. And it will come about in that day,” declares the LORD, “that you will call me Ishi (i.e., my Husband), and will no longer call me Baali (i.e., my Master, or Baal). For I will remove the names of the Baals from her mouth, so that they will be mentioned by their names no more. In that day I will also make a covenant for them with the beasts of the field, the birds of the sky, and the creeping things of the ground. And I will abolish the bow, the sword, and war from the land, and will make them lie down in safety. And I will betroth you to Me forever. Yes, I will betroth you to Me in righteousness and justice, in lovingkindness and in compassion. And I will betroth you to Me in faithfulness. Then you will know the LORD. And it will come about in that day that I will respond,” says the LORD. “I will respond to the heavens, and they will respond to the earth, and the earth will respond to the grain, to the new wine, and to the oil, and they will respond to Jezreel (lit., God sows). And I will sow her for Myself in the land. I will also have compassion on her who had not obtained compassion, and I will say to those who were not my people, ‘You are My people!’ and they will say, ‘You are my God.’”

—Hosea 2:14-23

Now it is clear that this prophecy is fully eschatological. That is, it envisions the *eternal* (and not millennial) blessedness of God's covenant people subsequent to the great redemptive act by which he will bring in the Kingdom (v. 19). Accordingly, it invites the Christian interpreter to find here a “covenantally conditioned” picture of the life of the Church in the eternal Kingdom instituted by Christ, and especially in the new heavens and the new earth.

Concerning the picture itself, like most OTKP's, its imagery is largely controlled by the prototypical Kingdom prophecies laid down in the Mosaic Law (Lev. 26:40-45, Deut. 30:1-10). As predicted, Israel has sinned, fallen under the covenant curses, and gone away into captivity. But as promised, the covenant-keeping LORD is faithful (v. 20). Therefore, a second Exodus is coming (vv. 14-15); and not only a second Exodus, but an *ultimate* exodus. Once again, God will draw Israel into the wilderness (v. 14). Once again he will enter into covenant with her there (vv. 19-20). Once again he will bring her into the Promised Land (vv. 15, 23). This time, however, the covenant will be new and definitive: an eternal marriage, an everlasting spiritual union (v. 16). Therefore, Israel will come to know the LORD (v. 20). Therefore, she will be faithful to her divine husband, not even

remembering, let alone mentioning, the names of the Baals she formerly served (v. 17). And therefore she will experience the covenant blessings. The beasts, birds, and creeping things will never again prey upon her (v. 18). The bow, the sword, and the agonies of war will never again strike her land (v. 18). The rains will always fall, the land will ever produce, and the grain, the oil, and the new wine will continually abound (vv. 21-22). Yes, *in glorious fullness* all the blessings of the covenant will be hers, for in glorious fullness the all-encompassing promise of the covenant will be fulfilled at last: Israel will become God's people, and he will become their God, in spirit and truth (v. 23).

Like its prototypes in the Law, Hosea's prophecy is not exhaustive: It does not mention every aspect or element of the cosmic redemption to come. Nevertheless, it is representative. Like the other OTKP's, it conforms—and contributes—to the overall picture of the Kingdom, a Kingdom that is decidedly *redemptive* in character. For again, the great majority of OTKP's consistently tell us that in the last days God will act, the Messiah will come, atonement will be provided (Deut 32:43, Isaiah 53:11, Ezek. 16:60-63, Zech. 3:9, 5:5-11), forgiveness will be secured (Isaiah 27:9, Jer. 31:34, Micah 7:8-20), and the Spirit will be outpoured (Isaiah 44:1-5, Ezek. 36:27, 37:14, Joel 2:28-32)—all with a view to the *rescue* of God's people and his creation from every spiritual and physical enemy, and to their eternal *restoration* to every spiritual and physical friend.

A brief survey of the abundant data reveals the magnitude of the cosmic redemption envisioned by the prophets.

The citizens of God's coming Kingdom will be *rescued* from wrath (Isaiah 27:2f, 54:8-9), condemnation (Micah 7:8-20), fear (Isaiah 43:1, 55:14), their sinful heart of stone (Ezek. 11:19, 36:26), uncleanness (Zech. 13:1), foolishness (Isaiah 35:8), shame (Isaiah 5:4, 61:7, Ezek. 34:29), sorrow (Isaiah 25:6-9, 61:1-3, 65:19), Satan's attacks and accusations (Isaiah 27:1, Zech. 3:2), human oppressors (Isaiah 54:14, Jer. 23:1-7, Ezek. 34:27), war (Isaiah 9:1-6, 11:10-16, Micah 4:1-5, Joel 3:1f), animal violence and predation (Isaiah 11:1-9, Ezek. 34:25), natural disasters (Isaiah 4:2-6, 65:23), poverty (Psalm 72:4, 12-14), sickness (Ezek. 34:16), and death itself (Psalm 22:9, Isaiah 25:6-9, 26:19, Ezek. 37:12-14).

On the other hand, they will be *restored* to divine favor (Isaiah 60:10, Zech. 11:17), forgiveness of sins (Isaiah 40:2, 43:25, 44:22), divine sonship

(Isaiah 43:6-7, 56:5, Hos. 1:10), a heart of flesh (Ezek. 36:26), the fear of the LORD (Hos. 3:5, 11:10), penitence (Jer. 31:9, Zech. 12:10-13), obedience (Jer. 31:33, Ezek. 36:27), faithfulness (Isaiah 1:26), holiness (Isaiah 35:8, 52:1, Zech. 14:20-21, Mal. 3:3), joy (Isaiah 12:3, 35:10, Jer. 33:10, Zeph. 3:14-20), peace (Isaiah 9:1-7, 11:10-16, Micah 5:5, Nahum 1:15, Zeph. 3:9-13), unity (Isaiah 19:18, 24, 33:16-24, Jer. 3:11-18, Ezek. 37:15f, Hosea 1:11), righteousness (Psalm 72, Isaiah 1:26, 9:1-7, 42:1-4), reproductive fruitfulness (Isaiah 49:19-21, 54:1-3, Ezek. 36:38, Zech. 10:10), prosperity (Psalm 22:27-31, Jer. 32:42, Ezek. 36:22-37, Amos 9:11-18, Joel 2:18-27, Zech. 2:1-13, 8:12, 9:17), health (Jer. 30:17, 33:6, Hos. 6:1), longevity (Isaiah 65:20-22, Zech. 8:4), a new and transformed physical world (Isaiah 35:1f, 41:18-20, 43:19-21, 65:17, 25, Ezek. 47:1-12, Zech. 14:1-8), eternal life in new resurrection bodies (Isaiah 25:6-8, 26:19, Dan. 12:2, Hosea 13:14), and everlasting enjoyment of the presence and glory of God (Isaiah 4:2-6, 33:16-24, 35:2, 40:1f, 43:7, 66:18, Ezek. 43:4-5, Hab. 2:14, Zech. 2:5).

If we consider these OTKP's in the aggregate, it is clear that they are designed to convey one thing: the idea of *absolute cosmic redemption*. We see this from their *scope*, which takes in Israel and the nations, man and nature, the spiritual as well as the physical. We also see it in their *finality*; in the fact that they manifestly speak of ultimate and eternal blessings, blessings that reflect and accord with the greatest blessing of all: the reentry of the sovereign God of glory into full, intimate communion with his people and his creation.

Moreover, some of these prophecies speak *explicitly* of absolute redemption. Isaiah, for example, tells us that in the days of the Kingdom God will make the wilderness of Zion like Eden, and her desert like the Garden of the LORD (Isaiah 51:3). Similarly, Ezekiel declares that when God restores Israel, her neighbors will see and testify that the land which was formerly desolate has now become like the Garden of Eden; and that the wasted, desolate, and ruined cities are now fortified and inhabited (Ezek. 36:35). In conjunction with related predictions of the eschatological destruction of Satan and his kingdom (Isaiah 14:3-20, Ezek. 28:12-19), these two prophecies clearly intend to affirm that "in that day" the great and prototypical promise of Genesis 3:15 will at last be fulfilled: The Serpent and his seed will be completely crushed, the evil fruits of their work

altogether rolled back, and Paradise forever regained. In short, absolute cosmic redemption will come.

Nevertheless, a careful scrutiny of its precise details warns us against receiving this stream of OTKP too literally; against thinking that the representative OT idea of a rescued and restored cosmos is meant to picture the world to come *as it actually will be*; against thinking that here we are not seeing through a glass darkly. In part, we arrive at this conclusion from still more apparent contradictions. Let us briefly consider just a few.

Over and again the prophets tell us that in the days of the Kingdom all men and all nations will worship the LORD (Psalm 22:27, 66:4, Dan. 7:27, Zeph. 2:7). Yet Zechariah forewarns us that Egypt and other rebellious nations will refuse to go up from year to year to Jerusalem to worship the LORD of hosts and to keep the Feast of Tabernacles, for which sin they will be sorely judged (Zech. 14:16-19). Note carefully: There is nothing here about a millennium. The prophet is clearly speaking of the eternal Kingdom. How then shall we understand this apparent blot upon the face of a world redeemed once and for all?

Again, any number of OTKP's teach that in Kingdom times nation will not lift up sword against nation (Isaiah 2:4); that instead they will beat their swords into plowshares (Micah 4:3); that of the increase of the Messiah's government and of peace there shall be no end (Isaiah 9:6); and that no foreign enemy will ever again invade Israel's homeland (Joel 3:17, Ezek. 34:28). Yet Micah, fully expecting eschatological Assyria to attack Israel and tread in her palaces, promises that in those days the Messiah and his armies will thoroughly repulse the enemy, carrying the battle to the very entrances of the land of Nimrod (Micah 5:5-6). All of these prophecies pertain to the one Kingdom. How shall we reconcile them?

Again, Isaiah tells us that in the new and *eternal* world God will create, no youth will die before his hundredth birthday, and that the man who fails to reach one hundred will be thought accursed (Isaiah 65:17-20). Likewise, Zechariah envisions old men and old women sitting in the streets of Jerusalem, their staffs in hand, watching children at play (Zech. 8:4). It certainly appears, then, that old age and death will remain to mar the Kingdom. Yet elsewhere God tells us that he will swallow up death forever, and that he himself will be the destruction of the grave (Isaiah 25:8, 26:19, Hosea 13:14, NKJV).

And what of the luminaries: the sun, moon, and stars? Isaiah predicts that they will dissolve: The sky will be rolled up like a scroll and its whole host will fall down, as leaves fall from a vine, or as fruit from a fig tree (Isaiah 34:4). Yet the very same prophet also tells us that in the days of the new heavens and the new earth, all flesh will come to worship before the LORD from one New Moon to another, and from one Sabbath to another (Isaiah 66:22-23)! So then, which passage gives a true picture of the astronomical realities of the Kingdom?

Importantly, there are also a number of apparent contradictions between OT and NT representations of the Kingdom. Jeremiah, for example, promises that in eschatological Jerusalem there shall again be heard the joyful voice of the bride and the bridegroom (Jer. 33:10-11). Yet our Lord taught that those who are counted worthy to attain to the resurrection and the Age to Come will neither marry nor be given in marriage (Mt. 22:30).

Similarly, we have seen that both Isaiah and Zechariah anticipate the presence of children in the Kingdom, and (we must presume) the procreative act by which they continually will be conceived (Isaiah 11:6-9, Zech. 8:5). Yet Jesus says that in the world to come human beings will be like the angels, who appear to be without gender, and who certainly do not marry or procreate (Mark 12:25).

Finally, we saw earlier that both Ezekiel and Zechariah speak of the presence—and healing—of the Dead Sea and the Great Sea (i.e., the Mediterranean) in the days of the eternal Kingdom (Ezek. 47:1-12, Zech. 14:8). Yet the apostle John, in his final vision of the completed Kingdom, assures us that there will be no seas at all (Rev. 21:1).

So once again we are forced to ask ourselves: How shall we resolve these apparent contradictions? The premillennial solution, as we have repeatedly seen, offers no help at all, since the OT prophets never speak of a limited, thousand year stage of the Kingdom; to the contrary, they consistently state or assume that the very Kingdom they are heralding will last forever.

Accordingly, there is really only one viable solution; a solution that concurs with NT teaching about progressive revelation and the unfolding “mystery” of the Kingdom of God; a solution that therefore preserves the unity, divine inspiration, and inerrancy of the Bible. And it is this: ALL of these OTKP’s are “covenantally conditioned.” By divine inspiration, they

use the language and imagery of the Old Covenant (i.e., the Mosaic Law) to speak “mysteriously” of New Covenant realities. In particular, they use distinctly Mosaic images of blessing (Lev. 26:3-13, Deut. 28:1-14) and cursing (Lev. 26:14-39, Deut. 28:15-68) to depict—in a more or less figurative manner—the spiritual and physical conditions pertaining to the twofold Kingdom of God introduced by Christ and the New Covenant. If, then, we will simply use the key of NT revelation to open up the “mysteries” of OTKP, we will not only find that we understand the true meaning of those prophecies, but also that the apparent contradictions immediately disappear.

In the pages ahead, we will consider this approach to OTKP in greater depth. However, in order to get a feel for how effectively this hermeneutic works to solve these kinds of problems, let us pause for a moment to discuss three examples.

Will there be Marriage in the Kingdom?

Will there be marriage in the Kingdom of God? We have just seen that with respect to the second, completed stage of the Kingdom, the NT rules this out. How then are we to interpret OT texts that seem to teach the contrary? A brief look at some of the relevant passages will serve to illumine the fruitfulness of the NCH for solving this problem.

Jeremiah 33:10-11 reads:

Thus says the LORD: “Yet again there shall be heard in this place, of which you say, ‘It is a waste, without man and without beast,’ —that is, in the cities of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem that are desolate, without man and without inhabitant and without beast—the voice of joy and the voice of gladness; the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride; the voice of those who say, ‘Give thanks to the LORD of hosts, for the LORD is good, for his lovingkindness is everlasting’, and of those who bring a thank offering into the house of the LORD. For I will restore the fortunes of the land as they were at first,” says the LORD.

That this is an OTKP is clear from the larger context, in which God promises ultimate eschatological blessings to his restored people: the advent of the Righteous Branch of David (v. 15), cleansing and pardon (v. 8), health and healing (v. 6), the perpetuity of the Davidic dynasty and Levitical priesthood (vv. 21-22), and fear and trembling among the

observant nations, who marvel at all the well-being God will grant to Jerusalem (v. 9). How then are we to interpret this passage?

Applying the NCH, we begin by recognizing that the promise is fulfilled in the twofold Kingdom that Christ instituted by the New Covenant. This means it is fulfilled in the Church, which is the New Covenant community, the eschatological Israel of God.

During stage one of the Kingdom—the Era of (Gospel) Proclamation and Probation—God first draws an elect remnant of Jews to Christ, thereby creating a spiritual Bride for his Son (the heavenly Bridegroom), and also a spiritual City for himself: the Jerusalem of God, where he will dwell with his people forever. In time, the “nations” of elect Gentiles begin to behold the health, beauty, and joy of the Bride, and so respond to the Gospel themselves, thereby becoming part of the growing Bride and the growing City of the LORD. In still more time, these Gentile converts provoke to jealousy the “nations” of elect *unbelievers* (i.e., spiritual Gentiles), so that more and more people are married to the high King of Heaven, thereby making their way into the Jerusalem above. And so the process will continue—right up to the Day of the Lord’s return—as men and women everywhere hear the sound of joy and gladness emanating from Christ’s Church; the voice of the Bride and the Bridegroom speaking endearing words of love one to another; the praises of the heavenly Bride and the heavenly City, giving thanks to God for the goodness and lovingkindness everlastingly granted to them in Christ.

But even this is not all. God will perfect all this joy, praise, and wholeness when the second stage of the Kingdom appears; when, having sent his Son to consummate the saints’ redemption in a new heaven and a new earth, he restores once and for all the fortunes of the “land” (i.e., the whole earth), so that it will be as it was in the beginning, as in the Garden of Eden itself.

So then, will there be marriage in the Kingdom? Yes indeed! In the first stage of the Kingdom, it will be both spiritual and physical: spiritual, in that it is between Christ and the Church; physical, in that it is between Christian men and women, who understand that their marriage is a picture and a celebration of the eternal marriage of Christ and his Bride. However, in the second stage of the Kingdom it will be spiritual only, since, at the Marriage Supper of the Lamb (Rev. 19:9), God will perfect the union of Christ and

his Bride, with the result that physical marriage—a mere type and shadow of things to come—will be done away with at last, through the resurrection and glorification of the eternal Body of Christ.

Will there be Children in the Kingdom?

What of children? If, as the NT teaches, there will be neither marriage nor procreation in the completed Kingdom, how shall we understand Isaiah when he says that in those days the nursing child will play by the hole of the cobra, and the weaned child will put his hand on the viper's den (11:6-9)? Also, how shall we read Zechariah, when he says that in eschatological Jerusalem the city will be filled with boys and girls playing in the streets (Zech. 8:5)?

Applying the NCH yet again, we find that the solution is not difficult at all. Knowing that the prophets are speaking “in a mystery” of Christ's Church in the twofold Kingdom, we understand immediately that they are using OT images of divine blessing to describe the everlasting joys of God's NT people. Therefore, Isaiah is not telling us that in the eschaton literal children will play by literal holes of literal cobras. No, he is saying, with the Mosaic Law, that in those days God will “rid the land of evil beasts” (Lev. 26:6); that his eschatological people—whom the NT repeatedly refers to as little children (Mt. 8:13, John 1:12, 21:5, Rom. 8:16, 1 John 2:1, 3:18)—will live and play in a world full of Edenic benignity; a world free of all danger, in which all former enemies will have been transformed into eternal friends (Rom. 8:18-21).

Likewise, Zechariah is not saying that literal old men and women will watch literal boys and girls at play in the new heavens and the new earth (though in the present stage of the Kingdom, you will indeed find many such seniors in Christian homes, schools, and churches). No, he is saying, with the Law, that in the last days God will bless his NT people with great longevity (Exodus 20:12, Deut. 5:33, 6:2, 11:8-9), and with great fruitfulness (Gen. 1:28, 9:1, 17:6, Exodus 1:7, Lev. 26:9, Deut. 7:14). In other words, he will bless them with *eternal life*, and with all the childlike joy and *spiritual fruitfulness* that must characterize the people who receive it (John 15:8, Gal. 5:22f, 1 Peter 1:8).

Will there be Death in the Kingdom?

Turning now to our final apparent contradiction, we ask: Will there be death in the Kingdom? The NT—our final court of appeal—answers decisively. Jesus said, “He who believes in me, though he may die, yet shall he live. And whoever lives and believes in me shall never die” (John 11:25-26). Here is the NT view in a nutshell: *Spiritually*, a saint *never* dies, never experiences separation from God under punishment in hell. *Physically*, he may indeed die, but only in the first stage of the Kingdom. For after the resurrection—when the second stage of the Kingdom begins—he will have become a son of the resurrection; a son like Christ and the holy angels; a son who therefore can never die again (Luke 20:34-38).

All of this accords perfectly with Isaiah 25:6-9, a truly glorious OTKP in which the prophet promises that in the last days, on Mt. Zion, God will do three wonderful things: He will prepare a lavish banquet for all peoples, he will swallow up death for all time, and he will remove the reproach of his people from the whole earth.

What exactly is he saying here?

With its emphasis upon Mt. Zion, this prophecy is obviously “covenantally conditioned.” That is, it is giving us NT truth under OT imagery. Nevertheless, here, as opposed to elsewhere in the canon of OTKP, the NT truth about death pours quite forcefully through the veil. Christ, the Author of eternal life, will die on Mt. Zion, and so, on that mountain, prepare a feast of fat things—both spiritual and physical—for his NT people. And though, in the first stage of the Kingdom, they may indeed die physically, *spiritually speaking* death has indeed been swallowed up forever. Moreover, when Christ returns, he will create new heavens and a new earth: the Holy Mountain of the LORD, the chosen place of his dwelling (Isaiah 11:9). And in that place, *physical* death will also be swallowed up for all time, with the result that the most shameful reproach of man’s sin—death itself—will be forever removed.

What, however, are we to do with Isaiah 65:17-20, where the prophet tells us that in the new and *eternal* world that God will create (vv. 17-18) no youth will die before his hundredth birthday, and the man who fails to reach a hundred years will be thought accursed? Will there be death in the Kingdom after all?

With the help of the NCH, the solution presents itself immediately: Here again the Spirit has used OT imagery to convey NT truth. As we just saw, in the Law great longevity is a mark of covenant faithfulness and blessing (Exodus 20:12, Deut. 5:33, 6:2, 11:8-9). Indeed, it is a type and shadow of the *one and only* blessing of the Covenant of Grace: eternal life. Therefore, under OT imagery drawn from the Mosaic Law, Isaiah is saying here that in the days of the Kingdom God's people will fully inherit the blessed promise of the eternal covenant. Together with their God, they will live for a *very* long time—as in, *forever*.

Summary

Thus far we have seen that the great bulk of OTKP's yield a fairly uniform picture of the nature of the coming Kingdom of God; that it appears to be *an eternal, universal theocracy, mediated by ethnic Israel and her Messiah, administered in accordance with the Mosaic Law, and set in a spiritually and physically redeemed cosmos*. However, we have also seen that a close inspection of OTKP uncovers various phenomena that warn us against taking the Representative Idea of the Kingdom too literally. These phenomena include many apparent contradictions among the OTKP's themselves; numerous prophecies that positively beg for a spiritual interpretation; and miscellaneous OTKP's that associate the Kingdom with a new covenant that will fulfill and supercede the old.

Moreover, we have repeatedly noted that premillennialism—which argues for a literal fulfillment of the Representative Idea in a future, millennial stage of the Kingdom—completely fails to resolve these problems. This is because OTKP says nothing about a temporary, one thousand year stage of the Kingdom, but instead represents the theocratic Kingdom as existing forever. Also, premillennialism entangles the biblical interpreter in scandalous anachronisms, since it requires the resurrection of ancient peoples, nations, and living conditions long departed from the stage of history. However, the most powerful witness against premillennialism—and in favor of a more figurative interpretive approach—comes from the NT itself, whose teaching on the (spiritual) nature and (two-staged) structure of the Kingdom completely rules out the premillennial scheme, as

does its outspoken declaration of the supremacy, finality, and eternity of the New Covenant.

We conclude, then, that both the Old and New Testaments invite us to interpret OTKP figuratively, in terms of the twofold Kingdom introduced by Christ under the New and Eternal Covenant.

The Coming (or Stages) of the Kingdom As Portrayed by the OT Prophets

In our discussion of the *nature* of the Kingdom in OTKP we have touched more than once upon the closely related idea of its *coming*; of the sequence of redemptive acts by which, according to the OT prophets, God will bring in the new and everlasting World to Come. Let us take a few moments to summarize our findings on this subject, and to explore it a little further.

Though no two interpreters are likely to agree on the exact details, most would concur that there is indeed a Representative OT Idea of the coming of the Kingdom. As we have seen, it is first set forth in the proto-typical prophecies of the Kingdom found in the Law itself (Lev. 26, Deut. 30, 32). According to this idea, God, in the latter-day s, will grant Israel repentance, rescue her from captivity, return her to the land, and restore her forever to all the blessings of the covenant. Here is the framework for the OT revelation of the coming of the Kingdom, a framework upon which the writing prophets of later times would build extensively.

The completed structure—appearing with special clarity in the Major Prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel)—includes, I would argue, five basic elements; five fundamental stages by which God would bring in his Kingdom. However, in reading about them below, I would urge you always to remember that this is only the *representative* idea; that it gives the gist of *most* OTKP's, but not all; that, in fact, a number of OTKP's omit one or more of these elements altogether, and in some cases even appear to contradict them. But none of this is by accident. For as with OTKP's of the *nature* of the Kingdom, so here: Apparently conflicting pictures of the *coming* of the Kingdom signal the presence of mystery, and therefore of our need for a key—for a fuller, clearer revelation—by which that mystery may

be opened up; by which we may finally know, in truth, exactly *how* the Kingdom will come.

The Restoration

The first stage in the coming of the Kingdom is the restoration. More particularly, it is penitent Israel's *rescue* from captivity—whether to Assyria, Babylon, or “the nations” at large—and her *return* to the Promised Land (Isaiah 43:1f, Jer. 3:11-18, 30:1f, 50:1f, Ezek. 34:11f, Hos. 1:10-11, Micah 2:12-13, 5:1-6). In many of these prophecies, we find that ethnic Israel's restoration from Babylon is clearly in the foreground. However, with eyes schooled in the NT, we cannot help but see something else—and something far greater—looming up in the background: the spiritual rescue and restoration of eschatological Israel—the Church—from all the nations wherein they have been held captive to the Domain of Darkness. Did not God have in mind this very thing when, speaking to “Israel” through Isaiah, he said:

Do not fear, for I am with you; I will bring your offspring from the east and gather you from the west. I will say to the north, “Give them up!” and to the south, “Do not hold them back!” Bring My sons from afar, and My daughters from the ends of the earth, every one who is called by My name, and whom I have created for My glory; whom I have formed, and whom I have made.

—Isaiah 43:5-7

Yes, reading these amazing words, *every* believer in Christ should rejoice and praise the Lord, whether Jew or Gentile!

The Days of the Messiah

The second stage of the coming of the Kingdom may be called *The Days of the Messiah*. This eschatological expression arose during the inter-testamental period, and is still in use today among Orthodox Jews. It refers to the temporary season between the Messiah's (first) coming to (restored) Israel, and the Day of the LORD (i.e., the Last Judgment). Here, the Kingdom has indeed arrived, yet not in the fullness that the world will enjoy *after* the Day of the LORD, when he brings in the Age to Come.

Earlier, we discussed the elements of the OT idea of the Days of the Messiah in some detail. By way of brief review, in those days the Messiah

will be born in Bethlehem, gain a following, restore the throne of David, and secure his people and his land against all enemies. At that time, God will make atonement for his people's sins, grant forgiveness, pour out the Holy Spirit, and transform stony hearts. Seeing all this, many Gentile nations will be provoked to jealousy, foreswear their idolatrous religions, and turn to the one true and living God. As a result, the Messiah's dominion—and his vital faith in the LORD—will spread from sea to sea. His blessed reign will be marked by universal peace, justice, prosperity, and the presence and glory of God.

Again, this is the *representative*, or customary, idea of the Days of the Messiah. We have seen, however, that a considerable number of OTKP's raise questions about—and even cast shadows over—this happy picture. They seem, for example, to affirm that God *alone* will bring in the Kingdom, or that Israel *alone* will enjoy it, or that Israel will reject her Messiah, or that an everlasting Davidic dynasty will rule over the nation (rather than the greater David himself). Anomalies like these warn us that OTKP is a minefield through which the biblical interpreter must walk with extreme care; that the Days of the Messiah may in fact be far different from the representative (and Orthodox Jewish and premillennial) ideas; and that to receive the true picture, we need to sit down at the feet of the Messiah himself, just as we did in chapter 9!

The Last Battle

The third stage in the coming of the Kingdom is *The Last Battle*. I refer to it as a “stage,” not because this solemn historical event will be of any appreciable duration, but because it looms so large, both in OT and NT prophecy; because, in the unfolding of God's redemptive plan, it is a discrete, dramatic, challenging, and very nearly climactic event for which God's people must be fully prepared.

At least five OT prophets speak of the Last Battle, some more than once: Ezekiel (38-39), Daniel (7:1-28, 9:26-27, 11:36-12:17), Joel (3:1-17), Micah (4:11-5:1), and Zechariah (12:9, 14:1-3). A careful reading of these passages creates a strong impression that the prophets are indeed speaking of the same eschatological event: a final, decisive clash between Israel and the hostile nations that surround her. Notably, the points of agreement in

these texts are both numerous and concrete: Israel, rescued from captivity, is now restored to her homeland, dwelling in peace. But God—eager to display his truth, power, and glory to the whole earth—has something further in store: By the secret workings of his providence, he will sovereignly bring down from the north a great confederacy of hostile nations against his people. When they attack, Israel will fight and suffer intensely, yet only for a little while. For God, again according to plan, will rise quickly to their defense, intervene supernaturally, destroy their enemies, and rescue his beloved people once and for all. In short, in the Last Battle and the Day of the LORD, God will bring to pass the final scenes of Salvation History, after which he will usher in his completed Kingdom and the glories of the World to Come.

And yet, upon closer inspection of these prophecies, we discover something both interesting and significant: Though they clearly speak of the same event, they differ in a number of important details. Indeed, at certain points they seem actually to contradict one another. Let us look briefly at some of the difficulties, and then pause to consider their meaning.

In Daniel's prophecy, the invading and occupying power is Rome (Daniel 7). In Ezekiel's, however, the leader of the hostile confederacy is Gog, chief prince of Meshech and Tubal, both of which are small northern tribes that long ago dwelt in modern Turkey. In the other prophecies, no leader or country of origin is designated.

Joel and Zechariah explicitly declare that *all* the nations will come up against Israel. However, the other prophecies simply say *many*.

Daniel points to an individual king who will spearhead the last battle, representing him apocalyptically (i.e., by means of eschatological symbols) as a little horn uttering great boasts (7:8). Likewise, Ezekiel anticipates a single human leader—Gog—riding at the head of Persia, Cush, Put, Gomer, and Beth-togarmah—"many nations." However, Joel, Micah, and Zechariah say nothing at all about an individual leader.

Daniel's prophecy of the Last Battle gives the impression of a fairly long occupation—"a time, times, and a half a time"—marked by struggle, loss, and the suppression of religious observances (7:25). Similarly, Zechariah foresees a quite devastating assault, in which half of the city of Jerusalem is pillaged or taken captive (14:1-3). However, the other prophets

say little or nothing of Israel's agony, and seem to anticipate a more or less immediate deliverance at the hand of God.

As to the exact location of the Last Battle, Joel places it in the Valley of Jehoshaphat (3:12) and the Valley of Decision (3:14). In Daniel's prophecies, mention is repeatedly made of the Glorious Land (8:9, 11:16, 11:41). For Ezekiel, the great conflict will occur on "the mountains of Israel" (38:8, 39:2, 4). Meanwhile, Zechariah situates the war at the very gates of Jerusalem, the beloved city of God, a city that will become an injurious stone to all who try to lift it, and a cup full of strong drink that will send the nations reeling (12:9, 14:1f).

Micah (4:13), Daniel (7:25), and Zechariah (12:6, 14:14) envision the saints as fighting back against their opponents—in Micah and Zechariah's case, victoriously. Meanwhile, the other prophets depict God himself as the heavenly warrior who fights triumphantly against his foes.

Finally, the portrayal of God's eschatological intervention differs rather sharply from prophet to prophet. In Joel, the sun and moon grow dark, and God shakes the heavens and the earth (3:15). Micah, on the other hand, looks for no such cosmic disturbances: God simply favors and strengthens the daughter of Zion, who goes on to thresh her enemies and plunder their treasures (4:13). Zechariah tells us that the LORD himself will fight against the nations massed at the gates of Jerusalem, even as he transforms the Mount of Olives into a valley, a way of escape for his people (14:3-5). But in Ezekiel, the hand of the LORD waxes mightier still, shaking not only the land of Israel, but also the whole earth (yet not the heavens, as in Haggai 2:6), throwing down the mountains, and entering into judgment against Gog and his troops by means of plague, blood, torrential rain, hailstones, fire, and burning sulfur (38:22). Moreover, after all this, he will give the dead bodies of his enemies to the birds of the air and the beasts of the field, even as Israel takes seven years to burn their weapons and bury the remains of their dead (39:9-20).

So once again we must ask: What are we to make of all these differences, discrepancies, and apparent contradictions? Certainly (the literalism of) premillennialism is of no help, seeing that it places the Last Battle at the beginning of the Millennium (rather than the eternal Age to Come), looks for a second Last Battle at the end of the Millennium, plunges us into all sorts of anachronisms, and makes the contradictions in these

prophecies real rather than apparent, thereby undermining the integrity and authority of Scripture.

No, the best solution, as we have seen over and over again, is the NT solution. It is to recognize that these prophecies do indeed speak of the same eschatological event, but that they are “covenantally conditioned;” that they use OT ideas and images to convey NT truth; that we must therefore turn to the NT itself to receive a true picture of the time, place, nature, and participants of the Last Battle; and that we must receive this picture as the God-given key that opens up the true meaning of these powerful OTKP’s symbolizing the final clash between Christ and Satan, the Church and the world.

In the pages ahead, we will do this very thing.

The Day of the LORD

Following close on the heels of the Last Battle is the fourth OT stage of the coming of the Kingdom, the Day of the LORD. Based upon a close reading of the relevant OT texts, we may define it as a final, supernatural visitation of God, both in judgment and redemption, upon the entire fallen world; a visitation in which he eradicates all his enemies, vindicates his people, and introduces the manifold blessings of the World or Kingdom to Come.

By way of illustration, let us consider a short prophecy from Malachi, found at the very end of the Old Testament:

“For behold, the Day is coming, burning like a furnace, and all the arrogant and every evildoer will be chaff; and the Day that is coming will set them ablaze,” says the LORD of hosts, “so that it will leave them neither root nor branch. But as for you who fear My name, the Sun of Righteousness will rise with healing in its (or, his) wings; and you will go forth and skip about like calves from the stall. And you will tread down the wicked, for they shall be ashes under the soles of your feet on the Day which I am preparing,” says the LORD of hosts.

—Mal. 4:1-3

Importantly, OTKP’s like this arise from, and elaborate upon, the prototypical Kingdom prophecies found in the Mosaic Law. For example, in a prophecy of Israel’s eschatological restoration to the Promised Land, Moses wrote, “And the LORD your God will inflict all these curses on your enemies, and on those who hate you, who persecuted you” (Deut. 30:7).

Likewise, in the Song of Moses we first hear God lamenting Israel's future apostasy, judgment, and exile (Deut. 32:1-31). Nevertheless, as the Song nears its climax, we also hear him promising that he will yet have compassion on his people (v.36), make atonement for them and their land (v. 43), and rise up in wrath against their enemies:

“Is it not laid up in store with Me, sealed up in My treasuries? Vengeance is Mine, and retribution. In due time their foot will slip; for the Day of their calamity is near, and the impending things are hastening upon them ... Indeed, I lift up My hand to heaven and say, ‘As I live forever, if I sharpen My flashing sword, and My hand takes hold on justice, I will render vengeance on My adversaries, and I will repay those who hate Me. I will make My arrows drunk with blood, and My sword will devour flesh; *drunk* with the blood of the slain and the captives, *blood* from the long-haired heads of the enemy.’”

—Deut. 32:34-35, 40-42

Here, in seed form, is the Day of the LORD, spoken of by all the OT prophets. Accordingly, the Christian interpreter must ever bear in mind that just as Israel, their Law, their land, their exile, and their restoration all typify larger eschatological realities, so too do the various prophecies of the Day of the LORD given *under* the Law. All of them are “covenantally conditioned” and must therefore be interpreted as such with a view to their true fulfillment in NT times.

With this as background, let us briefly survey three interesting and important characteristics of OTKP's of the Day of the LORD.

First, a great many of these prophecies display a fascinating biblical phenomenon called *prophetic perspective* or *prophetic blending*. The idea here is that in delivering a single prophecy of coming judgment and/or restoration, the prophets sometimes spoke simultaneously of two (or even three) similar but historically separate events; of events near and far, local and universal, preliminary and eschatological. It is as if they are looking through the eyepiece of a telescope at two separate mountain ranges, one in the foreground, and the other in the background: They *seem* to be seeing one range, when in fact they are seeing and describing two.⁴

Examples of this phenomenon abound. In Isaiah 13 the prophet explicitly speaks of the Day of the LORD upon Israel's archenemy, Babylon (vv. 2-5, 14-22). Yet right in the middle of his discourse, we suddenly find him addressing the whole earth (vv. 6-13). In Jeremiah 25:30-32, the seer begins by pronouncing God's judgment upon his own fold (i.e.,

Israel), but immediately goes further, declaring that he will also “enter into judgment with all flesh.” Similarly, Zephaniah speaks not only of a Day of the LORD against Judah (1:4-6), but also of a Day of the LORD against “all the inhabitants of the earth” (1:2, 14-18). In Obadiah 15-20 we learn that the Day of the LORD is drawing near, not only upon Edom—the nation in the foreground of this prophecy—but also upon “all nations” (v. 16). Some of those nations are explicitly mentioned in verses 19-20: Corporately, they typify all the (eschatological) enemies of God’s people. As for Nahum, while speaking of God’s wrath against Nineveh (i.e., Assyria), he suddenly lifts his eyes to the farthest margin of history and glimpses the Day of the LORD against *all* his adversaries, thus indicating (to the NT interpreter) that in God’s sight the city of Nineveh typifies the City of Man: the fallen and impenitent world system, the Domain of Darkness, doomed to final destruction (1:2-8, Rev. 14:1ff).

Such prophetic blending is not universal. A few OT prophecies of the Day of the LORD have only local judgments in view, though in context even these may be seen as presupposing and foreshadowing something far greater (Joel 1:15, 2:2, 11; Amos 5:18-20). Meanwhile, others seem only to have the eschatological Day in view (Psalm 96:4-13, Isaiah 2:12-22, Haggai 2:20-23, Zech. 12:1-9, 14-18, Mal. 4:1-3). But no matter where we turn, it soon becomes clear that *every* prophecy of the Day of the LORD reflects a common OT conviction and a common OT hope: God has appointed a Day in which he will judge the world in righteousness, after which he will bring in his glorious, eternal reign (Acts 17:31).

This brings us to our second point: Not only do these prophecies blend the local and universal, the near and far, but they also blend judgment and redemption. Yes, the accent often falls upon judgment—indeed, an occasional prophecy speaks almost exclusively of judgment (e.g., Isaiah 13)—with the result that down through the years the Church has come to speak (and sing) of the *Dies Irae*, or the Day of (the LORD’s) Wrath. Nevertheless, upon closer inspection one finds that these prophecies almost always include a strong element of redemption. We saw this in the OTKP’s found in the Law, cited above. We saw it in Malachi 4. We saw it in our discussion of the Last Battle. Indeed, everywhere we look, the Day of the LORD is never the last word, but is always and essentially transitional: It is the final Judgment that leads to the final Redemption; to the final rescue and

restoration of God's people and their world (Isaiah 2:1-22, Ezek. 38-39, Joel 2:28-32, 3:12-17, Obadiah 15-21, Nahum 1:12-15, Zeph. 2:4-11, 3:8-13, Zech. 12:1-9). In short, it is the penultimate stage in the coming of the Kingdom, the stage that ushers in the Kingdom in its fullness.

Finally, we also note that while most prophecies of the Day of the LORD envision Yahweh as the Agent of final judgment and redemption, not a few at least hint that he will do so through the Messiah. Psalm 2, for example, speaks of the Messianic Son who will shatter the (rebellious) nations like potters' ware (Psalm 2:7-12). Psalm 110 declares that the LORD will send forth the scepter of his Messianic Priest-King out of Zion, and that through him he will shatter kings on the Day of his wrath, and execute judgment among the nations (Psalm 110:2, 5-6). Isaiah, speaking of the universal reign of the Messiah, predicts that he will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth (11:4, 2 Thess. 2:8). Daniel closely associates the everlasting dominion of the heavenly Son of Man with the final destruction of all earthly empires (Dan. 7:9-14, cf., 2:44-45). Habakkuk, in his majestic vision of the devastation of eschatological Babylon and the final deliverance of God's people, does not explicitly mention the Messiah, but he does indeed speak of One who seems to descend from above, whose glory covers the very heavens, filling the (redeemed) earth with praise (Hab. 3:1-15, Mt. 24:27).

And what student of the NT can fail to hear the voice of Christ in this astonishing prophecy of Isaiah?

“Who is this who comes from Edom, in crimsoned garments from Bozrah; he who is splendid in his apparel, marching in the greatness of his strength?”

“It is I, speaking in righteousness, mighty to save!”

“Why is your apparel red, and your garments like his who treads in the winepress?”

“I have trodden the winepress alone, and from the peoples no one was with me; I trod them in my anger, and trampled them in my wrath; their lifeblood spattered my garments, and stained all my apparel. For the day of vengeance was in my heart, and my year of redemption had come. I looked, but there was none to help; I was appalled, but there was none to uphold; so my own arm brought me salvation, and my wrath upheld me. I trampled down the peoples in my anger; I made them drunk in my wrath, and I poured out their lifeblood on the earth.”

—Isaiah 63:1-6 (ESV)

Like all the rest, this prophecy of the Day of the LORD is covenantally conditioned, using OT language to convey NT truth. In particular, it

represents the divine Judge and Redeemer as passing through Edom—Israel’s proud and inveterately hostile neighbor—in order to liberate his people once and for all in the eschatological Year of Jubilee (Lev. 25). The NT, looking beyond the conditioning, unveils the true meaning: The Redeemer/Judge is the Lord Jesus Christ at his Parousia, descending from heaven in power and glory, mighty to save his beleaguered but trusting saints, and ready to judge *all* the proud and hostile nations that, like Edom of old, have not only rejected his heavenly rule, but are now also persecuting his earthly people (Mt. 24:29-31, 25:31ff, 2 Thess. 1, Rev. 19:13).

We conclude, then, that OT prophecies of the Day of the LORD pave the way for the NT revelation of the Day of the Lord Jesus Christ (Mt. 24:36, Luke 17:31f, 1 Cor. 5:5, 2 Cor. 1:14, Phil. 1:10, 2:16, 2 Thess. 2:2). Kneeling reverently at the feet of Christ, these prophecies bear solemn, majestic, joyful, and “mysterious” witness to the (second) coming of the High King of Heaven.

The World to Come

The fifth and final stage of the coming of the Kingdom is *The World to Come*. Though this expression (which originated in inter-testamental Judaism) does not appear in OTKP, the idea is present everywhere. We may define the World to Come as the ultimate goal of Salvation History; the final state; the world *fully* rescued from every enemy, and *fully* restored to every friend; the world in which God himself is fully present, fully manifest, and fully ruling over all.

With the lone exception of Jonah, there is not a single OT prophet who does not supply us with a “snapshot” of the World to Come. As we have seen, Moses himself opened up this particular spring of divine revelation (Lev. 26:40-45, Deut. 30:1-10), various Psalmists turned it into a stream (Psalms 2, 22, 72, 89, 96, 132), and the writing prophets swelled it into a mighty rushing river.

In OTKP, the immediate historical precursor to the World to Come is not uniform. *Usually*, it is Israel’s restoration from captivity; *often* it is the Days of the Messiah; *sometimes* it is the Last Battle, and *sometimes* it is the Day of the LORD. But again, in one way or another, the World to Come

always appears in OTKP, since it and the (completed) Kingdom of God are one and the same.

In our previous discussion of the (redemptive) nature of the Kingdom, we cited a great many of these prophetic snapshots, and examined several quite closely.⁵ In so doing, we discovered two important truths. First, all OTKP's paint the *same essential picture*: a picture of a world in which God has rescued man and nature from every physical and spiritual enemy, and restored them to every spiritual and physical friend. But secondly, because of covenantal conditioning, they by no means paint a *uniform picture*.

This point merits a brief review. We remember, for example, that in some prophecies of the World to Come Israel alone remains; in others, believing Gentiles remain alongside them. In some, all nations gladly submit to the LORD (and to his Messiah); in others, certain rebellious nations persist and are ever subject to divine judgment. In some, perfect peace prevails; in others, war (but not defeat) remains a permanent threat. In some, old age and death are forever banished; in others, they abide as constant (but harmless) companions. In some, Israel (with neighboring nations) lives under the Mosaic Covenant; in others, they live under a New Covenant. In some, all nature blossoms like a rose; in others, deserts and marshes stand as perpetual reminders of divine judgment. In some, the sun, moon, and stars give way to the light of God's glory; in others, new moons and Sabbaths continue as an everlasting call to the worship of the LORD. And all of this is to say nothing of the various ways in which certain OTKP's seem to clash with the NT picture of life in the age to come (e.g., *vis-à-vis* marriage, children, the curse, old age, death, oceans, the luminaries, etc.)

Pondering this array of apparent contradictions, we realized that there is no hope of harmonizing the conflicting data by an appeal to a future millennium. This is true primarily because the OTKP's are clearly speaking of an *eternal* World to Come, not a temporary thousand year interlude. We concluded, then, that the only viable way of escape is to humble ourselves before Christ and the apostles; to let the NT reveal to us the true nature of the World to Come; to use that knowledge as a key that unlocks the true meaning of the OTKP's; and therefore to understand that, to a greater or lesser degree, all of the latter are "covenantally conditioned" snapshots of

the World that Christ—by the New and Eternal Covenant—introduced to us at his first coming, and will bring to eternal perfection at his second.

In sum, if we want to know what life *really* will (and *really* won't) be like in the World to Come, we must first find out from Christ and the apostles, and then learn to see that very thing promised to us beneath the mysterious, poetic, and covenantally conditioned images of OTKP.

Conclusion

In our survey of OTKP we have discovered a remarkable tension. Yes, an inductive reading of the Law, the Psalms, and the Prophets yields a fairly representative idea of the nature and coming of the Kingdom of God. As to its nature, it appears to be an eternal, universal theocracy, mediated by ethnic Israel and her Messiah, administered in accordance with the Law of Moses, and set in a spiritually and physically redeemed cosmos. As to the stages of its coming, it appears to begin with Israel's return to the Promised Land and the subsequent advent of her Messiah; then to grow in the Days of the Messiah (however few or many they may be); and then—following the Last Battle and the Day of the LORD—to reach its full redemptive stature in the World to Come.

But if our survey has shown us anything, it has shown us that these are indeed only *representative* ideas; ideas found in *most* OTKP's, *but not all*. For—as I have been at pains to point out—there are a great many “uncooperative” OTKP's that either neglect or (apparently) contradict each and every element of the Representative Idea. So again, because of such glaring omissions and (apparent) contradictions, OTKP does indeed give us a *representative* idea of the Kingdom, but by no means a *uniform* one. Furthermore, we have also seen that on a number of weighty themes, the NT itself seems directly to contradict a straightforward reading of many OTKP's, denying, for example, the perpetuity of the Mosaic Law, or portraying the World to Come in terms far different than the representative OT idea.

Such tensions are profoundly significant. In effect, they render OTKP an opaque window. Yes, gazing through the window we can see the basic shape of things to come; *but we can never see a photograph of things themselves*. In other words, the actual data of OTKP—with its abundance of

apparent contradictions and frequent intimations of deeper spiritual meaning—were apparently *intended* to discourage the OT saints from viewing OTKP as pre-recorded history. Instead, they were intended to create and sustain a living hope in the coming of the Messiah and his Kingdom; a Messiah who, in due time, would “explain to us all things” (John 4:25, 1 Peter 1:11).⁶

For many Christians devoted to an inspired and inerrant Bible, these profound tensions remain, and remain profoundly painful. Our premillennial brethren are among them. With a fierce and sometimes heartrending loyalty—not only to the OT Scriptures, but also to a literal interpretation thereof—they toil on, hoping to discern and produce a detailed picture of a three-staged Kingdom of God, a picture that can somehow reconcile all the conflicting data into a harmonious whole.⁷

We have seen, however, that for many reasons it is a labor in vain. The OT prophets never speak of a discrete, thousand year stage of the Kingdom. The literal reading of OTKP favored by premillenarians simply cannot resolve all the apparent contradictions, which are too numerous and too stark. Also, such a reading forces us to imagine a future return to institutions and world conditions long since departed from the stage of history. Furthermore, such a reading repeatedly shatters upon certain prophecies that the Spirit obviously meant for us to receive figuratively; prophecies that draw upon OT physical conditions in order to depict NT spiritual realities. But most importantly, prophetic literalism brings the interpreter into direct conflict with any number of core NT teachings.

All of this pain, I have argued, is traceable to a single, many-faceted hermeneutical failure: a failure to anchor to Christ and the Apostles in the Didactic NT; a failure to receive their instruction on the exact relationship between the Old Covenant and the New; and a failure to embrace the NCH, by which alone we may understand the OT in general, and OTKP in particular. In sum, our pain is traceable to a failure to receive from Christ the Master Keys by which alone we may open up the “dark sayings” of OTKP, quickly resolve all apparent contradictions, and then go on to preach, teach, and rejoice in *all* of God’s rich eschatological truth.

In the present chapter we have begun to use the NCH to do this very thing. Now, however, we must embark on a new leg of our journey. Now we must turn to the writings of the apostles themselves, so that we might

receive from them a comprehensive set of NT principles by which, with the Spirit's blessing, we may accurately and confidently interpret all OTKP. In other words, we must now go in search of *more* keys, keys that will open the doors of Scripture still wider to the truth and beauty of the Kingdom of God.

New Testament Principles for Interpreting OT Kingdom Prophecy

IN OUR JOURNEY thus far, we have spoken often of the New Covenant Hermeneutic. We defined it as the NT method for interpreting the OT. We learned that Christ himself introduced it to his disciples. We explored, at great length, its theological basis, which we identified as *progressive revelation*, but progressive revelation of a very special kind; progressive revelation such that *the OT is the NT concealed* (under a veil of sundry types and shadows), *while the NT is the OT revealed* (by the manifestation in history of Christ and the Eternal Covenant, through which the OT is unveiled). Then, in a lengthy survey of the nature and stages of the Kingdom in OTKP, we began to see that while prophetic literalism hurls us into a morass of confusion and contradiction, the NCH seems swiftly to resolve all difficulties, and also to set before our wondering eyes a beautiful, many-faceted, but fully integrated prophetic tapestry; a tapestry that everywhere depicts Christ and the twofold spiritual Kingdom he introduced under the New Covenant.

Now we must take a further step. Now we must turn to the Didactic New Testament itself—and this time more or less exclusively to the writings of the apostles—in order to discern and develop a *complete* set of guiding principles for the proper interpretation of OTKP. That will be our goal here in chapter 13. Then, in chapter 14, we will examine a number of OTKP's actually cited by the apostles in their writings, in order to see if they do indeed use these principles to interpret them. In short, our goal in the next two chapters is to see if the apostles, by precept and example, use the NCH to interpret OTKP. If they do, it is sure that we too should go and do the same.

New Modes of Seeing

Having opened their eyes to the heart, structure, and progress of Salvation History, the exalted Christ initiated his apostles—and all his New Covenant people—into *new modes of seeing* the OT in general, and OTKP in particular. Taken together, these new modes of seeing constitute what we have called the NCH. In the discussion to follow, I will identify seven such modes, discuss them briefly, and spotlight them in the apostles' writings. By way of illustration, I will also apply them to Genesis 3:15, the *protoevangelium*, wherein we hear God say to the serpent, “And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed. He will crush your head, and you will bruise him on the heel.” Please note that in these modes of seeing there is some overlap: Certain modes imply and involve others. Nevertheless, each one is relatively distinct, and therefore merits a separate treatment.

Based on a careful reading of the New Testament, we may say that by way of precept and example the apostles of Christ, following their Master, urge us to bring the following modes of seeing to the OT:

1. Literal

This mode of seeing applies primarily to the great substratum of OT revelation, its historical narratives. We read them literally when we take them as statements of historical fact. The apostles, in their approach to OT history did this very thing. They regarded Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, and David as true historical figures. They regarded the creation, the probation in Eden, the Fall of Adam, the descent of the Curse, the Flood, the Dispersion at Babel, the call of Abraham, and the Exodus as true historical events. They regarded OT history as true history, supernatural and all. Indeed, had they come to regard it as something different—say as myth or legend—they would have considered themselves of all men most pitiable, since their eternal hope in Christ was itself *an historical hope*, a hope that altogether depended upon the historical veracity of OT and NT Salvation History (Luke 1:1-4, 1 Cor. 15:12-19, 1 Tim. 1:4, 4:7, 2 Peter 1:16).

Interpreting the OT literally, the apostles therefore read Gen. 3:15 as a true historical narrative. They affirmed that God really did speak those words to the serpent, and also to the evil spirit that indwelt it. Moreover,

they also affirmed that God's words had a literal (i.e., a natural or physical) sense to them; that God really did put a spirit of enmity between Eve and this particular serpent, and also between her (physical) children and its children, with the result that real people would be bitten by real snakes, who in turn would really crush them under foot. The apostles would *not*, however, have affirmed that this sense exhausted—or even scratched the surface—of the deeper layers of meaning embedded in God's words.

Here, two questions naturally arise: Could OTKP have a literal layer of meaning, as well as a more figurative? And if so, could this literal layer be speaking of a future Millennium? We will attend to these important questions later.¹

2. Ethical

The apostles also read the OT ethically, as a revelation of God's will of precept for the attitudes, words, and deeds of all men, especially his New Covenant people. Obviously, this mode of seeing comes into play most naturally when we encounter OT passages like the Ten Commandments, or the numerous exhortations to repentance and covenant faithfulness found in the Psalms and Prophets. However, in drawing ethical application from the OT, the apostles go far beyond simply reiterating OT precepts to NT disciples. Rather, they are at pains to show the ethical implications of *all* OT texts *for the believer in Christ*. In other words, being fully persuaded that the *entire* OT—whether its history, law, poetry, or prophecy—ultimately concerns the things of Christ, the apostles' ethical reading of the OT was not merely law-centered, but Christ-centered and Gospel-centered.

The NT supplies some fascinating illustrations of this approach. For example, drawing liberally from the narrative of Israel's moral failures in the wilderness of Sinai, Paul exhorts Christians as to how they should walk in the wilderness of this present evil age (1 Cor. 10:1f). Citing OT Law to the effect that farmers must not muzzle an ox when it is treading out the grain, he also instructs Christians as to how they should supply the material needs of their leaders (1 Cor. 9:9, 1 Tim. 5:18). Reflecting upon various OT prophecies of final Judgment and Redemption, Peter presses home his application, asking what sort of people the NT saints—who will soon see that Judgment—ought to be in all holy conduct and godliness (2 Peter 3:11-14). As for John, he cites the OT story of Cain and Abel, not only to show

that believers ought to love one another, but also that they ought *not* to be surprised when the world—sometimes embodied in false brethren—hates them (1 John 3:10-13). Thus, for the apostles, all OT indicatives contain imperatives—*Gospel imperatives*—that NT revelation alone can bring out into the full light of day.

We can apply the ethical mode of seeing to Genesis 3:15. It is a prophecy: It simply speaks of what God will do, and of what will happen when he does. Nevertheless, it is also ethically charged. If God has put enmity between the Woman and the Serpent, then it is quite clear that the Woman *ought* to hate the Serpent and his evil works (Rom. 7:15, Jude 1:23, Rev. 2:6, 15). However, turning to the NT, we find something that brings us up short, something to show us how much we *need* the NT to draw out the correct ethical implications of this or any other OT passage. For while one might also *naturally* conclude from Gen. 3:15 that the seed of the Woman *ought* to hate the seed of the Serpent, the Lord Jesus—quite *supernaturally*—tells his living saints that they ought rather to love their enemies, pray for them, and do good to them (Mt. 5:43-44); indeed, that in this Era of Proclamation and Probation they ought to give them the Gospel, so that the seed of the Serpent might *become* the seed of the Woman, and their brothers and sisters in Christ as well (Acts 26:12-18, Eph. 1:5-6, 2:1ff, Col. 1:13)!

3. Typological

The apostles read the OT typologically. Because this mode of seeing involves so many others (see below), it is, in some ways, the most important. The main idea here is that in all four OT administrations of the Eternal Covenant—and indeed in the very warp and woof of all OT history—God was pleased to reveal the things of Christ *in a veiled manner*. In particular, he revealed them by means of *types*. Again, we have defined types as OT persons, places, things, events, or institutions that “mysteriously” and symbolically point ahead to the several elements of the Eternal Covenant. The more we read the OT, the more we see them. Indeed, Christ himself explicitly told us that *the entire OT* is typological: its history, law, poetry, proverb, and prophecy (Mt. 5:17-18, Luke 24:25-27, John 5:39-46). He viewed it as a vast network of highly symbolic pictures; pictures by which God was pleased to supply a veiled revelation of his eternal plan of salvation, even as he also created a biblical “language of Zion” whose

manifold imagery would henceforth serve as a vehicle for the poetic expression of his lofty redemptive truths (Psalm 78:2, Mt. 5:17-18, Luke 24:25-27, John 5:39-46). Later we shall see how important this is for the proper interpretation of the Revelation.

Both by way of precept and example the apostles taught us to interpret the OT typologically.

Concerning the way of precept, many NT passages come to mind. One of the most important is 1 Cor. 15:46. Comparing and contrasting the First and Last Adams, Paul declares, “The spiritual is not first, but the natural; then comes the spiritual” (1 Cor. 15:46). Lying at the base of this rather cryptic text is the principle of progressive revelation. Paul is saying that in OT times “natural” things pointed to, and paved the way for, “spiritual” things. This was true of the first Adam, and it was true of many other things, as well. Indeed, the whole panoply of “natural” OT things pointed to, and paved the way for, the spiritual things of Christ and the Covenant. To understand the deep meaning of the natural things, we must therefore look at them through the lens of the spiritual. We must interpret them typologically.

Other NT texts that encourage typological interpretation include Colossians 2:17, where Paul asserts that such OT institutions as festivals, new moons, and Sabbaths were mere “shadows,” shadows cast by the true “substance” that is Christ and the Eternal Covenant. The writer to the Hebrews agrees, declaring that the Law had only a shadow of the good things to come, and not the very form of the things themselves; that the elaborate physical service of worship instituted by Moses was but a pale reflection of lofty spiritual realities, realities long ago prepared “in the Mount” (of heaven), typologically conveyed to Moses, and now made manifest in Christ (Heb. 8:4-5, 9:11-12, 10:1). As for the apostle Peter, he has seen that the waters through which Noah and his family safely passed were typological; that they speak both of the eschatological judgment to come, and of a present baptism that saves a believer from it (1 Peter 3:18-22, 2 Peter 3).

We find, then, that all the apostles read the OT typologically. They recognized that in OT times God used various historical types and shadows to speak of “the good things to come,” the things of Christ; and they urge us to recognize it as well (Heb. 9:11, 10:1).

In order to get a feel for the extent of OT typology—and the extent of NT typological interpretation—let us now consider some specific examples. After the risen Christ ascended to heaven, he poured out the Spirit and opened the apostles' minds, so that they might fully understand the OT Scriptures (Luke 24:45). The revolution in their way of seeing was stupendous.

Henceforth, they saw OT *persons* as types: Adam (Rom. 5:14, 1 Cor. 14:45), Melchizedek (Heb. 5:8-10, 7:1-17), Moses (Acts 3:20-22, Heb. 3:2-6), and many more.

They saw OT *places* as types: Egypt (Acts 7:9-10, 30-36, Rev. 11:8), the wilderness of Sinai (1 Cor. 10:5, Rev. 12:6), Canaan (Gen. 17:4-6, Rom. 4:13, Heb. 11:13-16), Zion (Heb. 12:22, Rev. 4:1), Jerusalem (Gal. 4:25-26, Heb. 12:22), and more.

They saw OT *things* as types: the pillar of cloud and fire that led the Israelites in the wilderness (1 Cor. 10:1-2), the manna that they ate (1 Cor. 10:3), the rock from which they drink (1 Cor. 10:4), and more.

They saw OT *events* as types: the Flood (1 Peter 3:18-22), the life-long sojourn of Abraham (Heb. 11:8-10), the (near) sacrifice of Isaac (Heb. 11:17-19), the Exodus from Egypt (1 Cor. 10:1-11, Heb. 3:7-19, 4:1-11), and more.

Very importantly, they also saw OT (Mosaic) *institutions* as types: prophets (Acts 3:22), priests (Heb. 3:1), kings (Heb. 7:1), the service of worship in the tabernacle/temple (Heb. 8:1-10:25), animal sacrifices (Eph. 5:2, Heb. 9:26), circumcision (Phil. 3:3, Col. 2:11), the Sabbath (Col. 2:16-17, Heb. 4:1f), the Passover (1 Cor. 5:7f), Pentecost (Acts 2:1, NAS margin), the seed of Abraham (Rom. 4:16-17, Gal. 3:15-16, 29), the house of Moses (Heb. 3:1-6), the dynasty of David (Acts 15:13-21), the priestly nation of Israel (Rom. 9:6-8, Gal. 6:16, Heb. 8:10, 1 Peter 2:9), and the Mosaic covenant itself (Heb. 8:6-13, 9:1ff).

The sheer abundance of these examples is impressive. Indeed, it forces us to conclude that after Pentecost the apostles came to view *the entire OT* as a preliminary, promissory, and preparatory revelation of Christ; a revelation over which God, for wise reasons, had placed a thick veil of OT type and shadow. Moreover, they also realized that sin and Satan had placed another kind of veil over the minds of unbelievers, a veil of spiritual blindness that prevented them from discerning the things of Christ in the

OT Scriptures (Acts 13:27, 2 Cor. 3:12-18). However, they also gloried in the fact that at any time the sovereign God could graciously place an unbeliever in Christ, open his eyes, and permanently remove the veils (John 3:3, 6:43-45, Luke 24:45, 2 Cor. 3:16).

Earlier in our study we closely examined the typology of Genesis 3:15, so there is no need for me to repeat myself here. We may, however, pause to marvel yet again at how, in the space of some 30 words, God can speak in types of Satan, Christ, the Church, the crucifixion, the overthrow of Satan's spiritual kingdom, the perennial battle between the Church and the World, and the final destruction of Satan and his followers at the end of the age. And all this is to say nothing of the literal layer meaning, which so helpfully warns the sons and daughters of Eve against getting too close to snakes!

4. Eschatological

Closely related to the typological mode of seeing is the eschatological. The apostles employed it freely. They read the OT as a body of divine revelation wherein God used mystical, typological language to speak of things to come, things that he would make manifest *in the last days* (Acts 2:17, Heb. 1:2, 1 Peter 1:20, 2 Peter 3:3, Jude 1:18).

The apostles' eschatological take on the OT is especially clear in the epistles of Paul. For example, when expounding the Gospel to the Romans, he wrote, "But now, apart from the Law, the righteousness of God has been manifested, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets" (Rom. 3:21). This parallels his remarks at the close of the epistle, where he explicitly refers to the Gospel as a great mystery, a mystery that had been kept secret for long ages past, but now, in these last days, has finally been made manifest to the whole world (Rom. 16:25-27).

In these two texts we see clearly how the apostle now understands and uses the OT. He understands that it bears witness to the supreme mystery of God, the Eternal Covenant. Yet he also sees that for long ages past God kept that mystery a secret, hiding it away under a veil of OT type and shadow. Accordingly, all OT revelation implicitly (and sometimes explicitly) *looked ahead* to a better time; indeed, to *the fullness of time*, wherein there would be a complete unveiling of the Son of God, the righteousness of God, and the Gospel of God (Gal. 4:4, Eph. 1:10). What's more, there would also be an unveiling of (the deep meaning of) the OT Scriptures themselves! So

again, Paul and the other apostles came to regard the entire OT as a vast body of divine revelation promising, picturing, and preparing for an administration of the Eternal Covenant in the last (and best of) days. It was eschatological through and through (1 Cor. 1:26, Eph. 1:7-10, Titus 1:3, Heb. 9:26, 1 Peter 1:10-12, 2 Peter 2:19-21).

We have seen that the eschatological interpretation of the OT is inseparable from the typological; that by its very nature OT typology looks forward to the last things. Over and over again, the apostles demonstrate their appreciation of this new and crucial truth. The first Adam was a type of the last Adam (Rom. 5:12-21, 1 Cor. 15:45). The first deliverer (Moses) was a type of the last Deliverer (Acts 3:20-22, Heb. 3:2-6). The first Passover was a type of the last Passover (1 Cor. 5:7). The first temple was a type of the last Temple (1 Cor. 3:16, Eph. 2:19-22, 1 Peter 2:4-5). This is but a sampling of the many cases in which the lesser, temporary, and physical things of the OT look forward to the greater, permanent, and spiritual things of the NT; in which they look forward to the *last* things.

Turning again to Genesis 3:15, we find that the eschatological mode of seeing yields rich treasures. Looking beyond the literal sense to the typological, we suddenly hear God speaking of that which he will do in the fullness of time, in the last days: He will put enmity between the Serpent (Satan) and the Seed of the Woman (Christ), so much so that the two will enter into mortal combat. Yes, Satan will bruise Christ's heel unto death. However, as Christ's resurrection will abundantly show to all nations, Satan's "victory" will swiftly be reckoned as his ultimate defeat. For by God's own design, Christ's death will be redemptive; and because it will be redemptive, the Woman too will be brought back to (spiritual) life, learn to hate her former master, and—at the end of the story—be the very instrument of judgment by which her new Master will altogether crush the head of Satan and his willing followers (Ezek. 37:1ff, Rom. 16:20, 1 Cor. 6:2-3). All this and more comes immediately into view when, with fully developed NT eyes, we look for the eschatological sense of Genesis 3:15.

5. Covenantal

Having received all wisdom and insight into the eternal purpose and plan of God, the apostles were now able to read the OT covenantally; they were able to look beyond the types and shadows to the great mystery of

God, the Eternal Covenant in Christ. Moreover, in writing as they did, they gave us the tools to do the same.

In chapters 7 and 8, we discussed the nature of the Eternal Covenant at some length, and also explored its relevance for the proper interpretation of the OT. We learned that we are reading the OT covenantally when we look for both sides of the one Covenant: The Covenant of Redemption (i.e., the covenant between the Father and the Son) and the Covenant of Grace (i.e., the covenant between God and his people). Also, we are reading covenantally when we look for the key elements of covenants: the parties, the promise, the provision, the proviso, and (in the case of the Covenant of Grace) the penalty for all who refuse to enter.

In this new mode of seeing, the apostles point the way. Paul, for example, seems clearly to have had the promise of the Covenant of Redemption in view when he wrote, very cryptically, to the Galatians: “Now the promises were spoken to Abraham and to his Seed. He does not say, ‘and to seeds,’ as though referring to many, but rather to one, ‘and to your Seed,’ that is, Christ” (Gal. 3:16). Yes, God made great and wonderful promises to the (sinful) seed of Abraham; that is, to his spiritual children, to all would later follow in his footsteps by believing the Word of God in the Gospel (Rom. 4:16). But, says Paul, that seed receives the promises only because, by faith, they are in the one (divine) Seed of Abraham, to whom God originally made the promises; promises to the effect that he (Christ) would inherit the world (Gen. 12:7, Rom. 4:13), and that in him all the families of the earth would be blessed (Gen. 22:18). Here then, at the dawn of OT history, the apostle catches a precious glimpse of the Father’s eternal promise to his Son in the Covenant of Redemption. His fellow-apostles behold still others in the lives of Moses (Heb. 3:1-6), David (Acts 2:22-36), and Isaiah (Heb. 2:13).

As for the Covenant of Grace, we have already seen how the apostles frequently draw upon various OT texts to describe its several elements: its divine and human *parties* (Gal. 6:16, 1 Peter 2:9-10, 2 Cor. 6:16, Heb. 8:10, Rev. 21:3), its *promise* (Rom. 4:13, Gal. 3:4, Rev. 2:7, 22:14), its gracious *provision* (Acts 8:32, 1 Cor. 5:7, 1 Peter 1:18-19), its *proviso* (Rom. 1:17, 4:3, 6-7, 10:6-8, 2 Cor. 4:13, Gal. 3:11), and its *penalty* (Rom. 16:20, Heb. 3:16-19, 12:18, 26-27, 2 Peter 2:1-10, Jude 1:7). By keeping the elements of

the Covenant of Grace before their eyes—by reading covenantally—they were able to plumb OT revelation to its very depths.

Comparative and Contrasting Covenantal Reading

Here we do well to note that we are reading the OT covenantally not only when we look for types of the Eternal Covenant, but also when we look for signs of *the inferiority of its OT administrations*. The former may be called *comparative covenantal reading*, and the latter *contrasting (or antithetical) covenantal reading*. The contrasting mode of covenantal reading is very valuable, since it highlights and magnifies the true greatness of the New Covenant, a greatness that consists in the fact that it is none other than the Eternal Covenant; the one true redemptive plan that God conceived in eternity past, veiled in OT times, and unveiled in these last days through his Son, so that now and forevermore, his people may worship him in spirit and truth (John 1:14, 17, 4:23-24).

We can get a feel for contrasting covenantal reading by turning to the epistle to the Hebrews. Here, the writer's great goal was to open the eyes of wavering Jewish Christians to the ultimacy of the New Covenant, thereby discouraging them from a deadly return to Judaism and the (obsolete) institutions of the Mosaic Law. Accordingly, he is at pains to compare and contrast the two covenants in such a way as to highlight the inferiority of the Old Covenant and the superiority of the New. In doing so, he shows that the Levitical high priesthood (filled by the sons of Aaron) was inferior to that of Melchizedek (now filled by Christ), since Levi, while still in Abraham's loins, paid tithe to Melchizedek (7:1-10). Also, the Levitical priesthood required an endless stream of new ministers, since the (mere) men who served in it were both sinful and mortal; whereas the Melchizedek priesthood is eternal and unchanging, since one immortal Man now occupies it; a divine Man who is holy, harmless, and undefiled (7:20-28).

Again, OT temple worship was clearly inferior, since under that arrangement only one man—the high priest—had access to God in the Holiest of All, and that but once a year, and that with much fear and trembling, lest he err and die! In Christ, however, many men—indeed, the entire Church—are bidden to come boldly to the Throne of Grace, and now may do so freely whenever and wherever they wish (9:1-28, 10:19-22).

Or again, we see the inferiority of (mere) animal sacrifices in the fact that the priests had to offer them over and over again; whereas Christ offered up his own body but once, for all the sins of all his people of all time—and in so doing, fulfilled the typology of the animal sacrifices, thereby abolishing them forever (10:1-19).

Or again, we see the (intrinsic) inferiority of the Law in the events at Sinai, where God administered the Old Covenant; where he enveloped the whole site in tokens of his wrath, forbidding Israel even to touch the mountain, and setting all hearts to trembling, so much so that the people begged to hear this word no more (12:18-21). Meanwhile, Christians—who love to hear the Good News of the Gospel—are called to *live* in the heavenly Zion, where, because of Jesus, the Mediator of the New Covenant, they receive a warm and joyful welcome from God, the holy angels, and the spirits of just men made perfect (10:22-24)!

In all these examples, we see that the writer to the Hebrews comes to the OT with a mind thoroughly schooled in the new truth about God's various administrations of the Covenant in Salvation History. In particular, he understands that God was pleased to plant many types and shadows of the Eternal Covenant in the Law of Moses, but also many tokens of its intrinsic weakness, unprofitability, impermanence, and inferiority (7:18-19, 8:6-13)! Thus, the writer to the Hebrews has shown us how to perform a comparative *and* a contrasting covenantal reading of the OT, so that we might appreciate all the more the unsearchable riches we now enjoy in Christ.

Under type and shadow, the elements of the Covenant appear abundantly in Genesis 3:15. The Woman is the Church, the human party to the Covenant of Grace; so too is her seed, whom she begets through the preaching of the Gospel. However, the Seed is also Christ, the provision of the Covenant, who, by freely suffering the bruise of Satan, makes atonement for the sins of his people. As for the promise of the Covenant, it is seen in the Woman's enmity towards the Serpent, an enmity that Christ will purchase for her by his death, so that in due season he might deposit it within her by his Spirit. The promise is also seen in the crushing of the Serpent's head, which will be fully effected at Christ's return, when he (Christ) destroys Satan and his every evil work, thereby returning the Woman to Paradise and more.

By way of conclusion, we do well to note that the covenantal mode of seeing is especially helpful when interpreting OTKP. That's because OTKP is *covenantally conditioned*: It (primarily) uses imagery drawn from Israel's life under the Law (the Old Covenant) to speak of the life of God's people in the redemptive Kingdom to come. But what was life under the Law—or under any other OT administration—if not a mystical representation, cast in type and shadow, of the several elements of the Eternal Covenant; of the New Covenant by which God, “in that day,” would bring in his everlasting Kingdom? So then, as for OT law and history, so for the OTKP's that were conditioned by them: We must interpret them covenantally, as speaking in a mystery of the various elements of the Eternal Covenant in Christ.

There's No Going Back

Before continuing further, it is appropriate to pause here and discuss an important premise underlying the apostles' teaching about the administration of the Eternal Covenant in Salvation History, a premise of special relevance for our study in eschatology. It is this: The New Covenant—which is none other than the Eternal Covenant—*fully fulfills the Mosaic Law and therefore renders it forever obsolete*. An important corollary of this premise—one that I would urge my premillennarian brethren to ponder carefully—is that *there is no going back*. In other words, in the days ahead there *will not* be—because there *cannot* be—a return to the institutions of the Mosaic Law.

As we saw earlier, in his earthly ministry, the Lord Jesus taught this very thing. On the one hand, he implicitly associated the two-staged Kingdom of God with the New Covenant that he himself was instituting. On the other, he explicitly declared that the New Covenant fulfills the Old, renders it obsolete, and permanently replaces the entire spectrum of Mosaic institutions with new Gospel institutions (Mt. 5:17, 9:16-17, 24:2, Mark 11:14).

The apostles, to the extent they understood their Master's teaching, humbly acquiesced. However, after the Day of Pentecost—when the first stage of the Kingdom began, and when the exalted Christ began giving them all wisdom and insight into the mystery of his will—they attained a far better spiritual understanding from which to teach on these matters.

Now they could probe and explain the intricate relationship between the Eternal Covenant, the Old Covenant(s), and the New Covenant; and now they could unveil the true heart, structure, and progress of Salvation History. Once we understand their conclusions on these matters, we realize immediately that the apostles would never have dreamed of a future reversion to the Mosaic Law; to a millennial, theocratic administration of the Eternal Covenant.

There are two main reasons why.

First, their newfound understanding of the structure of the Kingdom (i.e., of the Era of Fulfillment) would have forbidden it. As we saw earlier, the apostles closely followed Jesus in teaching that the Kingdom comes in two stages only: the present Kingdom of the Son (emanating from Heaven above), and the future Kingdom of the Father (situated upon a renewed earth). Neither is theocratic. In the Kingdom of the Son, Christ does not rule according to the Mosaic law; rather, he rules by his Spirit according to new Gospel precepts; according to the commandments of his holy apostles and prophets. And in the Kingdom of the Father, the form of things will remain essentially the same, though the saints' enjoyment of them will be immeasurably enhanced. In other words, in the Kingdom of the Father the direct rule of the Spirit—one of the supreme gifts of the New Covenant—will simply be extended to the physical side of a glorified creation. Where in all of this is there room for—or need of—a return to the institutions of the Mosaic Law?

But secondly—and more to the point in our present discussion—the apostles' understanding of the *progress* of Salvation History would also have ruled out a return to the Mosaic Law. If the various institutions of the Mosaic Law belong in the Era of Promise and Preparation—if, by their very nature, they are meant to typify, picture, promise, and prepare for the advent of Christ and the Eternal Covenant—then why, when Christ finally appears and fulfils the “promissory pictures” of the Law, would God ever want to go backwards? Why would he want to revert to what were merely temporary foreshadowings, now that he himself has fulfilled the promise they mystically contained?

It is, then, because of the apostles' profound awareness of the progress of Salvation History that they understood and taught the eternal obsolescence of the Mosaic Law. Yes, even now the *moral* component of

that Law retains an abiding value and function, since its precepts serve to define, restrain, and convict of sin (and therefore also of one's need of the Savior), even as they depict the contours of the holy life to which all the saints should aspire (Rom. 2:16-17, 3:20, 4:15, 5:20, 7:1f, Gal. 3:19, 1 Tim. 1:8-11). And yes, even now the (scriptural record of the) *ceremonial* Law continues to serve as a powerful witness to the grace of God offered through Christ in the Gospel (Rom. 3:21, 16:25-27).

However, *as a vehicle of divine redemption*, the Mosaic Law does not have—and never did have—any intrinsic power, nor did any of the previous administrations of the Covenant. Rather, their power to save was *extrinsic*, being derived solely from the Christ who would later fulfill them in the New Covenant (Rom. 3:21-26, Heb. 11:39-40). As it is written, the Mosaic Law (whether the moral or the ceremonial) was weak (Rom. 8:3); it made nothing perfect (Heb. 7:19); and it was powerless to make those who approach God complete (Heb. 10:1). All it could do was hold the (OT) heirs of salvation in temporary custody, guarding, stewarding, and tutoring them until the time appointed by the Father, when the heirs—till then little different than slaves—should at long last become full-fledged sons and the masters of all (Gal. 3:19-4:7).

For this reason, the apostles forcefully insisted that God, through the Gospel, had fulfilled and done away with the Mosaic Law, once and for all. The NT witness on this score is impressive.

Christ has *abolished* the (OT) Law of commandments contained in ordinances, so as to remove (forever) the dividing wall of partition separating Jew and Gentile; so as to make of the two people groups “one new man” (Eph. 2:11-22).

Having now been fulfilled, the trappings of the Law have, as it were, fallen to the earth, there to join the other *weak and worthless rudimentary principles of the (religious) world* (Gal. 4:8-11, Col. 2:16-23).

Jews who stubbornly cling to the Law are like Hagar: slaves in bondage to sin and a dead faith (Gal. 4:21f).

Now that Christ has changed the (OT) priesthood, there is of necessity *a change of law* also—a change from the Mosaic Law to the Law of the Spirit of Life in Christ Jesus (Rom. 8:2, Heb. 7:11-12).

Now that God has introduced the New Covenant, he has made the first *obsolete*; and whatever is obsolete and aging is *ready to disappear* (Heb.

8:13).

Having made Christ an eternal High Priest according to the order of Melchizedek, God has (forever) *taken away* the Levitical priesthood, and (eternally) *established* the priesthood of the Lord Jesus Christ (Heb. 7:1-28, 10:9).

The saints have been forever sanctified by means of his sacrifice, the offering up of his body *once for all* (Rom. 6:10, Heb. 7:27, 9:12, 10:10).

And the list goes on.

So again, because Salvation History is progressive; because its supreme goal was the manifestation of the Eternal Covenant; because the OT administrations of the Covenant were temporary, promissory, and preparatory, whereas the New Testament administration of the Covenant was (and is) permanent; because the OT revelation of the Covenant was concealed under type and shadow, whereas the NT revelation of the Covenant was a manifestation in broad day light ... because of all this, *the apostles would never have dreamed of a return to life under the Mosaic Law*. Indeed, page after page of the NT reveals that in their own day they fought tooth and nail to prevent misguided believers from attempting to do this very thing (2 Cor. 3, Gal. 2-6, Phil. 3, Col. 2, 1 Tim. 1, Heb. 1-13)!

How likely is it, then, that the apostles would ever have desired—let alone taught—a future, millennial phase of the Kingdom of God, in which Christ would rule the world according the Law of Moses?

6. Christological

In the christological mode of seeing, the interpreter comes to the OT seeking Christ. In particular, he is looking for types, prophecies, and other OT adumbrations of the Person and Work of the Messiah; of the divine-human Prophet, Priest, and King, anointed by the Spirit of God to redeem the world.² And he is also looking for the ways in which Jesus of Nazareth has fulfilled—or yet will fulfill—all these holy offices.

A little reflection will show that there is no fundamental difference between the christological and covenantal modes of seeing, since the Person and Work of Christ lie at the heart of both. Nevertheless, it is fitting to recognize—and, indeed, to prioritize—a distinctly christological mode of seeing. Why? *Because there is no other gateway into the world of the OT.*

This is true both for seeker and for saint. The seeker—trying to ascertain the truth of the Christian faith—will most naturally approach the OT looking for signs of him who boldly claimed, “These are they that testify of Me” (John 5:39). Meanwhile, the saint—desiring life-giving communion with his Lord—will most naturally come to the OT looking for the One whom his soul loves (Song 1:7, 3:1-4); for the One whom the Holy Spirit delights to unveil and magnify (John 16:14).

If, then, the covenantal mode of seeing—with all its theological nuance, breadth, and depth—somehow enlarges a maturing believer’s vision of Christ, it will have served its purpose—and God’s—very well. However, in the end, this mode of seeing—and all modes of seeing—is properly subordinate to the christological, since it is only in seeing Christ that the world is saved and the Church sanctified (Isaiah 45:22, John 6:40). As it is written, “But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image, from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord” (2 Corinthians 3:18).

7. Ecclesiological

The final NT mode of seeing is ecclesiological. Here we come to the OT looking for the Church, the New Covenant people of God. This mode of seeing is complex and controversial, yet crucially important for interpreting OTKP correctly, and for resolving the Great End Time Debate. It will serve us well to ponder it carefully.

In order to understand ecclesiological OT interpretation, we must begin by answering a deceptively simple question: What is the Church? We know, of course, that Jesus said, “I will build my Church” (Mt. 16:18). We know that he is presently building it upon the foundation of his holy apostles and prophets (Eph. 2:19). We know that he himself is the chief cornerstone (Eph. 2:20). And we know that all born-again believers in Christ are the “living stones” of which this temple is made, a temple that serves as a habitation of God in the Spirit (1 Peter 2:5, Eph. 2:22).

But how exactly is the Church situated in Salvation History? Is it a temporary embodiment of the people of God, or an eternal? Is it the sole embodiment of the people of God, or a partial? And along these lines, what is the exact relationship between God’s NT people (the Church) and his OT people (Israel)? As we have seen, different interpreters offer (radically)

different answers to these questions. For example, our dispensational brethren assert that the Church is a largely Gentile people with a heavenly destiny, while Israel is an earthly people with an earthly destiny. So for dispensationalists, God has two separate plans for two separate peoples. On the other hand, covenant theologians assert that the Church is the last stop on the long road of Salvation History, and that she includes in her immense bosom *all* of God's people of *all* time, whether Jew or Gentile.

How, then, are we to think of the Church?

Happily, our journey to this point has equipped us to address this crucial question with confidence. Three points may be made, points that will enable us to understand what it means to interpret the OT ecclesiology, and why we must be faithful to do so.

First, the Church is indeed properly defined as the New Covenant people of God. It is the totality of all elect persons—Jew or Gentile—called into the Eternal Covenant in the Era of Fulfillment; in “these last days” when Christ and the elements of the Covenant have finally been manifested. The Church is the community of NT saints who, through the preaching of the Gospel, have “beheld” the Person and Work of Christ, believed on him, and received the twin gifts of imputed righteousness and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, *eschatological* gifts promised long ago by the OT prophets (John 6:40, 7:39, Gal. 3:11-4:7). The OT saints tasted of these gifts and waited for them, but did not experience them in fullness. For this reason we cannot say that the OT saints—*in their day*—were members of the Church. There is a valid biblical distinction between the Church and ethnic Israel; indeed, between the Church and the true OT saints of God.

But secondly, the Church nevertheless *includes* the OT saints of God. This is abundantly clear from the NT. Reading Hebrews 11, for example, we cannot fail to see that such OT stalwarts as Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel, and all the prophets *are reckoned as model believers in Christ, as true members of his Church* (Heb. 11:26, 39-40). As for Paul, he pictures the Church as a *single* olive tree whose root is (faithful) Israel, and whose branches are Gentile believers in Jesus (Rom. 11:16-24). Likewise, John pictures the Church as a *single* Woman living both *before* and *after* the first advent of Christ. In her OT embodiment, she gives birth to the Christ Child; in her NT embodiment, she flees into the

wilderness of this world, there to be nourished along with *all the rest of her offspring* who keep the commandments of God and *hold to the testimony of Jesus* (Rev. 12:1-17). So then, as for Paul, so for John: There is one Woman, one people, and one Church, comprised both of the OT saints and the New.

But how exactly does this work? How can the Church be distinct from the OT saints, yet also include them? Our study of the Eternal Covenant supplies the answer. When God administered the Covenant of Grace in OT times, he brought his people to faith in some promise and/or emblem of Christ. Thus did they respond to the provision of the Covenant; thus did they fulfill the proviso of the Covenant; thus did they become party to the Covenant; and thus did they *begin* to enter into the promise of the Covenant, enjoying a preparatory work of the Spirit in their hearts (Haggai 2:5, John 7:39). However, it was not until Christ actually came into the world and accomplished his redemptive work that the OT saints became complete; it was not until he sat down at the Father's right hand, poured out the Spirit, and gave birth to the Church, that they actually joined it; it was not until the Head of the Church entered into his glory that they (whose spirits were already in glory, and eager to welcome him home) became *full-fledged* members of the one Body now seated in the heavenly places in Christ (John 7:39, Eph. 1:23, 2:6, Col. 1:18, Heb. 11:39-40, 12:22-24).³

So then, while Israel's *experience* of God's plan was distinct from that of the Church, the plan itself was the same for both. God has always had but one purpose and one plan—whether for his Old Testament saints or his New—and it is this: That they should become parties to the Eternal Covenant of Grace, and in so doing become members of the eternal Body of his Son, the Church.

This brings us to our third and final point, namely, that in the Era of Promise and Preparation, God *prophetically pictured* the Church in different ways at different times. Please consider this point carefully, for it is easily misunderstood. It is not that Christ and the apostles simply decided to use various OT images of the people of God to picture the Church. No, it is that Christ and the apostles saw those images as *divinely appointed vehicles for picturing and pointing ahead to that which would fulfill them in the eschatological era: the Church*. There is a world of difference between these two perspectives, and a world of trouble if we fail to see it!

In our earlier discussion of the Eternal Covenant and its several administrations we examined the theological foundation for this mode of seeing; for the ecclesiological perspective on the OT people of God. The gist of it is simple: In OT times God gave veiled, typological revelations of the several elements of the Covenant; in the NT times, he lets us see the elements as they really are, out in broad historical daylight. But this truth has an important ecclesiological application. It means that just as in former times God gave veiled revelations of the provision of the Covenant (i.e., Christ), and the promise of the Covenant (i.e., eternal life in a glorious new world), so too he gave veiled, typological revelations of the *human parties* of the Covenant—the Church.

Consider for a moment how lavishly—and creatively—he did so. We have seen that in OT times God called Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, and their respective families to be parties to the Eternal Covenant. But in so doing, he also called them to be pictures of the Church. And he did not stop there. Mother Eve was also a picture of the Church (Gen. 2:22, Eph. 5:22ff). Her seed was a picture of (Christ and) the Church (Gen. 3:15, Rom. 16:20). The pious descendants of Seth—the sons of God who called on the Name of the LORD—were a picture of the Church (Gen. 4:26, 6:2, Rom. 10:12-15, 1 Cor. 1:2). Lot and his daughters were a (very faint) picture of the Church (Gen. 19:16, Luke 17:32, 1 Thess. 1:10). The Levites—who had the LORD for their inheritance—were a picture of the Church (Deut. 18:1-2, 1 Peter. 2:5, 9). The house of Obed-Edom, blessed because of the presence of the Ark of the Covenant within, was a picture of Church (2 Sam. 10-11, Eph. 1:3). Israel’s prophets were a picture of the Church (Num. 11:29, Acts 2:17, Rev. 11:3f). The dynasty of David was a picture of the Church (2 Sam. 7:11, 16, Acts 15:13-21). David’s mighty men—who resorted to the King in his stronghold in the wilderness—were a picture of the Church (1 Chron. 12:1f, 2 Tim. 2:3-4). One could continue, but the point is clear: OT individuals or communities that, by faith in some emblem of Christ, were destined to become actual members of his Church, also served—naturally enough—as prophetic pictures of the Church.

It is astonishing to see how fulsomely the apostles draw upon those pictures to describe the NT people of God. One of the most impressive examples is found in 1 Peter 2:4-11. Speaking to—and of—Christ’s Church, he describes it as a spiritual house (2 Sam. 7:27), a holy priesthood (Exodus

19:6, Isaiah 61:6), a royal priesthood (Psalm 110, Zech. 6:13), the Zion of God (Psalms 9:11, 48:2), a temple (1 Kings 6:11-13, 2 Chron. 7:1), a chosen race (Deut. 7:7f, 10:15, Isaiah 65:9), a holy nation (Exodus 19:6, Deut. 7:6), a treasured possession (Deut. 7:6, Mal. 3:17), and the people of God (Exodus 3:7, 6:7, Hos. 1:10). Similarly, Paul can speak of the Church as Abraham's seed (Rom. 4:16, Gal. 3:29), the Body of Christ (Eph. 1:22, 4:12, 5:28-30, Col. 1:24; Gen. 2:18-25), the Bride of Christ (Eph. 5:25-26; Isaiah 49:18, 62:5, Jer. 2:2), the flock of God (Acts 20:28, 1 Peter 5:2; Psalm 78:52, Isaiah 40:11), the temple of God (Eph. 2:19-21, Ezek. 43:7), the people of God (Rom. 9:25-26, 2 Cor. 6:16), and the Israel of God (Gal. 6:16, Heb. 8:8-12). Meanwhile, John refers to Christians as the children of God (1 John 3:1-2, 9-10; Exodus 3:9-11), and James addresses the Church as the twelve tribes (James 1:1, Rev. 7:1f).

Again, it is not that the apostles simply laid hold of these OT images as apt vehicles by which to describe God's NT people. Rather, it is that they came to understand the Church as the *eschatological fulfillment* of those images, and so laid hold of them as the God-ordained vehicles by which they were meant to speak about the final embodiment of his eternal family. The OT typological communities were lesser, temporary shadows of that which is greater, permanent, substantial, and eternally true: the Church.

This is, by the way, the great thought underlying the lofty ecclesiology of Paul's epistle to the Ephesians. He is not saying, as dispensationalists claim, that the Church is a "mystery" because the OT never pictured it, or because the former prophets never predicted it. No, he is saying that the *embodiment* of the eschatological people of God—the *form* that God planned for them to take—was a mystery. The prophets did indeed foresee the Church, and often spoke of it as the eschatological Israel (or Jerusalem or Zion) of God. But they never foresaw the astonishing form that eschatological Israel would take; that it would be a Spirit-filled community of Jewish and Gentile believers in Jesus; a spiritual family (1:5-6, 3:14-15); a spiritual Body, with Christ as Head (1:22-23, 2:5, 3:6, 4:12, 16, 5:23); one new spiritual Man (2:16, 4:13); a spiritual Temple (2:19-22); and a spiritual Bride (5:25-27). Moreover, they never foresaw that this spiritual community would be the last stop on the long road of Salvation History; that it would be the Church—and the Church alone—that would give glory to God, through Christ Jesus, to all generations, forever and ever. Amen (2:7, 3:21).

I would invite my premillennarian brothers to wrestle earnestly with this understanding of NT ecclesiology. If true, it has profound implications for their eschatology. Among other things, it means that the Church—the people called by God to live with him in the eternal Era of Fulfillment—is the *true* Israel of God (Gal. 6:16); for not all Israel is Israel, but only those, like Jacob of old, who cling to Christ for eternal salvation (Gen. 32:22-31, Rom. 9:6f, Phil. 3:12, 1 Tim. 6:12, Heb. 3:6, 4:14, 6:18, 10:23). It means that the distinction between Jew and Gentile has been *forever* abolished, permanently erased (Gal. 3:28); that henceforth and *forever* there will be but one Flock (John 10:16), one Vine (John 15:5, Rom. 11:16-24), one Woman (Rev. 12), and one New Man (Eph. 2:15). It means that ethnic Israel—in unbelief and opposition to the Gospel—is no longer reckoned as the people of God, but as a synagogue of Satan (Rom. 9:6-13, Gal. 1:6-10, 5:12, 1 Thess. 2:13-16, Rev. 2:9, 3:9). But it also means that when God effectually calls unbelieving Jews to Christ—when he circumcises their hearts through the preaching of the Gospel—that they become Israelites indeed, and therefore members of the one holy family, people, nation, and special treasure that the Redeemer of the world was pleased to call his Church (Mt. 16:18, John 1:47, Rom. 11:1ff, 1 Peter 2:4-11, Rev. 7:1ff).

Here, then, are some of the challenging but profoundly edifying NT truths that enable the Christian to read the OT ecclesiologically; to look, not only for Christ, but also for the eternal people of Christ, on every page of the OT revelation of God.⁴

NT Principles for Interpreting OTKP

Having surveyed the several elements of the NCH, we are now ready to focus our attention on the portion of OT revelation that concerns us most: Old Testament Kingdom Prophecy. My approach in this section will be to offer a few introductory remarks about OTKP, and then set forth three broad NT principles for its proper interpretation. In chapter 14, we will watch the apostles put those principles to work.

OTKP Defined

There is simple OT prophecy, and there is OTKP. By simple OT prophecy, I mean any OT prediction that was fulfilled in OT times. God

told Abraham that his family would live in Egypt for 400 years (Gen. 15:13). A man of God from Judah told Jeroboam that in days ahead a king named Josiah would burn dead men's bones on his (Jeroboam's) illicit altar (1 Kings 13:1-2). Isaiah predicted that a Persian king named Cyrus would give the order to rebuild Jerusalem (Isaiah 44:28). All of these are examples of simple OT predictive prophecy, since all were fulfilled in OT times. Note carefully a crucial characteristic of simple OT prophecies: They all were *literally* fulfilled. There was no good reason for them not to be.

OTKP prophecy is different. Yes, it too is predictive, promising as it does a future Kingdom; a Kingdom in which God, through his Messiah, will redeem his people, rescuing them from every enemy of the Domain of Darkness, and restoring them to every blessing of his direct spiritual rule. But unlike simple OT prophecy, OTKP it is *not* fulfilled in OT times. Rather, it is fulfilled in NT times. And because of progressive revelation—because God *veiled* his redemptive truth in OT times, but *manifested and unveiled* it in NT times—it needs “decoding.” It needs to be interpreted covenantally, typologically, christologically, and ecclesiologically, and not literally. It needs the NCH.

How exactly do we recognize an OTKP? In part, we look for certain literary cues designed to signal that the prophecy immediately to follow looks beyond OT times into the New; that it looks into the last days, wherein Christ and the Covenant will appear. These cues include such expressions as, “In that Day ...” (Isaiah 2:11, 4:1-2, Jer. 30:8f); “At that time ...” (Isaiah 18:7, Jer. 3:17); “Days are coming ...” (Jer. 30:3, Amos 9:13); “The time is coming ...” (Isaiah 66:18); “In latter-day s ...” (Jer. 30:24, Dan. 10:14, Micah 4:1); “In latter years ...” (Ezek. 38:8); and “Afterwards it will come to pass ...” (Jer. 46:26, 49:6, Joel 2:28). Usually, though not always, these phrases herald an OTKP.

More important than cues, however, is content. Does the prophecy speak of Israel's final rescue from captivity, and/or her final restoration to the Promised Land? Does it speak of the Person and Work of the Messiah *after* his exaltation as High King, and of the progress of his Kingdom in the earth? Does it speak of the Last Battle, or the Day of the LORD, or the glories of the World to Come? If so, then we are clearly dealing with an OTKP.

When we encounter OT prophecy, we also do well to remember what I earlier referred to as *prophetic perspective*. George Ladd explains its nature and purpose as follows:

The OT hope (of the Kingdom) is always ethical and not speculative. It lets the light of the future shine on the present, that Israel may be confronted by history in the here and now. For this reason, there is a coalescing of the near and the distant future. God will act in the near future to save or judge Israel, but he will also act in the indeterminate future to bring about the fulfillment of the eschatological hope. The prophets do not sharply distinguish between the near and the distant future, for both will see the act of God for his people.⁵

Does Jeremiah predict that after seventy years of captivity a remnant of chastened and penitent Jews will return from Babylon, both to God and to the Promised Land (Jer. 3:11-18, 29:10-14)? To be sure. But one cannot read these prophecies for long without realizing that he is also seeing something far greater and far more enduring: converted Jews and Gentiles, with new hearts of love for God, rescued from the Domain of Darkness, and forever dwelling together as the Jerusalem of God; as the very Throne of the LORD upon which he is pleased to rest! In short, he is seeing the Church in the days of the Church. Equipped with a good understanding of prophetic perspective, the biblical interpreter will be able to discern both of these layers of meaning. In other words, he will be able to read Jeremiah's pregnant words not only as a simple OT prophecy with an historical fulfillment among the godly Jews of OT times, but also as an OTKP with an eschatological fulfillment in the Church. Later we will look at some further examples of this fascinating and important OT phenomenon.

Three NT Principles

With all this as background, we are now ready to introduce and discuss the three over-arching NT principles for the proper interpretation of OTKP. Along the way, we will look at a number of subordinate principles that properly fall under each heading. We will also consider a few caveats that should further increase our appreciation for the nuance, subtlety, and beauty of OTKP.

1. All OTKP's are fulfilled in the twofold spiritual reign (Kingdom) of God instituted by Christ under the New Covenant, and must be

interpreted accordingly.

This principle is based upon NT teaching—both dominical and apostolic—about the nature and structure of the Kingdom of God. With respect to its nature, the principle assumes that the Kingdom is a direct spiritual reign of God introduced by the NC. With respect to its structure, the principle assumes that the Kingdom is divisible into two great stages, each of which is the result of a unique administration of the NC at the hand of Christ. Always and everywhere, the apostles brought these fundamental eschatological assumptions to OTKP, and interpreted it accordingly.

This principle has a number of important corollaries that must be carefully considered.

First, it implies that OTKP's speaking of *The Days of the Messiah* (i.e., Christ's ministry *after* his session and *prior* to the Day of the LORD) are fulfilled in the Kingdom of the Son; in the Heavenly Mediatorial Reign of the Lord Jesus Christ; in the Era of Proclamation and Probation; in the inter-adventual period wherein Christ, ruling and reigning at the Father's right hand, oversees the ingathering and upbuilding of his Church. As we saw in chapter 9, this was one of the great mysteries of the Kingdom, namely, that the Messiah's reign would emanate from the Jerusalem above, rather than the Jerusalem below; and that the conversion of (many) Gentiles to faith in Israel's God would not come about through force of arms, but through the force of truth proclaimed in love by the Church. A good understanding of these mysteries will enable the Christian interpreter to see his Lord and himself in all OTKP's of the Messiah's reign.

Secondly, this principle implies that OTKP's of *The Last Battle* are fulfilled in the final, eschatological clash between Christ and Satan (embodied in the Antichrist), the Church and the World. Not only does this conclusion flow naturally from the NT view of the Kingdom, but it is also the explicit teaching of the apostles of Christ, who clearly saw the Last Battle as the culmination of the perennial clash between the Woman and the Serpent, and between her seed and his seed; who saw it as the great eschatological anti-type, of which Israel's fierce battles with Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, and Rome were the lesser historical types.

Thirdly, this principle implies that OTKP's of the Day of the LORD will be fulfilled at the Parousia; at the Second Coming of the High King of

Heaven, into whose hands the Father has placed “all things,” including the high privilege and prerogative of consummating all Salvation History in final Judgment and Redemption.

And fourthly, this principle implies that OTKP’s of the World to Come are fulfilled in the second stage of the Kingdom; in the eternal Kingdom of the Father (and the Son); in the new heavens and the new earth. As we have already seen, such prophecies are nearly always covenantally conditioned, and must therefore be interpreted beneath the light of NT revelation concerning the true conditions of life in the Age to Come.

In passing, it is important to note that some OTKP’s—and perhaps quite a few of them—appear to be fulfilled in *both* phases of the Kingdom. For those schooled in NT teaching about the Kingdom, this should not be surprising. For again, the two phases of the Kingdom share a common essence: Both are New Covenant spheres of rescue and restoration, in which God, through Christ, rules directly over his blessed people. The only fundamental difference between them is that in the Kingdom of the Son, God’s blessings are largely spiritual, and are experienced “in heavenly places in Christ Jesus” (Eph. 1:3, 2:6); whereas in the Kingdom of the Father, his blessings are both spiritual and physical, and are experienced on a spiritually renewed earth. Laden as they are with typological and poetic imagery, many OTKP’s are well able to speak of both.

Consider, for example, Micah’s great prophecy of the LORD’s future reign in Zion (Micah 4:1-4). These things will come to pass, the prophet says, “in the latter-day s.” But from the NT, we know that the latter-day s include both the Kingdom of the Son and the Kingdom of the Father. Therefore, on a first reading of this prophecy, we may see Micah’s words as being fulfilled in the Era of Proclamation and Probation, and in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus (Eph. 1:1, 2:6). On this view, the LORD’s house is Christ’s Church, and the Mountain of the LORD’s house is the Zion above (Heb. 12:22). Even now, through the faithful preaching of the Gospel, many nations of new believers are ascending this Mountain, there to worship the God of Jacob. Even now, through Christ—the High Prophet of Heaven—God is teaching his people his ways. Even now, the instruction of the Gospel is going forth from Zion; even now the Word of the LORD is going forth from the Jerusalem above, of which the Church on earth is a member in good (heavenly) standing (Gal. 4:26, Heb. 12:22); etc. However,

on a second reading of this prophecy, we may just as easily view it as being fulfilled in the Kingdom of the Father, in the new heavens and the new earth. For though they are experienced in different degrees, the same immutable blessings of the Eternal Covenant belong to God's people in both stages of the Kingdom, and it is of these blessings that the OT prophets speak so beautifully, powerfully, and mysteriously, in type and shadow.

2. To a greater or lesser degree, all OTKP's are *covenantally conditioned*, and must be interpreted accordingly.

We have spoken of this principle more than once. The idea here is that in interpreting OTKP we must not fail to apply our NT understanding of the deep meaning of *all* OT revelation: that it testified of Christ; that it was a veiled revelation—cast in OT type and shadow—of the things of the Eternal Covenant. For if the *whole* OT speaks of Christ and the Covenant, then it is certain that the portion we call OTKP does, as well. Therefore, we must interpret it accordingly.

But what exactly do we mean when we say that OTKP is *covenantally conditioned*? To my mind, the important point is this: In giving his OT saints hope of a coming Kingdom, the Spirit of God (naturally enough) used language and imagery familiar to the OT saints. More particularly, in giving hope of Christ and the Covenant to his OT saints living under the Mosaic Law, the Spirit was pleased to frame that hope in language and imagery *drawn primarily from the Mosaic Law, or from historical conditions peculiar to the days of the Law*. Thus, in OTKP, explicit promises of future New Covenant blessings are “conditioned”—clothed in, and veiled under—the typological language and imagery of (life under) the Old (Mosaic) Covenant.

This great NT truth opens wide the door to a correct interpretation of OTKP. However, it also requires much from us if we hope to arrive safely at that interpretation. In particular, it requires that we be so thoroughly saturated in the NT that we can follow the apostles themselves in “translating” or “decoding” the language of the OT into the New; that in reading OTKP we can spot specific NT truths and blessings hidden beneath the OT typological language employed by the Spirit. Earlier, we discussed such language at length, probing the “mysterious” NT significance of many different OT types and shadows; of various persons, places, things, events,

and institutions that appear, not only in OT historical narrative, *but also, with great frequency, in OTKP.*

By way of illustration, let us consider again the prophecy of Micah. There is no hope of understanding it correctly unless we first recognize that it is covenantally conditioned; that here the Spirit uses images drawn from the Mosaic Law to represent New Covenant blessings yet to be unveiled by Christ in the fullness of time; that “the LORD’s house,” “the Mountain of God,” “Zion,” “Jerusalem,” and “the Law” are, in fact, spiritual, heavenly, New Covenant realities, of which the ancient physical analogues, so central to the Law, were mere types and shadows.

Here, then, is the conclusion of the matter: In order to understand OTKP we must be able to decondition it—to decode or translate it—so that we can see, enjoy, and proclaim the NT blessings that are being promised and predicted under OT imagery. The apostles led the way; we have but to follow.

Premillennarian Questions

Before discussing our third principle, it is timely to address two questions that have greatly troubled our premillennarian brethren.

The first is this: If OT prophecies concerning the birth, life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Christ were literally fulfilled, by what right do we say that OT prophecies of his Kingdom are not? By what right do we introduce a completely new hermeneutic for the interpretation of OTKP? The answer to this reasonable question is found in the distinction between simple OT prophecies and OTKP. As we saw above, by definition simple OT prophecies were fulfilled under the Law; they were fulfilled in the days when the Law was still in force. For this reason, they were literally fulfilled, since there was no good reason for them not to be. In their case, God had, as it were, nothing to hide. He could supply hope, instruction, and encouragement to his OT people by letting those prophecies be literally fulfilled right before their eyes.

OT Messianic prophecies of events that occurred *prior* to the Day of Pentecost—prior to the coming of the Kingdom—fall into this category. In the days of their fulfillment, the Law was still in force; as it is written, Jesus himself was born and lived under the Law (Gal. 4:4). Therefore, they too were simple OT prophecies, and were more or less literally fulfilled. As we

study the NT, we realize that these simple Messianic prophecies were an important element in God's evangelistic outreach to the Jews of Jesus' day, whether before or after his death on the Cross. In them, he sought to give hope, instruction, and encouragement to ethnic Israel; in them he sought to enable his OT people to identify their Messiah and turn to him.

How exactly did he do this? The manifold answer is impressive: He did it by foretelling the place of the Messiah's birth (Micah 5:2, Mt. 2:5-6); his predilection for ministry to the mixed multitudes of Galilee (Isaiah 9:1f, Mt. 4:12f); his prophetic works of power on behalf of the poor (Isaiah 61:1-3, Mt. 11:1-6, Luke 4:18); his rejection by hostile rulers, both Jew and Gentile (Psalm 2:1-2, Acts 4:23-31); his death as an apparent criminal, by which, according to God's stated purpose, he atoned for the crimes of his people (Isaiah 53:1f, Mark 10:45, 1 Peter 2:21-25); and his resurrection, ascension, and session at God's right hand (Psalms 16, 110, Acts 2:22-36). As this small sampling of texts reveals, the apostles employed these simple OT Messianic prophecies to great purpose, if by any means they could use them effectively to save some of their Jewish brethren (Rom. 11:14). Moreover, in due season they used those same prophecies to create and strengthen the faith of Gentile believers, even as it is today.

However, OTKP's are *not* simple, but fall into a unique category of their own. They are fulfilled *after* Pentecost, when the Kingdom has come at last; they are fulfilled under the New Covenant, when the New Covenant is in force at last. And in their case, God *did* have something to hide, for as we have learned from the NT, it pleased him to make the New Covenant—and the spiritual Kingdom it would introduce—a *mystery*; to conceal the true nature of the Kingdom from his OT people under types and shadows drawn from the Law; and to do this, so that in the fullness of time his only-begotten Son might enjoy the privilege and prerogative of unveiling "true truth," not only to Israel, but also to the whole world. In short, it pleased God to hide in Christ all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge, so that in the days of Christ, Christ himself might be the One to open them up to his own (Mt. 13:10-17, John 1:17, Rom. 16:25-27, 1 Cor. 2:1f, Eph. 1:9, 3:1f, Col. 1:26, 2:3, Heb. 1:1f).

This brings us to a second, related question: If indeed God spoke figuratively in OTKP; if indeed he covenantally conditioned it; if indeed he placed a veil of (Mosaic) types and shadows over the truth, then is it not the

case that God, in effect, lied to his OT people, and knowingly deceived them? For surely he knew that they would interpret these prophecies literally, just as they did the simple OT prophecies that had been fulfilled before their eyes in ages past.

While at first glance this objection may seem weighty, there are at least four good reasons why it cannot stand.

First, in speaking as he did through the OT prophets, God told the absolute truth. Not one word of all the good words found in OTKP has fallen—or will fall—to the ground (Joshua 23:14). True, in them God did not say everything he meant, for much was hidden away under type and shadow. Nevertheless, he certainly meant everything he said: He intended to convey important truths, and he intended those truths to have a desired effect. For this reason, the Spirit of Truth zealously bore witness to God's prophetic words, using them to give light, strength, and hope to his OT elect. Therefore, in giving OTKP, God did not lie.

Secondly, even in OTKP itself God gave many hints to the effect that his words about the coming Kingdom had a figurative, spiritual meaning. We discussed these hints earlier. Apparent contradictions, patently symbolic texts, and talk of a completely new covenant all warned against an overly literal approach to OTKP.

Thirdly, God also repeatedly intimated to his OT people that they would not fully understand his redemptive purpose and plan until the last days, until the days of the Kingdom itself. For example, looking ahead to the time of Christ, and speaking of the Gospel he would bring, God warned Israel through Isaiah, saying, "My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways" (55:6-13). Similarly, he spoke of a day to come when all the sons of Zion would be taught by the LORD (54:13, John 6:45); a day when their Teacher would no longer hide himself; a day when they would see their Teacher, and hear a word behind them, saying, "This is the way, walk in it" (30:19-21). Micah looks forward to a (Kingdom) time when God himself will teach his ways to all peoples (4:2). Jeremiah, speaking of God's redemptive promises to Israel, declares, "In the latter-day s you will understand this" (Jer. 30:18-31:6). As for Daniel, he found himself astonished by the apocalyptic visions he had just received, but "there was no one to explain" (8:27). Indeed, after giving him his final vision, the Angel of God told him to "conceal these words and shut up the (whole)

book until the time of the end” (12:4). Only then would a people arise who could give (full) insight to many (11:33); only then would knowledge increase (i.e., to the point of fullness, or completion, 12:4); only then would all these Kingdom prophecies be fully understood. Confronted by words such as these, what OT saint could fail to walk humbly before the mysteries of OTKP (Isaiah 66:2)?

This brings us to our fourth and final point, namely, that no sooner did God begin to fulfill OTKP, than he also supplied the keys by which anyone who wished to could correctly interpret them. As we have seen, even *before* the coming of the Kingdom, Jesus himself revealed the mysteries of the Kingdom to his inquiring disciples (Mt. 13:1ff). After the Day of Pentecost, when the first stage of the Kingdom began, he gave his holy apostles and prophets still more light—indeed, definitive light—on the true nature of the Kingdom and the proper interpretation of OTKP, light that was then available to honest Jewish seekers, and that is now available in the pages of the NT to seekers of all nations. If, then, in OT times there was occasion for a certain amount of confusion—and caution, patience, and trust—regarding the true meaning of OTKP, in NT times that occasion is completely removed. Henceforth, to all who are willing to receive it, Christ offers the Rosetta Stone: the NCH, by which they can easily translate the mysterious tropes of OTKP into glorious NT truth. Therefore, if any today are deceived by OTKP, they are not deceived by God, but, in one way or another, by themselves (cf., Rom. 1:18-20).

3. All OTKP’s are fulfilled in the Church, and must be interpreted accordingly.

As for the OT in general, so for OTKP in particular: It is fulfilled under the New Covenant (and so must be interpreted covenantally); it is fulfilled in Christ, who lies at the heart of the New Covenant (and so must be interpreted christologically); *and it is fulfilled in the Church, which is the people of the New Covenant (and so must be interpreted ecclesiologically)*. Yes, this last assertion is controversial, but the truth of it should be no more controversial than that of the previous two, since it flows logically and necessarily from them both. There is no escaping it: The Church—and not ethnic Israel—is the one and only sphere of fulfillment of all OTKP.

This statement does, however, require some qualifications and elaboration. Two main points may be made.

First, we must again remember that some OT prophecies about the future of God's people subtly blend "simple OT prophecies" and "Kingdom prophecies." Since simple OT prophecies are, by definition, fulfilled in OT times, this component of a blended prophecy must be fulfilled among God's OT people, ethnic Israel. However, the component of a blended prophecy that looks beyond the days of the Old Covenant into the days of the New is fulfilled among God's New Covenant people, the Church. Daniel's famous—and quite challenging—prophecy of the seventy weeks is an outstanding example of this phenomenon (Dan. 9:24-27). Later, we will discuss it at length.

Secondly, there are a number of OTKP's that have what might be called a *double anthropological fulfillment*. The idea here is far less intimidating than my name for it. In these prophecies, the prophet speaks of ethnic Israel's relation to the Gentiles; to the nations that are not yet part of God's covenant people. Reading them from one angle, we can see that they are fulfilled in the relationship between the NT remnant of Jewish Christians and their Gentile neighbors who have not as yet heard of Christ or trusted in him. However, reading them from another angle, we can see that they are also fulfilled in the relationship between the Church (the spiritual Israel of God, comprised of believing Jews and Gentiles) and the unbelieving world, a world typified in these prophecies by "the nations" that remain outside of the covenant.

Consider, for example, Zechariah 8:23. It reads, "Thus says the LORD of hosts: 'In those days ten men from the nations of every language will grasp the garment of a Jew, saying, "Let us go with you, for we have heard that God is with you."'" The telltale eschatological phrase, "in those days," signals that this is an OTKP. It is, then, fulfilled in the Church. But how? Well, it certainly was fulfilled when the Ethiopian eunuch asked Philip for light on the meaning of Isaiah 53 (Acts 8:26f). Similarly, it was fulfilled when the Gentiles in Antioch begged Paul to preach the Gospel to them again on the next Sabbath (Acts 13:42). But it was also fulfilled when the Gospel "sounded forth" from the Gentile converts of Thessalonica, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but in "every place," with the result that still more Gentiles believed and "went with them," realizing that the true and

living God was indeed in the midst of their assemblies (1 Cor. 14:25, 1 Thess. 1:8). And the same has been true all throughout Church history, whenever and wherever Gentile Christians have preached the Gospel to unbelievers.

So then, Zechariah 8:23—an OTKP—has a double fulfillment, not only in spiritual relations between Jewish Christians and Gentiles, but also in spiritual relations between Christians and unbelievers. Nevertheless, being fulfilled under the New Covenant, this text is fulfilled exclusively in the sphere of the Church. Such is the case for all OTKP.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have set forth and discussed three fundamental NT principles for the proper interpretation of OTKP, principles taught and used by the Lord's apostles. We have seen that all OTKP's are fulfilled in the twofold spiritual reign of God and Christ introduced by the NC; all are covenantally conditioned, and therefore require the "decoding" of OT types and shadows into NT truths; and all are fulfilled in the Church, whether in the present Era of Proclamation and Probation, the Age to Come, or both.

Can we, then, interpret OTKP's literally? Can we interpret them as simple OT prophecy? Clearly not! Rather, we must recognize, with the OT prophets themselves, that these indeed are "dark sayings"; that they are a great thicket and a forbidding maze, wherein many a poor literalist has lost his way; and that we therefore stand in desperate need of the High King of Heaven, and of the powerful NT keys that he so graciously puts in our hands, if ever we are to enter, pass through, and reach our glorious destination: true truth about the Kingdom of God (Num. 12:8, Psalm 78:2, 1 Peter 1:10-12)!

NT Examples of Interpreting OT Kingdom Prophecy

IN THE PREVIOUS chapter we examined three basic principles by which the apostles taught us to interpret OTKP. In this chapter, we will see if they practiced what they preached!

Our focus here will be limited. Specifically, we will confine our attention to OTKP's cited in the book of Acts or the epistles. We do this because in the four gospels the authors' interest lies almost entirely in *simple* OT Messianic prophecies, prophecies fulfilled at the *founding* of the Kingdom during the days of Christ's earthly ministry under the Mosaic Law. The situation is different in the book of Acts and the epistles. There the apostles' interest turns largely to OTKP's, many of which were being fulfilled right before their eyes through the preaching of the Gospel and the resultant *advance* of the Kingdom.

I should mention also that in this chapter we will not consult the Revelation. The reasons are many. Above all, it is not a didactic book, but a prophecy; it does indeed cite or allude to many OTKP's, but (unlike the epistles) it does not teach us how to interpret them. Rather, it assumes that we have fully mastered the NCH, and so leaves us *to apply it for ourselves*. The Revelation is, as it were, the Christian's final exam in biblical interpretation. There he is put to the test, to see if he has so mastered the Scriptures and the NCH that he can discern all of the rich NT truth there presented under a vast array of Old (and New) Testament symbols. I will have much more to say on this subject in chapters 19 and 20.

In the pages ahead we will look at twelve NT texts. As we do, we will keep before us three fundamental questions, questions rooted in our earlier discussion of the NCH.

First, what did the apostles regard as the eschatological sphere of fulfillment of these prophecies: a future millennium or the two-staged spiritual Kingdom of God proposed by classic Reformation theology?

Secondly, what kind of hermeneutic did the apostles bring to these texts? Did they interpret them basically literally, or did they follow Christ in using a NCH that sees OTKP speaking (mysteriously) of New Covenant blessings by means of typological language and imagery drawn from the Old (Mosaic) Covenant?

And finally, what did the apostles see as the human sphere of fulfillment of these OTKP's: Ethnic Israel or the Church (comprised both of Jew and Gentile)?

Solid answers to these questions should go far towards helping us determine the true shape of the apostles' eschatology, and also the proper method of OT prophetic interpretation.

Again, in the interest of saving space I will not usually reproduce the biblical texts, so please keep your Bible in hand!

1. The Exaltation of the High King of Heaven

(Acts 2:33-35; Psalm 110)

Back in chapter 9 we looked closely at Peter's sermon on the Day of Pentecost and saw how he interpreted Psalm 110, an OTKP that appears quite prominently in the NT. He makes no mention of a future millennial kingdom. In Peter's eyes, the psalm has its fulfillment in the heavenly mediatorial reign of Christ. Indeed, he is quite explicit that Psalm 110:1 was fulfilled when Christ ascended into heaven and sat down at the right hand of God the Father. This entails that Psalm 110:2-3 will be fulfilled throughout the entire Era of Proclamation and Probation, when the Father extends the scepter of His Son—the High King of Heaven—over all the earth, doing so through Christ's Church, a people who volunteer freely in the day (i.e., era) of his power (i.e., cosmic authority) to preach the Gospel. Psalm 110:4-6—an OTKP of the Day of the LORD—is fulfilled at Christ's Parousia when, in the day of his wrath, he places all his enemies under foot, shattering kings, destroying "nations" of rebellious sinners, and definitively crushing Satan, the former "head" over a broad country (Gen. 3:15, Acts 2:35, 1 Cor. 15:25). In short, Peter's interpretation of Psalm 110:1 opens up the meaning

of the whole Psalm, a meaning that is confirmed by NT eschatology and easily discerned through the proper use of the NCH.

2. What Kind of House Will You Build for Me?

(Acts 7:44-50; Isaiah 66:1-2)

Though Stephen was not an apostle, he sat under apostolic teaching. Most assuredly, that teaching made its way into his great sermon before the Sanhedrin (Acts 2:42). His words contain subtle, inspired, and precious insights into the apostolic view of the Church and the proper interpretation of OTKP.

Having been charged with “speaking against” the temple (Acts 6:13), the Spirit-filled evangelist brings his review of Jewish history to a close by making an explicit defense. In former times, says Stephen, it pleased God that Israel should worship him, first in the tabernacle, and later in Solomon’s temple. However, all this was only provisional, since the Most High cannot dwell in houses made by human hands, and does not even desire to do so (Acts 7:48). In support of this shocking assertion, Stephen quotes Isaiah 66:1-2:

“Heaven is my throne, and the earth is the footstool of my feet. What kind of house will you build for me,” says the Lord, “or what is the place of my rest? Was it not my hand that made all these things?”

Yes, *even in OT times* God hinted broadly at the inadequacy and impermanence of Israel’s ancient places of worship!

But where, then, *does* God desire to dwell? It appears that Stephen had daringly tried to answer that question in previous conversations with his kinsmen; here he does not. However, it is more than noteworthy that in the very text he has just cited, God himself gives us the explanation: “This is the one to whom I will look: to him who is humble and contrite of spirit, and who trembles at my word” (Isaiah 66:2). In context, the LORD is saying that he will look upon the humble and the contrite *as the place of his rest; as the house wherein he is pleased to dwell eternally; as the one true house of which all previous houses were mere types and shadows*. Having learned the truth of this great mystery from Jesus and Peter (Mt. 12:6, John 2:19f, 14:23, Acts 2:38, 1 Peter 2:5), and having seen it confirmed in Isaiah,

Stephen tried to open it up to his Jewish brethren in the Sanhedrin. Alas, he could not get their blind eyes to see, or their uncircumcised ears to hear: God's new and eternal temple is the Church, the everlasting Body of his Son (Eph. 2:22).

Though in strictness Isaiah 66:1-2 is not a prophecy, I have touched on it here because it dwells in close proximity to a number of powerful OTKP's, and also because it hints at their proper interpretation (e.g., Isaiah 65:17-25, 66:7-14, 18ff). As Stephen well knew, a close study of these texts tells us much about where God will dwell "in that day." He will dwell in a New Jerusalem of his own creation (65:18-19, 66:10, 13). He will dwell in his Holy Mountain, upon which the New Jerusalem will rest (65:25, 66:20). He will dwell among a nation born in a day (66:8), and among the newborn sons of Zion, who will nurse at the comforting breasts of the Holy City (66:8-12). But if God cannot dwell in a house made by human hands, is it likely that he will dwell in a city made by human hands? Who exactly are the inhabitants of this eschatological City? Who exactly are the citizens of the mysterious "nation" that will be born in a day? How exactly is that nation to be born, and when? How would Stephen have answered these questions? How would the apostles? How would you?

3. A Light to the Gentiles

(Acts 13:46-47, Isaiah 49:1-12)

In Acts 13:13-52, Luke gives an account of the mission of Paul and his companions to the Jews and God-fearing Gentiles of Pisidian Antioch. Like Peter on the Day of Pentecost, so here: Paul offers his Jewish brethren a sterling exposition and defense of the Gospel, buttressed by many OT Messianic prophecies. When, however, most of the Jews resisted his message, Paul and Barnabas spoke out boldly and said:

It was necessary that the word of God should be spoken to you first. Since you reject it and judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life, behold, we are turning to the Gentiles. For thus the Lord has commanded us, saying, 'I have placed you as a light for the Gentiles, that you should bring salvation to the end of the earth.'

—Acts 13:46-47

Here, Paul (the likely speaker) is quoting from an OTKP, Isaiah 49:1-12. Both the prophecy and his handling of it are fascinating. In 49:1-6, it is Christ himself who is speaking. He identifies himself as God's Servant, and also as God's "Israel"—the Redeemer appointed to restore the preserved ones of (ethnic) Israel, and to be a light to the Gentiles, so that God's salvation may reach the ends of the earth. Then, in 49:7-13 we hear the voice of the LORD responding to the Servant's discouragement, promising that his labors are not in vain; indeed, that they will enable his people (both Jew and Gentile) to inherit the Promised Land, and to experience the everlasting comforts of the Kingdom.

Paul's take on all this is clear. Yes, the One who opens the door of the Kingdom—both to (elect) Jews and Gentiles—is the Lord Jesus Christ, the suffering and triumphant Servant of the LORD. But it is also the Church, *the suffering and triumphant Body of Christ*. For not only has God placed Christ in the world as a light for the nations, he has also so placed Paul, Barnabas, and every other member of the Body of his Son who brings the truth of the Gospel to those bound in the darkness (Isaiah 49:9, Mt. 5:14, John 1:5). In other words, Paul uses the NCH to interpret Isaiah 49:1-12 eschatologically, christologically, and ecclesiologically. It is not fulfilled in a future Mosaic theocracy, but in Christ, the Church, and the twofold spiritual Kingdom that Christ introduced and the Church proclaims.

4. The Rebuilt Tabernacle of David

(Acts 15:12-21, Amos 9:11-12)

The scene is a Council of the Church in Jerusalem. The matter under discussion is this: Should Gentile Christians be circumcised and compelled to follow the Mosaic Law? Paul and Barnabas, having labored fruitfully among the Gentiles, say no. Peter agrees, citing God's sovereign work of grace in Cornelius' household. Then James—a leading elder of the church in Jerusalem—gives his judgment:

Brethren, listen to me. Simeon has related how God first concerned himself about taking from among the Gentiles a people for his name. And with this the words of the Prophets agree, just as it is written, "After these things I will return, and I will rebuild the tabernacle of David which has fallen, and I will rebuild its ruins. And I will restore it, in order that the rest (or,

remnant) of mankind may seek the Lord, even all the Gentiles who are called by My name, says the Lord, who makes these things known from of old.”

—Acts 15:13-18

For opening a window on the proper interpretation of OTKP this is surely one of the most important texts in the entire NT. To understand why, we must understand James’ premise. It is crystal clear: The ongoing conversion of Gentiles under the evangelistic ministry of Peter, Paul, and Barnabas is in fulfillment of the prophecy of Amos. Indeed, it is in fulfillment of *all* the OT prophecies to this effect (Acts 3:24, 15:15). For James, Amos’ prediction is but a single example. Had he been so minded, he could easily have cited more. In his regular teaching ministry, he no doubt had. So too had the other apostles. As we shall see below, all of them understood and taught that *the OT prophecies of the conversion of the Gentiles are being fulfilled in Christ and in his Church*.

Bearing this crucial premise in mind, we easily can see how James understood this encouraging OTKP, and also why he used it. The phrase “After these things” (or, “In that day,” in the Masoretic Text) signals that the prophecy is to be fulfilled in the last days. But for James, the last days are the days in which he is presently living; the days of Christ and the New Covenant that he instituted; the days of the (first stage of the) Kingdom that the New Covenant created (Heb. 1:1).

And what is God doing in these last days? He is rebuilding the fallen tent (or booth) of David; which is to say, he is restoring the fallen Davidic Dynasty. As we saw earlier, this was a common motif in OTKP: Over and over again, God had said he would restore Israel to the Promised Land, raise up a (Messianic) son of David, and *cause his dynasty to remain forever* (Psalms 89:34-37, 132:13-18, Isaiah 9:7, Jer. 33:14-18, Ezek. 37:24-25, Hos. 3:5, Zech. 12:10-12, 13:1). But James has come to see that Jesus Christ, the root and offspring of David, is the Messiah (Rev. 5:5). Moreover, he has also come to see that Christ’s Church—comprised of all who believe in him, whether Jew or Gentile—is his eschatological dynasty. For James, it is the Church, and the Church alone, that is David’s booth, tabernacle, house, and family—no longer fallen, but now being restored, and never to be torn down again.

Why is God restoring this tabernacle? Amos said, “So that the rest of men may seek the Lord.” In view of all that was happening before their very eyes—whether in Cornelius’ household, or Samaria, or the far-flung Gentile churches—this could mean but one thing to James and the other apostles: Now that he has finally sent the Redeemer, and now that he has made him the High King of Heaven, God is going about the business of fulfilling his ancient promise to father Abraham, to the effect that in his (Messianic) Seed *all the nations of the earth* would be blessed; to the effect that God, exactly as planned before the foundation of the world, should have a people for his very own possession, *called out of every tribe, tongue, family, and nation* (Rev. 5:9).

So then, using the NCH, James sees that Amos’ prophecy—and all the others like it—is not fulfilled in a future millennium, but in the present Era of Proclamation and Probation. It is not fulfilled on earth in Palestine, but in heavenly places in Christ Jesus. And—as all of the leaders of the Council agreed—it is not fulfilled with the least adherence to the Mosaic Law, but rather through simple faith in the One who fulfilled the Law, with the result that henceforth and to all eternity there is no distinction between Jew and Gentile, but all are one holy dynasty in Christ Jesus our Lord (Acts 15:9, Rom. 10:12, Gal. 3:28).

5. Sons of the Living God

(Romans 9:19-26; Hosea 2:14-23)

Here is yet another valuable text, richly illuminating the apostolic approach to OTKP. In Romans 9-11, Paul is addressing the scandal of widespread Jewish rejection of the Gospel. His main point in chapter 9 is that God’s OT promises of eschatological salvation for “Israel” have not failed, because “they are not all Israel who are descended from Israel” (9:6). He means that the OT Kingdom promises were not made to ethnic Israel, but to “spiritual Israel,” to the “nation” of elect Jews and Gentiles who, by God’s sovereign grace, would become believers in Christ. These are the true parties of the Eternal Covenant, and these are the true “Israelite” remnant of whom God repeatedly speaks in OTKP.

In making this argument, Paul quotes Hosea 2:23:

“I will call those who were not My people, ‘My people,’ and her who was not beloved, ‘Beloved.’ And it shall be that in the place where it was said to them, ‘You are not My people,’ there they shall be called sons of the living God.”

Paul’s handling of this particular verse is quite instructive. He uses it to lend OT authority to his assertion that the NT Israel of God is comprised not only of Jews, but also of Gentiles. Here, the “beloved people” of whom Hosea spoke are Gentiles; Gentiles who, by God’s grace, have found their way into his eternal family.

When, however, we consult Hosea himself, we find that the extended OTKP of which this verse is the conclusion carries (or rather *seems* to carry) a very different sense. Here, God seems to be addressing ethnic Israel, sinful Israel, the very Israel whom he has just divorced and who will soon go away into captivity (Hosea 1:6, 9, 2:2). Moreover, it is to this same Israel that he seems to promise the Kingdom, which consists in rescue from captivity, a new (marriage) covenant, a new heart purged of its former idolatries, and peace, prosperity, and eternal life as a nation forever sown in the Promised Land (Hosea 2:14-22). This is the Israel to whom the covenant-making God will say, “You are My people!” This is the Israel who will reply, “You are my God!” (Hosea 2:23).

What are we to make of all this? In Hosea, God seems to be speaking to ethnic Jews, yet in Romans Paul says he is speaking to Gentiles. How are we to reconcile this apparent contradiction?

Paul himself has just given us the answer. Again, in the mind of God, they are not all “Israel” who are descended from Israel. In the mind of God, the true human parties to the Eternal Covenant—the true “Israel of God”—are elect believers in Jesus, whether Jew or Gentile (Gal. 6:16). It is of this “Israel” that God speaks—albeit in typological and covenantally conditioned language—in Hosea’s great OTKP. Was God therefore speaking of elect Jews? Yes. But was he also speaking of elect Gentiles? Yes. And this is why Paul did not hesitate to apply Hosea 2:23 to Gentile Christians. He could, however, just as easily have applied it to himself, or to the many Jewish priests who had lately become obedient to the faith (Acts 6:7, 9:1). Prior to their conversion they too were Lo-Ammi, “not God’s people” (Hosea 1:9). After their conversion, they too were Ammi and

Ruhama: God's people, and those who had obtained compassion (Hosea 2:1). Hosea's prophecy speaks of—and to—Jew and Gentile alike.

Here, then, is yet another instance in which we find the apostle using the NCH; in which we find him interpreting OTKP typologically, covenantally, and ecclesiologically. To Paul's mind, God is not speaking in Hosea of his plans for ethnic Israel in a future millennium. No, he is speaking of his plans for the Church of his Son—both Jew and Gentile—in the two-staged Kingdom to come. This is how he understands all OTKP, how he finds the Gospel in it, and how he preaches the Gospel from it. God calls us to do the same.

6. Whosoever Calls on the Name of the Lord

(Romans 10:12-13, Joel 2:28-32)

Continuing his discourse on Israel's unbelief, Paul now commends his Jewish brethren for their religious zeal, but faults them for not recognizing that right standing with God cannot come through the Law (for no sinner can keep the Law), but only through Christ, who, by his righteous life and atoning death, fulfilled the Law for all who will trust in him. The great need, then, is for all sinners, whether Jew or Gentile, to look to Christ in faith, thereby receiving his imputed righteousness, and so becoming righteous in God's sight. In Rom. 10:12-13, Paul sums up this argument, capping it off with a quote from the prophet Joel:

For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all, abounding in riches to all who call upon Him; for, "Whoever will call upon the name of the Lord will be saved."

By using one of Joel's most thought-provoking OTKP's in this context, Paul indicates that he regards its sphere of fulfillment to be the Era of Proclamation and Probation; the era in which the Church is called to preach the Gospel to sinners; the era in which sinners—both Jew and Gentile—are bidden to receive righteousness and salvation by calling, in faith, upon Christ (Rom. 10:14-15). Paul's approach, however, immediately casts Joel's prophecy in a Gospel framework, forcing us to interpret it, not literally, but typologically, christologically, and ecclesiologically.

In order to understand this better, let us consider the words of the prophecy itself. Where a literalist would say that here God promised to pour out his Spirit on all *Jewish* flesh, Paul says that he promised to pour him (the Spirit) out on believing Jews and Gentiles; upon Christians everywhere (Joel 2:28-29, Gal. 3:14, 1 Cor. 12:13). Again, where a literalist would say that everyone who calls upon the name of *Yahweh* will be saved, Paul says that everyone who calls upon the name of *Yahweh's* Messianic Servant, Jesus Christ, will be saved (Joel 2:32). Or again, the literalist will say that “afterward” only Jews will be saved, for it is only upon literal Mt. Zion and in literal Jerusalem that there will be a people who escape the Judgment (Joel 2:32). Paul, however, would say that at that time both Jews and Gentiles will be saved, for when God effectually calls his elect “survivors” to Christ, he seats them in heavenly places, thereby planting them on the Zion above, and making them citizens of the Jerusalem above, where they will live safely with Christ till he returns to execute the Judgment himself (Acts 2:39, 17:31, Rom. 9:24, Eph. 2:6, Heb. 12:22)!

So then, here again we find Paul using the NCH to interpret a specific OTKP, and then using the prophecy to teach and preach the Gospel. In so doing, he again invites us to do the same.

7. The Deliverer Will Come from Zion

(Rom. 11:25-27, Isaiah 59:15-21)

In Romans 9, Paul explained Israel’s widespread unbelief in terms of God’s sovereignty, showing that at this present time (i.e., the latter half of the first century) it pleased God to save only a small remnant of Jews. In chapter 10, he takes a different tack, explaining the same unbelief in terms of Israel’s personal responsibility, showing that despite their having heard the Gospel, the great majority of Jews have stubbornly clung to the Law for salvation, rather than to the One who—according to their own Scriptures—fulfills it. Then, in chapter 11, he brings his meditation to a close—to a true *grand finale*—by warning Gentile Christians against anti-Semitic pride, even as he arms Jewish Christians against despair over the destiny of their kinsmen. How? By unveiling still another mystery. Here’s the way he states it:

For I do not want you, brethren, to be uninformed of this mystery, lest you be wise in your own estimation, that a partial hardening has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in. And thus all Israel will be saved. Just as it is written: “The Deliverer will come from Zion, he will remove ungodliness from Jacob. And this is My covenant with them, when I take away their sins.”

—Rom. 11:25-27

In this chapter—and in this part of it—Paul’s basic thought is clear: God’s plan for “filling up” his Church involves three fundamental steps. First, he brings in a small remnant of Jews, some of whom are laid into the very foundation of the Church. This is, as it were, the firstfruits of his Jewish harvest. Secondly, throughout the bulk of the Era of Proclamation he brings in a large number of Gentiles. Then, when the fullness of the Gentiles has come in, a third and final step occurs: He brings in a large number of Jews—grafting them by faith back into the olive tree of Abraham—so that ethnic Israel finally reaches its fullness. In this way “all Israel”—the full number of elect Jews of all Church history—will be saved (Rom. 11:12, 23-24).¹

But how exactly will the third step occur? How will God graft the great mass of Jews living at the end of the age into the tree of Abraham? How will he bring them into the Church?

Paul answers by citing Isaiah 59:20-21: The Deliverer will come from Zion! This cannot refer, as some have argued, to the bodily (premillennial) return of Christ from heaven, for Paul himself has explicitly stated that just as Jewish branches were broken off *because of unbelief*, so God will graft them back in again *through faith* (11:20, 23). And indeed the apostle is quite insistent that this is the only way *anyone* enters the Church: through faith in the word about Christ (Rom. 10:10, 17, 1 Cor. 1:21). When, therefore, Paul writes that the Deliverer will come from Zion, he means that Christ himself—the High King of Heaven—will come down to latter-day Israel *by the Spirit, through the Gospel preaching of the Church*, and effectually call them to himself, so that having brought them to faith in their Messiah, he may remove ungodliness from (the rest of elect) Jacob and forgive them their sins.

If this view is correct, it means that Paul is using the NCH to interpret Isaiah 59:15-21, the OTKP from which he quotes. Turning to it, and following the apostles’ lead, we immediately see that the prophet’s words

speaking richly to—and of—Christians. Because of his innate depravity, man is destitute of righteousness (59:15) and completely unable to save himself (59:16a). Therefore, God himself—in Christ—must and will provide salvation for his people (59:16b). As a mighty victorious warrior, Christ will come in judgment against the enemies of the Church, here typified as unbelieving Gentiles living in distant lands (59:18-19). However, as a loving and merciful Redeemer, he will come to the Church—here typified as Zion and Jacob—to whom he will grant repentance and forgiveness of sins (59:20). All of this is the fruit of the New Covenant, through which the Spirit of God and the Word of God will come to dwell forever in the people of God, even as they did in Isaiah, the great OT prophet of the Christ and Covenant to come (59:21).

Two further observations are in order.

First, Paul departs slightly from Isaiah's exact wording by saying that the Redeemer will come *from* Zion, rather than *to* Zion. Why did he do this? I would answer by saying that when Paul wrote to the Romans, Christ had indeed come *to* Zion, but in all humility and seeming defeat, rather than as the mighty victorious warrior pictured by Isaiah. Therefore, in order to accent the infallibility of Christ's latter-day purpose for his OT people, Paul does indeed *imply* that Christ will come to (ethnic) Zion, but elects to *state* that he will come *from* the heavenly Zion, where the victorious and omnipotent King is seated with all authority in heaven and earth! In short, in Paul's mind the NT mystery of Christ's different (kinds of) comings necessitated this slight but significant change.

Secondly, while the NCH leads us to interpret Isaiah's prophecy as speaking of the Church as a whole, Paul here reads it as speaking of one *portion* of the Church: latter-day ethnic Israel. How are we to resolve this? The answer, I think, is twofold. On the one hand, we can legitimately read Isaiah's prophecy as having a double fulfillment: The Deliverer will come to the elect remnant of Jews and make them *part* of Christ's Church; but he also will come to the elect in its entirety—both Jew and Gentile—and make them *into* Christ's Church. On the other hand, Paul himself has told us that here he is making known to us a mystery, a hitherto unrevealed truth about how Christ will bring the Church to her appointed fullness: He will do so by visiting multitudes of latter-day Jews from heaven, forgiving their sins, and

making the physical sons of Jacob into spiritual sons of Jacob; making citizens of the Zion below into citizens of the Zion above!

And who is sufficient for these things (Rom. 11:33-36, 2 Cor. 2:16)?

8. Now is the Day of Salvation

(2 Corinthians 6:1-2, Isaiah 49:8)

Paul is anxious for the Corinthian Church. Certain “false apostles,” “deceitful workers,” and “ministers of Satan” are attempting to draw his hard-won flock away from the all-sufficient Person and Work of Christ and put them back under the Mosaic Law (2 Cor. 11:13-15). With great urgency he therefore writes:

And working together with Him (Christ), we also beseech you not to receive the grace of God in vain. For He (God) says, “At the favorable time I listened to you, and on the day of salvation I helped you.” Behold, now is the acceptable time; behold, now is the day of salvation!

—2 Cor. 6:1-2

Feeling himself to be the very mouth-piece of Christ, Paul here pleads with these impressionable Gentile Christians, begging them not to take circumcision or convert to Judaism. Why? Because to do so would be to “receive the grace of God in vain.” It would be to go back and seek justification through “weak and beggarly” religious institutions, instead of clinging to the One who has just now fulfilled them and rendered them forever obsolete! It would be to fall from grace, sever themselves from Christ, and forfeit their eternal salvation (Gal. 5:4).

In making his case, Paul enlists the help of Isaiah 49. We discussed this OTKP earlier, observing that in vv. 1-6 we hear the voice of Christ, while in vv. 7-12 we hear the voice of God the Father. Thus, in 49:8a (the verse that Paul cites), we hear God the Father saying to Christ, “In a favorable time I have answered you, and in a day of salvation I have helped you.” Here, God is assuring his incarnate Son—the second party of the Covenant of Redemption—that despite his (Christ’s) sufferings and discouragement, he (the Father) favors his cause, will hear his prayers, and will help him finish his work, so that through a New and Eternal covenant he can plant his people, once and for all, in the Promised Land.

The manner in which Paul interprets and applies this text is strikingly christological and ecclesiological. Because the Corinthians are one with Christ—because they are the Body of which he is the Head—Isaiah’s prophecy is fulfilled not only in Christ, but also in the Church. Just as God helped Christ in the days of his flesh, so now he has helped the Corinthians to find salvation through simple faith in the Lord Jesus. But if they are to retain and enjoy this salvation, they must understand: Having completed his redemptive work on earth, their Master has inaugurated “the favored time” and “the Day of Salvation”; a new and consummate stage of Salvation History, a stage in which God has made manifest all the elements of the Eternal Covenant, his one and only instrument of eternal salvation. How foolish, then—and how dangerous—for the Corinthians even to think of returning to yesterday’s (Mosaic) scheme of salvation, a scheme that has been fulfilled and rendered obsolete by Christ. Now—in the new Gospel Era—is the time to find the full riches of God’s favor. Now—in the Era of Proclamation and Probation—is the Day in which men may fully experience God’s salvation. The Corinthians must cherish the new Day, and never abandon the Word of God uttered in it.

We see, then, that here Paul uses the NCH to great effect, finding in Isaiah 49 precious NT truth not only about Christ, but also about his Church. His interpretation is christological, covenantal, typological, and ecclesiological through and through.

9. The Temple of the Living God

(2 Cor. 6:14-18, Ezek. 37:26-28)

Paul has more to say to the Corinthians. To maintain their spiritual health and vitality, they must not be “unequally yoked” to unbelievers, whether Jewish or Gentile. There can be no partnership, fellowship, or harmony between light and darkness, Christ and Satan. Seeking to bring this point home, the apostle concludes by asking a final, penetrating question, and by buttressing his remarks with a string of powerful OT texts:

What agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God, just as God said: “I will dwell in them and walk among them, and I will be their God and they will be My people. Therefore, come out from their midst and be separate,” says the LORD.

“And do not touch what is unclean, and I will welcome you. And I will be a father to you, and you will be sons and daughters to me,” says the LORD Almighty.

As a glance at the cross-reference column of your study Bible will show, here Paul has cited or alluded to at least 10 different OT passages. Some are taken from the Law (Exodus 6:7, 29:45, Lev. 26:12), but most from the Prophets (Isaiah 43:6-7, 52:11, Jer. 31:1, 33, Ezek. 37:26-28, Hos. 1:10). We need not discuss them at length in order to discern his thrust: All throughout OT times God manifested a desire to live within his people, and promised through the Prophets that one day he would do so. That day has come. Because of Christ, the people of Christ have become the one true and eternal Temple of the Living God. And because God is holy, his Temple must be holy as well.

Since the idea of the Church as God’s temple is the central theme of this cluster of OT texts, it may well be that Ezekiel 37:26-28 is the core around which Paul has gathered all the others. It reads:

And I will place them (in the land) and multiply them, and will set My sanctuary in their midst forever. My dwelling place also will be with them, and I will be their God, and they will be My people. And the nations will know that I am the LORD who sanctifies Israel, when My sanctuary is in their midst forever.

Yes, one could read this prophecy literally, arguing, as some premillennarians do, that it looks for a day when God will restore ethnic Israel to her homeland, and will dwell among them in a bigger and better temple than they have ever known. But that is not how Paul reads it. Rather, as 2 Cor. 6 clearly shows, he views it as a prophecy of Christ (Ezek. 37:24-25) and his Church. For Paul, the Church is the true Temple of the living God, of which all former temples were mere types and shadows. And as God said through Ezekiel, this is the sanctuary where he will live *forever*. There is no going back.

Thus, Paul’s beautiful string of OT pearls confirms yet again what we have seen all along: He reads the entire OT—the Law, the Writings, and the Prophets—eschatologically, christologically, typologically, and ecclesiologically. The NCH is the key to it all.

10. The Jerusalem Above, the Mother of us All

(Galatians 4:26-27, Isaiah 54:1ff)

Once again Paul is combating the heretical doctrine of the Judaizers, this time in Galatia. Shrewdly, he uses the NCH to show the Galatians that the very OT Law to which they are tempted to return warns them against doing so, on pain of death itself! This, he argues, is the lesson we should learn from the clash between Abraham's two wives (Sarah and Hagar) and between their children (Isaac and Ishmael). These things "contain an allegory"; that is, they hold typological significance. Hagar, a slave, gave birth to a slave through a merely natural act of intercourse. She typifies the Old Covenant, which, in and of itself, has no power to release its children from their natural bondage to sin and judgment. For this reason, Hagar "corresponds" to Mt. Sinai where the Law was given, and to the Jerusalem below, where its adherents presently live in slavery. Sarah, on the other hand, was a free woman who, according to divine Promise, supernaturally gave birth to a free child. She typifies the New Covenant, a covenant that does indeed have power to release her offspring from sin and judgment, and to bestow upon them the glorious freedom of the children of God (Rom. 8:21). Therefore, Sarah corresponds to the Zion above (whence Christ and the New Covenant came), and to the Jerusalem above (the heavenly city comprised of all who are seated with Christ in heavenly places, Heb. 12:22).

It is clear that these two seeds have antithetical natures. Small wonder, then, that there is conflict between them. Small wonder that Jews—and Judaizers—persecute Christians, even as Ishmael persecuted Isaac. Nevertheless, such persecution will not prevail. The bondswoman and her son will not inherit the promises, but instead will be cast out. Let every Galatian contemplating a return to the Law understand—and fear (Gal. 4:28-31)!

In the course of making his argument, Paul cites a second OT text, an OTKP, Isaiah 54:1. He writes,

But the Jerusalem above is free, which is the Mother of us all. For it is written, "Rejoice, O barren, you who do not bear! Break forth and shout, you who are not in labor! For more are the children of the desolate than of her who has a husband."

In order to understand Paul's point, we need to know a little about the OTKP whose opening verse he cites here. It is—at least on the face of things—a word of promise and encouragement to the inhabitants of earthly Jerusalem; inhabitants of a city that soon will be attacked and destroyed by the Babylonians, even as they themselves are deported. Therefore, speaking of (and to) the old Jerusalem, God promises a new. “Yes, once you were spiritually barren. Yes, once you did not effectively travail, so as to bear the good spiritual fruit you should have. But a better day is coming, and along with it, a better Jerusalem! In that day, your sons will be many (54:1). Then you will grow, expand, and possess nations (54:3). You will forget your former shame (54:4). You will be married to your Maker and your Redeemer (54:5-6, John 3:29, Rom. 7:1-4, Eph. 5:25-27, Rev. 19:7, 21:9). You will receive of his unchanging compassion (54:8-10). Your foundations, walls, and battlements will all be made of precious stones (54:11-12, Rev. 21:9-21). Your sons and daughters will all be taught by the LORD (54:13, John 6:45). Yes, rejoice and shout for joy, because everlasting peace, security, and righteousness will soon be yours (54:13-17)!”

Observing how Paul puts this prophecy to use among the Galatians, we realize immediately that he does *not* see it as having been fulfilled in the restoration of earthly Jerusalem under Cyrus. Quite to the contrary, *that* Jerusalem and *that* Israel—being in the flesh and under the Law—are still in bondage to sin and condemnation, and nigh unto being cast out. How, then, *is* it fulfilled? Paul himself has just told us: It is fulfilled *in the Jerusalem above*, in all who are seated with Christ in the heavenly places (v. 26); it is fulfilled in the brethren, both Jew and Gentile (v. 28); it is fulfilled in the children of promise (v. 28); and it is fulfilled in those who are born according to the Spirit (v. 29). In short, it is fulfilled in the Church (Gal. 4:26-31).

Therefore, the Galatians should rejoice. For just as Isaiah did indeed speak to desolate Jews, so too did he speak to desolate Gentiles. They too were barren. They too did not bear. They too were in bondage (Gal. 4:9). Yet they too—like their Jewish brethren in Christ—have been born from above through the faithful preaching of the Jerusalem that is seated above—the Church. And so, having the Church as their Mother, they too have become part of the Bride. Henceforth, just as Isaiah said, they are married

to their Maker and their Redeemer. Henceforth, they will be taught by him, protected by him, adorned by him, and everlastingly fruitful with him. Therefore, let every Christian—Jew or Gentile—break forth and shout for joy, for by God’s mercy and grace in Christ, She who once was altogether desolate has become the most fruitful Woman of all!

11. A New Covenant with the House of Israel

(Hebrews 8:1-13, Jeremiah 31:31-34)

Though we have touched on this text more than once in the course of our journey, it’s implications are of such great eschatological importance that we must consider it here at greater length.

We remember that the anonymous author of the epistle to the Hebrews is writing largely to Jewish Christians who, under various pressures, are in danger of forsaking the all-sufficient Christ and drifting back into a now-defunct Judaism. In the course of appealing to them, he has demonstrated his expertise in the NCH by contrasting the imperfections of the OT Levitical priesthood with the perfections of Christ’s priesthood, a priesthood that was promised in OT times (Gen. 14:18-20, Psalm 110:1f).

As he begins chapter 8, the writer sums up his argument, declaring that Christ is the true High Priest, the true Sacrifice, and the true minister of the true (i.e., heavenly) Tabernacle; and that the earthly OT analogues to these true, heavenly, and eternal realities were mere “copies and shadows” (8:5). Then he introduces the main point of the chapter: the superiority of the New Covenant mediated by Christ, a covenant that not only brings in a better priesthood, but also extends better promises to its human parties (8:6). In an effort to seal his argument among his Jewish kinsmen, he also brings forth as a witness the Hebrew Scriptures themselves, citing Jeremiah 31:31-34:

“Behold, days are coming,” says 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 lead them out of the land of Egypt, for they did not continue in My covenant, and I turned away from them,” declares the LORD. “For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put My laws into their minds, and I will write them upon their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. And they shall not teach every one his neighbor and every one his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD,’ for all shall know Me, from the least to the greatest of them. For I will be merciful towards their iniquities, and their sins I will remember no more.”

The writer cites this famous OTKP primarily because he desires his audience to consider the “better promises” of the “better covenant” that Jeremiah foretold, and to hold onto them! Under this covenant God will invade the hearts of his eschatological people and write his laws upon them, as never before; he will be their God and they will be his people, as never before; everyone—not just an occasional charismatic leader—will know the LORD, as never before; and—because of the work of their New High Priest—God will forgive their sins and cleanse their conscience, as never before. In view of such glorious promises, why would any Christian—Jew or Gentile—*want* to go back to life under the Law?

But their faithful friend is still not done. Yes, through Jeremiah God promised a New Covenant and a better covenant. But in promising “a New Covenant,” he also did something else: He promised to abolish the Old. For the Old, being a mere “copy and shadow” of the New, was always inferior. But now that the New has fulfilled it, it is also “obsolete and ready to pass away” (8:13). Therefore, (Jewish) Christians must not go back, for now there is nothing to go back to!

Here, then, is the first of the two main reasons why Hebrews 8 is of such tremendous eschatological significance. More, perhaps, than any other text in the entire NT, it teaches us that the Old Covenant, having been fulfilled in the New, is now *eternally obsolete*. This entails that henceforth there cannot be—and must not be—any reversion to OT institutions. And this entails that OTKP—which in most cases envisioned the perpetuity of those institutions—cannot be interpreted literally (as our premillennarian brothers urge), but must be interpreted according to the NCH.

But there is a second—and equally weighty—reason why this text is so important: *It links all OTKP with the New Covenant, and therefore with the people of the New Covenant, the Church.* This subtle but crucial point merits careful consideration.

To begin with, we must see exactly how our text links all OTKP to the New Covenant. The connection appears, with striking force, in Jeremiah 30-33. That bloc of Scripture contains, of course, the promise of a New Covenant, here under consideration (31:31-34, cf., 32:40). But when we read it in its entirety, we see something else of extraordinary significance: It is devoted almost entirely to soul-stirring promises of Israel’s eschatological

rescue from captivity and restoration to the Promised Land. In other words, like a string of precious pearls, this bloc of Scripture gives us one OTKP after another (30:1-17, 18-22, 23-24; 31:1-6, 7-9, 10-14, 15-22, 23-30, **31-34**, 35-37, 38-40; 32:36ff; 33:1-8, 10-11, 12-13, 14-18, 19-22, 23-26). Please note carefully that Jeremiah 31:31-34—the most precious pearl of all—is strategically situated, like a featured pendant, in their very midst!

And there is more. For no sooner do we contemplate this astonishing necklace of OTKP's, than we realize that in spirit and substance they differ not a whit from the OTKP's of Isaiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, Hosea, Micah, and all the other OT prophets. With words just like theirs, Jeremiah makes exceedingly great and wonderful promises to eschatological Israel: rescue from their enemies (30:1, 8), judgment upon former oppressors (30:11, 16), regathering from the nations (31:8, 10, 32:7), return to the Promised Land (30:3, 31:8, 10, 32:36, 41), a gracious drawing by the Spirit of God (31:3), penitent weeping and supplication (31:9), the gift of a new heart (31:33-34), divine pardon (33:8, 31:34), a new relationship with God as Father (31:10, 31:18-20), devoted service to David their King (30:9, 33:15), the perpetuity of his dynasty (33:19-22), a definitive restoration of Israel's fortunes (31:23, 33:7, 11, 26), bountiful harvests (31:5, 12), godly shepherds who give rest to their flocks (33:12-13), the rebuilding of Jerusalem (the City of God, 31:27-28, 31:38-40), joyful merriment in song and dance (30:19, 31:4, 31:11-14, 33:11), everlasting health and peace (33:6), and the surrounding nations trembling in awe at the sight of all that God has done (33:9). Yes, time and again the OT prophets issue these very promises, promises that Jeremiah explicitly links to the advent of the New Covenant! The message of the Holy Spirit is clear: *All OTKP is fulfilled in Christ and the New Covenant.*²

In passing, we do well to observe that Jeremiah does *not* represent these as temporary blessings. Restored Israel will *never* cease from being a nation before God (31:36). The people and the land shall not be plucked up or overthrown *any more forever* (31:40). In this place and in the enjoyment of these blessings, God's covenant with Israel will be fully fulfilled (30:22, 31:1, 32:38). Here we have a picture—not of a temporary millennium—but of the eternal Kingdom of God. And again, both Jeremiah and the NT tell us that this eternal kingdom will appear in the days when God makes a New

and Eternal Covenant “with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah” (31:31-34, 32:40, Heb. 13:20).

So then, in Jeremiah 30-33 we discover an indissoluble link between the Kingdom and the New Covenant. The message of this amazing necklace of OTKP’s—communicated, as it were, between the lines—is that the eternal Kingdom of God is the gift and creation of the New and Eternal Covenant to come, just as Christ and his apostles taught us.

All of this brings us back to Hebrews 8, which, by citing from Jeremiah 30-33, not only unveils the indissoluble link between OTKP and the New Covenant, but also enables us to see that *all OTKP is fulfilled among the New Covenant people of God, the Church.*

How exactly does it do this? To find out, we must ask ourselves, “To whom is the writer writing?” The answer is obvious: He is writing to first-century Christians; to the human parties of the New Covenant in Christ; to members of his Body, the Church. Yes, in all likelihood, most of them were ethnic Jews, though we cannot rule out the possibility that some of them—especially those with previous involvement in Judaism—were Gentiles. But for the writer of the epistle, the ethnic background of his audience was of relatively little importance. His real concern was that certain Christian people were seriously contemplating a return to Judaism.

Now, in addressing these Christians, the writer cites Jeremiah 31:31-34, *and clearly does so on the assumption that Jeremiah was speaking about them; about the people of the New Covenant; about the Church.* This implies that Jeremiah 31:31-34—and all the OTKP prophecies in its immediate vicinity—are *fulfilled in the Church.* Moreover, it also implies that dozens of other OTKP’s in the prophetic cannon must also be fulfilled in the Church, for as we have just seen, they bear a compelling family resemblance to Jeremiah’s. Thus, by applying Jer. 31:31-34 to the Christian Church of his day, the writer to the Hebrews strongly suggests—and clearly assumes—that *all OTKP is fulfilled under the New Covenant among the New Covenant people of God, the Church.*

Objecting to this weighty conclusion, some may ask, “But when Jeremiah says that God will effect a New Covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, is he not speaking of ethnic Jews?” As we have already seen, the NT replies decisively: No, he is not. He is speaking of those who are Jews inwardly; of those whose praise (Heb., *judah*) is not

from man, but from God (Rom. 2:29); of those who are the sons of Abraham by faith in Christ (Rom. 4:16); of the (elect) children of the promise (Rom. 9:6-8); of the true circumcision, who worship God in the Spirit, and who put no confidence in the flesh (Phil. 3:3, Col. 2:11); of those who “hold fast” to Christ until the end, and so “prevail with God” in order to inherit eternal life (Gen. 32:28, Heb. 3:14, 4:14, 6:18, 10:23, Rev. 3:21). Yes, some of these believers are Jews according to the flesh, while others are Gentiles according to the flesh. But in God’s sight, their physical descent counts for nothing. What counts is a new spiritual creation resulting in faith in Christ (Gal. 6:14-16). These “new creatures in Christ” (2 Cor. 5:17) are the eschatological Israel of God, the eschatological Judah of God, and the eschatological race, nation, and people of God (1 Peter 2:10). It is of these, and these alone, that Jeremiah and the other prophets wrote in OTKP.^{3,4}

We conclude, then, that Hebrews 8 is indeed a NT text of vast eschatological importance, seeing that it declares the eternal obsolescence of all OT institutions, rules out prophetic literalism, and stands as an open invitation to Christians everywhere, that they may—and should—use the NCH to see the life of Christ’s New Covenant people, the Church, promised and pictured in all OTKP.

12. New Heavens and a New Earth

(2 Peter 3:13, Isaiah 65:17, 66:22)

Our final text appears in a portion of NT Scripture dealing with the Consummation (2 Peter 3:1-13). The Lord has tarried for years, ignorant skeptics are mocking at the promise of his return, believers are having doubts, and Peter is eager to strengthen their faith and perseverance.

After reminding them that God has indeed supernaturally intervened in history on many different occasions, and after explaining that God has wise reasons for the apparent delay of Christ’s Parousia, Peter offers a solemn description of the cosmic conflagration that will engulf sinners on the Day of the Lord Jesus Christ. Then, to encourage his trembling brethren, he closes by saying, “But according to His promise, we are looking for new heavens and a new earth, in which righteousness dwells” (2 Peter 3:13).

In speaking thus of the World to Come, Peter is referring to an OTKP, Isaiah 65:17-25 (see also Isaiah 66:18-24). Before looking at it, we must first ask ourselves: What exactly did the apostle have in mind when he said that Christians look for a new world “in which righteousness dwells?”

Our first clue is found in the verses immediately preceding this one. From them we learn that the World to Come will be a replacement: It will replace an old world that—in a manner analogous to the world of Noah’s day—*has been altogether purged of evil*. Not only will the fires of divine judgment engulf ungodly men in destruction (3:7), but they also will consume “the earth and its works” (3:10). In other words, in the final conflagration, everything evil will be purged—every mark of man’s sin and every mark of God’s curse (Rev. 21:1-4, 22:3). As mentioned earlier, this reminds us of the words of Christ, who said that at his return he will cast out “everything that offends,” so that afterwards the righteous will shine forth like the sun in the Kingdom of the Father (Mt. 13:41-43). It also reminds us of the words of Paul, who taught that at Christ’s return every remaining enemy of the Domain of Darkness—including death itself—will be placed under foot, and all creation will be released from its bondage to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God (Rom. 8:18-25, 1 Cor. 15:20-28, 50-55). Since Peter understood and agreed with all these Scriptures, it is certain that in his mind “the new heavens and the new earth” for which believers wait is a *perfectly* righteous world; a world in which *perfectly* righteous people will dwell with God in *perfect* fulfillment and joy.

When, however, we peruse the OT text that he cites (Isaiah 65:17-25), we see that while the world it describes is indeed very good—and certainly far better than the one we know today—it is not perfect, for here both the old and the young will still die (65:21). Stumbling over this, some Christian interpreters argue that Isaiah must have been speaking of the millennial world, a world better than ours, yet still falling short of the perfection that awaits God’s people in the new heavens and the new earth.

However, this solution is problematic. Isaiah himself says nothing of a thousand year epoch, nor does he even hint at the idea that the world he describes will be temporary. To the contrary, he clearly represents it as the *eschaton*, the final state, the *eternal* World to Come (65:18, 19). Meanwhile, Peter, who in none of his sermons or letters has ever breathed a

word about a millennium, obviously believes that the perfect world we Christians anticipate is indeed the very same world of which Isaiah spoke.

How are we to solve this apparent contradiction? Will the World to Come be perfect, or will there be sickness and death in it? As I argued earlier, the solution is definitely not to import a millennium into Isaiah, but rather to read Isaiah's prophecy as a "covenantally conditioned" revelation of the perfect world that Christ and his holy apostles and prophets promised to all who are found faithful at the Lord's return. On this view, the Spirit was pleased to picture the new heavens and the new earth to Isaiah (and his Jewish brethren) under familiar OT images of divine blessing, images rooted in the Mosaic Law. Thus, in Isaiah's prophecy the promise was—among many other things—of great longevity (65:20). But in the NT we see at last what the OT blessing of longevity typified: Eternal Life, the same Eternal Life offered to mankind in Eden, forfeited at the Fall, regained by Christ, and fully inherited at his return, when he himself will create new heavens and a new earth in which perfect righteousness dwells (John 1:29, Eph. 1:10, Phil. 3:21). Speaking of Isaiah 65:17-25 as a whole, commentator Derek Kinder well says:

(Here) the new is portrayed wholly in terms of the old, only without the old sorrows; there is no attempt (as in the NT) to describe any other kind of newness ... All is expressed freely, locally, and pictorially, to kindle hope rather than feed curiosity.⁵

Summing up, in this solemn and majestic text, Peter, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, supplied God's new covenant people with "true truth" about the Day of the Lord and the World to Come. Moreover, by identifying this truth as the fulfillment of specific OTKP's, he teaches us how to interpret those prophecies and all OTKP. All that is necessary is to remember that the Old Testament is the New concealed. After that, the NCH will do the rest.

Conclusion

In this chapter we have watched the apostles practice what they preached; we have observed them using the principles of the NCH to open up various OTKP's; and we have therefore repeatedly seen them regard the

two-staged spiritual Kingdom introduced by Christ under the New Covenant as the true sphere of fulfillment of all OTKP.

In view of all this, it certainly appears that Christ and his apostles—both by precept and example—have given us all the hermeneutical tools we need to understand OTKP.

Let us therefore honor their great gift by boldly taking a further step. Let us venture once again into the “mysterious” thickets of OTKP, this time to wrestle with a number of texts that are not expounded in the NT; texts that have become traditional bastions of premillennial thinking; texts that are roiling centers of controversy in the Great End Time Debate. I should forewarn you here: Some of them are *quite* challenging. But thanks to Christ, the Didactic NT, and the NCH, our key ring is now full, so that we are ready, willing, and fully able to enter in!

OT Kingdom Prophecies Considered: Psalms, Isaiah, Jeremiah

THE GOAL IN Part 3 of our journey has been to become NT scribes so thoroughly instructed in the Kingdom that we are like householders, able to bring out of our treasure things old and new; able to understand, teach, and preach the Kingdom of God, not only from the NT, but from OTKP as well. To that end we have carefully considered the OT revelation of the Kingdom; we have gleaned from the NT proper principles for interpreting OTKP; and we have watched the apostles apply those principles to a dozen OT texts. Hopefully, our journey into the forest deeps of OTKP has not left you feeling lost, but eager to enter deeper still.

In the next few chapters we will do that very thing. Here we will consider a large sampling of OTKP's drawn from each of three great epochs in Israel's history: pre-exilic, exilic, and post-exilic. And here, with the Master Keys in hand, we will apply the NCH in an effort to unlock their true meaning. Please note that I have purposely chosen premillennial favorites, prophecies that our premillennarian brothers commonly and enthusiastically cite in defense of their position. Also, I have intentionally chosen a number of the most difficult OTKP's, biblical texts that make amillennarians squirm because they seem to resist the "spiritualizing" hermeneutic to which premillennarians so strongly object. Whether I have succeeded in explaining them satisfactorily is for you to decide. But one thing is sure: We will never attain a meeting of the minds on eschatology by weaseling out of uncomfortable encounters with the hardest texts and the best arguments of our opponents!

Before embarking, let me offer a word or two more about my approach in the pages ahead. As a rule, I have not reproduced the passages under

consideration, many of which are too long for inclusion. Also, I have tried not to go into too much exegetical detail. Rather, my goal has been to use the NCH to give a brief but substantial overview of the basic meaning of each prophecy. Those interested in exploring a given passage in greater depth may consult the commentaries that I recommend in the endnotes. Finally, wherever appropriate, I have briefly engaged premillennial arguments and interpretations relative to the text under consideration.

And now, with Bibles again in hand, let us begin!

1. The Reign of the LORD'S Anointed

(Psalm 2)

This is the first of several *royal* or *Messianic* psalms (Psalms 2, 18, 20, 45, 72, 89, 110). As a rule, they feature an immediate reference to an earthly king, subtly blended with eschatological references to the coming Messianic King. Such is the case here. Psalm 2 has an OT fulfillment, presumably in the person of King David, but also, as the NT makes clear, a far richer fulfillment in Christ (Acts 4:25-27, 13:33, Heb. 1:5, 5:5, Rev. 12:5). Here, I will focus exclusively on the Messianic meaning.

The Nations Rage (1-3)

Verses 1-3 speak of the rage of the nations who vainly rebel against God and his Anointed. According to the NT, it was first directed, with lethal but redemptive results, against Jesus of Nazareth, who was rejected both by Jew and Gentile (Acts 4:25-26). However, the NT also repeatedly warns that despite assured evangelistic success, the nations also will rage against believers in Jesus, who also are the LORD's anointed, having been endowed with the Spirit for Kingdom service throughout the Church era (Mt. 10:24-25, John 15:20, 1 John 2:20, 27, Rev. 12:13, 17). Verses 1-3 will also be fulfilled in the Last Battle, when the rage of the nations, fueled by the rage of Satan, explodes one final time against the Church, which will follow in the footsteps of her Master, both in death and eternal resurrection life (Rev. 11:7-13).

The LORD Replies (4-6)

Verses 4-6 give God's response to the rejection of his Messiah. He derides the nations for their futile attempts to thwart his sovereign will. But, in the exaltation of Christ and the subsequent global proclamation of the Gospel, he also speaks to them in his wrath. My paraphrase goes like this: "Though you have crucified My Son (and so fulfilled My redemptive plan), I have installed him as King of the Cosmos at My own right hand; I have set him upon the Zion above, upon My holy mountain of heaven, from which he will return to judge the world in righteousness and turn all impenitent rebels into hell. Now you have been warned; hopefully you will fear, repent, and believe" (Mt. 23:33, Acts 17:31, 1 Thess. 1:10, Heb. 12:22, Rev. 12:5, 14:7).

The Inheritance of the Son (7-9)

In verses 7-9 we hear the voice of the Son, sharing with us the words of the Father, spoken to him immediately after his exaltation to God's right hand. A New Covenant paraphrase would go something like this: "Because of your obedience unto death—because you have faithfully fulfilled your part in the eternal Covenant of Redemption—this day, in your exaltation, I have begotten you, the God-Man, as My eternal Divine-human Son; the One who will inherit all my wealth and rule over all my redeemed creation; as the One who will serve as Head over all redeemed things in the eternal offices of Prophet, Priest, and King. Therefore, simply ask, and in fulfillment of my part in the Covenant of Redemption, I will give the raging and rebellious nations as your inheritance. Those for whom you died, I will draw to you, that they may become the eager subjects of your Kingdom, as well as my own beloved children. Those who continue in sin, I will give to you for judgment, especially at the end, when you return in power and glory to punish the wicked with a rod of iron, and to shatter them like an earthen pot" (John 6:44, Acts 13:33, Eph. 1:10, Phil. 2:1-11, Col. 1:13, Heb. 1:5, 5:5, Rev. 2:26-27, 12:5, 19:15).

The Way of Wisdom (10-12)!

In verses 10-12 we hear the voice of David—and the voice of the Spirit—issuing a final warning. "You kings, you judges, and you sinners everywhere, in view of all that God has done in Christ, it is high time to

exercise some discernment. Understand that today is a Day of Salvation; that for as long as Christ is pleased to tarry in heaven, you still can take refuge in him. But do not wickedly delay, for his wrath may suddenly flare up against you, or he may suddenly return for final judgment. Therefore, fear God, repent, and come to Christ now. How blessed you will be if you do (Luke 4:16-20, Acts 2:37-40, 2 Cor. 6:2)!”

Does Psalm 2:6-9 speak of an earthly thousand year reign of Christ emanating from earthly Zion, as C. I. Scofield asserts?¹ The NT passages cited above—and indeed the whole substance of NT eschatology—answer with a resounding “No!”

2. An Ideal King for an Ideal Kingdom

(Psalm 72)

This is another royal psalm, frequently cited as a bastion of premillennial truth. John Walvoord writes, “Psalm 72 is an unusually complete picture of the millennial reign of Christ ... The psalm as a whole pictures the peace and righteousness and universal rule of the King of whom it is predicted, ‘Yea, all kings shall fall down before him, all nations shall serve him.’”² Similarly, Wayne Grudem states, “(This psalm) speaks of an age far different from the present age, but short of the eternal state in which there is no more sin or suffering.”³ In other words, it speaks of the Millennium.

However, a close look at the psalm itself tells a different story. To begin with, it is not at all clear that this an OTKP. Following the AV and the NIV, Walvoord and Grudem read it (or portions of it) as serial predictions about the Messiah and his millennial kingdom; they read it as straight OTKP. However, in all translations verse 1 clearly marks it as a prayer. And indeed, some translations, such as the NASB and the ESV, render much or all it as a prayer; as a series of petitions, presumably written by king David (v. 20), asking God to bless not only his son Solomon, but also the entire royal seed, in such a way that they may fulfill the divine purpose for the chosen nation. In sum, this may well be a liturgical prayer, designed for the coronation of any royal son of David, expressing David’s ideal conception of the character, career, and global impact of Israel’s king(s), and asking God to bring it all to pass.

What would such a reign look like? Turning to the psalm itself, we learn that it would be marked by justice (vv. 2, 4), prosperity (vv. 3, 16), a healthy fear of God (v. 5), righteousness (v. 7), widespread peace (v. 7), the global dominion of Israel's king(s) (vv. 8-11), his special solicitude for the poor and the weak (vv. 12-13), his sure retribution against their oppressors (v. 14), prayer for the king (v. 15), blessings invoked upon the king (v. 15), the everlasting renown of the king (v. 17), and joyful universal adoration of the king (v. 17). Notably, David concludes his prayer urging God's people to bless the LORD, who alone does wondrous things; who is well able to give Israel and the world just such a king; and who, through him, could well fill the whole earth with his glory (vv. 18-19)!

So then, is this an OTKP, as Walvoord claims? I would say no. But does it give us a "mysterious" glimpse of the Messiah and the Kingdom he will usher in? Does it portend that David's ideal king will indeed enter history and fulfill Israel's destiny? Absolutely! For the Lord Jesus Christ is Israel's ideal king, and God's as well. Moreover, in one or both of the two stages of his Kingdom, he will bring to perfect fulfillment every aspect of this psalm.

For example, even now he defends the cause of the poor (v. 4, Mt. 5:3, Mark 14:6, Luke 14:18, 1 Cor. 1:26-30). Even now he gives deliverance to the oppressed and needy (v. 4, 12, Eph. 2:1-10, 1 Thess. 1:10, Titus 3:3f). Even now he is to his thirsting people as showers that water the earth (v. 6, Acts 3:19, 1 Cor. 12:13, Phil. 1:19). Even now, through the faithful preaching of the Gospel, his far-flung dominion is spreading from sea to sea, and to the ends of the earth (v. 8, Mt. 13:33, Acts 1:8, Col. 1:23).

The psalm also anticipates the Consummation, and the second, eternal stage of the Kingdom. For at his return, the High King's dominion will become absolute: His enemies will lick the dust (v. 9, Luke 19:27), all kings will fall down before him (v. 11, Phil. 2:10), and he will crush every remaining oppressor, including death itself (vv. 4, 14, Rom. 16:20, 1 Cor. 15:25). Then, in the completed Kingdom that he himself has ushered in, the mountains will bring forth perfect prosperity (v. 3, Heb. 12:18f, Rev. 21:10), the people will fully blossom like the grass of the field (v. 16, Rev. 22:2), the saints will praise his name forever (v. 17, Heb. 13:15), and all the nations of the saved will call him blessed (v. 17, Rev. 5:6-14). Long shall he live, and long shall his redeemed Bride and Family live with him in the eternal Kingdom of God (vv. 14, 15, Rev. 1:18, 21:3-4).

In sum, with eyes schooled by the NT, it is easy to see that this psalm is not fulfilled in a temporary millennium, but in the eternal two-staged Kingdom that Christ has introduced under the New Covenant.

3. A Glorious Remnant Covered by Christ

(Isaiah 4:2-6)

Viewed in NT perspective, this short, picturesque OTKP speaks powerfully of the election, redemption, regeneration, sanctification, and glorification of the Church. Alas, premillennarians bar the way to such panoramic vistas, asserting that these rich promises belong exclusively to a latter-day Jewish remnant that will enter the Millennium immediately after Christ's second coming.⁴

This conclusion would be reasonable enough, *if* we could approach the text literally. We have seen, however, that the NT disallows it. Moreover, as soon as we *do* approach it literally, telltale problems immediately begin to arise. One such problem is that Isaiah himself says nothing about a millennium, or even a temporary stage of the kingdom. To the contrary, he seems clearly to be depicting the eternal Messianic Kingdom. Another problem is that there is no mention of the Gentiles. Here, the Kingdom appears to be geographically confined to Zion and Jerusalem, and to belong exclusively to the Jewish remnant. To judge solely from this OTKP, Jews and Jews alone will inhabit the eternal Kingdom.

Happily, the NT opens the way of escape from these unwelcome results, giving us eyes to see that this lovely prophecy is actually fulfilled in the twofold Kingdom of Christ. It also gives us ears to hear what Isaiah so comfortingly says to the Christian citizens of that Kingdom. A moment or two with the prophecy itself will enable us to discover just how fruitful this approach can be.

The Beautiful Branch (2)

Verse 2 opens with the phrase "In that Day," an eschatological marker signifying that what follows is fulfilled in one or both stages of the twofold Kingdom. In this case, I believe it is largely fulfilled in both. The Branch of the LORD is Jesus Christ, the Messiah (Isaiah 11:1-5, Jer. 23:5, Zech. 3:8).

In the days of his flesh he was beautiful and glorious, and now all the more so, seeing that he, like fruit springing up from the earth, has risen from the dead, ascended into heaven, and entered his eternal glory (Luke 24:26, Phil. 2:9f). Whether by faith or by sight, believers gaze upon him as their pride and joy, as their one and only boast before God (1 Cor. 1:30-31, 2 Cor. 3:18, Gal. 6:14). He is also their adornment, this One who by imputation clothes them with his own righteousness (Mt. 22:11-14, 2 Cor. 5:21, Phil. 3:9, Rev. 7:13-15), and who by sanctification conforms them to his own character (Rom. 8:29). Speaking typologically, Isaiah calls the glad heirs of these great eschatological gifts the “survivors of Israel.” They are a people like Jacob of old, who by faith have wrestled and prevailed with God for salvation, and who are therefore survivors of the wrath to come (John 5:24, 1 Thess. 1:10).

Recorded for Life (3)

Verse 3 tells us more about these survivors: They are “recorded for life in Jerusalem.” That is, they were chosen in Christ Jesus before the foundation of the world (Eph. 1:10), written in the Lamb’s book of life (Rev. 17:8), and predestined to become the inhabitants of the eternal City of God (1 Peter 2:4-10, Gal. 4:26, Rev. 3:12). They are the elect remnant of sinful humanity—Jews as well as Gentiles—called to be holy, through Christ, in the sight of God (Rom. 1:7, 8:30, 9:22-25, Eph. 1:4, 5:27).

Holiness, Glory, Everlasting Safety (4-7)

Verses 4-7 crown the prophecy by speaking of everything that God will do for the Church in his two-staged Kingdom. Likening her to a woman in her uncleanness, God promises to rinse away every stain—both from her record and her heart—through the washing of regeneration and the renewing work of the Holy Spirit, whom he will pour out richly, through Christ, on all who are justified by faith (v. 4, Eph. 5:26-27, Titus 3:4-7). Then, recalling the visible tokens of his presence and protection among his OT saints (v. 5, Ex. 32:32-33, 40:34-38, Num. 9:15-23), God promises that he will again give his glory to the far-flung assemblies of Christ’s Church, all of which are situated on the Zion above (v. 5, John 17:22, Col. 3:4, Heb. 12:22, Rev. 21:11). Moreover, he will cover that glory—keep it forever safe

—with his own presence and power. To all eternity, the holy canopy (which is Christ) will enfold the people of God in his blessings, even as it serves as an abiding shelter from the heat, storm, and rain of his judgments (v. 6, 2 Thess. 1:3-10, Rev. 3:10, 22:3).

4. The Rod of Jesse, a Banner for the Nations

(Isaiah 11:1-16)

Though we touched on this OTKP earlier, we must now examine it at greater length, seeing that it may be the single most popular OT bastion of premillennialism. Scofield asserts, “This chapter is a prophetic picture of the glory of the future kingdom, which will be set up when David’s Son returns in glory.”⁵ Walvoord agrees, saying, “Isaiah 11 paints a graphic picture of the reign of Christ on earth, a scene which cannot be confused with the present age, the intermediate state (i.e., heaven), or the eternal state, if interpreted in any normal literal sense.”⁶ Grudem advances the same argument, observing, “It does seem, therefore, that (here in Isaiah 11) the eternal state has not begun, yet the reversal of nature far exceeds anything that will happen in this present age. Does this not indicate a future millennial kingdom?”⁷

The answer to Grudem’s question is, “Yes, it might indicate a millennial kingdom if Isaiah had said anything at all about a thousand years; if the NT had given us liberty to interpret this Kingdom prophecy in ‘any normal literal sense’; if we were not under strict NT orders to recognize that the true sphere of fulfillment of all OTKP is the New Covenant in Christ, the two-staged Kingdom it introduces, and the Church that it creates; and if, therefore, we were not under a positive NT obligation to interpret all OTKP eschatologically, covenantally, christologically, typologically, and ecclesiologically.”

Therefore, let us do so now, and let us see once again how illuminating and uplifting this approach can be for the NT people of God.

We begin by noting that Isaiah 11 is actually a string of four related yet distinct OTKP’s: Isaiah 11:1-5, 6-9, 10, 11-16. This is clear not only from the unique substance of each of these mini-prophecies, but also from the fact that two of them are introduced by the expression “In that Day,” a phrase that signals the beginning of a new prediction about the Kingdom.

Therefore, we must not conflate the four mini-prophecies into a single prophecy, as our premillennarian brothers do. Instead, we should recognize that their eschatological spheres of fulfillment may differ, with some looking ahead to the Kingdom of the Son, others to the Kingdom of the Father, and still others to both.

The Reign of Israel's Messiah (1-4)

Isaiah 11:1-4 may be entitled *The Reign of Israel's Messiah*. Its purpose is briefly to reveal the design, course, and universal impact of his kingship. The NT tells us that this prophecy is fulfilled in the Person and Work of Christ, especially in his heavenly mediatorial reign. Born to Joseph and Mary (both descendants of David), Jesus is a shoot springing up from the (seemingly dead) stump of Jesse, David's father. He is the One whom God has appointed to restore the eschatological Davidic dynasty (i.e., the Church); to spiritually revive it, rule over it, and make it into an eternally fruitful royal family (v. 1, Mark 11:10, Luke 1:32, Acts 15:12-21, 1 Peter. 2:9, Rev. 22:16).

In order that he might have wisdom and power to do so, the Father anoints him with the Holy Spirit (v. 2). This first occurs at the river Jordan (Mt. 3:16, John 1:32), where Jesus is equipped for his earthly ministry; but it occurs again, in still fuller measure, at the Father's own right hand, where he now receives all authority in heaven and earth, in order to spearhead the advance of the Gospel in the earth below (v. 2, Mt. 28:18, John 5:19-29, Acts 2:33, Rev. 5:6-7). Henceforth, with a perfect justice not displayed in Israel's former kings, he "decides with fairness for the poor," granting eternal life to all who, by God's grace, recognize their own poverty of spirit, and so decide for him and the Gospel (vv. 3-4a, Mt. 5:3, Luke 18:9-14, 1 Cor. 1:26-31).

When at last the Era of Proclamation draws to a close, he comes again in power and glory to judge the world in righteousness, gathering his resurrected and glorified Church safely to his side in the air, but striking the earth itself with the rod of his mouth, and slaying the impenitent wicked with the breath of his lips (vv. 4b-5, 1 Thess. 4:13ff, 2 Thess. 2:8, 2 Peter 3, Rev. 19:5). With this, the Days of the Messiah's heavenly reign come to an end. The World to Come is about to begin.

Eternal Life on the Mountain of God (6-9)

Not surprisingly, the World to Come is indeed the theme of 11:6-9, Isaiah's next OTKP. Here we have, not a photograph, but a covenantally conditioned picture of life in the new heavens and the new earth. Recalling both the original peace of Eden, and also God's promise in the Law that he would protect his obedient people from the wild animals of Canaan (Lev. 26:21-22), the prophet uses OT language and imagery to give us a glimpse and foretaste of the perfect harmony of the Church (here represented as the *children* of God) and nature in the glorious World to Come (vv. 6-8). Will such a world actually include animals, animals from which Christ, at the resurrection of the dead, has lifted every burden of the curse? Romans 8:18-25 certainly seems to suggest it.

That this is the correct interpretation of vv. 6-8 is clear from v. 9, a capstone for the entire prophecy. It too describes the World to Come, only under different imagery. Now that World has become God's Holy Mountain, for it is the place of his eternal rest, just as Zion, in OT times, was the place of his temporary rest (Psalm 132:13-14). Note carefully that in those days the earth will be *fully* filled with the knowledge of the LORD, even as the waters *fully* cover the sea. This is no millennium, where good and evil, life and death, and saints and sinners mingle together. No, this is the new heavens and the new earth, whose true nature is here glimpsed dimly, as in a mirror, but in the NT, "face to face" (1 Cor. 13:12, 2 Cor. 3:12-18, Rev. 21-22).

An Ensign for the Nations (10)

In verse 10 we have Isaiah's third OTKP. This one is fulfilled in both stages of the Kingdom, though its close association with 11:11-16 suggests that the accent falls primarily on the Kingdom of the Son. In the days of his heavenly reign, the nations will resort to the (divine) root of Jesse. How? The NT answer is clear: The Church, through her preaching of the Gospel, will lift up Christ, just like an army lifts up its ensign (John 12:32). The result will be that "nations" of believers from every tribe, tongue, and people will flow to him for salvation (Rev. 7:9). In those days, says Isaiah, Christ's resting place will be glory. This could mean that his place of rest is heaven, where believers who trust in his finished work are also resting with

him by faith (Eph. 1:20, 2:6, Heb. 4:3). Or it could mean that his preferred place of rest is his Church, which, by his Spirit, has received his glory (John 14:15-18, 17:22). Perhaps it means both.

This prophecy will also be fulfilled in the Kingdom of the Father. For once having resorted to Christ for salvation, it is certain that the worshiping nations of the redeemed will continue to resort to him, giving eternal thanks to the One Mediator between God and man who so graciously secured for them a home in the glorious new World that now has Come (Eph. 3:21, 1 Tim. 2:5, Rev. 5:8-14, 7:9-17, 22:2).

Israel's Second Exodus (11-16)

The fourth and final prophecy, Isaiah 11:11-16, may be called Israel's Second Exodus. Its sphere of fulfillment is the first phase of the Kingdom, the Era of Gospel Proclamation and Probation, in which God rescues his eschatological people from spiritual Egypt (i.e., the Domain of Darkness) and leads them into the Promised Land of his Kingdom. In v. 11, the Spirit speaks of the regathering of God's remnant. While this may indeed allude to the Jewish restoration under Cyrus, the true focus is upon eschatological Israel: the Church, the elect remnant of humanity. The Father will draw her to Christ out of many (i.e., all) nations, for ever since the events of Eden and Babel her members have been scattered to the four corners of the earth (v. 12, John 6:44, Rev. 7:1ff). In verses 12-13 God promises that as they gather together in faith beneath his exalted Banner (i.e., Christ), the nations of the redeemed—long exiled from the primordial unity of Paradise—will find that former enmities and divisions such as those that troubled Judah and Ephraim are miraculously dissolved in the oneness of the Body of Christ and the unity of the Holy Spirit (Gen. 3:24, John 17: 20-23, 1 Cor. 12:12-3, Eph. 2:11-22, 4:1-6, Col. 3:15).

Verse 14 uses concrete OT imagery to depict the eschatological triumph of the Church over the hostile world system: Just as ancient Israel swooped down victoriously upon her enemies to the North, South, East, and West, so the Church will triumph over her foes worldwide—whether by evangelistic success or in a final administration of divine retribution (2 Cor. 2:14-16, Rom. 16:20, 1 Cor. 6:2).

Again alluding to the exodus event, verses 15-16 bring the prophecy to a close by promising a latter-day Red Sea crossing; indeed, many such crossings, by which God's far-flung people may walk safe, sound, and "dry shod" upon a highway of holiness straight into the Promised Land (Isaiah 55:8, 40:3-5, 57:14). The highway is the Person and Work of Christ, and the Promised Land is the spiritual Kingdom into which he effectually calls the New Covenant Israel of God (John 10:16, 14:6, Col. 1:13).

Does the NCH give a satisfying interpretation of Isaiah 11? Does it rescue this prophecy from practical irrelevancy? Does it fill the Christian mind with wonder, and move the Christian heart to praise, hope, and devoted Kingdom service? You be the judge.

5. Prisoners in the Dungeon

(Isaiah 24:21-23)

²¹On that day, the LORD will punish (or visit) the host of the high ones on high, and the kings of the earth upon the earth. ²²And they will be gathered together as prisoners are gathered in a pit (or dungeon), and will be shut up in a prison. And after many days they will be punished (or visited). ²³Then the moon will be confounded, and the sun ashamed, for the LORD of hosts will reign on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem; and *his* glory will be before his elders.

This short but challenging OTKP appears in the midst of a long string of prophecies devoted to the end time judgments of God (Isaiah 24:1-27:13). In the verses immediately preceding our text, Isaiah has spoken of the final destruction of the earth (vv. 17-20). Then, as indicated by the telltale phrase "In that Day," a new prophecy begins, a prophecy that only three verses later brings the chapter to a close (24:21-23).

Many premillennial interpreters find here an OT adumbration of the Millennium of Revelation 20.⁸ In verse 21 they see the binding of Satan (and his demonic hosts) at Christ's return (Rev. 20:2). In verse 22a they see Satan's thousand year incarceration in the abyss. And in verse 22b they see his postmillennial release (a visitation, Rev. 20:3, 7), followed shortly thereafter by his final destruction in the Lake of Fire (a punishment, Rev. 20:10). Reading verse 23 literally, they assert that Isaiah concludes his prophecy by depicting the glory of Christ's earthly reign on Zion, in

Jerusalem; a reign set in a supernaturally transformed, but not yet perfected, Palestine.

There are, however, serious objections to this interpretation. First, the text says nothing whatsoever about the Messiah, still less about his coming in glory, though Isaiah is well able to speak of both. Secondly, verses 21-22a indicate that the evil hosts of heaven and the impenitent kings of the earth will share the same fate: Both will be punished, both will be incarcerated, and both—after many days—will be visited and punished yet again. However, while Rev. 20 does indeed speak of Satan being bound and shut up in the abyss, it says nothing at all about a divine judgment of men, let alone kings. Finally, the whole momentum of the prophecy—well captured in the little word “then” (found in nearly all the translations)—favors the view that the LORD of hosts will reign on Zion *after* these end time judgments occur. In other words, the most natural reading of verse 23 is that it does not describe the (alleged) Millennium of v. 22, but the final state, the World to Come.

Can the NCH help us here? Yes indeed, primarily because it enables us to think clearly about the true sphere of fulfillment of this prophecy. Bearing this in mind, one might therefore argue that in vv. 21-22 Isaiah is speaking of punishment(s) to be meted out by the High King of heaven and earth all throughout the (long) “day” of his heavenly reign; how he will cast (many) impenitent kings and evil spirits into Hades, committing them to pits of darkness, where they are reserved for (final) judgment (Luke 8:31, Col. 2:15, 1 Peter 3:18-20, 2 Peter 2:4). On this view, the final punishment spoken of in v. 22b occurs on the Day of Judgment, when Christ, at his Parousia, will cast Death and Hades into the Lake of Fire (Rev. 20:14). This leads to the advent of the new heavens and the new earth, where the glory of God and Christ will ever be before his Church, just as v. 23 teaches under OT type and shadow (Rev. 4:4, 10, 5:8, 11:16, 19:4, 21:23).

Alternatively, it may be that verses 21-22 speak exclusively of the Last Judgment at the return of Christ (see NKJV). On this view, v. 22b is not describing a different judgment, subsequent to that of v. 21, but is instead affirming yet again that the Last Judgment will indeed occur, though after “many days” of divine forbearance (and Kingdom advance through the preaching of the Gospel). This interpretation fits well with the rest of the

chapter, since it makes vv. 21-22 the natural (and dramatic) climax of all that has preceded it.

Summing up, while it is indeed difficult to be dogmatic about the exact meaning of this mysterious OTKP, we see that the NCH definitely gets us “in the ballpark,” opening up viable interpretations that harmonize well with NT teaching about the nature and structure of the Kingdom of God.

6. Arise and Shine!

(Isaiah 60)

Premillennarians confidently claim that this stunningly beautiful prophecy of Jerusalem’s latter-day glory is a photograph of life in the Kingdom Age; an age when, for a thousand years, Israel will be the head and not the tail among the nations. However, simply to read the text itself is to see immediately that this interpretation—and the prophetic literalism that underlies it—is impossible.

Consider some of the problems involved. First, it requires that extinct nations and/or regions such as Midian, Ephah, Sheba, Kedar, Nebaioth, and Tarshish rise from the dead and walk again onto the stage of history (vv. 6-9). Similarly, it also requires an implausible return to ancient modes of transportation, such as camels (v. 6). Secondly, it repeatedly represents this particular Jerusalem as the *eternal* habitation of God and his people: Its gates will be open continually (v. 11), it will be an everlasting pride (v. 15), it will have the LORD as an everlasting light (20), and its citizens will possess the land forever (21). Thirdly, it conflicts with NT teaching on the eternal obsolescence of the ceremonial Law, declaring that the rams of Nebaioth will go up with acceptance (as bloody sacrifices) on God’s altar (v. 7). Fourthly, it is filled with verses that loudly proclaim its symbolic character, and by which we are nudged towards a typological and symbolic, rather than a literal, interpretation of the prophecy as a whole (vv. 2, 3, 17, 18, 18). And finally, its closing verses clearly envision the City of God situated, not in a millennial world, but in the new heavens and the new earth (vv. 19-22).

For all these reasons, Isaiah cannot possibly be speaking of a temporary millennial kingdom. Therefore, I heartily concur with commentator Derek Kidner when he writes:

These glowing, exultant chapters (60-62) depict blessings that transcend the old order, and even, in places, the Christian era itself (i.e., the Era of Proclamation); but the language is that of the OT ordinances and of the literal Jerusalem. It will (therefore) need translating into terms of “the Jerusalem above “... Here the return of dispersed Israelites to Jerusalem is made the model of a far greater movement, the worldwide inflow of converts into the Church; and the vision repeatedly looks beyond this to the end, to the state of ultimate glory.²

In so speaking, Kidner shows himself to be fully under the rule of the NCH. Accordingly, he sees Isaiah using covenantally conditioned imagery to speak “mysteriously” of both stages of the eschatological Kingdom introduced by the New Covenant in Christ. A closer look at our text abundantly vindicates his approach, and also helps us to see how richly Isaiah speaks to the hearts of Christians everywhere, whether Jew or Gentile.

Lift Up Your Eyes (1-3)

Verses 1-3 sound the theme of the chapter. In words that would have comforted struggling OT saints, God promises that in the last days many nations will stream to Zion, there to worship the one true God in concert with the people of the one true God. According to the NT, this promise began to be fulfilled on the Day of Pentecost, when Christ first poured out his Spirit upon the New Jerusalem—the nascent Church—and seated her in heavenly places upon the Zion above (Acts 2, Eph. 1:20, 2:6, Heb. 12:22). On that happy day, her light finally came, the glory of the Lord rose upon her, and she herself arose like a bright morning star shining in the dead of night (v. 3, Rev. 22:16).

Henceforth, she is as a city set upon a hill (Mt. 5:14, John 7:39). Through the preaching of the Gospel, she sends out her light, calling people everywhere to forsake the Domain of Darkness and enter safely into the eternal City of God (John 1:5, 8:12, Phil. 2:15). Throughout the entire Era of Proclamation, many do: Parthians, Medes, Elamites, residents of Mesopotamia, Judea, and Cappadocia; people from every tribe, tongue, family, and nation (Acts 2:9-11, Rev. 5:9). And they will continue to do so, even until the end of the age, when Christ returns to fully glorify the Zion of the Holy One of Israel, and to bring in the new heavens and the new earth (vv. 14, 19-22, Mt. 24:14, Acts 1:8, 2:9-11, Rev. 21:11).

The Wealth of the Nations Will Come (4-9)

Verses 4-9 elaborate upon all this, using concrete imagery drawn from Israel's life under the Law to depict the eschatological fulfillment of her mission to the nations; to depict God effectually calling his elect sons and daughters to Christ and into the Church (v. 4, John 6:37, 10:16, Rom. 8:30, 1 Cor. 12:13). When they come, they will bring great wealth, not simply their material possessions, but also the true riches of gratitude, love, obedience, consecrated service, and more new believers in Jesus (v. 5; Mark 10:29-30, 12:28-30, John 14:15, Rom. 12:1, 15:16, Col. 3:15). These precious spiritual sacrifices will come up with acceptance upon God's altar (v. 6, 1 Peter 2:5, Heb. 13:15). As the Church offers them, she will grow in holiness; as she grows in holiness, she will be built up as a beautiful spiritual house, a house wherein the God of glory himself is pleased to dwell (vv. 7-9, Mt. 16:18, John 14:23, Eph. 2:22, 1 Peter 2:5).

They Will Bow at the Soles of Your Feet (10-14)

Verses 10-14 continue to speak of the rise of eschatological Zion, this time with special emphasis upon her relation to her enemies, whether past or present. Those who formerly were the instruments of God's wrath towards his Zion will be the very ones to build up her walls (v. 10); those who refuse to serve her will be utterly ruined (v. 12); and the sons of those who previously afflicted her will now come and bow themselves at her feet (v. 14). These challenging verses speak not only to Jews, but also to Gentiles. In the days of the Kingdom, Jewish Christians will marvel to see Egyptians, Mesopotamians, Romans, and other former oppressors coming to Christ, humbling themselves before the God of Abraham, and collaborating with them for the growth of the Church (Acts 2). Likewise, Gentile Christians will marvel to see God bringing "nations" of former persecutors into his City. Also, both Jew and Gentile will tremble at the eternal ruin of those who refuse to love and serve the Church, for failure to love and serve the Heavenly Husband whom she proclaimed (vv. 12, 14; Mt. 10:40, Luke 19:27, John 20:23, Gal. 1:22-24, Eph. 5:22ff, 1 John 4:20-21, Rev. 3:9).

An Everlasting Praise (15-16)

Verses 15-16 contrast the destinies of the former Jerusalem and the latter. The old, living under a Law that left her earthbound, was barren, trodden under foot by the Gentiles for her sins (Gal. 4:24-27, Heb. 7:19, 8:7ff). The new, living under a Christ who translates her into heavenly places, is eternally fruitful, drinking the milk of multitudes of (converted) Gentiles, whom God, from the very beginning, purposed to bring into his City, Family, Nation, and Land (Gen. 22:18, John 10:16, Gal. 4:24-27). Such is the redemptive power of the Mighty One of Jacob (v. 16).

Walls of Salvation, Gates of Praise (17-18)

Verses 17-18 launch the climactic description of the New Jerusalem in the World to Come. The opening lines of v. 17 speak of the glorification of the Church (Rev. 21:9-21). Because of the Person and Work of Christ, the eternal City of God will enjoy peace, righteousness, security, salvation, and endless praise (1 Cor. 1:30-31).

Your God Will Be Your Glory (19-22)

In verses 19-22 we arrive in the eschaton, the new heavens and the new earth, the Kingdom of the Father. Here, sun and moon have given way to the glory of God, the true and everlasting light of the New Jerusalem (vv. 19-20, Rev. 21:23, 22:5). Here, the days of the saints' mourning are ended (v. 20, Rev. 21:4, 22:3). Here, God's people are perfectly righteous (v. 21, 2 Peter 3:13). Here, they will live forever, eternally planted in the eschatological Promised Land (v. 21, Isaiah 66:22). And here the little flock of Jesus—more than conquerors through him who loved them—will have become a great multitude and a mighty everlasting nation (v. 22, Luke 12:32, Rom. 8:37, Rev. 7:9f). All this the LORD will hasten in its time (v. 22). Even so, Lord Jesus, come (Rev. 22:20)!

7. A Nation Born in a Day

(Isaiah 66)

This is one of the most difficult chapters in the entire prophetic canon. As such, it has proven a fertile field for speculation, especially among dispensationalists, some of whom find here predictions of the birth of the

modern Israeli state, Jewish evangelism during the seven year Tribulation era, a premillennial regathering of Jews to Palestine, and living conditions in the Millennium itself. I survey it here at some length in order to show that the NCH supplies a far simpler understanding, an understanding that not only accords with NT eschatology, but also speaks with great power and comfort to Christians everywhere.

Contrasting Destinies

By way of introduction, we should note that this chapter continues a theme struck in Isaiah 65: the contrasting destinies of the faithful remnant vs. the apostate multitude. The former, a minority in Israel, have suffered rejection, mockery, and persecution at the hands of the latter, even as the nation has grown ripe for judgment (28:9-22, 66:5). In chapters 65-66, God therefore encourages his saints with rich promises of ultimate justice: Those who forsook the LORD will perish, but those who sought him, mourning for Jerusalem's degradation, will live to see the day when he bestows eternal glory upon the City of God, and brings the Gentiles themselves into her blessed precincts (Isaiah 65:10-11, 13-16, 66:10-11; Luke 6:20-26).

The LORD's Chosen Temple (1-2)

In verses 1-2, God reminds his people that no house—no temple made of stone—can contain the infinite Creator of the universe. He does, however, hint at his preferred resting place: the hearts of those who have a poor and contrite spirit (Mt. 5:3, Luke 18:13). Doubtless these words would comfort pious Jewish exiles in the years ahead. However, with the benefit of hindsight, we now see that they also anticipate a better Day—an eschatological Day—when God, through Christ, by the Spirit, will take up his eternal place of residence in the Church; when her members will worship him, neither in this mountain, nor in Jerusalem, but in spirit and in truth (John 4:21f, 14:23, Eph. 2:22).

Judgment is Sure (3-6)

Verses 3-4, in graphic terms, depict the loathing with which God greets the religious observances of the apostates, and the judgment that awaits them, owing not only to their willful sins, but also to their rejection of the

mercy offered them in the admonitions of the prophets (Luke 12:47-8, John 15:22-24).

In verses 5-6, God begins speaking directly to his faithful remnant. He assures them that he will judge their “brothers” who excluded them—presumably religious officials who barred them from sanctioned public worship—and who also blasphemously mocked them (Mt. 27:39-44, John 9:34). Verse 6 intimates the fall of Jerusalem, not only to the Babylonians, but also to the Romans. The latter, like the rending of the temple veil at Christ’s death, marked the end of the Old Covenant, the beginning of the New, and the appearance of “the Jerusalem above” as the eschatological dwelling place of God (Mt. 27:51, Mark 11:14, Luke 21:6, 20-24, Gal. 4:21-31).

A Nation Born in a Day (7-13)

Verses 7-13, which clearly take us into the eschatological era, speak of this very thing, and so offered great hope to the struggling (OT) saints. The “she” of verse 7 is Zion, a figure for the OT Church that, in Jesus’ day, was typified by (and embodied in) mother Mary. Suddenly, supernaturally, she will give birth to a male child: Christ, the Son of Man, the Last Adam (Rom. 5:12ff, Rev. 12:1-2, 5). After he has completed his great redemptive work, her pains will indeed come upon her, as she shares in his sufferings, even to the end of the age (Rom. 8:17, Phil. 3:10, Rev. 12:1-6, 13ff).

In verse 8 the birth of Christ (the Head) is conflated with the birth of the Church (his Body). Because of Jesus’ incarnation and subsequent work, God, on the Day of Pentecost, will suddenly and supernaturally beget a new Land, a new Nation, and a new City (v. 10, 1 Peter 2:9). These three are none other than his elect sons (and daughters), the inhabitants of the NT Zion and Jerusalem, begotten from above throughout the entire Era of Proclamation and Probation by the preaching of the Gospel (1 Cor. 4:15, 1 Peter 1:23).

In verse 9, God assures his disheartened (and exiled) OT saints that their toil has not been in vain; that divine omnipotence stands behind the promise of Jerusalem’s latter-day restoration. Therefore, in verses 10-11 he exhorts them to receive the promise by faith, that they too, out of the fullness that dwells in Christ and his Body, may one day experience eternal spiritual

comfort and delight (John 1:16, 1 Cor. 14:3, 2 Cor. 1:3-7, Eph. 1:23, Phil. 2:1, 2 Thess. 2:16-17).

Verses 12-13 further explain why the saints should rejoice: Through Christ, God will extend peace—reconciliation and spiritual reunion—to his Church, flooding her not only with multitudes of Gentiles, but also with the glorious riches of their grateful love and devoted service (John 10:16, 17:22-23, Rom. 12:1f, 15:10, Eph. 2:11-22). In those days, the Father, with a Mother’s love, will richly comfort his own (1 Thess. 2:1-12).

The LORD Will Come in Fire (14-17)

Verses 14-17 reprise the theme of the contrasting destinies of the faithful remnant and the apostates: The hand of the LORD—which will bring in the New Jerusalem—shall be made known to his saints; but for his enemies, he reserves only indignation (v. 14; Rom. 2:1-11). The judgment of vv. 15-16, adumbrated by the OT destruction(s) of earthly Jerusalem, is eschatological, seeing that it falls upon all flesh. It will be accomplished at Christ’s second coming (2 Thess. 1:7-10). Once and for all, it will purge the earth of idolatry, here set forth as the bane of OT Israel and Jerusalem (v. 17, Acts 17:22-31).

They Shall See My Glory (18-21)

Verses 18-21 promise the faithful remnant that their spiritual seed will one day gather the Gentiles into God’s Kingdom, where they (the Gentiles) will enjoy the pleasures and privileges of full membership in the covenant community (see v. 12). This beautiful OTKP is fulfilled in the Era of Proclamation and Probation. It begins in v. 18b, with God declaring that the time is coming for him to gather all nations, and for the peoples to behold his glory. This reminds us of Jesus’ words, spoken in response to a show of Gentile interest in his ministry: “And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all to myself” (John 12:32). Through the preaching of the Gospel, the Spirit will effectually call God’s elect—both Jew and Gentile—into the Kingdom, enabling them to behold the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ, and eagerly to receive the benefits of his redemptive work on their behalf (John 1:14, 3:1ff, 6:4, 10:16, 14:9, 2 Cor. 4:6).

He himself is the sign spoken of in v. 19, a standard beneath which the peoples may gather for salvation (11:10, 12, 49:22, 62:10, Luke 2:34). God will set it among his Church: first, by sight among his elect remnant of Jews, and later by faith among his elect remnant of (more Jews and) Gentiles. Both, through faith in Christ, are reckoned as survivors of the wrath to come (John 5:24, Rom. 5:1-2, 1 Thess. 1:10). So that still others may be saved, God will send them to “the remotest parts of the earth,” here typified and epitomized by seven of ancient Israel’s most distant neighbors (Acts 1:8, Rev. 5:9). There they will preach the Gospel, wherein the glory of God is declared, and whereby nations sunk deep in idolatry will at long last hear of God’s fame and behold his glory for themselves (v.9, Micah 4:4-5, Rom. 10:14-15, 15:14-21).

Verse 20—virtually impervious to literal, futuristic interpretation—speaks of their good success: Using every spiritual device at their disposal (Rom. 14:13-14, 1 Cor. 9:19-22), the latter-day evangelists will transform their pagan neighbors into brothers and sisters in Christ (Eph. 2:11-18), transport them to the Zion and Jerusalem above (Gal. 4:21-31, Heb. 12:22), and present them as a spiritual sacrifice in the house of the LORD (Rom. 15:15-16, Phil. 2:17). While all of them will become part of Christ’s royal priesthood, some, according to the typology of verse 21, will be ordained as spiritual leaders in his Church (Eph. 4:7-16, Titus 1:5, 1 Peter 2:5, 9).

Final Destinies (22-24)

In verses 22-24 we pass from the Era of Proclamation into the eschaton. Here we meet the contrasting *final* destinies of saints and sinners. Just as the new heavens and the new earth will endure forever before God, so too will Zion’s offspring: the resurrected and glorified Church of Christ, the faithful of all times and all places (John 5:28-29, 11:23-26, 1 Cor. 15:50-58, Col. 3:4, Heb. 11:1f, Rev. 21:2, 10-11).

As we saw earlier, the NT forbids a literal interpretation of v. 23, teaching that ceremonial “months, seasons, and years” have been fulfilled and antiquated by Christ (Gal. 4:10, Col. 2:16-17, Heb. 8:13), and also that in the eschaton the sun, moon, and stars will give way to the perpetual light of the glory of God (Rev. 21:23, 22:5). Thus, under OT imagery, the

message here is simply that all redeemed flesh—both Jew and Gentile—will worship God forever (Rev. 15:4).

Similarly, the meaning of v. 24—which alludes to the perpetual burnings in the accursed Valley of Hinnom just outside Jerusalem—is that the saints will look with satisfaction (among many other emotions) upon the eternal punishment of the wicked, who are receiving their just due (2 Kings 23:1-14, Dan. 12:2, 2 Thess. 1, Rev. 15:2-4, 16:4-7, 22:15).

Therefore, I agree again with commentator Derek Kidner, when he sums up verses 18-24 as follows:

One may take this final section to be an epilogue that spans the first and second comings of Christ. Verse 18 will then state His purpose for the world, and vv. 19-21 His means of carrying it out: the sign set among men (Christ crucified and risen); the survivors, or saved remnant, sent to the nations (v. 19); and the gathering of His people into his Jerusalem (v. 20), the Gentiles being admitted to full membership with Jews (v. 21). On this view, Jerusalem is not the literal city, *but a spiritual* (Gal. 4:25-26). Verses 22-24 would describe (still in OT terms) the states of final glory and perdition.¹⁰

Conclusion

Again, all agree that Isaiah 66 is one the most difficult chapters in the prophetic canon. All do not, however, agree on how to interpret it. Therefore, the great question before us is this: Which method of interpretation—premillennarian literalism or the NCH—yields the most satisfying results? In particular, which method best accords with NT eschatology? Which produces the simplest, clearest interpretation? And which best fulfills the stated purpose of all the OT Scriptures, which is that they should give encouragement and hope to the people of the Lord Jesus Christ, upon whom the ends of the ages have come (Rom. 15:4, 1 Cor. 10:11, 1 Peter 1:10-12)?

Hopefully, our brief journey through this rich chapter will help you answer these crucial questions for yourself.

8. God's Coming Shepherd-King

(Jeremiah 23:1-8)

In the course of our journey we have touched on a number of OTKP's found in the book of Jeremiah, many of which appear in chapters 30-33.

Since Jeremiah 23:1-8—quite popular among premillennarians—gives the gist of them all, we will take a moment to examine it here.¹¹

Woe to the Shepherds (1-2)

In verses 1-2, God warns of coming judgment against Israel's faithless leaders, both temporal and spiritual. Because of their failure properly to shepherd God's flock, the sheep will soon be scattered among the nations, and they themselves will be punished. In the near term, the prophecy will be fulfilled by the Babylonian captivity; in the far term, by dispersion at the hands of Rome (cf., Ezek. 34:1f, Zech. 11:1ff). Back of the egregious failures of Israel's leaders stands the worse failure of Adam, whose sin in Eden drove his whole family into exile in the Domain of Darkness.

I Will Gather My Flock (3-4)

In verses 3-4, God offers the faithful hope, promising that he will gather the remnant of his flock out of all the countries where he has driven them, give them godly shepherds, and make them fearless and fruitful in the Promised Land. Since they will fear *no more*, we know the reference here is to "Israel's" eschatological ingathering (v. 4). With the help of the NCH, we can see how this OTKP is fulfilled. On the one hand, it is fulfilled among elect Jews who, in the last days, will turn to Christ, and so inherit all the blessings of the Kingdom. On the other, it is also fulfilled among elect Gentiles who will do the same. Both are "remnants"—some from Israel, all from Adam's fallen race. Both, because of sin, have gone into exile—some from Palestine, all from Eden. But both, because of God's sovereign grace, will be gathered into Christ for eternal life in their eschatological homeland.

David's Righteous Branch (5-6)

In verses 5-6, God speaks of a divine/human Agent, through whom he will grant these ultimate covenant blessings to the holy nation (1 Peter 2:9). In fulfillment of his ancient promise *to* David, he will raise up a righteous Branch *from* (the line) of David: the Messiah, the Lord Jesus Christ (Mt. 1:1, Luke 1:32, 69). He will be a King whose righteous reign overspreads the whole land, a promise fulfilled in Christ, whose heavenly reign overspreads the whole earth through the preaching of the Gospel during the

Era of Proclamation (Mt. 13:31-33, Acts 1:8, Col. 1:6, Rev. 5:9). Whether from his throne above, or at his Parousia, he is the One appointed by God to execute judgment and righteousness in the earth (v. 5; Mt. 28:18, John 5:22, Acts 17:31). In his days, Judah and Israel—both of which stand as types of the Church, the one as God’s (Messianic) Tribe, the other as his Family and Nation—will dwell securely in the only true ark of safety, Jesus Christ (John 10:28-29, Eph. 2:14-18, Heb. 6:8). And why will they stand? They will stand because the perfect righteousness of the Righteous One will be imputed to all who call upon him as Lord (John 16:8, 10, Acts 3:14, Rom. 3:21-22, 10:9-13, 1 Cor. 1:30).

A Second Exodus (7-8)

In verses 7-8, God takes up a favored prophetic motif, casting the great eschatological ingathering as a Second Exodus. These beautiful words, full of praise for God’s sovereign grace, can and will be spoken by all Christ’s saints, whether Jew or Gentile. For just as in ancient times God rescued ethnic Israel from their Egyptian oppressors and restored them to the Land of Promise, so in these last days he has rescued eschatological Israel—the Church—from every enemy of the Domain of Darkness, and restored them, in Christ, to their heavenly homeland, both now and in the World to Come (Mt. 12:29, 2 Cor. 1:10, Eph. 2:1-10, Col. 1:3, Heb. 12:22).

9. The City Shall Be Rebuilt

(Jeremiah 31:38-40)

Earlier we saw that Jeremiah 30-33 contains a great many OTKP’s, strung together like the pearls of a beautiful necklace. This is one of them. However, for reasons we are about to consider, it is especially difficult to interpret, and so merits some extra attention here.

To state the problem succinctly: On the one hand, we can see from v. 40 that this is indeed an OTKP; that God is speaking of his eschatological City, a city that will not be plucked up or overthrown *any more forever*. In other words, according to the NCH, he is actually speaking of the Church. On the other hand, because this prophecy mentions a number of specific geographical landmarks familiar to the Jews of Jeremiah’s day, it hardly

seems possible that God could be referring to the Church; that he must instead be predicting a latter-day restoration of physical Jerusalem, perhaps along the lines anticipated by premillennarians. How, then, are we to resolve this quandary?

One tempting solution is to argue that the prophecy is partly historical and partly eschatological; that it blends predictions of the restoration of Jerusalem under Ezra and Nehemiah with predictions of the upbuilding, sanctification, and eternal security of the New Jerusalem, the Church. However, upon closer inspection it becomes clear that there really is no way to determine which phrase or sentence of the prophecy is historical and which is eschatological. Yes, there may well be an allusion to the restoration of Jerusalem under Nehemiah (Neh. 3:1, 12:39); but if we desire to preserve the integrity and perspicuity of our text, our only recourse is to view it as altogether historical or altogether eschatological. And so, because verse 40 clearly marks it as eschatological, I conclude that this is indeed an OTKP; that it is eschatological through and through.

This conclusion finds confirmation in the fact that the premillennial solution is no solution at all. Again, quite apart from NT teaching on the twofold structure of the Kingdom, the text itself explicitly states that this City will endure forever, and not simply for a thousand years. Now it is true that some premillennarians have been willing to affirm the perpetuity of an earthly Jerusalem. This, however, would entangle them even further in the morass of prophetic literalism, since the Jerusalem of most OTKP is a city where priests and Levites perpetually minister, where animal sacrifices are perpetually offered, and where feast days are perpetually observed. But according to the NT, all of these Mosaic institutions are forever obsolete. And if they are obsolete, so too is the (earthly) city with which they are associated in OTKP (John 4:21, Gal. 4:25).

Good NT logic, then, drives us to the conclusion that this is indeed an OTKP in which God is speaking of the eschatological upbuilding and final state of his Church.

But how exactly are we to interpret the details?

A City Built for the LORD (38)

In verse 38, God tells us that the City will be rebuilt *for the LORD*. This reminds us of Paul's word to the Ephesians, that Christ is building up his Church to be a dwelling place of God by the Spirit, and that the Church will exist for the glory of God to all generations (Eph. 2:22, 3:20-21).

As for the Tower of Hananel and the Corner Gate, according to some commentators these well-known landmarks stood at opposite ends of the old city; according to others, they stood at the opposite ends of the northern wall. In either case, the message here seems to be that the *whole city* will belong to the LORD. And indeed this is the thrust of the entire prophecy, which declares that the City and *all* of its environs will be holy to the LORD. The NT gives us the meaning, assuring us that the whole Church, and the whole world she inhabits, will one day be without spot or blemish or any such thing, but will have the very glory of God (v. 40, Joel 3:17, John 14:23, Eph. 2:21, 5:26-27, Rev. 21:2, 10-11).

The Line Will Go Out (39)

In speaking of a measuring line that goes straight out to the hill Gareb, and then turns to Goah, verse 39 alludes to the expansion of the Church, and also to the complete healing of the world that she will inherit in the Consummation: Through Christ, at his Parousia, God will swallow up all things—even death itself—in victory (Dan. 9:25, Mt. 13:31-33, Rom. 8:18f, 1 Cor. 15:54, Col. 2:19, Rev. 5:9).

The details support this happy conclusion. Commentators tell us that Gareb was a hill to the northwest of Jerusalem where lepers dwelt, and that Goah was the place of capital punishment. If so, the idea here would be that in that Day the Redeemer's mighty arm will extend to the vilest offenders and to the worst sufferers, all of whom he will gladly gather into the precincts of the Holy City, upon condition of simple faith in him (Mt. 11:5, 28, Luke 15:1-2, 1 Cor. 6:9-11).

Forever Holy to the LORD (40)

Still more confirmation of this line of interpretation appears in verse 40, which tells us that the sacred environs will even include the Valley of the Sons of Hinnom. Again, in OT times this valley, situated just outside Jerusalem, served as a garbage dump. It was a place of refuse, stench, and

fire, previously cursed and defiled by king Josiah, since there the apostate Jews had caused their children to “pass through the fire” to the Ammonite god, Molech; and since there they had buried their remains (2 Kings 23:10, Jer. 32:35). Here, then, in thickly veiled imagery, God promises that Christ, at his return in judgment, will transform Topheth itself—and every other defiled corner of the physical universe—into new heavens and a new earth, the home of everlasting righteousness (Mt. 13:41, Phil. 3:21, 2 Peter 3:10, Rev. 21:1-5). In that Day, all the earth—and all the saints who constitute the City that fills the earth—will be holy to the LORD, forever (Rev. 21:2, 10).

In passing we should note that this OTKP is quite similar to two of Zechariah’s prophecies dealing with latter-day Jerusalem (Zech. 14:9-11, 19-21). In these, however, it is even more clear that the prophet is looking ahead into the eschatological era, and that he does so using richly symbolic language that points mysteriously to the things of Christ and his Church.

We conclude, then, that the great German commentator, C. F. Keil (1807-1888), was quite right to sum up this prophecy as follows:

The prophecy does not refer to the building of Jerusalem after the exile, but to the erection of a more spiritual Kingdom of God in the Messianic age. Indeed, it reaches to the time when the Kingdom of God shall have been perfected. It contains under an Old Testament dress the outlines of the image of the heavenly Jerusalem that John saw on Patmos in its full glory.¹²

In so speaking, Keil shows himself a master of the NCH. We do well, I think, to follow his lead.

OT Kingdom Prophecies Considered: Ezekiel

IN OUR NEXT two chapters we will spend considerable time with the two OT prophets who served God (and us) during the days of Israel's exile in Babylon: Ezekiel and Daniel. Their writings are loaded with OTKP's, some of which are quite difficult to understand. Of the two, I judge Ezekiel to be the most challenging. As we will soon see, the OTKP's that bring his book to a close have given rise to *much* speculation and controversy. Are they forever shrouded in mystery? Must we await the Parousia, or the very last of the last days, to find out what they mean? Or is it possible that the NCH could enable us, even now, to see, enjoy, and profit from what God has said here?

Let us delve into Ezekiel and find out.

Introduction to Ezekiel 33-48

In this chapter we'll be examining four of the most difficult (and popular) of Ezekiel's OTKP's. However, before engaging them, we are wise to get a good feel for their context; for their place in the overall flow of Ezekiel's prophetic ministry. Happily, this is easy to do, since the book is quite naturally divided into four well-defined parts. Commentator Iain Duguid outlines them as follows:

I. Ezekiel's Call and Commission (1-3)

These chapters set the stage, describing how the God of glory revealed himself to Ezekiel, called him to prophesy, warned him of Jewish impenitence, but exhorted him to speak (and write) faithfully, nonetheless.

II. Oracles of Doom (4-24)

These chapters contain numerous prophecies of imminent judgment upon apostate Jerusalem and her homeland. Even here, however, there are glimpses of hope that will come through a future restoration.

III. Oracles Against the Nations (25-32)

These chapters contain prophecies of coming judgments—and also of redemptive mercies—spoken over Israel’s hostile neighbors.

IV. Oracles of Good News (33-48)

These chapters, which are loaded with OTKP’s, contain rich promises designed to arouse the hope and redemptive expectation of God’s people.

Very importantly, the encouraging prophecies contained in Part IV (the Oracles of Good News) may be further divided into the following three categories:

A. Promises of Israel’s Eschatological Restoration (34-37)

B. Promises of Israel’s Divine Rescue from the Last Battle with Her Gentile Opponents (38-39)

C. A Vision of Israel’s Renewed Temple, Worship, Homeland, and City in the World to Come (40-48)

A Helpful Breakdown

For two main reasons, Duguid’s breakdown of the book as a whole is of great help to us.

First, it shows us that Ezekiel’s eschatology—just like that of Isaiah, Jeremiah, and all the other OT prophets—conforms perfectly to the prototype found in the Law of Moses. As we have seen, to a man they cast the promise of cosmic redemption in terms of Israel’s sin, exile, and final restoration. This is the great underlying motif of virtually all OTKP, a motif that, according to the NCH, finds its fulfillment in the two-staged Kingdom of God that Christ instituted under the New Covenant.

Secondly, the simple threefold structure of the Oracles of Good News (chapters 33-48) supplies an exciting clue to their proper interpretation. *This is because it corresponds perfectly with the structure and contents of NT*

eschatology! To be specific: When we read in chapters 34-37 of the gift of Israel's Messiah, and of her return to the land, our familiarity with NT eschatology immediately inclines us to think that these promises are fulfilled in the NT Era of Proclamation of Probation. Similarly, when we read in chapters 38-39 of a final clash between Israel and the hordes of Gog, we think immediately of the Last Battle between the Church and the World, and of the Judgment at Christ's return that will bring that battle to an end. And finally, when we read in chapters 40-48 of the ultimate renewal of Israel's Temple, Worship, Land, and City, we think immediately of the eschaton; the eternal Era of Reward and Retribution; the everlasting glory and worship of the Church in the new heavens and the new earth.

Yes, these parallels are most striking, most suggestive, and most encouraging. But do they reflect biblical reality? In order to find out, we will need to keep this thought-provoking correspondence in mind as we examine our texts themselves, trying to see if they do indeed support our educated NT guess as to their true meaning.

Another Helpful Breakdown

Concerning the Oracles of Restoration (chapters 34-37), a few further introductory words are in order. Duguid outlines them as follows:

- 1. A New Shepherd (chapter 34)**
- 2. A Renewed Land (chapters 35-36)**
- 3. A Renewed Covenant (chapter 36)**
- 4. A Renewed People (chapter 37:1-14)**
- 5. A Renewed Unity (37:15-28)**

Here again we have a most helpful breakdown. Why? Because it highlights the theological unity of these chapters, and also strongly intimates their true sphere of fulfillment: the New Covenant Era of Proclamation and Probation. In other words, Duguid's outline quietly suggests what the NCH positively affirms: All the oracles in this section speak of the *new* things God will do in and for his people in the last days. In particular, he will (1) give them a new Shepherd, the Lord Jesus Christ, (2) plant them in a new homeland, the Zion above, where the exalted Christ

now dwells, (3) draw them into a New Covenant, the Eternal Covenant in Christ's blood, (4) fill them with new spiritual life, the very resurrection life of Christ, and (5) bestow upon them—factious, warring sinners that they were—a new unity in the Spirit, in Christ, and in the Body of Christ.

In sum, Duguid's outline enables us to see that all of the oracles in this section—each in its own way and each from its own angle—depict the blessings of Christ's Church in the first stage of the Kingdom of God. They depict them, however, in language and imagery calculated to stir the imagination and kindle the hopes of God's struggling OT saints, some of whom had recently endured the ruin of their capital city, the destruction of their temple, and the humiliating agony of deportation and exile from their beloved homeland.¹

And now, with all of this good background information filling our minds, we are ready at long last to visit with Ezekiel himself. We will begin by venturing into the Valley of Dry Bones.

1. Resurrection Life In the Valley of Dry Bones

(Ezekiel 37:1-14)

Ezekiel's famous vision of the Valley of Dry Bones is a great favorite among Christians, and with good reason: Its evocative symbolism unfailingly calls to mind their own conversion; the happy day when the sovereign Spirit of God lifted them out of the Valley of the Shadow of Death and planted them in Christ, through whom they have now begun to experience the joy of eternal resurrection life (John 11, Rom. 6:1f, Eph. 2:1-12, Col. 1:13). However, as good biblical exegetes we must honestly ask ourselves: Is this really what the Spirit of God had in mind when he gave Ezekiel this mysterious vision and prophecy?

Premillennarian Musings

Our premillennarian brothers think not. Though differing among themselves as to details, all of them are united in reading this prophecy literally rather than figuratively. Therefore, all are united in referring it, not to the Church, but to latter-day ethnic Israel. Some say it has already been partially fulfilled in the modern return of millions of Russian and European Jews to Palestine. Others (dispensationalists) say it will be fulfilled during a

seven year period of tribulation, when a believing Jewish remnant fans out across the globe to gather their dispersed brethren back to their ancestral homeland, there to await the Second Coming of their Messiah (Isaiah 66:18-21). Still others argue that it will be fulfilled *after* Christ's return, when, through the same faithful remnant, he (Christ) assembles his far-flung Jewish brethren to rule and reign with him in his millennial kingdom. But again, all agree that Ezekiel was *not* speaking figuratively about the spiritual ingathering of Christ's Church.

If, however, we have been won to the NCH, we simply cannot go down this road. Why? Because now we understand that Ezekiel—clearly speaking of the last days—*must* have been speaking figuratively of the days of the New Covenant; of the twofold spiritual Kingdom that Christ introduced under the New Covenant; and of the people of the New Covenant—his Church. The task before us, then, is to see if our prophecy actually favors this view over and above the premillennarian's, and also to see in which phase of the Kingdom it is fulfilled: In the Era of Proclamation and Probation, in the Era of Reward and Retribution, or in both.

Let us turn to it now.

How Shall the Restoration Come?

In the previous oracle (36:1ff), God had given glorious promises of Israel's latter-day restoration. Among other things, he had spoken of prospering his people upon the mountains of their homeland (36:8-15), and of filling them with his Spirit, so that they might walk in his ways and secure his covenant blessings (36:27-28). Here, in 37:1-14, he gives a vision of how this will come to pass. The resulting contrast is stark: Because of the greatness of God's grace, a people lying altogether dead in the Valley of the Shadow Death will, in that Day, be miraculously transferred to—and planted upon—the high mountains of Israel, where they will live forever in consummate prosperity with their covenant-keeping God (40:1-2)!

The Valley of the Shadow of Death (1-2)

The vision begins with the LORD carrying Ezekiel, in the Spirit, to a valley where he beholds a great multitude of bones scattered over the face

of the ground. Upon close inspection, he realizes that they are “very dry”—that is, long dead, and therefore *thoroughly* dead (1-2). Reading these verses, the Jews in exile may well have recalled Jeremiah’s dreadful prediction to the effect that the Babylonians would fill the accursed Valley of Topheth with the bones of the inhabitants of sinful Jerusalem (Jer. 7:32-8:2). But God does not name this valley, and for good reason: The vision does not speak of a physical place, but rather of a spiritual condition. This is the Valley of the Shadow of Death (Psalm 23:4, 107:10, 14, Isaiah 9:2, Jer. 2:6, Luke 1:79). This is the great spiritual wasteland into which God, through the sin of Adam, cast all the sinful exiles of Eden (Gen. 3:24, Luke 4:5-7, Rev. 12:6, 14). This is the Domain of Darkness, whose unregenerate inhabitants, though having a name that they are alive, are in fact completely dead in trespasses and sins (Eph. 2:1-10, Col. 1:13, 2:13, Rev. 3:1).

Can These Bones Live? (3)

Now that the inspection is complete, God questions the prophet: “Son of man, can these bones live?” Ezekiel well understands that nothing is too hard for the LORD (Gen. 18:14, Jer. 32:27). But not yet knowing what these bones symbolize, he is uncertain as to whether or not God wills for them to live. So he responds, “O Lord God, You know” (v. 3). This calls to mind Christ’s exchange with his incredulous disciples, when they asked, “Who then can be saved?” Jesus’ answer is applicable here: “With men it is impossible. But with God, all things are possible” (Mt. 10:17-27). The sovereign God can indeed save spiritually dead sinners. Moreover, in the case of his elect, nothing in heaven or upon the earth can keep him from doing so (John 6:37, 10:16)!

Prophecy to Them! (4-6)

In verses 4-6, we hear God’s command to Ezekiel: He is to prophesy to the dry bones, telling them that God will put sinew and flesh upon them, cover them with skin, and fill them with breath, so that they will live again and come to the knowledge of the LORD who has just raised them from the dead!

The text speaks of a creation. Clearly, the imagery is designed to recall the creation of Adam, whom God first formed from the dust of the earth,

and then raised up by breathing the breath of life into his nostrils (Gen. 2:7). However, this is something different: It is a *re*-creation, and a spiritual re-creation rather than a physical. The NT tells us that Christ himself will accomplish it (John 20:19-23), with the result that his people will come to know both him and his Father as their sovereign Savior (John 14:15-20). A NT paraphrase of God's message to Ezekiel might therefore go like this: In that day, God will regenerate a great multitude of elect sinners (his Church), raising them up from the spiritual death they inherited through the first Adam, to an eternal newness of life that that they will inherit through the Last (Rom. 6:1-4, 1 Cor. 15:45, Eph. 2:6, Col. 3:1).

Does this prophecy also allude to the resurrection of the body? To be sure. However, it does so in a manner that anticipates NT teaching on the two stages of salvation; teaching in which we learn that the saints' *spiritual* resurrection (through faith in Christ) necessarily precedes, alludes to, and guarantees a *bodily* resurrection that will occur at the end of the age (John 5:24-29, 11:25-26, Rom. 6:5). Here, then, in Ezekiel 37, the resurrection of the body is not in view, since before that resurrection can come, the (spiritually) risen, regenerated, and restored "Israel of God" must go to war (37:10, 38-39).

Come, O Breath, That They May Live! (7-10)

In verses 7-10 we find the prophet doing exactly as he was bidden. Moreover, when he does, all unfolds exactly as God said it would. Such mighty prophesying pictures the spiritually creative power of the word of the truth of the Gospel (Rom. 1:16, 10:17, 1 Thess. 2:13, Heb. 4:12, 1 Peter 1:23).

Following the pattern laid down in Genesis, this recreation occurs in two stages: First, the dead bones become bodies (7-8); then the dead bodies become living bodies, for the breath (i.e., the Spirit) of God stands them up on their feet, so that they become an exceedingly great army (9-10). This pictures the ongoing creation of the Church Militant throughout the Era of Proclamation and Probation. In a microcosm, it was fulfilled on the Day of Pentecost, when the Spirit fell upon and filled 120 "rattling bones" who had previously come together in one place (Acts 2:1), with the result that they stood up boldly so as to make loving war in the cause of Christ and the

Gospel (Acts 2:4, 11, 14ff). But the vision will continue to be fulfilled—even until the end of the Age—whenever and wherever God assembles and builds up the Body of Christ through the preaching of the Gospel (1 Cor. 12:13, Eph. 4:12, 15-16, Col. 2:18-19).

Notably, this ecclesiological interpretation is supported by verse 9, which represents the Spirit as coming from the four winds, an allusion to the four corners of the earth, from which God will gather his universal Church, comprised of Jew and Gentile (Mark 13:27, Rev. 7:1f). It is also supported by verse 10, in which eschatological “Israel” is portrayed as an exceedingly great army, a metaphor repeatedly ascribed to the NT soldiers of Christ (Luke 14:31, 1 Cor. 9:7, Eph. 6:10f, 2 Tim. 2:3, Rev. 19:14).

The Whole House of Israel (11-14)

In verses 11-14, God finally interprets the vision to Ezekiel: It is yet another oracle of Israel’s eschatological restoration. However, the Israel in view is not ethnic, but spiritual. It is the Church, the eschatological “Israel of God” (Gal. 6:16). Ethnic Jews will be among them, for in many times and places they have indeed felt themselves to be hopelessly lost and cut off. But so too have multitudes of elect Gentiles (v. 11, Mt. 4:12-16, Mt. 15:25, Eph. 2:12). And since, through Christ, they also will enter the Eternal Covenant, God will not be ashamed to call them “My people” (Rom. 9:25-26, 2 Cor. 6:16, Heb. 2:11, 11:16, 8:10, Rev. 18:4).

It is, then, of his New Covenant people—both Jew and Gentile—that God here speaks, promising to raise them up from the grave of spiritual death, and to transport them to their heavenly homeland; indeed, to plant them on the very top of his Holy Mountain (v. 12, 36:8-15, 40:1-2; Col. 1:13, Gal. 4:26, Heb. 12:22, Rev. 14:1). Note carefully from the conclusion of this prophecy that when he does so, they will realize that the great transformation was not at all of their own doing; that God himself, by his sovereign grace, was the One who made them alive together in Christ, raised them up together with Christ, and caused them to sit down together with Christ in heaven, there to enjoy the glories of the Zion above until the happy day of the King’s return, when he will raise them bodily for eternal life in the glorious World to Come (v. 13-14; John 15:16, 1 Cor. 1:26-31, Rom. 8:28-30, Eph. 2:4-10, Titus 3:4-7, 1 John 3:14, Rev. 14:1, 21:1-5).

2. Two Sticks, One Cross, One Nation

(Ezekiel 37:15-28)

Here the prophet's theme is the Renewed Unity of Eschatological Israel. As far back as patriarchal times, there had been rivalry between Judah and Joseph. In the days of the Judges, tensions flared between Ephraim (Joseph's son) and the other tribes. Under David and Solomon, the nation was briefly united. Soon, however, it was split up into the Northern and Southern Kingdoms—each with its own center(s) of worship—and remained divided until the deportation of the Northern Kingdom (Israel) at the hand of the Assyrians. No doubt many devout Jews of exilic times despaired of the twelve tribes ever being united again as one nation—and one Kingdom—under God.

The Two Shall Become One

This OTKP is God's antidote to such despair. Here he promises that in the great restoration ahead he will forever reunite the Israel of God. In particular, the "stick" of Joseph and the "stick" of Judah will become one stick in his hand (vv. 15-19). How will this come to pass? God answers fulsomely: There will be one regathering "from every side" (v. 21); one deliverance from "all the dwelling places where they sinned" (v. 23); one cleansing from idolatry and transgression (v. 23); one new nation, planted in their eternal homeland (vv. 22, 25); one new Shepherd-King whom Israel will continually serve (vv. 22, 24); one New Covenant, under which Israel will ever live (vv. 24, 26); and one (new) sanctuary "in their midst" where the God of the Eternal Covenant will ever dwell (vv. 27-28). Seeing all this come to pass, the surrounding nations will know that the LORD is God, and that he himself has done it (v. 28).

Of Whom Does the Prophet Speak?

Christian interpreters ruled by the NCH thrill to read this beautiful OTKP, seeing here a "mysterious" picture of the ingathering and upbuilding of Christ's New Covenant people—the Church—throughout the entire Era of Proclamation. They themselves are the new sanctuary in which God is pleased to dwell (Eph. 2:20, Rev. 21:3). Heaven itself is the new "land" and

the high “mountain” upon which they are privileged to live, even as they await the return of their Shepherd-King to pasture them once for all in the World to Come (vv. 21-22; Eph. 1:20, 2:6, Heb. 12:22). “This prophecy,” says Whitby, “can never be fulfilled except by the ingathering of God’s spiritual Israel into their permanent inheritance, the Christian Church and the heavenly Canaan.”² “The territory of blessing,” says another commentator, “is no longer Canaan, but the region of which Christ is King and Lord.”³

Judah, Joseph, and Ephraim

We must, however, wrestle with the specific references to Judah, Joseph, Ephraim, and their respective companions, the factious tribes of the house of Israel (vv. 15-20). Does not such language—so deeply rooted in the history of ethnic Israel—oblige us to conclude that the subjects of this prophecy are indeed literal ethnic Jews, and that the fulfillment of the rest of the prophecy must also be literal, just as our premillennarian brethren insist?

My answer is threefold.

First, the premillennial interpretation is impossible, since the prophecy itself repeatedly affirms that the conditions here envisioned will last forever (vv. 22, 23, 25, 26, 28). This is no millennium, but the eternal Kingdom of the “the Israel of God.” True, the emphasis here is upon the first stage of the Kingdom, the Era of Proclamation. But as we saw earlier, both stages of the Kingdom share a common essence; both are part of a single redemptive sphere of rescue and restoration in Christ. Therefore, even after the Last Battle (38-39), and even after the appearing of the World to Come (40-48), nothing fundamentally new will have been added. Rather, the fundamental things will simply have been perfected. So then, at its heart, our prophecy does indeed picture the one eternal Kingdom of God.

Secondly, it is undoubtedly the case that since the Day of Pentecost a remnant of ethnic Jews descending from each of the twelve tribes has come to know and enjoy the marvelous unity that is found in the Body of Christ (John 17:20-23, Eph. 4:1f, Gal. 3:28). Moreover, it is certain that the godly Jews of Ezekiel’s day, who took hope and courage from these words, are even now experiencing this blessed reality up in heaven (Heb. 11-12). In

other words, one could argue that here the Spirit is indeed addressing ethnic Jews, yet promising them spiritual restoration and unity in Christ, rather than physical restoration and unity in the historic land of Canaan.

But thirdly, it also quite possible—and, I think, preferable—to say that here divided “Israel” is put forth as a type of God’s elect, the Church. For just as Israel was broken down into rival tribes, exiled from their homeland, and scattered among the nations because of their sin, so too was God’s Church, prior to her conversion, broken down into rival cultures and ideological “dwelling places,” exiled from her home in Eden, and scattered throughout the worldwide Domain of Darkness.

On this view (and, indeed, on the view previously mentioned), the restoration here spoken of—and the unity here celebrated—is found strictly in Christ (Col. 1:13). Importantly, it was for just such a restoration, and for just such a unity, that our Lord himself prayed, asking his Father to send the Spirit to his people, so that they might become one, even as he and the Father are one (John 17:20-26); so that they might become a single light shining in the darkness, and a single city set upon a (very high) hill (Mt. 5:14); so that the nations may know that through his only-begotten Son, God the Father, even now, is sanctifying his eschatological “Israel,” a chosen and beloved people in whose very midst he is pleased to dwell forevermore (Ezek. 37:28, John 17:21, 23).

Two Sticks, One Cross, One Nation

Let me close with a final observation, again demonstrating the great fruitfulness of the NCH.

In obedience to God’s word, Ezekiel took two sticks and made them as one in his hand (37:17). Centuries later, by an all-controlling providence, God himself did much the same, causing an unknown Roman carpenter to take two sticks and fashion them into one Cross: the Cross upon which Israel’s promised King—the eschatological Son of David—would die (37:24-25).

Could it be, then, that way back in Ezekiel’s day God gave us a hint—a very subtle picture—of the means by which he would reunite spiritually divided and warring humanity? I am inclined to think that the man who wrote these very relevant words might well answer in the affirmative:

But now in Christ Jesus you who formerly were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For He Himself is our peace, who made both groups into one, and broke down the middle wall of division between us, having abolished in His flesh the enmity—the Law of commandments contained in ordinances—so as to create in Himself, from the two, one new man, thus establishing peace; so that he might reconcile both to God in one Body through the cross, by it having put to death the enmity. And He came and preached peace to you who were far off, and peace to those who were near, for through Him we both have our access in one Spirit to the Father.

—Ephesians 2:13-18

3. Ezekiel's Last Battle

(Ezekiel 38-39)

These well-known but highly controversial chapters describe the Deception, Destruction, and Disposal of Israel's great eschatological enemy: Gog and his worldwide confederation of evil armies. In the latter-days, by divine decree, they will go up against a people fully restored to the LORD and his covenant blessings, thinking to annihilate them and seize their homeland. It is, however, Gog and his armies who will be annihilated, for under furious strokes of divine judgment they will suffer complete and everlasting destruction upon the mountains of Israel.

While the prospect of such an attack would no doubt have been unsettling to devout Jews from Ezekiel's day onward, it is easy to see how they would have reckoned this nonetheless to be an Oracle of Good News. Yes, God himself will bring the dreadful assault to pass. But far from being a judgment against his own people, it will actually be final retribution against all their remaining enemies. Moreover, on that day Israel herself will not even have to fight, since God, as at the Exodus, will fight for her—this time with pestilence, blood, flooding rain, great hailstones, fire, and brimstone. In short, the good news is that *this* battle will indeed be the *last* battle; the battle in which God supremely “sets his glory among the nations,” manifesting his absolute sovereignty, justice, wrath, power, goodness, grace, mercy, and love—and then opening before his grateful people a door into the eternal blessings of the World to Come (38:16, 23, 39:7, 13, 21).

Premillennarian Problems

How exactly shall we who follow Christ interpret this mysterious extended prophecy?

As expected, the answer from our premillennarian brothers is uniform: We must interpret it literally, as predicting a war against an actual nation of latter-day ethnic Jews who are spiritually renewed and happily resettled in their ancestral homeland of Palestine.

There are, however, some telling points of disagreement among them. Fausset, for example, following the lead of Rev. 20:7-9, places the great battle at the close of the Millennium, forcing us to imagine Gog and his allies daring to attack the very “navel of the (millennial) world,” the land (and city) where the glorified Christ himself sits enthroned as king of the nations (38:12). Meanwhile, Gaebelien, Scofield, Walvoord, and Showers all assert that the battle will take place just *prior* to Christ’s Second Coming and the onset of the Millennium. This, however, forces them to explain why Ezekiel has the Messiah living in the land *before* the Last Battle, rather than coming to it afterwards (Ezek. 37:24-25).

Alas, such problems are only the tip of the iceberg. For even if the NT did not warn us against the literal interpretation of OTKP, our text itself supplies an abundance of hints that this cannot possibly be the exegetical route to follow. Let us briefly consider a few of them.

First, our prophecy contains a number of positive indicators that a symbolic interpretation is in order. Why, for example, is the identity of Gog so obscure and mysterious? Why does the number seven appear so frequently (38:1-6, 39:9, 12, 14)? Why do Gog and his hosts brandish six different kinds of weapons (the number six being biblically associated with man, Gen. 1:24-31, Rev. 13:18). Why does the Valley of Hamon Gog seem suddenly to turn into a city (39:15-16)? And why, in describing what appears to be a strictly local judgment, does God suddenly speak of shaking the whole earth with his presence, and throwing down *all* mountains, pathways, and city walls, wherever they may be (38:20)?

Secondly, as we saw earlier, a literal approach to this prophecy brings it into conflict with the other prophecies of the Last Battle and the Day of the LORD. While obviously speaking of the same eschatological event, these OTKP’s differ among themselves regarding the exact identity of Israel’s final foe, the location of the final conflict, the nature and extent of Israel’s involvement in the fight, and the character of the divine intervention that

finally resolves it. Our resulting choice is stark: Use the NCH to discern the “mystical” meaning of these texts, or go mad trying to resolve all the conflicts produced by prophetic literalism.

Thirdly, a literal interpretation entangles us in many anachronisms. Do we really want to say, for example, that in the latter-day s the nations of Magog, Meshech, Tubal, Gomer, Sheba, Dedan, and Tarshish will again return to the stage of world history? Will whole armies really ride to war on horses? And will they really brandish shields and bucklers, bows and arrows, javelins and spears (38:4, 39:3, 9)?

Also, what about some of the practical problems involved? Would (or could) modern armies bring enough wooden weapons to the field of battle for a nation of millions to use them as fuel for seven years (39:9)? If “all the people of the land” daily bury the dead bodies of their defeated foes for seven months, how many hundreds of millions of corpses would there have to be (39:13)? How could the Israelites bear the stench? How could they avoid the spread of disease or plague?⁴

For all these reasons—and many others found in the NT—we must abandon a literal interpretation, seeing that it will only land us in endless confusion and controversy. Rather, we must yet again take in hand the master key—the NCH—by which alone we may open up the door of understanding; by which alone we may see the rich NT truth that the Spirit of God embedded in this picturesque and powerful OTKP.

Let us do so now.

The NT and the Last Battle

By way of introduction, two important points may be made.

First, we must constantly keep in mind that the structure of NT eschatology supplies crucial light for the proper interpretation of this OTKP. As we just saw, it certainly appears that the rescue and restoration of eschatological Israel to her homeland in the Days of the Messiah (33-37) corresponds to the eschatological rescue of the Church throughout the NT Era of Proclamation (Eph. 1:20, 2:6, Col. 1:13, 2:19, Heb. 12:22). But if that is so, then the latter-day attack of Gog and his hordes must correspond to what the NT refers to as the Last Battle: the latter-day attack of Satan, the Antichrist, and the united world-system against the Church. And if all this

is so, then Ezekiel's portrait of Israel's eschatological Temple, Land, and City must correspond to—and mystically depict—the Church in the World to Come, in the new heavens and the new earth.

Secondly, if indeed these correspondences are real, then it is clear that in order to understand Ezekiel 38-39 we must thoroughly saturate ourselves in NT teaching about the Last Battle. In Part 5 of our study, we will do this very thing, carefully examining all the relevant texts. Here, however, a brief overview is in order, so that we may effectively wrestle with the passage before us.

According to the NT, the Last Battle (1) has been decreed by God, (2) will occur at the very end of the Church era, when the Great Commission has been, or is very nearly, completed, (3) will immediately precede the Parousia of Christ, (4) will be spearheaded by Satan himself, indwelling a personal Antichrist, the Man of Lawlessness, (5) will involve the political, economic, and religious consolidation of the world-system around Satan and the Antichrist, (6) will involve the world-wide suppression of the worship and witness of the true spiritual Church, (7) will involve the apparent demise of that Church, (8) will be of very short duration, and (9) will be brought suddenly, supernaturally, and unexpectedly to a close by the Parousia of the glorified Lord Jesus Christ, who will deal out wrath and retribution to his foes (both human and demonic), even as he consummately rescues and restores his joyous, awestruck people, the Church. As we will see later, Revelation 20:7-10, viewed in amillennial perspective, fully harmonizes with this NT characterization of the Last Battle.

And now, keeping all these things firmly in mind, we are ready for a fascinating journey through Ezekiel 38-39.

The Deception of Gog (38:1-17)

In verses 1-6, God commands Ezekiel to prophesy against Gog—who is consistently represented as a person—and the seven nations that will join him in the final assault against Israel: Meschech, Tubal, Persia, Ethiopia, Libya, Gomer, and Togarmah. The fact that he mentions exactly seven nations (the biblical number of completeness) indicates that these seven typify “the whole wide world.” So too does the fact that they are situated to the north, east, and south of Israel. Rev. 20:7-10 explicitly opens up this

symbolism, declaring that the hordes of Gog and Magog will be gathered from “the four corners of the earth.” The message, then, is that Gog—unveiled in the NT as a personal Antichrist controlled by Satan himself—will gather together the entire world-system for a final attack against the NT people of God, the Church. Being ignorant of the secret workings of God’s Providence, all these eschatological enemies will mean the assault for evil. But God, seeking a final majestic display of his glory, will mean it for good, and is himself the One who therefore will bring it to pass (Gen. 50:20, Rom. 8:28, 11:36).

In verses 7-9, God elaborates. The battle will occur “after many days” and “in the latter years”—that is, at the end of the present evil age; at the end of the Era of Proclamation. God himself, by his Providence, will “visit” his foes, emboldening them to gather together against the LORD and his Anointed people (Psalm 2:1-3, Acts 4:23-31, Rev. 13:7). With hostile intent, they will enter the land of God’s rescued and restored people (v. 8). That is, they will assault the people of Christ, a people called out of all the nations, rescued from the Domain of Darkness, and planted upon “the mountains of Israel.” At this stage in Ezekiel’s prophesying, the mountains are not earthly, but heavenly: In Christ, God has planted his people in heavenly places (long “desolate” because of man’s sin), where they now dwell, in peace and security, with their mighty risen Lord (Col. 3:1-3, Heb. 12:22). Later, at the Parousia, they will become earthly, for in that Day heaven and earth will become one. Observe again from verse 9 the universality of the attack: “Many peoples” are joined with Gog, and together they cover “the land”—the whole earth, soon to belong to the whole Church—like a cloud (Rev. 13:3, 8, 20:9).

In verses 10-13, God elaborates still further, this time probing the evil motivations of Gog and his hordes. Seeing the powerlessness and prosperity of a peace-loving people who trust in God rather than walls and weapons, they will be emboldened “to capture spoil and to seize plunder.” So too will many covetous onlookers, typified by the merchants of Sheba, Dedan, and Tarshish (v. 13, Rev. 18:15-19). This passage calls to mind the earthly course of Christ himself, who at the end was led as a lamb to the slaughter; and also of all the disciples who would follow him, whom he sends out into the world as sheep among wolves, armed only with the weapons of truth, prayer, faith, hope, and love (Isaiah 53:7, Luke 10:3, Rom. 8:36, 1 Peter

3:8-17). As a glance at world history plainly shows, for a longish season, these pilgrim people, by the Providence of God, became “the navel of the earth”, the spiritual center of world civilization (v. 12). Biederwolf well writes:

Palestine really was the center of the ancient civilized world. But the expression is hardly to be taken physically. It is rather to be taken morally, (as describing) the land most glorious and richly blessed, so that its inhabitants occupy the most exalted position among the nations, and thus a central position for being a blessing in the world.⁵

Yet Ezekiel warns us that a time is coming when the center will no longer hold; when the moral force of the Gospel—and the moral influence of the Church that proclaims it—will no longer register upon the conscience of a lawless world; when it will suddenly dawn upon the rulers of this present evil age that there is no longer anything to prevent them from seizing, not just the property, but also the religious, philosophical, and moral high ground of the followers of the Prince of Peace (Mt. 24:12, 2 Tim. 3:1f, 2 Thess 2). Only God knows what will fill the vacuum.

Before pronouncing judgment upon his foes, God reiterates his decree one final time (vv. 14-17). Yes, Gog will indeed discern the security—and vulnerability—of God’s little flock (v. 14). And yes, many latter-day nations will follow him, all animated by the same spirit that impelled so many of Israel’s former enemies (now passed from the stage of history) to invade Palestine from the north (v. 15, Isaiah 41:25, Jer. 1:13-15, 6:22f). But why are these things so certain? It is because God himself has ordained them, and because he has done so for the express purpose of manifesting his glory to all mankind (v. 16). As it was on the Day of the Exodus, so it shall be on the Day of the Last Battle: God will demonstrate his wrath and make his power known upon vessels fitted for destruction, even as he displays the riches of his glory upon (persecuted) vessels of mercy, whom he lovingly prepared beforehand for glory (Rom. 9:22-23, 2 Thess. 1). Over the course of many years the former prophets spoke of these very things. Why? Because before the foundation of the world God himself had decreed that they should certainly come to pass (v. 17, Deut. 32:34-43, Isaiah 34:1-6, 63:1-6, 66:15-16, Joel 3:9-14, Micah 4:19-23).

The Destruction of Gog (38:17-23)

Having spoken at length of the Deception of Gog, the LORD now speaks of his Destruction (vv. 18-23). When the murderous armies attack his beloved land, he will jealously pour out his fury, anger, and blazing wrath upon them, even as he did upon his only-begotten Son, so that his chosen people might be rescued from the same (vv. 18-19, Mt. 27:4, Rom. 3:25, 1 John 2:2, 4:10).

The first judgment mentioned is an earthquake. It is cosmic in its scope, affecting seven sectors of the creation: fish, birds, beasts, creeping things, all men, all mountains, and all human constructs (vv. 19-20; Heb. 12:29, Rev. 11:3, 16:8). In verses 21-22, seven more judgments are announced: sword, pestilence, blood, overflowing rain, hailstones, fire, and brimstone (Rev. 17:16). The NT reveals that this catalog of OT punishments symbolizes a single, cosmic, eschatological judgment by fire at the return of Christ (Mt. 3:12, Luke 17:29, 2 Thess. 1:8, 2 Peter 3:7, 12, Rev. 20:9). When it comes, all men and nations will see and confess that the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is the one, true, living, and altogether holy God (v. 23; 2 Thess. 1:3-10, Phil. 2:9-11).

The Disposal of Gog (39:1-20)

Chapter 39 takes up the theme of the Disposal of Gog and his hordes. Verses 1-8 begin with a brief recapitulation of his Deception and Destruction, wherein we hear again of the universality (v. 6), purpose (7), and certainty (v. 8) of the coming Judgment. Observe from verse 6 that when it does come, all the earth—from Magog in the remotest parts of the north to the distant coastlands of the west—will be living in security. But when they are saying, “Peace and safety,” sudden destruction will come upon them, as labor pains upon a pregnant woman, and they will not escape (1 Thess. 5:3).

The theme of verses 9-10 is Eschatological Plunder and Pillage. That the passage is symbolic is clear from the numbers used: six kinds of weapons will be used for fire over the course of seven years. But what is the meaning? Time and again Israel had been plundered and pillaged by her enemies. But here, says God, is where it all ends, with eschatological Israel once and for all plundering and pillaging *all* of her foes. The NT unveils the

complete truth. By God's decree, the saints will have a share in the Judgment. "Do you not know," asked Paul, "that the saints will judge the world" (Rom. 16:20, 1 Cor. 6:2)? In that Day, the glorified Church will pillage the destructive power of all her enemies, and then plunder all their illicit possessions. When the fires of judgment have done their work, a world that formerly had gone over to Satan and his evil seed will return again, in glory, to the saints of the Most High (Gen. 3:15, Dan. 7:18, Luke 4:5-7, 2 Peter 3:10-13).

Much the same theme is taken up in verses 11-16, which describe the burial of the hordes of Gog. The imagery of verse 11 is designed to communicate the immensity of the burial ground, which is nothing less than the entire Valley of the Jordan east of Jerusalem, soon to be renamed the Valley of the Multitude of Gog. Similarly, the poetry of verses 12-15 is designed to speak of the superabundance of dead bodies that will lie there. Verse 16 underscores this idea, declaring that the valley will suddenly become a city—or at least play host to a city—and men will call it Hamonah (i.e., Multitude). What, then, is the great message of this mysterious passage? The NT responds thus: In the Judgment, the resurrected saints will receive from Christ the honor of co-laboring with him in the final cleansing of the world, in the final casting out of all things that offend (v. 13, 1 Cor. 6:2-3, Mt. 13:41).

Verses 17-20 further illuminate the symbolic character of the whole prophecy, since here the corpses of Gog are not actually buried in a valley, but instead become a sacrificial meal, prepared by the LORD on the mountains of Israel for every sort of bird of the air and beast of the field. Moreover, as the text itself makes clear, the different sacrificial animals of verse 18 represent "the rulers of this age"—the princes of the earth and the mighty men of war—who, because of their opposition to God's Gospel and God's people, shall indeed come to nothing at Christ's return (vv. 18, 20, 1 Cor. 2:6-8).

That this is the correct interpretation is seen from its NT counterpart, Revelation 19:17-21. Drawing liberally from Ezekiel's words, the Spirit there closely associates "the Great Supper of God" with the Second Coming of Christ (19:11-16). Didactic passages from the Gospels and the Epistles decode the symbolism of both prophecies: At the Parousia, God, Christ, the holy angels, and the saints themselves will all fall upon the wicked, casting

them into Gehenna, where they are eternally devoured in final judgment (Mt. 13:39-43, Rom. 2:5-10, 2 Thess. 1, Rev. 19:20, 20:14-15). Thus shall they become a kind of sacrifice, not to atone for sin, but to glorify the holiness, righteousness, wrath, and power of the divine Judge of sin (Rev. 15:1-8, 16:4-6).

A Final Promise of Restoration (39:21-29)

This section brings the prophecy to a close, paving the way for Ezekiel's description of life in the World to Come. Appropriately enough, it gives yet another promise of Israel's eschatological restoration.

In verses 21-24, God opens by taking up once again the theme of his supreme purpose in the Judgment: "That they may know." In particular, he would have all men know his glory (21). He would have "Israel" (i.e., believers in Christ) know his covenant faithfulness (22). And he would have the "Gentiles" (i.e., unbelievers) know that whenever and wherever they (briefly) triumphed over Israel, it was not because God was unable or unwilling to save his people, but because they had sinned, so that for a short season he hid his face from them in judgment (vv. 23-24, Isaiah 54:8).

Mindful of this overarching purpose—and eager to instill hope in his suffering people—God therefore issues another promise of eschatological redemption (vv. 25-29). The blessings are familiar. He will restore the fortunes of Jacob and have mercy on the house of Israel (v. 25). When he does, they will forget their former disgrace and live securely in their own land (v. 26). Their holy and blessed life will bring honor to his name (v. 27). They will learn to see his sovereign hand, both in their previous exile and in their soon-coming return (v. 28). Moreover, once having returned, they will rest in this glorious confidence: Never again will God hide his face from them in judgment, for in those days he will have poured out his life-transforming Spirit upon all the house of Israel (v. 29, Heb. 8:1-13).

How shall we interpret this final promise? That it *appears* to be speaking of ethnic Israel can scarcely be denied. And yet the NT assures us that something more, something "mysterious," is actually in view. To be sure, the LORD here addresses the godly Jews of Ezekiel's day and after; Jews who will indeed, in the fullness of time, enter "the land" and experience the blessings of which he speaks. And yet, according to the NT,

the true sphere of fulfillment of these words is the New Covenant in Christ, the twofold Kingdom he has introduced, and the eschatological people he is creating: the Church.

On this view, Israel's history of sin, exile, and return stands as a type of the history of *all* God's people, whether Jew or Gentile. Having sinned in Adam, as well as by their own evil choices, God has exiled them in the Domain of Darkness, where they suffer grievously at the hands of their many enemies. Yet because of his everlasting love for them, he will take action. In the last days, he will set his glory—the Person and Work of his Son—among the nations, draw a chosen people to him, justify them, fill them with his Spirit, and plant them securely—with neither shame nor disgrace—in their new heavenly homeland.

Yes, at the end of the age the unbelieving world will mount a fierce attack against them, for it is appointed to the saints that they should follow in the footsteps of their Master. But after they have suffered a little, God will yet again set his glory among the nations, this time by sending the High King of Heaven back into the world to destroy and dispose of all his foes, and to establish his people once and for all in their eternal homeland: the new heavens and the new earth.

In that day, just as Ezekiel promised, all men—both saints and sinners—will indeed “come to know.” They will come to know the truth, power, sovereignty, justice, love, mercy, goodness, and grace—in short, the glory—of the one true living God.

4. Ezekiel's Vision of the World to Come

(Ezekiel 40-48)

This is the capstone, the last of Ezekiel's three Oracles of Good News. In the first, God promised his people a final restoration to the land, the coming of the Messiah, the gift of his Spirit, and the fullness of his covenant blessings (Ezek. 36-37). In the second, he promised to rescue them from the Last Battle, and to destroy, once and for all, all their surrounding enemies (Ezek. 38-39). Here in the third oracle, he completes his words of encouragement by giving them a vision of life with him in the eternal World to Come (Ezek. 40-48).

In essence, the vision is an elaboration of the promise previously given in Ezekiel 37:24-28. To re-read that text is to see immediately that the word “forever” is both prominent and crucial. Israel will dwell in the land forever (25a). The Messianic son of David will be their Prince forever (25b). God will enter into a covenant of peace with them forever (26a). And he will set his sanctuary in their midst forever (26b, 27, 28). Here then is what life will be like in the eschaton, in the World to Come. Here, at long last, the promise of the Eternal Covenant will be fully realized. Here the LORD will be "Israel's" God, and they his people. Here, every impediment to their spiritual and physical union will be removed, and every blessing of that union enjoyed—forever (v. 27).

This is also the message of Ezekiel 40-48. Here, however, the promise comes less by way of divine utterance, and more by way of divine vision (40:2). All interpreters agree that the vision is vast, complex, and intimidating. Nevertheless, upon closer inspection we see something else, something thought-provoking and encouraging: The vision has a definite structure. Incorporating ideas and images familiar to every godly Israelite, Ezekiel's vision depicts life in the World to Come *under seven memorable motifs*: (1) the everlasting Mountain of God (41:1-4), (2) the everlasting Temple of God (40:5-42:20), (3) the everlasting glory of God (43:1-2), (4) the everlasting worship of God (43:13-46:24), (5) the everlasting River of God (47:1-12), (6) the everlasting Homeland of God (47:13-48:29), and (7) the everlasting City of God (48: 30-35). In a moment we will examine each of these powerful motifs.

But first we must ask once again: How exactly is this vision to be interpreted? Happily, Church History strongly suggests the answer. Confronted with an unavoidable decision to interpret this prophecy literally or figuratively, the vast majority of Christian commentators, from the Church fathers on, have opted for the figurative approach. William Biederwolf states the case this way:

The prevailing view has been that it presents in grand outline the good in store for God's people during the times of the Gospel; that it is a vision of spiritual realities pictorially presented ... thus expressing under well-known (OT) symbols certain fundamental and eternal ideas with regard to the true worship of God.⁶

The reasons for this longstanding consensus are many, and well worth a brief discussion.

The Case for Figurative Interpretation

To begin with, this is a *vision*, a medium of revelation that, in both Old and New Testament times, is uniformly couched in symbols (Daniel 2, 4, 7, 8, Zech. 1-6, Rev. 4-22). The fact that the returning exiles of Ezra's and Nehemiah's day—and also the Jews of Herod's day—never attempted to erect Ezekiel's temple, or to reapportion the land along the lines mentioned in his prophecy, may well indicate that some leaders regarded the vision as “mysterious” and symbolic. Certainly all agreed that it would be folly to undertake any such project in their own strength; that instead they must wait for the Messiah to come, who would explain to them all things (John 4:25, NIV).

Secondly, both the contents of the vision and its role as the capstone of Ezekiel's Oracles of Good News clearly identify the subject matter as the everlasting World to Come. But for those steeped in NT eschatology, this means that the prophet *must* be giving us a “covenantally conditioned” revelation of the new heavens and the new earth (2 Peter 3:13, Rev. 21:1f). If so, the vision cannot be fulfilled in a temporary millennial era; nor can it be fulfilled literally, since the NT depicts the World to Come in vastly different terms.

This brings us to our third point, namely, that the worship here envisioned is—covenantally speaking—neither fish nor fowl. That is, it is governed neither by the Law of Moses (as other OTKP's say it will be, Isaiah 2:3, Micah 4:21), nor by the Law of Christ contained in the NT (1 Cor. 9:21). Yes, there are certain similarities with the Mosaic Law: a temple, an altar, various offerings, feast days, new moons, Sabbaths, etc. Yet there are also dramatic differences, in the form of both changes and deletions. For example, much of the tabernacle furniture is gone (e.g., the Ark, the Golden Candlestick, the Table of Showbread, etc.). There is no High Priest or Day of Atonement. Most of the Levites have been barred from their traditional privileges. While the faithful sons of Zadok do indeed continue to serve at the altar and in the Holy Place, even they cannot enter the Holy of Holies. The boundaries of the land are redrawn, the tribal

allotments are radically restructured, and the City of God receives a new name, etc.

Such discrepancies vis-à-vis the Law of Moses were deeply troubling to subsequent Jewish leaders, who in time refused even to read Ezekiel 40-48 in public, for fear of confusing the people. However, had they understood the typological character of OT revelation, they would have realized that Ezekiel—and indeed Moses himself—was speaking “mystically” of the things of Christ and the Covenant to come (2 Cor. 3:12-18).

Fourthly, there are a number of phenomena within the vision itself that clearly indicate the prophet was speaking symbolically. This is particularly true of 47:1-12, where we read of a River that will flow from beneath the Temple threshold and south of the altar; a river that not only grows without the help of tributaries, but also brings healing to whatever it touches, as do the mysterious trees situated on either side of its banks. Yes, it is indeed true that other parts of the vision lend themselves to a more literal interpretation. However, as soon as we read this portion, we immediately begin to wonder if both it and the vision as a whole are not meant symbolically.

Finally, and most importantly, we have the positive testimony of the NT. As we have seen, because of its teaching on the progress of Salvation History, the finality of the New Covenant in Christ, and the obsolescence of all the OT institutions that temporarily pictured that Covenant in type and shadow, the majority opinion of the Church down through the ages has been that we must indeed interpret this text figuratively. And indeed, the NT explicitly encourages us to do so, referring at least six times to this vision in the portion of the Revelation devoted to describing the experience of the Church in the new heavens and the new earth (Rev. 21:10, 11, 12, 27, 22:1, 2). The implications of this could hardly be clearer: Ezekiel’s vision does *not* pertain to the thousand year reign of Christ (Rev. 20), but rather to the new World that Christ will create *after* “the thousand years,” *after* the Last Battle, and *at* his Parousia (Ezek. 38-39, Rev. 21-22).

This, by the way, was the conclusion of the great German commentator, C. F. Keil. Summarizing his interpretation of Ezekiel’s vision, Biederwolf writes:

The vision of Ezekiel he understands not as depicting the rise and development of the new Kingdom of God (i.e., the Church of Christ), but—since Ezekiel sees the temple as a finished

building—(as) the Kingdom of God established by Christ *in its perfect form*. It is the Old Testament outline of the New Testament picture of the heavenly Jerusalem of the New Earth, as set forth in Rev. 21-22. It is the Father’s house of many mansions, heaven itself, the city of God coming down from heaven upon the New Earth, built of gold, precious stones and pearls, and illumined with the light of the glory of the Lord, all of which takes place after the final judgment has been consummated.⁷

Premillennarian Dissension

Despite the historic consensus in favor of a figurative, New Covenant interpretation of this text, many modern evangelicals dissent. They include such notable premillennarians as D. Brown, A. Bonar, A. Gaebelein, A. Saphir, G. Morgan, C. Scofield, C. Feinberg, D. Pentecost, M. Unger, J. Walvoord, C. Ryrie, and J. McArthur. Though differences exist among them, all would agree with Gaebelein when he writes:

The true interpretation is the literal one, which looks upon these chapters as a prophecy yet unfulfilled and to be fulfilled when Israel has been restored by the Shepherd and when His glory is once more manifested in the midst of His people. This great building seen in his prophetic vision will then come into existence and will be accomplished.⁸

Merrill Unger is equally dogmatic, asserting, “Ezekiel’s temple is a literal future sanctuary to be constructed in Palestine as outlined during the Millennium.”⁹

Walvoord, likewise assuming that literalism is the only lawful approach to OTKP, goes so far as to say, “The only (view) which provides any intelligent explanation of this portion of Scripture is that which assigns Ezekiel’s temple to the future millennial period.”¹⁰

We have already seen, however, that there are a great many reasons for believing that it is, in fact, the literalism of the premillennarians that is unlawful; that Ezekiel himself, the whole edifice of NT eschatology, and a great many texts found in the Revelation, all concur in urging upon us a figurative, New Covenant interpretation of this “mysterious” vision.

I need not, then, devote a great deal of time to a critique of the premillennial view. Nevertheless, because this particular OTKP looms so large in the premillennarian canon, we will do well to spotlight some of the major problems incurred by going down this interpretive road.

Premillennarian Problems

First, the passage gives no indication whatsoever that the conditions described herein will last only for a thousand years. To the contrary, God explicitly states that this Temple will remain the seat of his throne and the footstool of his feet forever (43:7). It is in this Temple, this Land, and this City that he will dwell among his people forever (43:9). But even if God had not so spoken (both here *and* in Ezekiel 37:24-28), who can read the text as a whole without concluding that it is indeed designed to encourage God's people with a vision of the *eternal* World to Come: a world from which all foreign enemies have been disbarred; a world in which God himself permanently dwells among them; and a world into which he continually sends healing waters so as to effect and maintain the ultimate restoration all things?

Secondly, on the assumption that our text does indeed speak of the World to Come, a literal interpretation requires us to believe that sin and death will endure forever (42:13,19, 44:27, 43:18, 27, 44:25, 45:15). Yet the NT assures us that in the new heavens and the new earth, they shall be utterly swallowed up in victory (1 Cor. 15:20-28, 50-58, Rev. 21:4). A covenantal and typological interpretation of Ezekiel is the only way of escape.

Thirdly, even if we dodged these reasonable conclusions by allowing that the vision describes a temporary, millennial phase of the Kingdom, the literal method of interpretation would still require us to affirm that in the Millennium God will once again command his Jewish priests to offer animal sacrifices in order to make atonement for sin(s) (43:26, 45:17, 45:20). This is, of course, scandalous to a mind saturated in NT truth. Every student of Christ and the apostles understands that OT animal sacrifices had no intrinsic redemptive power, but were instead mere types and shadows of the one true sacrifice for sin: Christ crucified (John 1:29, 36, Mt. 20:28, Heb. 10:1-18). Indeed, in order to underscore the omni-sufficiency of this sacrifice, the writer to the Hebrews asserts on at least four separate occasions that it was a "once and for all" sacrifice; that it was offered once for all God's people (whether OT saints or New), once for all their sins (past, present, and future), and therefore once for all time (Heb. 7:27, 9:12, 26, 10:12).

And there is more. In order to highlight still further the absolute finality and eternal efficacy of Christ's sacrifice for sin, the same writer repeatedly

associates it with his heavenly priesthood. Having died, risen, and ascended into the Holiest of All (i.e., heaven), our Great High Priest and Sacrifice now appears in the presence of God the Father *for us*, and he will do so *forever*, pleading the legal merits of his righteous life and atoning death on behalf of his own (Heb. 7:11-28, 9:24). Just as the OT foretold, Christ is an *eternal* High Priest according to the order of Melchizedek (Psalm 110:4, Heb. 7:1f). Is it, then, even possible, let alone tolerable, to think that God will once again ordain a thousand year regime of animal sacrifices—Mosaic or otherwise—in a future millennium?

“Yes,” say the premillennarians, “it is, since those sacrifices will serve Israel and the nations as a temporary *memorial* of Christ’s sacrifice, in much the same way that the Lord’s Supper has served the Church as a temporary memorial of his death on our behalf.”

But for many reasons, this “solution” is deeply problematic. First, the text itself says nothing whatsoever about temporary memorial sacrifices. Secondly, why would Israel even *need* a memorial, when, according to the usual premillennial scenario, the glorified Christ himself will be present before their very eyes, ruling in their very midst? Thirdly, while the NT does indeed represent the Lord’s Supper as a memorial (Luke 22:19, 1 Cor. 11:24-25), it ascribes to the Supper no power to atone for sin. But in Ezekiel’s vision, God explicitly states that these sacrifices *do* atone, both for sinful objects and sinful persons (43:26, 45:17, 45:20). This in turn raises the question of how millennial Jews will be justified. Will it be by simple faith in the finished work of Christ, as the premillennarians insist, or will it be by faith in the efficacy of animal sacrifices, as the text itself asserts?

But again, the weightiest objection to the idea of future animal sacrifices is found in the positive teaching of the NT, where we learn that Christ, having fulfilled the typology of animal sacrifices by his atoning death, made those sacrifices *obsolete*, with the result that they have *forever passed away* (Heb. 8:13, 10:12). Would God break his own Word by ordaining a needlessly painful thousand year return to the weak, beggarly, and useless elements of the OT service of worship (Psalm 145:9, Prov. 12:10, Gal. 4:8-11, Heb. 7:18)? Perish the thought!

For all these reasons, we conclude that the premillennial interpretation of Ezekiel’s vision of Israel’s life and worship in the World to Come is impossible.

An Overview of Ezekiel 40-48

Having ruled out the premillennial approach, it appears that there is only one route open to us: We must apply the NCH so as to uncover the NT truth here embedded in OT language and imagery. In other words, we must adopt an amillennial interpretation. While limitations of space prevent me doing so in great detail, I think it only fair to my premillennarian brethren that I make an honest effort to open up this challenging text at least a little, especially since it is among the two or three most difficult OTKP's in all of Scripture.

Here, then, is my approach. In the pages ahead I will comment at some length on each of the seven sections mentioned above. Following Keil, my thesis will be that these nine chapters do indeed describe the life of God's people in the eschaton, in the new heavens and the new earth. I will argue that in giving this climactic vision to Ezekiel, the Spirit of God was using ideas and imagery drawn from the entire corpus of OT revelation (but especially from the Law) to picture the Church in the World to Come as the Israel of God, now returned to the Paradise of God, all through the Person and Work of the Christ of God.

With the Master's keys firmly in hand, we are ready to begin!

The Everlasting Mountain (40:1-4)

These verses set the stage for Ezekiel's grand tour of life in the World to Come. In a vision, the prophet is transported to the land of Israel, where he is set atop a very high Mountain. Upon its southern slopes he sees a structure like a city (1-2). Suddenly an angel appears, who takes him to the structure and urges him to listen carefully so that he (Ezekiel) may relate all he hears to God's people, thereby encouraging their hearts (3-5). The tour is about to begin.

Again, this is a vision. As such, it is only natural to expect that its contents are symbolic (cf., Daniel 2, 4, 7, 8, Zech. 1-6, Rev. 4-22). And indeed, we have already seen that the NT attaches rich symbolic meaning to each and every one of the fundamental elements of Ezekiel's vision: the Mountain, the Temple, the Service of Worship, the City, and the Promised Land. Therefore, like Ezekiel's angel, it (the NT) must be our guide.

In these introductory verses, the central symbol is the very high Mountain. Its significance is illuminated by Israel's history. As Moses received the pattern for ethnic Israel's ceremonial worship on Mt. Sinai, so Ezekiel beholds—in modified OT imagery—the pattern for eschatological Israel's ceremonial worship on this Mountain (Ex. 24-31). As Moses surveyed ethnic Israel's temporary Promised Land from the heights of Mt. Nebo, so Ezekiel surveys eschatological Israel's eternal Promised Land from the heights of this Mountain (Deut. 32:48-52). And as ethnic Israel worshiped God in his temple situated atop Mt. Zion, so—according to Ezekiel—eschatological Israel will worship God in his Temple atop this high Mountain, this eschatological Zion (2 Chron. 5:1ff).

But what exactly does the Mountain represent? As we saw earlier, even the OT prophets used this particular symbol to represent the new heavens and the new earth; a fully transformed World from which every trace of moral and natural evil has been removed, so that the glory of God may fully dwell therein (Isaiah 11:9, 25:6-8, 57:13, 65:25, Joel 3:14-17).

This interpretation is confirmed by Revelation 21:1-11. There we learn that John, just like Ezekiel, was carried away in the Spirit to a great and high Mountain. What did he see? The Holy City—New Jerusalem—coming down out of heaven from God (21:10-11). And where, in fact, did the Holy City settle, there to remain forever? It settled upon a new earth, for the former heavens and the former earth had passed away (vv. 21:1-2). Thus, John, in accordance with the principle of Progressive Revelation, was given to see what Ezekiel could not: The Mountain of God is none other than the new earth, the glorious home of Christ's glorified Bride and God's glorified people (21:3). For the present, the Church is a light shining in the darkness of this fallen world; she is as a City upon a high Hill (Mt. 5:14, John 1:5). However, in that day—according to Ezekiel and John—she will shine like a City on a Mountain, the highest Mountain of all!

The Everlasting Temple (40:5-42:20)

This portion of the vision describes the Temple Area and its contents. Ezekiel's journey begins here because in the World to Come the Temple—or rather the worship of him who inhabits the Temple—will be of first importance. Also, as he learns later in his tour, the Temple Area will be

situated at the absolute center of the Land. Thus, by speaking first of the center of life in the World to Come, the Spirit alerts us to the fact that in the eschaton the worship of God in Christ will lie at the heart of all things.

If we limit ourselves to the essentials, the plan of the Temple Area is fairly easy to describe.¹¹ It is a perfect square (42:15-20). At the exact center is the altar (43:13-17). Behind the altar, to the West, stands the Sanctuary, or the Temple itself. Elevated upon its base, it is comprised of the Most Holy Place (another perfect square), the Holy Place, and a portico. The whole structure is enclosed on the North, South, and West by three galleries containing 90 side rooms (41:5-11). The Sanctuary and the altar are enclosed by a small rectangular court (40:47). On either side of the Sanctuary, just outside this court, are buildings with more chambers for the priests (42:1-10). Behind the Sanctuary to the West are three separate buildings, two of which contain utensils for the preparation of the various sacrifices (46:19-20). On the North, East, and South sides of the Temple court there are gateways, each containing chambers for the Temple guards (40:28-38). Surrounding the entire Temple Area is a large outer court, bounded by four high walls each measuring 500 cubits in length. Thus, it too is a perfect square. In the middle of the Northern, Eastern, and Southern walls there are large gates, each with chambers for the Temple guards (40:5, 16-20). Ezekiel's tour was "outside-in" and "inside-out." He enters through the Eastern Gate of the outer court, proceeds towards the Most Holy Place of the Temple (which he does not enter), and exits again through the Eastern Gate.

While it is undoubtedly true that each element of this vision contains rich typological significance, we cannot see the trees until we behold the forest. In other words, we must first ask ourselves, "What does the Temple Area as a whole symbolize?" The NT answers in no uncertain terms. Jesus said, "Destroy this temple and I will raise it up in three days" (John 2:18). For Christ, the Temple of God was—and would be—his body. The apostle Paul elaborates, declaring that God the Father gave Christ to be head over all things to the Church, which is his Body, the fullness of him who fills all in all (Eph. 1:22-23, 5:22ff). So then, the Temple is not simply Jesus' physical body, but rather his mystical Body, the Church, of which he is the Head. Paul states this explicitly, affirming that Christ's ever-expanding

Church is a “holy Temple in the Lord, in whom (the saints) are being built together into a dwelling place of God by the Spirit” (Eph. 2:21-21).

These NT passages reveal the true sphere of fulfillment of Ezekiel’s vision of the Temple Area. In other words, God was using OT ideas and images to give him a glimpse of the Church—the Body of Christ—as she will exist in the eschaton. John the Revelator confirms that this vision was indeed symbolic. In a vision of his own he describes the new earth. However, he sees no temple in it. Why? Because “. . . the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its Temple” (Rev. 21:22). Thus, in the World to Come (the very theme of Ezekiel’s prophecy) there will be no Temple made of wood or stone. However, John does see a holy city, adorned as a Bride for her Husband, and declares that she herself is the tabernacle (or temple) of God, the place where He will live and be among them forever (21:1-4). In short, John tells us that Ezekiel’s vision of the eschatological Temple of God is fulfilled in the glorified Body of Christ.

We conclude, then, with Duguid, that Ezekiel’s vision of the Temple Area is “architectural theology”, that it uses OT temple imagery to set forth important theological truths about Christ and the Church. In particular, we may say that in this early portion of the vision the Spirit uses OT type and shadow to picture *the completed Body of Christ, enjoying the life of Christ, because of the merits of the Work of Christ, even as it awaits the gift of the glory of God the Father at the Coming of Christ*. This thesis requires further explanation. It is best, however, to offer it as we look at some of the more important details of Ezekiel’s vision of the Temple Area.

1. The Outer Walls (40:5, 16-20)

The outer walls—which are very high, thick, and strong—are “walls of salvation” (40:5, 16-20; Isaiah 60:18). They represent the mighty power of the Person and Work of Christ “to separate the holy from the common”; to deliver and preserve his Body from the presence, power, and penalty of sin (42:20). Even today, through the sanctifying work of the Spirit, the High King of Heaven has erected a legal and spiritual barrier between his Church on the one hand, and the world, the flesh, the devil, and the judgments of God on the other (Ex. 14:19-20, John 17:15, 2 Cor. 6:14-7:1, 1 Pet. 1:1-2, Rev. 18:4). In the Age to Come, that barrier will be perfect and complete. The sin and defilement that entered ethnic Israel’s former temple area will

never enter spiritual Israel's eschatological Temple Area (Ezek. 8-9, Rev. 22:15). The God who abandoned ethnic Israel's earthly sanctuary will never abandon spiritual Israel's heavenly sanctuary (Ezek. 10). In the words of one commentator, the World to Come will be a "Paradise with Walls"—walls of salvation that mightily keep evil out and God in. Therefore, it will be a world that can never fall again.

2. Gates and Gateways (40:6-27)

The three gates in the walls surrounding the outer court, and the three gateways to the inner court, all symbolize *spiritual access*, access made possible by the redemptive work of the *triune* God. Because of that work, God the Father, by the Holy Spirit, can henceforth gain access to the Body of Christ, just as he did on the Day of Pentecost, and just as he has done ever since, whenever he calls a saint to newness of life in his Son (John 14:15-24, Acts 2:1f). Because of that work, the saints now have access in one Spirit to the Father (Eph. 2:18), and to the everlasting grace in which they now stand (Rom. 5:1-2, NKJV). Also, because of that same work, the God of glory will gain consummate access to the Body of Christ at the Parousia on the Last Day (Ezek. 43:1-4, Rev. 21:3, 11, 23).

Notably, the spiritual access described in Ezekiel's vision is not unlimited: None but the priests may enter the Sanctuary, the Eastern Gate must remain closed except on Sabbaths and New Moons, etc. Such restrictions are fitting in a distinctly *Old Testament* revelation of the Kingdom, a revelation given at a time when the way into the Holiest of All was not yet made manifest (Heb. 9:8). Nevertheless, the restrictions are not without significance for NT believers in Jesus, since they serve to remind us that apart from Christ's priestly work we have no access whatsoever to God. Happily, because of its infinite sufficiency, that work does indeed give God and (redeemed) man complete, unrestricted access to one another, as the Revelation picturesquely affirms (Rev. 21:25)

3. The Outer and Inner Courts (40:28-35)

Next we have the two courts, both outer and inner. More than any other element of the Temple Area, they bring to mind the idea of "holy ground" (Exodus 3:5). It is ground created by the walls of salvation, and therefore suitable as a meeting place for God and (redeemed) man (Psalm 65:4). For

the OT saints, the temple courts were a place of spiritual satisfaction (Psalm 84:2, 10), flourishing (Psalm 92:13), gratitude, joy, and praise (Psalm 100:4, 135:2-3). In his vision of God's eschatological courts, Ezekiel is therefore telling us that in that Day the LORD's holy people/royal priesthood will be able to meet with God on the ground of Christ, and so enjoy all these blessings forever.

4. The Chambers (40:38-44, 42:1-15)

The Temple Area contains a great abundance of *chambers*. Embedded in the walls and the buildings, they are mostly for the use of the (Zadokite) priests, but also for singers and (Levitical) gatekeepers (40:39-45, 42:1-10, 46:19-24). This calls to mind how Christ has strategically "set" each of his charismatically gifted children into his Body, so they may become vital, functioning members thereof (1 Cor. 12:18). Each of his "royal priests" occupies an appointed niche and has an appointed ministry to fulfill (1 Peter 2:9, 4:10-11). The prophet's vision also reminds us of the words of Christ, who said that in his Father's house there are many dwelling places (John 14:2; NIV, "rooms"). These are not physical structures, but spiritual spheres of service. The chambers in Ezekiel's Temple vision depict the eternal gifts and callings of the saints (Luke 19:17).

5. The Sanctuary, or Temple Building (40:48-41:26)

This tri-partite structure—consisting of a portico, an outer sanctuary (the Holy Place), and an inner sanctuary (the Most Holy Place)—is the dwelling place of the Presence and Glory of God. It displays four notable characteristics corresponding to its NT antitype, the Body of Christ.

First, the Sanctuary is *elevated* above all other structures in the Temple Area. Even in the World to Come, the Body of Christ will be seated in heavenly places; she will be high and lifted up, not spatially, but spiritually, in virtue of her surpassing holiness and intimacy with the Triune God (Isaiah 52:13, Eph. 2:6, Rev. 21:10).

Secondly, the Sanctuary is *protected*, not only by walls, chambers, buildings, buffer zones, courts, and gates, but also by divine decree. This is especially true of the Most Holy Place: Only God himself, and the angel whom he sent to the prophet, are permitted to enter by its exceedingly narrow door. If we think of this Sanctuary as a true physical structure, the

message here is indeed a gloomy one, speaking as it does of sinful man's exclusion from the Presence of the Holy God. But if, with John the Revelator, we think of the Sanctuary as a spiritual structure—as the Body of Christ itself—then suddenly we find Ezekiel giving us something vastly more encouraging: a holy people, filled with the Holy Spirit, indwelt by the holy God, and therefore eternally secure from every defilement and punishment of sin (Rev. 21:1-3, 17-18, 22, 27).

Thirdly, the Sanctuary is ever served (and preserved) by *sacrifice*. As we have seen, an altar of sacrifice stands before it at the absolute center of the land. Also, it is surrounded by various kinds of rooms that house priests and implements devoted to sacrifices for sin. On this score, the NT blessedly relieves our distress. No, it is not that in the eschaton Jewish priests will offer animal sacrifices forever. Rather, it is that Christ, our eternal High Priest and Sacrifice, will ever live to present the merits of his once-for-all sacrifice to the Father; he will ever live to make intercession for his Body, so that the Presence of the Holy God may ever fill his Body (Isaiah 53:12, Rom. 8:34, Heb. 7:25, 27, 10:10).

Finally, the Sanctuary is a *dwelling place*, not only for God, but also for man. True, the priests cannot remain in it, or even enter the Most Holy Place. But as we have seen, many of them live in the 90 side-chambers attached to it. The three tiers of galleries, each containing 30 (3x10) chambers, call to mind the redemptive work of the Holy Trinity: Together, the three Persons have created one many-membered Body of Christ, a holy priesthood that lives forever in (close proximity to) God, even as God lives forever in (close proximity to) it (John 17:23, 26, 1 Peter 2:5, Eph. 2:22).

6. Palm Trees and Cherubim (41:15-20, 24-36)

In passing, it is well worth noting that on the walls and door jambs of the Sanctuary Ezekiel saw carved images of palm trees and cherubim, situated one between the other. Each cherub had two faces, one of a man, the other of a lion, with each face looking towards an adjacent palm tree (41:15-20). Here the vision begins to incorporate inspiring pictures of Paradise regained. The palm trees remind us of Eden's lush vegetation; indeed, of the Tree of Life itself. The cherubim recall Adam and Eve's expulsion and exile from the Garden (Gen. 3:24). Here, however, the holy angels—just like the walls of salvation—are not keeping God's people out,

but keeping them in. In the eschaton, the world will become a Temple-Garden for God's people. The mighty cherubim, whose faces embody the compassion of the Son of Man (Heb. 4:14-15) and the royal power of the Lion of the Tribe of Judah (Rev. 5:5), will stand watch, this time *guaranteeing* perpetual access to the Tree of Life.

The Everlasting Glory (43:1-12)

For all its brevity, this is surely the high point of Ezekiel's vision, the climactic Oracle of Good News. Years prior, he himself had received a heart-rending vision of the glory of the God of Israel departing from Solomon's Temple (Ezek. 8-11). However, where sin abounds, grace will much more abound. Therefore, in a corresponding vision, he now receives a countermanding promise: In that Day, the glory of God will return to the eschatological Temple. And it will remain there forever, for in that Day Israel will become holy forever.

What exactly does this vision signify? How exactly is it to be fulfilled? As I suggested earlier—and as the details indicate—it points to nothing less than the gift of the fullness of the glory of God upon both man and nature at the Parousia of Christ. Yes, the glory of the LORD had indeed departed from Solomon's temple because of ethnic Israel's many sins. But that was a mere emblem of a far greater departure: the departure of the glory of God—and the hope of the glory of God in its fullness—from man and nature *because of the sin of Adam in Eden*. Here, however, under OT type and shadow, Ezekiel gives us great good news: These tragic departures will all be answered with a glorious, redemptive Return. The NT explains how. When at last Christ's Temple—his Church—is complete, he will come again in glory to consummate his redemptive work; to bestow upon his resurrected people and their world the fullness of the glory of God the Father (John 17:22, Phil. 2:11, Rev. 21:11, 23).

The details of the vision richly support this interpretation.

First, Ezekiel sees the glory of the LORD coming from the way of the East (v. 2). This is the place of the sun's rising, whence the glorified Christ will appear to all at the dawning of the Age to Come (Mt. 24:27, 2 Peter 1:19).

Secondly, the prophet also hears the voice of the LORD, which is as the sound of many waters (v. 2). Thus did John describe the voice of the glorified Christ, when he appeared to him on the island of Patmos and spoke to him of his coming again (Rev. 1:7-8, 15). Note also the astonishing declaration of the apostle Paul, that at his Coming Christ will descend from heaven with a shout (1 Thess. 4:16)!

Thirdly, when the LORD appeared to Ezekiel, the earth shone with his glory (v. 2). This too recalls John's initial vision of the glory of Christ, whose face shone like the sun in its strength, and at whose Parousia the earth will be illumined by that same glory (Rev. 1:16, 18:1).

Fourthly, Ezekiel records that the glory of the LORD will enter the Sanctuary through the East Gate(s) of the Temple Area (v. 5). Interestingly, in the days of his flesh, on Palm Sunday, Jesus entered Jerusalem by the East Gate. That, however, was but a type and harbinger of a far greater entering still to come; an entering that will occur at his Parousia, when, at the resurrection of the dead, he will adorn his holy Bride-City with the glory of God the Father (Eph. 2:2, Rev. 21:3, 11).

Fifthly, Ezekiel records that the glory of the LORD filled the house (v. 5). Doubtless this was partially fulfilled on the Day of Pentecost, when the Spirit arrived on earth to fill the nascent Church (Acts 2:1f). Yet even then the saints were not *fully* filled, owing to residual sin in their members; nor can the Church—Christ's holy Temple—be fully filled until, as she reaches the end of the age, the Lord sets the last stone set in place (Mt. 24:14, 1 Peter 2:5). Here, then, we have the final and complete infilling of God's eschatological Temple; the infilling that renders his people perfectly holy, thereby by making them a perfectly suitable House for the Great King, a resting place where he may sit enthroned forever (43:7, Rev. 21:11).

Finally, observe from verse 12 that when the Temple is at last filled with God's glory, the *whole area* atop the Mountain will be most holy. This, in a type, is exactly what the apostle Paul taught his Roman brethren, declaring that when Christ returns to resurrect the saints to eternal life all creation will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God (Rom. 8:20-21). The glorification of the Church ushers in the glorification of the world where she will live with God forever (Rev. 21:1-4). In that Day, the whole earth will become the High Mountain of the LORD.

The Everlasting Worship (43:13-46:24)

This long and detailed section is designed to portray the manner of life and worship by which God's restored Israel may—and surely will—maintain the perfect holiness of his eschatological Temple, thereby securing his presence and blessing in the land throughout the eternal Age to Come.

How will this be accomplished? In response, Ezekiel gives us two notable modifications of the Mosaic Law. First, the Prince, the priests, and the people will continually offer a full spectrum of sacrifices, more than ever before. And secondly, there will be, as Duguid has it, “a tightening of the holiness code.” Whether by restricted access to the temple precincts, or by new safeguards against spiritual defilements of any kind, there will never again be a recurrence of the desecration of the House of God, because of which Israel of old went into exile beneath the covenant curses.

How are we to understand these new regulations? In the paragraphs ahead, I will suggest some answers. Since the details are abundant and the symbolism complex, there is room for some difference of opinion as to their exact meaning. Nevertheless, we shall not go far wrong if we remember yet again that here the Holy Spirit gave God's OT saints *a veiled revelation of the Church in her glory*. In particular, he was using familiar ideas and images drawn from the OT ceremonial law to inspire them—and us—with a glorious hope of complete redemption and perpetual holiness through the Person and Work of his Son.

1. The Altar of Sacrifice (43:13-17)

Here we learn of the dimensions and consecration of the altar of sacrifice. It is a perfect square—a shape associated with holiness—situated not only at the absolute center of the Temple Area, but also at the center of the land itself. The message is clear: The eternal holiness (and blessedness) of God's people will be based upon—will be centered around—the eternal efficacy of Christ's sacrifice, whether his active or passive obedience (Heb. 7:27, Rev. 5:6ff). As under the Mosaic Law, so here: The altar must be consecrated, cleansed, and atoned for by means of sacrifice, a sign of its defilement and intrinsic “uselessness” (v. 26; Exodus 29:36-7, Heb. 7:18). The NT gives us the meaning: Jesus, by his willingness to die upon the Cross, consecrates it, transforming a tree of cursing into a Tree of Life, with

the result that, henceforth and forever, his people—a royal priesthood—may offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God (Gal. 3:13, 1 Peter 2:5, 9, 24).

2. The Prince and his Dynasty (44:1-3)

Here we encounter the first of many new restrictions: The Prince (and his royal successors) are indeed privileged to sit and eat in the Eastern Gate, but they may not enter the Temple Area by it, for the glory of the LORD has entered there. This law recalls the sinful ways of Israel's former kings, who had presumptuously violated the holy precincts (43:7-8). But never again. Why? Because in that Day, God alone will be King, and the royal household mere princes! And also because the prince's access to the Temple area will be limited to the outer court.

What is the NT "translation" of these mysteries? For reasons that will become clear below, I lean to the view that the princes typify the Church as a whole; the Church as a *royal* priesthood; the Church as the everlasting *dynasty* of the greater King David, ruling and reigning in life by Christ (2 Sam. 7:12-16, Rom. 5:17, 1 Peter 2:9, Rev. 5:10). For in that Day, says the NT, each one will serve the Great King within their proper sphere, in accordance with the nature and limits of the authority given to them. Therefore, they will never violate, but rather beautify, the good order of the Temple of God (Luke 19:11-27, 1 Cor. 14:40).

3. The Law for Foreigners (44:4-9)

Here God issues a second restriction, and it is absolute: No foreigner, uncircumcised in heart or flesh, shall ever enter his sanctuary. The NT explains: Only those circumcised in heart by regeneration, and in the flesh by the resurrection and glorification of their bodies, will inherit the (perfected) Kingdom of God (John 3:5, Col. 2:11, 1 Cor. 15:50f, Rev. 22:15).

4. The Eternal twofold Priesthood (44:10-13)

Now Ezekiel learns about the eschatological priesthood. Two main revelations are involved. First, the great bulk of Levites—who, along with the nation as a whole, strayed into idolatry—will bear their iniquity and shame by forfeiting some of their former privileges, some of their former access to God's "holy things." The sons of Zadok, on the other hand, will be

allowed to offer sacrifices at God's altar, enter the Holy Place, and minister at his table, since they alone among all the Levites remained faithful amidst the widespread rebellion.

Secondly, in the World to Come, God will hold the Zadokite priesthood to a new and higher standard of ceremonial holiness. In particular, they will follow new rules pertaining to attire, appearance, diet, married life, ministerial duties, and purification from limited contacts with the dead. Corresponding to this greater holiness and ministerial privilege, there will be a greater inheritance: The LORD himself will be their treasured possession, and they will have as their food all the various offerings that a worshipful people bring to their God.

What NT truths lie hidden beneath this elaborate OT typology? Duguid argues that here the vision depicts the condition of the saints in the World to Come from two different angles. On the one hand, Ezekiel has the great bulk of Levites living and serving in the Temple, not because of their own faithfulness (which faded away like a morning cloud, Hosea 6:4), but because of God's, manifested previously in his gracious covenant with Levi and his children (Mal. 2:5). For Duguid, this corresponds to NT teaching about the ground of the saints' *presence* in the Kingdom: They will live and serve there owing solely to the gift of the miracle of (new) birth into the priestly family of the Greater Levi, and also to the divine imputation of his righteousness to God's chosen and believing seed (1 Cor. 1:30-31, Heb. 2:17, 9:24). On the other hand, the prophet declares that the Zadokites will enjoy special privileges because of their extraordinary level of faithfulness amidst widespread apostasy. According to Duguid, this corresponds to NT teaching about the ground of the saints' *status* in the Kingdom: Higher levels of covenant obedience, labor, and self-sacrifice will result in higher levels of intimacy with God and priestly service in his eternal Temple, the Church (Mt. 19:21, 28, 1 Cor. 3:11-15, 2 Cor. 9:6, Heb. 6:10). In short, for Duguid, the Zadokites are the cream of the Christian crop.

While this approach definitely draws upon some solid NT truth, I believe there is another interpretation that better fits the text, more highly exalts Christ, and less sharply divides his Church into successes and failures. Here, the Zadokites stand for Christ himself. The OT offers strong support for this idea. In the days of Samuel, God told unfaithful Eli that he would raise up “. . . a faithful priest, who will do according to what is in my

heart and in my mind” (2 Sam. 2:35). According to *The Reformation Study Bible*, the fulfillment came in the person of Zadok, who served as High Priest alongside Abiathar under David, and who came to preeminence under Solomon. The descendants of Zadok held the high priesthood from the time of Solomon to the time of Antiochus Epiphanes and the Maccabees.¹² As for NT teaching, it takes us a giant step forward, revealing the Messianic significance of God’s word to Eli: It is Christ—and Christ alone—who is the faithful High Priest of his people (Heb. 2:17). It appears, then, that in Ezekiel’s vision, the Zadokite priesthood stands as a familiar and time-honored OT emblem of the faithful Messianic Priest whom God promised in the days of Samuel, and whom he finally sent in the person of his incarnate Son.

There is much in the text itself to confirm this thesis; much to cause us to think of Christ. First, God will call the Zadokites to serve under unprecedented standards of ceremonial holiness: They must be dressed in white linen, untainted by the “sweat” of fleshly human works (vv. 17-18; Luke 1:35, John 8:29, Heb. 7:26, Rev. 1:9ff); their appearance must conform to God’s creation norm, with no nods to pagan fashion, faith, or practice (v. 20, Rom. 5:12ff, Heb. 7:26); God alone must be their delight, their sole source of holy intoxication (v. 21; Mt. 27:34, Luke 10:21f, John 4:32); in marriage, they must be equally yoked, bound to a wife made in their own image and likeness (v. 22; John 3:29, Eph. 5:22ff, Col. 3:8-11); they shall have no contact with death, save in the service of their near and dear relatives (v. 25; Isaiah 53:4-6, Mark 10:45, John 10:11, 15); and when the effects of such contact are cleansed away, they shall enter the sanctuary with a sin offering, to minister there because of the dead (vv. 26-27; Acts 2:22-36, 1 Peter 1:21, Heb. 7:25, 9:12, 24). By reading the NT texts that I have cited here, you will see the astonishing ways in which Jesus of Nazareth fulfills all these criteria!

Secondly, God will call Zadokites to privileged positions of ministry: to teach (v. 23; Mt. 23:8, 10), to judge (v. 24; John 5:22, Eph. 1:22), to preside over all God’s feasts and Sabbaths (v. 24; Mark 2:28, Luke 22:15, 1 Cor. 5:8), to draw near to God, to minister to God, and to serve God in behalf of his people for the forgiveness of their sins (vv. 15-16; John 14:2, 6, 1 Tim. 2:5, Heb. 7:25, 9:12, 24). Again, in all these things we see the Person and Work of Christ.

Finally, God (the Father) will bestow upon them extraordinary honor and blessing: He himself will be their inheritance, their exceedingly great reward for faithfully keeping the charge of God's sanctuary, even when the people strayed far from him (vv. 28, 15; Isaiah 59:16, John 5:23, Phil. 2:9f); they shall savor and draw strength from all the good things that the people of God offer through them (vv. 29-30; Heb. 13:15, Rev. 5:8-14); and they shall never taste of death, save the sacrificial death by which God gives life to his own (v. 31; Heb. 2:14-15, 1 Peter 1:18ff). Cannot all of these things be affirmed of Christ and his relation to the Father?

But what of the rest of the Levites, what do they signify? Here I would largely concur with Duguid, arguing that they picture Christ's Church as a whole. In the completed Kingdom, they will indeed bear their iniquity and shame, for like their father Adam, and like Israel's unfaithful Levites, they abandoned their glorious priestly calling by creation—to draw near to God and minister to him and one another—and fell instead into abominable idolatries, religious or otherwise (vv. 10, 12, 13; Rom. 1:18-25, 1 Peter 4:3).

But how *exactly* will they bear their iniquity and shame? Certainly not by undergoing eternal punishment, for here Ezekiel sees that the merciful and gracious God will not only grant them access to his sanctuary, but also give them “charge over the house and all that shall be done in it” (vv. 11, 14; Rom. 5:2, Eph. 3:12, 1 Peter 2:5). So then, they will remain a holy and eternal priesthood, but their “punishment” will consist in this: They will minister to God at one remove from Zadok; they will serve God by serving Zadok; Zadok will become, as it were, the one mediator between God and Levi (v. 13; John 14:6, 1 Tim. 2:5). Again, the NT illumines all this. Looking upon Christ's “rich wounds,” believers in Jesus will indeed be eternally reminded of the dreadful sins that put him to such a dreadful death (Rev. 5:6, 9ff). But strange to tell, in this “shame” there will be no admixture of sorrow; only of joy and gratitude to a loving Savior who so mercifully and graciously qualified his people to be a kingdom and priests to his God (Col. 1:12, Jude 1:24, Rev. 1:6, 5:10, 21:4).

5. The Division of the Land (45:1-8)

Next, God begins to show Ezekiel the new division of the land in the World to Come (cf., 48:8-22). His concern here is exclusively with the LORD's portion, a Holy District that belongs to no tribe, but to God alone.

Situated in the midst of the land, it is a perfect square, 25,000 cubits by 25,000 cubits. In the midst of the Holy District is the Temple Area, another perfect square. To the South of the Temple Area is the City, yet another perfect square. Notably, every sector of the eschatological nation is represented as living in, or dwelling adjacent to, the Holy District: the Prince, the Zadokite priests, the Levites, and “the whole house of Israel” (i.e., those who possess and maintain the City and its environs).

This, according to Duguid, is the beginning of Ezekiel’s “theological geography lesson.” The angel is not giving him a map of the World to Come, but is instead disclosing profound truths about spiritual conditions to be experienced in that World. The main message is that the life of God’s people will be centered around the Temple; that in all their diverse activities, there will be one essential activity: the worship of God through Christ on the ground of Christ’s priestly work (Eph. 3:20-21, 1 Peter 2:5, Rev. 7:9-17). Another message, strikingly communicated by the presence of so many perfect squares, is that life in that world will be perfect: perfectly holy, and therefore perfectly harmonious. All of God’s people will be (squarely) bundled together in the (square) bundle of the living (1 Sam. 25:29)! In the Revelation, the Spirit takes up this beautiful motif one final time, representing the Church as a City foursquare—and as a Temple foursquare—situated in the new heavens and the new earth (Rev. 21:1-3,16).

6. The Princely Dynasty (45:9-46:24)

In this section God continues his revelation of Temple-centered life in the World to Come, focusing on various ordinances of worship. Having just described the new *spiritual* leaders of the eschatological nation, he now turns his attention to the new *temporal* leaders. Importantly, he does not refer to them as kings, but as princes, thus signaling to his people that in the eschaton God’s original purpose for his holy nation will indeed be fulfilled: The royal dynasty will remain, but God alone will be King (1 Sam. 8:7, 1 Cor. 15:28).

A close examination of the ordinances unveiled here reveals a striking fact: The primary duties of the Prince (and his dynasty) pertain to the worship of God in the Temple. To be sure, he must faithfully administer justice and righteousness in the land (45:9-12, 46:16-18). But even more

importantly, he must co-labor with the priests and the people in the full round of Temple worship. Indeed, along with the priests, he will serve as a kind of *mediator* between God and the people. For example, he must receive the sin offerings of the people and present them to the priests, who in turn will present them to God (45:9-12). Out of his own means he must supply the offerings for the various Feasts, such as the Passover and the Feast of Tabernacles (45:18-25). According to a very strict regime, he and the people must worship together on the Sabbath and at the New Moons, gathering just outside the Eastern Gate of the inner court to present a great abundance of sacrifices and offerings (46:1-8). And on the Feast Days, both he and the people must enter and exit the Temple together (46:9-12). Does the prince have a role to play in the daily offerings (46:13-15)? If not, they appear to be the only ones left altogether in the hands of the priests. Thus, the overall message of this section is quite clear: The Prince—or rather the royal dynasty that will serve under Yahweh the King—is *a royal priesthood*.

Here, then, in a prophecy full of complex OT symbolism, we have a picture of the Church as a *spiritual dynasty*—the spiritual seed of God’s greater David, the High King of Heaven—and as a *royal priesthood*, offering up eternal spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God (Rom. 12:1). This royal priesthood was first glimpsed in king David (himself a prince beneath the sovereign Yahweh), who donned an ephod and danced before the LORD, thus leading his kinsmen in the worship of their true King (2 Sam. 6:1f). Shortly thereafter it was mystically promised to Israel in the Davidic Covenant (2 Sam. 7:8-17, Psalm 89:19-37). Later it was foreshadowed in Solomon and other Israelite kings, who, like David, ministered in tandem with the Levites in behalf of his people (1 Kings 8, 2 Chron. 20). Finally, on the Day of Pentecost it was born, beginning immediately to offer manifold spiritual sacrifices to God through Christ, as indeed it will continue to do until the end of the Age (Acts 2, Rom. 12:1, 1 Peter 2:9, Rev. 1:6, 5:10).

But according to the vision here given to Ezekiel, Christ’s royal priesthood is to exercise their ministry to all eternity. That is, in the new heavens and the new earth they will use whatever spiritual authority, gifts, privileges, and prerogatives they may have received from God to facilitate—to *mediate* to their kinsmen—the eternal worship of God through Christ (Luke 19:17, Heb. 13:15, Rev. 5:10, 22:5). To say it as Ezekiel might be

pleased to say it, in the World to Come the Church as *royal priesthood* will team up with the Church as *Levitical priesthood*, so that together, through Christ, whether in word or deed, they may offer up an eternal sacrifice of praise to God; so that the one holy nation may dwell in the Promised Land together with their God and King, forever enjoying the manifold blessings of their Eternal Covenant with him (Gal. 6:16, 1 Peter 2:5, Heb. 13:15, Rev. 4, 5).

The Everlasting Wholeness (47:1-12)

This short but beloved portion of Ezekiel's vision might aptly be called the Restoration of All Things (Mt. 19:28, Acts 3:21). Under rich types, it depicts God, through Christ, by the Spirit, bestowing everlasting wholeness upon his creation; transforming our present sin-cursed earth into the Land of Promise; turning the former things into the new heavens and the new earth (Rom. 8:18-25, Rev. 21:1, 5).

The narrative is well worth a brief retelling. The prophet is now brought to the door of the Temple. There he sees a little stream of water welling up from beneath the threshold, flowing just south of the altar (where the Laver was situated in former times), and then out through the two East Gates of the Temple District (vv. 1-2; 1 Kings 7:23f). Mysteriously enough, the further the stream flows, the deeper and wider it becomes, until at last it is an unfordable River (vv. 3-5). Suddenly, the prophet notices a great many trees growing on the two banks of the River (vv. 6-7).

At this point, the angel explains all: The River will first go east, then south, and then through the desert, until at last it empties into (something like) the Dead Sea, whose (salty) waters will therefore be healed (v. 8). Indeed, everywhere it goes, the River will bring life, so much so that (what seems to be) the Dead Sea itself will again be filled with fish. As a result, fishermen, with nets in hand, will station themselves all along its shores, even from En Gedi to En Eglaim (v. 10); however, its swamps and marshes will be left for salt (v. 11). All kinds of trees will grow along the banks of the River, trees whose leaves will never wither, and whose fruit will never fail. The water continually flowing from the Sanctuary will give them eternal life, so that their fruit will ever serve for food, and their leaves for healing (12).

Again, I reckon this to be a vision of the Restoration of All Things. Here we have a “mysterious” OT picture of what Christ will accomplish at his Parousia, when he subjects all things to himself by the exertion of his mighty power; when he consummates his redemptive work by making all things new (Phil. 3:21, Rev. 21:5). It is important to note, however, that the vision also gives us a kind of retrospective; that it also pictures something of the works of God by which this, the final goal of Salvation History, has now been reached.

We can better understand all this by bringing NT light to bear on some of the symbols involved. The waters are, of course, the life-giving Spirit of God, long promised by his OT prophets (Psalm 46:6, Isaiah 44:3, Ezek. 39:29, Joel 2:28, 3:18, Zech. 14:8). They flow forth from the Temple of God, which typifies both the Person of Christ (John 2:19, 4:10-14, 7:37-39, Acts 2:33), and the Body of Christ, his Church (Eph. 1:23, 2:22). In the Era of Proclamation, they flowed through faithful Christians (who are fishers of men) to Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the uttermost parts of the earth (Mt. 4:19, John 20:22-23, Acts 2, 10). Now, at the Parousia, they flow through Christ himself into all creation.

Other details are rich with significance. The waters pass by the altar: They are given solely on the ground of Christ’s substitutionary life and death. They also pass over the site historically reserved for the laver: They provide spiritual cleansing from the guilt and stain of sin (John 13:10, 1 Cor. 6:11, Titus 3:5). Also, as they flow outward, they grow from a trickle to a mighty rushing River. Here again we have a retrospective, a picture of the infallible advance of the Kingdom of the Son, of which Jesus himself often spoke (Mt. 13:31-33). But above all, this is a picture of the mighty work of the Spirit at Christ’s return, when he raises the dead, transforms the living, lifts the (salt of the) curse from nature, swallows up death in victory, and floods the whole creation with the healing, life-giving glory of God (Rom. 8:18-25, Phil. 3:21, 1 Cor. 15:51ff).

In that Day, only the swamps and marshes surrounding the Dead Sea (which covers the ruins of Sodom and Gomorrah) will be left in salt. That is to say, only those who have refused to take the water of life will eternally remain under the curse and judgment of God (Deut. 29:23; Mt. 25:46, John 4:10, 7:38, Jude 1:7, Rev. 18:2).

In passing, we should note that this particular OTKP is outstanding for taking up the biblical motif of Paradise Lost and Regained. The waters flowing from beneath the Temple threshold remind us of the great River that flowed out of Eden (Gen. 2:10-14). The trees on either side of the River—trees that nourish and heal—remind us of the Tree of Life that stood in the midst of the Garden (Gen. 2:9, 3:22, 24). As for Paradise itself, it is true that Ezekiel, like all the OT prophets, typically describes it in terms of the Promised Land. That was only natural: Since he and his contemporaries lived under the Law, the prophetic Spirit was pleased to frame the promise of the Eternal Covenant in terms drawn from the Law; in terms of an eternal restoration to life with God in the land (Deut. 30:1-10). In the Revelation, however, “true truth” comes out. There we see what Ezekiel only hints at here: When Christ returns, the River of Life will indeed transform all creation into the Promised Land. But more than this, it will transform the Promised Land into Paradise itself. There the River will ever flow; there the Tree of Life will ever nourish and heal; and there the Last Adam will ever dwell, in glory, with his beloved Bride (Rev. 21:1-2, 22:1-2, 14).

The Everlasting Homeland (47:13-48:29)

Having spoken to the prophet about the Temple at the heart of the Holy District, and the Holy District at the heart of the land, God now brings Ezekiel’s grand tour to a close by unveiling the boundaries and distribution of the Promised Land itself. Here, the central theme is *inheritance*. This is the land that God will cause his people to inherit, and this is the place where he will cause them to inherit an everlasting life of God-centered and Christ-centered worship. Thus, as in the Revelation, so here: The Spirit is giving us a picture of the eschatological Church worshipping God in the new heavens and the new earth.

In 47:15-23, Ezekiel learns about the borders of Israel’s eschatological homeland. They are patterned after the ideal given to Moses (Num. 34:1-12). The message is: In the eschaton, the LORD will bring to pass what Joshua could not, but what God’s Greater Joshua could and did. At long last, his people will enter his rest; they will fully occupy the Land of Promise (Heb. 3:7-4:10). Moreover, God himself explicitly tells us that this is the land he promised to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; the same land that

the apostles identified as the World to Come and the new heavens and the new earth (Gen. 12:7, 15:18-21, 22:17, 28:4, Psalm 37:11; Mt. 5:5, Rom. 4:13, 8:18f, 2 Peter 3:13).

And there is more. It appears, for example, that the eastern boundaries of the five northern tribes reach almost to the Euphrates River (47:15-17, 48:1-5). This recalls the glory days of the United Kingdom, days that pictured the universal dominion of Solomon's greater Son—the Lord Jesus Christ—in the Age to Come (Psalm 72, I Kings 4:20-21). Also, here there are no longer any tribes living across the Jordan. This tells us that in the Age to Come *all* Israel, being bound together in Immanuel himself, will gladly dwell together in Immanuel's Land (Josh. 22:19, Isaiah 8:8, John 10:16, Rom. 8:16-17, Heb. 12:22).

Finally, we learn that the right of inheritance is given not only to Israelites, but also to resident aliens (vv. 21-23). This depicts NT teaching to the effect that citizenship in God's Kingdom is not based upon physical birth or descent, but solely upon a God-given, faith-filled desire to live with Immanuel himself, and so—at his Second Coming—in his everlasting land (Isaiah 8:8). Whether Jew or Gentile, all such persons are the true sons of Abraham; therefore, along with father Abraham himself, they will inherit the Promised Land (Rom. 4:9-25, 8:12-17, Mt. 8:11, Gal. 3:28, Eph. 2:11-22).

In 48:1-29 the theme of inheritance is especially prominent. The new homeland was indeed promised in days of old, but forfeited by sin. Now, however, grace has abounded, and it is fully inherited at last.

The passage—which discusses the territorial allotments in the new Israel—displays a remarkable symmetry. In essence, God divides the Land into 13 parallel strips, the length of each one running from west to east. First, he allots the seven northern strips: the northern-most to Dan, after whom comes Asher, Naphtali, Manasseh, Ephraim, Reuben, and Judah (48:1-7). Then—at considerable length, so as to emphasize its importance—he allots the territories within the central Holy Strip (48:8-22). At its own center lies the Holy District, a perfect square which itself is divided into three strips. The topmost is the territory of the Levites; the central contains the temple and the territory of the (Zadokite) priests; the lowermost contains the City, its surrounding open spaces, and the pasturelands cultivated by City workers drawn from the several tribes of Israel. On either

side of the Holy District are the territories of the Prince. Finally, God allots the territories of the five southern tribes: Benjamin (closest to the Holy Strip), followed by Simeon, Issachar, Zebulun, and Gad (48:23-29).

Here again, as Duguid puts it, we have “theology in geographical form.” The picture is loaded with theological significance, a significance that should expand the mind and rejoice the heart of believers in Jesus. Let us take a moment to explore it.

We have already seen that the Temple-centeredness of Israel’s eschatological homeland depicts, under OT type and shadow, the God-centered and Christ-centered worship of the Church in the World to Come (Rev. 4-5, 7).

So too does the orientation of the tribal territories, which, like the door of the Temple itself, is towards the East. Here we glimpse the spiritual orientation of God’s eschatological people, who, through all eternity, will gaze eastward, looking expectantly for fresh dawns of the glory of the LORD over the Land, and fresh entrances of his glory through the Temple Gates. According to a slightly different metaphor, the orientation of the tribal allotments pictures the Bride of Christ, who, through all eternity, will watch for fresh visitations of her Beloved; of the One who, at the close of her arduous pilgrimage upon the earth, suddenly rose like the Morning Star, and—in power and great glory—circled the Earth from east to west, gathering her to his side, so that in the end he might bring her to his everlasting home (Ezek. 43:1-5, Mt. 2:1, 24:27, 25:1f, John 14:1f, 2 Peter 1:19, Rev. 2:28, 7:2, 22:16).

According to 47:13-14, each tribe will receive an equal allotment of land for a permanent possession. This recalls Jesus’ Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard, wherein we find the compassionate landowner giving each laborer a denarius, irrespective of how long he worked (Mt. 20:1-16). It also reminds us of his Parable of the Wedding Feast, where entrance to the Feast is said to depend not upon what one has done, but simply upon the possession of a proper wedding garment (Mt. 22:1-14). All three texts teach the same glorious NT truth: While the saints *standing* in the Kingdom may indeed be a reward for their own good works, their *presence* in the Kingdom is an inheritance, a gracious gift of God, bequeathed to them through the Christ who so lovingly and effectually worked on their behalf (Mt. 25:34, Gal. 3:26-4:7, Rom. 8:12-17, Rev. 21:7).

The precise arrangement of the twelve tribes also seems to convey NT truth. For example, in the new order, Benjamin will be situated south of the Holy District, while Judah will lie to its north. Under the Divided Monarchy, these two tribes constituted the entire Southern Kingdom. The message, then, is that the eschatological division of the land into northern and southern regions will in no way reflect a spiritual division rooted in sin. To the contrary, here all former divisions have been overcome, for now all the tribes are perfectly united around the central sanctuary and under the Prince. Certainly this pictures the perfect spiritual unity of the Church around her great High Priest and Sacrifice; perhaps it also pictures her spiritual unity around the Prince of Life, the High King who nevertheless reigns at all times in glad submission to his Royal Father (Acts 3:15, 5:31, 1 Cor. 15:27-28). In eschatological Israel, the blood of Christ will have broken down every dividing wall, with the result that to all eternity there will be one flock, one kingdom, and one holy nation living in the land (Ezek. 34:23, 37:24, Zech. 14:9, John 10:16, Gal. 3:28, Eph. 2:11-22, 4:1f, 1 Peter 2:9).

We observe also that the eight tribes closest to the Temple are the descendants of Jacob's wives (Leah and Rachel), while the four tribes situated at the extremities of the land are the descendants of their handmaids, Bilhah and Zilpah (Gen. 30:1-13). Since the OT prophets often represented the Gentiles as (blessed) servants of eschatological Israel, Ezekiel may have done the same here, by way of vision (Isaiah 49:22-23, 60:1-14). If so, the lesson is not that in the eschaton the Gentiles will be second-class citizens dwelling at maximal distance from Christ, but rather that God, in the last days prior to the Consummation, graciously grafted them into the vine of Israel, making them "handmaids" of the (Jewish) heirs of the Kingdom, but also co-heirs with them of the glorious covenant promises given to Abraham and his seed (John 10:16, Rom. 4:1f, 11:11-24, Gal. 3:1-14, Eph. 2:11-22).

The Everlasting City (48:30-35)

Fascinatingly, the capstone of Ezekiel's vision of the World to Come is devoted to a subject almost completely overlooked in all that has gone before: the City. For the exiles—and indeed for godly Jews of all

subsequent generations—“the City” could be none other than Jerusalem, the very same Jerusalem whose eschatological restoration is sung by OT prophet after prophet. It is, then, quite understandable that the Spirit of God, having devoted 95% of Ezekiel’s vision to a description of Israel’s Temple-Centered life in her eschatological homeland, should bring the prophecy to a close with a few words about the future of the Holy City, Jerusalem. By so aligning Ezekiel’s message with the rest of OTKP, the Spirit would only strengthen Israel’s ancient hope of eternal life in the land with their faithful, covenant-keeping God.

And yet, with the benefit of NT hindsight, we can see clearly that the City God actually had in mind was very different than the one the OT saints had in mind. This is apparent from certain curiosities within the text itself, and also from explicit NT teaching, especially as that is found in the Revelation.

Concerning the curiosities, we observe in chapters 40-48 that the word “Jerusalem” does not appear once. Also, Ezekiel’s City lies outside the Temple Area, whereas in historical times the Temple was always situated inside the walls of Jerusalem. Similarly, Ezekiel’s City is clearly subordinate to the Temple, since the Temple alone is situated in the midst of the Holy District. Note also that the tribal names of the twelve territorial allotments differ from the tribal names on the twelve gates of the City: The latter include Levi and Joseph, but exclude Ephraim and Manasseh. Finally, and most tellingly, God assigns the City a completely new name: The LORD is There. We conclude, then, that the text loudly and repeatedly hints at a great eschatological mystery: The Eternal City of God will be different from the Jerusalem of old; it will have a new nature, a new identity, and therefore a new name.

As we have seen, in the NT the mystery is finally unveiled: The true and everlasting City is not made of brick and mortar, but of living stones; the saints themselves are not only the Temple of God, but also the Jerusalem of God (John 4:21, Gal. 4:26, Heb. 12:22, 1 Peter 2:5, Rev. 3:12). Knowing this, they steadfastly persevere in their pilgrimage through this fallen world, eagerly awaiting their Lord’s return and the manifestation, in glory, of the eternal City whose Builder and Maker is God (Col. 3:1-3, Heb. 11:10, 16, 13:14).

Notably, this theme is especially prominent in the Revelation, where God's elect hear the Spirit calling them out of the Great City (Babylon) and into the Holy City, the New Jerusalem (Rev. 11:8, 16:19, 18:1ff). Neither is a physical structure, both are spiritual populations; they are distinct realms with distinct rulers, whether Satan or Christ. As Ezekiel himself saw, just prior to the Consummation, Satan's forces will attack the Beloved City (Ezek. 38-39, Rev. 20:9). But God—in Christ—will intervene to destroy the Great City and glorify the Holy City; a City that will be without stain or wrinkle or any such thing; a City that will be worthy to be called the Bride and the Wife of the Lamb (Eph. 5:27, Rev. 18:1f, 21:1-2, 9). This is the City that all God's people—from Abraham on—have seen, sang, and faithfully striven to enter by the narrow gate (Luke 13:24).

6. Ezekiel and the Revelation

I want to conclude this long chapter with a few words about the usefulness of the Revelation for helping us discern the true meaning of certain OTKP's. Its great value is rooted in two fundamental facts. On the one hand, the Revelation is very much like OTKP in that it uses OT ideas and images to convey NT truth. On the other hand, it is different from OTKP in that it goes on to incorporate specifically New Testament ideas and images, *thereby pointing the way to a proper interpretation of the Old*. In other words, just like the Gospels and the Epistles, the Revelation *confirms the New Covenant Hermeneutic*. It does so, however, by using apocalyptic rather than didactic language.

Two illustrations from the book of Ezekiel should make this important point clear, and also serve to undergird the New Covenant interpretations I have offered in this chapter.

Two Views of the Last Battle

In our study of Ezekiel 34-39, I argued that the prophet used OT ideas and images to describe the Last Battle, the final clash between Christ and Satan, the Church and the World. The Revelation positively confirms this view. The primary proof text is Rev. 20:7-10, where the Spirit identifies the eschatological opponent of God's people as Gog and Magog. Observe, however, that in the Revelation the Holy Spirit subtly departs from

Ezekiel's portrait of the battle so as to encourage an ecclesiological interpretation of both texts.

For example, here in the Revelation, Gog and Magog come up upon "the breadth of the earth" (i.e., the whole world, wherever Christians are living). Here they surround "the camp of the saints" (i.e., Christians everywhere, who are "encamped," like Israel after the Exodus, in the wilderness of this fallen world-system). And here they surround "the Beloved City" (i.e., Christ's beloved Church, a City built of living stones).

That the Spirit here has the Church in view is further confirmed by 20:4-6, where we learn that it is only *the followers of Jesus*—many of whom were faithful unto death in the face the Beast's persecutions—who enter heaven to reign with Christ throughout the thousand years. This helps us to identify the "saints" of Rev. 20:9 who are to endure the Last Battle at the end of the thousand years: They too are the followers of Jesus (Rev. 1:9). We conclude, then, that Revelation 20—and a great many other NT texts—identifies the true contestants of the Last Battle as the Church and the World; and that here the Spirit of God is teaching us to read Ezekiel 38-39 as giving *all* of God's people a veiled OT revelation of this very thing (Mt. 24:15, 21, 2 Thess. 2:1f, 1 John 2:18, Rev. 11:7-10, 16:12-16, 19:17-21).

Two Views of the World to Come

This brings us to our second illustration. In the course of our study, I have argued that Ezekiel 40-48 uses OT types and shadows to describe the life of God's people in the eschaton, in the new heavens and the new earth. Revelation 21-22 confirms this view. Indeed, it is safe to say that these two chapters serve as a kind of NT commentary on Ezekiel's final vision. The many similarities tell us that John's vision is actually *based* on Ezekiel's. However, the many differences—the many additions and NT elucidations—tell us that John's vision is also meant to *interpret* Ezekiel's. In other words, here in Revelation 21-22 the Spirit of God uses apocalyptic language—signs and symbols, frequently drawn from the OT—to confirm what the more didactic Gospels and Epistles positively teach: All OTKP—including Ezekiel 40-48—is fulfilled under the New Covenant that Christ introduced, and in the twofold spiritual Kingdom that he brought into the world.

Let us take a moment to illustrate how this works.

Like Ezekiel, John is carried away in the Spirit to a great and high Mountain, upon which he sees a City (Ezek. 40:2, Rev. 21:10). Here, however, we learn what the Mountain represents: The new heavens and the new earth. For just as John sees the Holy City “coming down from heaven” to alight upon the Mountain (21:10), so too he sees it coming down from a new heaven to alight upon a new earth (21:1-2). The two are one: the Mountain and the New Earth. So then, Ezekiel’s Mountain (and the land as well) stands for the new world that Christ will create at his Parousia, a world in which there will no longer be any curse, tears, mourning, pain, or death (Rev. 21:2, 22:3).

Like Ezekiel, John sees a City (Ezek. 40:2, Rev. 21:2, 10). Or, to be more precise, Ezekiel saw “a structure *like* a City”—which was the Temple—while John saw a City, but no Temple, for the Lord God, the Almighty, and the Lamb are its Temple (Rev. 21:22). Already, the two visions begin to converge. And the convergence continues, for just as Ezekiel beholds the glory of God entering the Temple, so John beholds the City “having the glory of God” (Ezek. 43:1-5, Rev. 21:11). Thus, God and the Lamb are the Temple in which the City dwells, but the City is the Temple in which God and the Lamb dwell! John’s is a “Temple-City” where God “will dwell among the sons of Israel forever” (Ezek. 43:7); where “he shall dwell among them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be among them” (Rev. 21:3). In the glorified Temple-City, the promise of the Eternal Covenant is fully fulfilled (Ezek. 37:27).

Like Ezekiel, John sees the names of the twelve tribes of Israel on the gates of the City (Ezek. 48:31-34, Rev. 21:12). However, John also sees the names of the twelve apostles written on the foundation stones of the City walls (Rev. 21:14). This beautiful symbolism confirms two crucial NT truths: The City is the Church, the antitype of OT Jerusalem; and the Church—comprised of *all* God’s saints, both OT and New—is the one true eternal habitation of God, built upon the foundation of Christ’s holy apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the chief cornerstone (Gal. 4:26, Eph. 2:20). Ezekiel, then, beheld the Church, but he could not yet behold the foundation of the Church, God having foreseen something better, such that the OT prophet(s) could not be made complete apart from the NT saints (Heb. 11:39-40).

Like Ezekiel, John hears that no foreigners can enter God's sanctuary (Ezek. 44:9, Rev. 21:27). In John's case, however, the meaning of "foreigners" finally becomes clear: They are (willful) strangers to God's Covenant of Grace, which, in NT times, was offered in Christ; having spurned it, they remain in their sins, under judgment, outside the City (Rev. 22:10-15).

Finally, like Ezekiel, John saw the River of the Water of Life flowing from the throne of God; and on either side of the River, trees bearing fruit for food and leaves for healing (Ezek. 47:1, 7, 12; Rev. 22:1-2). John, however, sees much more, and much to illumine the true meaning of Ezekiel's vision. For example, he beholds the water flowing from the throne of God *and of the Lamb* (22:1). This confirms that the water does indeed represent the Holy Spirit, whom God, in both stages of the Kingdom, pours out richly upon his people (and his new creation) *through Christ* (Acts 2:33, Titus 3:6). Very importantly, John also identifies the trees as the Tree of Life (22:2). The message here, aptly situated at the end of the NT canon, is that through the Last Adam—the One who perfectly fulfilled the Covenant of Works in behalf of his people—the saints have returned to Paradise; indeed, they now enjoy Eternal Life in all its fullness, the same Life offered to man in Eden, but forfeited when the First Adam fell into sin. To all eternity, the twelve crops of fruit—emblematic of the divine life of Christ bestowed because of his fruitful Work—will sustain God's people; to all eternity the leaves of the Tree—emblematic of the restorative power of Christ's life and work—will bring ever-increasing wholeness to the nations of the saints (Rev. 22:2).

We conclude, then, that the Revelation is indeed a precious resource for opening up the meaning of Ezekiel's Oracle of Good News, and of OTKP in general. However, that usefulness is useful only to those who are well established in NT eschatology and the NCH, both of which the Revelation presupposes and abundantly confirms.

OT Kingdom Prophecies Considered: Daniel

IN THIS CHAPTER we turn our attention to the second great prophet of the exile, Daniel. As in the case of Ezekiel, so here: There are some things that are hard to understand, things that have therefore become controversial. However, with Christ and the apostles at our side, I trust we shall find ourselves well able to close in on the true meaning of these precious and beloved OT prophecies of the Kingdom of God.

1. The Triumph of the Kingdom

(Daniel 7)

The apocalyptic vision here under consideration is one of a number found in the book of Daniel in which we behold the course, conflict, and climax of Salvation History from the time of the Babylonian Empire until the coming of the Kingdom of God in its glorious fullness at the end of the age (Dan. 2, 7, 9, 11, 12). The purpose of these visions is clear: to give God's suffering people hope. The method is also clear: to impart hope by means of repeated symbolic representations of God's absolute sovereignty over history, the necessity—and brevity—of holy suffering on the part of his saints, the final overthrow of his (and his people's) enemies, and the final rescue, restoration, and vindication of the saints on the Day of Judgment, when the Kingdom of God appears in its fullness, triumphing once and for all over the evil kingdoms of this fallen world.

Needless to say, these prophecies are of great eschatological importance. But given the nuance and complexity of the symbolism involved, how are we to interpret them with confidence? Again, the answer is found in the NCH. We will approach these daunting OT visions with

confidence only when we realize that the NCH alone is able to open them up; indeed, when we realize that our Lord *meant* it to open them up, so that we, his NT people, more even than his Old, might walk with clarity, boldness, and joy through great tribulation, even to the end of the Age.

Let us pause, then, for a brief look at Daniel 7, and see if all this is so. In particular, let us see if the NCH manifests the deep meaning of the text, positively confirms the twofold spiritual Kingdom of NT eschatology, and enables us confidently to decide between the amillennial and premillennial interpretations of this prophecy.

The Four Beasts (vv. 1-8)

In the first year of Belshazzar, king of Babylon, Daniel had a dream in which he beheld visions from God. In the first part of his vision he saw the four winds of heaven stir up the Great Sea in such a manner that four great and terrifying beasts rose up out of it, one after another (vv. 1-3). The first was like a lion, the second like a bear, the third like a leopard (vv. 4-6). The fourth—stronger and more dreadful than the rest—was largely indescribable, though Daniel does manage to convey its strength and rapacity by mentioning its iron teeth (well suited for devouring) and its powerful feet (well suited for trampling). This beast had ten horns (cf., Dan. 2:41-45). While contemplating the horns, Daniel saw a little horn rising from among the ten: It tore out three horns by the roots, had the eyes of a man, and spoke boastful words (7-8).

The message of this vision—which is almost identical with that of Nebuchadnezzar’s dream of a huge, four-part statue (chapter 2)—is clear: The sovereign God has decreed that between the days of Daniel and the coming of the Kingdom of God in its fullness, four earthly kings/kingdoms shall arise, like monstrous predatory beasts, out of the turbulent sea of fallen humanity (Dan. 2:24ff; Isaiah 7:12, 13, 57:20). Because of details embedded in the symbols used to describe the four beasts, conservative commentators are nearly unanimous in identifying them as Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece, and Rome. As we have seen, the NT further illumines this vision by unveiling Satan as the invisible ruler of all the kingdoms of this world (Luke 4:5, John 12:31, Eph. 6:12, 1 John 5:19); as he who summons one evil empire after another onto the stage of history (Rev. 13:1); as he

who, since the days of Babel, seeks to use proud and wicked men to consolidate the entire world-system around himself, thereby usurping the worship of God and mimicking his absolute sovereignty (Mt. 4:8-10). One day, according to Daniel and the NT writers, he will get his wish—and much more besides (2 Thess. 2:1f, Rev. 11:5, 16:14).

The Ancient of Days (vv. 9-12)

Even as the little horn continues to exalt himself, Daniel beholds the chariot-throne of God arriving upon the scene for final judgment. Other thrones are set up, and the Ancient of Days—he who was, and is, and is to come—takes his seat (Rev. 4:8). His garment and his hair are as white as snow and wool, emblems of his holiness, righteousness, and age-old eternity. His throne and its wheels are ablaze with fire, a token of his wrath, now fully kindled (v. 9). A stream of fire pours forth from before him, ready to engulf his enemies. Ten thousand times ten thousand holy ones stand before him, ministering to him. The court is seated and the books are opened: The Judgment has begun (v. 10). As soon as it does, the little horn is forever silenced, for the body of the beast from which it arose is now slain and cast into the blazing fires of hell (v. 11). So too, we assume, are the rest of the beasts, whose dominion was lately taken away, but who were allowed to live on (as members of the fourth beast?) for a little time (v. 12).

There can be no reasonable doubt that this majestic vision depicts the Last Judgment. As we have just seen, it is preceded by the destruction of the *final* earthly kingdom, and it is followed by the saints taking possession of the *everlasting* Kingdom of the Most High (7:18, 26-27). But if this is so, then NT teaching concerning the Last Judgment must be brought to bear upon the passage before us. When it is, wonderful things begin to appear before our eyes!

Who, for example, is the Ancient of Days? Verse 7:13 (and Revelation 4) make it clear that this is indeed the One we immediately think of: God the Father. Yet the NT calls for a more nuanced answer, since there we also learn that God the Father has committed all judgment to the Son (John 5:22), and that all must appear before the Judgment Seat of Christ (Mt. 25:31:f, Acts 17:31, 2 Cor. 5:10). The Ancient of Days of vv. 9-10 is, then, God the Father *acting through Christ*—the very Christ who, when he came

to John on Patmos, appeared in the form of the Ancient of Days (Rev. 1:14)!

The NCH answers other questions, as well.

Where shall the Judgment Seat of Christ appear? According to the NT, it will appear in the skies above the earth (Mt. 19:29, 1 Thess. 4:13-18, Rev. 20:11-21:2).

Who are the thousands of thousands who stand before him and minister to him? Doubtless they include the holy angels, but also the glorified saints, rejoicing in their new resurrection bodies and exulting in the justice of God (Mt. 13:43, 24:29-31, 1 Cor. 15:50-58, 1 Thess. 4:13-18, Rev. 15:1-4, 16:6, 19:11-21).

Who is seated upon the other thrones that were “put in place,” presumably around the throne of Christ itself? Again the NT answers richly, assuring us that the thrones belong to the saints of Christ, who, under him, will judge both men and angels (Rom. 16:20, 1 Cor. 6:1-3, Rev. 4:4, 19:11-21).

And what of the books that were opened when the court sat for judgment? The NT clearly identifies them as the Book of Life, and also as the books in which are recorded the deeds of all men, so that all may be judged according to their works (Luke 10:20, Rev. 20:12).

We conclude, then, that the NCH does indeed fully illuminate this majestic and mysterious OT revelation of the Last Judgment.

The Coronation of the Divine Son of Man (vv. 13-14)

As Daniel continues to watch, still another vision appears before his inward eye. He beholds a Personage—One like a Son of Man—coming with the clouds of heaven to the Ancient of Days. An entourage, presumably of angels, brings him near to the throne (v. 13). At this point, God gives him dominion, glory, and a kingdom—or a right of sovereignty—so that all peoples, nations, and languages might serve him. Unlike the dominion of the four beasts, the dominion of the Son of Man will be everlasting. Unlike the kingdoms of the four beasts, the Kingdom of the Son of Man—which is the fruit of his dominion—will never pass away or be destroyed (v. 14).

Regarding this brief, opaque text, three great questions arise, questions that only the NT can answer in such a way as to bring clarity and conviction: (1) Who is the One like a Son of Man, (2) What is the nature of the transfer of authority here envisioned, and (3) When exactly does the transfer occur?

As for the One like a Son of Man, nearly all evangelical commentators identify him as the Messiah, the divine-human Lord Jesus Christ (Dan. 9:25-26). True, our text displays a certain parallel between the inheritance of the Son of Man (v. 14) and the inheritance of the saints (vv. 18, 27), suggesting to some that the Son of Man symbolizes the saints. But Daniel explicitly identifies this Personage as *One* who is like *a* Son of Man, and he uses the singular pronoun throughout to speak of him. As for the parallelism, the NT explains all, declaring that through Christ the saints will indeed reign (and judge) upon the earth (Rev. 2:26-27, 5:10). Very importantly, in the days of his flesh, the Lord Jesus over and again spoke of himself as the Son of Man; it was, by far, his favorite self-designation, meant not only to identify him as the Messiah, but as a *divine* Messiah whose true origin is heaven itself. Notably, towards the end of his earthly course he explicitly cited this text while speaking to the Sanhedrin about his Parousia, lest there should be any confusion at all about which “Son of Man” he understood himself to be (Mt. 26:64, Mark 14:62)!

But what about the nature and timing of the transfer of authority from the Ancient of Days to his Messiah? Admittedly, the most natural reading of the text—apart from any reference to explicit NT teaching on the subject—is to say that God will bestow absolute and universal sovereignty upon the Messiah at the Judgment described in the vision immediately preceding; and, indeed, that it may well be the Messiah himself who executes that Judgment (vv. 9-12). Interestingly, certain OT apocrypha, along with several NT texts, make it clear that this was indeed the impression of at least some Jews in Jesus’ day, possibly including John the Baptizer himself (Mt. 3:12, John 12:34).¹ However, the ambiguity here is considerable, *and it stands as an open invitation to search the NT for much-needed help.*

Happily, the NT does not disappoint. When was it, according to the NT, that Christ came *to* the Ancient of Days, riding upon the clouds of heaven (v. 13)? And when was it that God gave him dominion, glory, and absolute sovereignty over all creation, so that in the end all peoples, nations, and

men of every tongue might serve both him and his Father (v. 14)? As we have already seen, both Jesus and his apostles answer fulsomely: All this occurred when the Father highly exalted Christ by raising him from the dead, catching him up into heaven on clouds of glory, seating him at his own right hand, and bestowing upon him all authority in heaven and earth, so that he might apply and consummate the redemption that he achieved through his humiliation on earth, thereby bringing the Kingdom to its full, final, and glorious form (Luke 19:12, Mt. 28:18ff, Acts 1:9-11, 2:22-36, Phil. 2:5-11, Heb. 1:1-3).

On this score, Rev. 4-5 is of special importance. Indeed, one might well argue that these two chapters constitute a NT elaboration of Dan. 7:9-14. In Revelation 4 we behold the Ancient of Days, the eternal Creator and Judge of the world, seated in glory upon his throne. In Revelation 5 we then behold the Redeemer. Using apocalyptic imagery quite reminiscent of Daniel 7, the Spirit here depicts the session of the Lord Jesus Christ. Having “prevailed” on earth to fulfill all righteousness and atone for the sins of his people, the Lion/Lamb enters heaven, comes before the Father, and, in taking a scroll from his hand, receives all authority in heaven and on earth (Rev. 5:1-7, 12). Henceforth, he is authorized to “break the seals” on God’s last will and testament. That is, he is commissioned to superintend the remainder of Salvation History with a view to applying the merits of his redemptive work to the elect, gathering in a people for God’s possession from every tribe, tongue, people and nation, thereby creating a kingdom of priests who will inherit (the fullness of) eternal life and who will everlastingly reign upon the earth (Rev. 5:8-14). This is Daniel 7:9-14, writ large.

But this line of interpretation raises a legitimate question: Why, in Daniel 7, would the Spirit represent the heavenly reign of Christ as coming *after* the Last Judgment? Several answers, rooted in NT eschatology, come to mind.

First, the text itself hints that here we are in fact dealing with two visions rather than one, for both begin with the telltale introductory phrase: “I saw in my vision by night” (vv. 2-12, 13-14). Yes, the chapter as a whole may indeed be reckoned as a single vision; but at the very least, these verbal markers suggest that 7:13-14 touches upon a new (though related) theme. The NT, as we have just seen, seems to confirm this very thing in

Revelation 4-5, where first we have a vision of God the Father as Judge, and then a vision of the Lord Jesus Christ as the High King of Heaven, with divine authority to rescue his people from the Judge.

Secondly, the burden of Daniel 7 is to speak of the great inversion of rulership that will occur at the *end* of Salvation History. It is, then, altogether fitting for the Spirit to touch on Christ's heavenly reign *in such a way as to emphasize its end result*, precisely as he does in verse 14.

Finally, the sequence of the two visions effectively underscores a pervasive biblical theme: The Messianic Son of Man is subordinate to the Ancient of Days; the Ancient of Days is the fountainhead of all divine authority, from whom the Son of Man will receive the right to rule in such a way as to create the eternal Kingdom of God. As we have seen, the NT fleshes out this important theme in a number of texts, especially 1 Corinthians 15:20-28.^{2,3}

Given that Daniel received this vision in an era when God was pleased to conceal or veil the mystery of the Eternal Covenant, it should not surprise us that here much eschatological truth is fused, hidden, or (purposely) left unclear. This includes the two stages of the Kingdom, the Messiah's heavenly reign, its distinctly redemptive character, the exact sequence of events leading up to the Judgment, the Messiah's role in the Judgment, and his role in the coming of the Kingdom in its fullness. But in the NT—and especially in Revelation 4-5—all is unveiled, clarified, and set in good order. Therefore, the NT mysteries of the Kingdom—and the NCH that is built upon them—have prevailed, not only to open up Daniel 7, but all OTKP. Without them we are at sea. With them, we reach our desired haven and stand confidently upon solid ground.

The Vision Interpreted (vv. 15-28)

As the vision draws to a close, Daniel inquires as to the meaning of what he has just seen, and receives a measure of further illumination from one of the angels involved. The section falls nicely into four parts. I will comment briefly on each one, highlighting aspects of special relevance for our study.

In verses 15-18 we find the prophet—grieved and troubled at the persecutions yet in store for God's people—asking for more light on the

vision as a whole. One of the angels in attendance responds, identifying the four beasts as four kings/kingdoms that will arise “out of the earth.” However, the emphasis here, as elsewhere, falls upon the eternal Kingdom of God, which the Most High—the sovereign LORD of all history—will bestow upon the saints from heaven above (cf., Dan. 2:44-45). As we have seen, verses 13-14, supplemented by an abundance of NT teaching, reveal that God will accomplish the final reversal at the Parousia of the glorified Son of Man. This is the blessed hope of all the saints, both OT and New (Titus 2:13).

In verses 18-20, Daniel relates that even after this general explanation he remained curious about the details surrounding the fourth beast. As if in answer to his curiosity, the vision suddenly resumes, and he sees the little horn making war against the saints and prevailing over them (v. 21). In a moment, the angel will explain the meaning of these ominous words. But first the prophet’s vision ends with yet another sighting of the coming of the Ancient of Days (who is Christ at his Parousia), vindicating the faith (and the faithfulness) of the saints, and bestowing upon them the joys of eternal kingdom life (1 Thess. 3:1-10). Now the motif of the entire vision—indeed, of the entire book—is clear: God faithfully warns of coming conflict so as to produce endurance; then he graciously promises coming triumph so as to produce courage, hope, and eager expectation.

In verses 23-27, we have the angel’s (partial) explanation of the vision of the fourth beast. Several key points—much illumined by the NT—may be made.

First, the fourth beast, which is emblematic of the final earthly kingdom, will be different from all the rest, largely because it will succeed in devouring the *whole* earth (v. 23). Here, the global hegemony of the ancient Roman Empire is partly in view. However, that very hegemony anticipates something far greater, something eschatological, and the true burden of this verse: In the days of the fourth beast, Satan will finally achieve his age-old purpose—manifested from the very beginning at Babel—of creating a counterfeit kingdom that overspreads the entire world (Gen. 11:1-9). Later, John will foresee much the same thing, writing, “And all the world marveled and followed the beast” (Rev. 13:3; 12:9, 16:4). Only “the saints”—the true spiritual Church of all generations, but especially of the

last generation—will refuse to marvel, follow, worship, and otherwise receive his mark of ownership (Rev. 13:8, 17:8, 20:4).

Secondly, the verbiage of verse 24 suggests to some commentators that the life of the fourth beast is destined to unfold in three separate stages. In the first, the beast arises from the Great Sea: This marks the advent of the ancient Roman Empire. In the second, “ten” horns (i.e., kings/kingdoms) arise from head of the Beast: This marks the totality (symbolized by the number ten) of the serial manifestations of Greco-Roman culture subsequent to the fall of ancient Rome. In the third, one final horn arises, subduing “three” of its ten predecessors. This speaks of the final eschatological embodiment of the Roman Empire, achieved by the Antichrist, who suddenly consolidates the residuum of Roman power and influence (symbolized by the number 3). This approach, advocated by E. J. Young, is quite attractive in that it allows us to see how, from the time of Christ right up to the Consummation, the territories, peoples, and culture of the ancient Roman Empire remain near the center of the drama of world history.⁴

There are, of course, other views. For example, many of our dispensational brethren, adopting a highly futuristic interpretation of this verse, look for an end time confederacy of ten European nations, over (the remnant of) which the Antichrist will rule after subduing three of them. However, this approach seems *too* futuristic: Certainly the text itself does not teach it explicitly. Moreover, if the numbers ten and three are meant symbolically, then the dispensational view becomes a prescription for fruitless speculation and failed “fulfillments” based upon the ebb and flow of European politics. By my lights, Young’s approach is far preferable.

Verse 25 sketches the character and career of the Antichrist. He is arrogant and blasphemous; he will attempt to alter well-established customs and laws (including many pertaining to religious observances); and—for a brief, divinely ordained season—he will “wear out” the saints (i.e., persecute them to the point of apparent defeat). This, as we have seen, is none other than the Last Battle, which, according to the NT, will be pitched by the Man of Lawlessness and his subservient world-system against the true spiritual Church of Christ (Mt. 24:9-13, 2 Thess. 2:1f, Rev. 11:7-10, 16:14, 20:8).

In verses 26-27 the angel brings his message to a close by once again sounding a note of final triumph. The NT fully illumines his words. At Christ's return, the Son of Man will execute final judgment, destroying not only the Antichrist and his followers, but also "the dragon" that inspired and empowered them all (Mt. 25:41, 2 Thess. 2:8, Rev. 17:14, 19:19-21, 20:10). After this, the kingdoms of the world will become the (universal) Kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ; and he—and the saints with him—will reign forever and ever, amen (v. 27, 1 Cor. 15:28, Rev. 11:5, 22:5).

Conclusion

We have seen that the NCH richly opens up this majestic but mysterious OTKP, giving us a simple, biblically coherent interpretation, thereby greatly encouraging the NT saints of all times.

Alas, premillennial views do not fare so well. Premillennarians assert, for example, that verses 9-12 do not describe the Last Judgment at all, but instead speak of a lesser judgment that will immediately precede Christ's millennial reign. Regarding verses 13-14, some among them, following Scofield, argue that Daniel is describing a special "investiture" in heaven, by which Christ, just prior to his millennial reign, will receive authority from the Father to descend to the earth and rule there. Others—such as Fausset, Walvoord, and Pentecost—contend that these verses, and verses 26-27 as well, simply describe Christ's Second Coming in order to inaugurate his millennial kingdom upon the earth.

The great difficulty with all such views—apart from the fact that they are needlessly complicated and confusing—is that they miss the thrust of the chapter as a whole. Again, the Spirit's evident purpose in giving Daniel this vision was to illumine, prepare, strengthen, and encourage *all* the saints of subsequent times with a revelation of *the entire course* of "the kingdoms of this world;" a revelation of *all* that must occur up to and including the Consummation, after which God's everlasting Kingdom will appear in its glorious fullness. Premillennarians, bound by their own eschatology, are forced to deny this, and to assert that Daniel 7 merely takes us to the end of the Era of Proclamation, after which there is still much more to come: the Millennium, the (last) Last Battle (i.e., at the end of the Millennium), and the (last) Last Judgment—all of which the Spirit neglected to mention, not

only here, but in chapter 2 as well! The net effect of this error is to eclipse the grandeur of what God actually revealed, becloud the vision of the saints, and defer their fondest dreams for an extra thousand years!

We conclude, then, that unlike premillennarian literalism, the NCH gives us a profoundly satisfying interpretation of Daniel 7; an interpretation that richly equips Christ's Church for the dramatic closing scenes of the present evil age, even as it kindles their hopes for a glorious, everlasting, heavenly Kingdom *soon* to come!

2. Daniel's Prophecy of the Seventy Sevens

(Daniel 9:24-27)

The year is 539 B.C. Daniel, still in captivity under Darius the Mede, has been reading the prophet Jeremiah (Jer. 25:11-12, 29:10). He realizes that the 70 years of Jerusalem's desolation are nearing an end, but also that many captive Jews remain unbroken and impenitent (v. 13). They are not spiritually qualified for the great restoration promised decades earlier.

So Daniel prays (vv. 3-23). First, he rehearses and confesses the sin of God's covenant-breaking people (vv. 3-10). Then he acknowledges God's justice in sending them into captivity (vv. 11-15). Finally, he makes his petition. Appealing solely to God's mercy, grace, and zeal for the honor of his Name, he pleads with the LORD to fulfill his promise given through Jeremiah: to restore his City, his Sanctuary, and his Holy Mountain (vv. 16-19).

His words are not in vain. Even as he is praying, the angel Gabriel arrives and stands before him, declaring to Daniel that God has heard his prayer and answered it. He (Gabriel) has been sent to give Daniel "insight and understanding" about the coming Restoration (vv. 20-23). In the four long verses that follow, he does just that (vv. 24-27).

Are you familiar with this famous OTKP, often referred to as the prophecy of Daniel's Seventy Sevens (or Weeks)? If so, you know one thing for sure: A whole host of commentators have been seeking insight and understanding ever since! In the paragraphs ahead, we will find out why.

The Three Main Views

Close students of this short but complex OTKP know that interpreters differ widely on the exact meaning of dozens of the details found herein. To give but one illustration, Biederwolf cites at least eleven different opinions as to when, historically, the seventy sevens start.⁵ This is hardly an auspicious beginning! And yet, when we stand back and look at the history of interpretation surrounding this prophecy, we discover something both interesting and encouraging: In the end, the vast majority of conservative commentators espouse one of three main views. My purpose in this section is briefly to introduce them, and then to explain why I believe that the Lord is now putting his finger on the one that is true.

The Traditional First Advent View (TFAV)

First, we have what I will call the *Traditional First Advent View*. It has been around from the beginning, and is still popular today. The basic idea here is that the *terminus ad quem*—the goal or end point—of the seventy sevens is the first advent of Christ.

Regarding the seventy sevens themselves, there are differences of opinion. Some say they are 490 consecutive years, a commitment that forces them to look for a viable historical starting point. Others argue that they are symbolic, a commitment that delivers them from unwelcome computations and manipulations. But all agree that the great burden of the prophecy is to unveil *the redemptive instrument*—the New Covenant, and the Christ of the New Covenant—by which God will make an end of sins, bring in everlasting righteousness, and so create, once and for all, his eschatological City, Sanctuary, and Mountain (v. 24).

How will God do this? Turning to the text itself, proponents of the TFAV reply: He will send a Messiah, an Anointed One, a holy Priest and Sacrifice, who, by God's foreordination, will be cut off for the sins of his people (v. 25, 26). Because of this, he will be able to make a firm covenant with them—a New Covenant—and in so doing will bring the Old Covenant sacrifices and burnt offerings to an end (v. 27).

And that is not all that will be brought to an end. For another prince will come—the Roman general Titus—to destroy the former city (Herod's Jerusalem) and the former sanctuary (Herod's Temple) (v. 26). This is indeed a divine judgment against the Jews, who rejected their Messiah. But

it is also a message from God: Christ's death has rendered the temple (and its sacrifices) abominable in his sight; therefore, he has decreed its perpetual desolation, a desolation that began with Titus' assault (v. 27).

There is, however, great good news. When the Messiah comes, and when he makes a New Covenant with his own, a new City and a new Temple will arise—the Church. As the NT teaches, it is in the Church that God, throughout the Days of the Messiah, will accomplish the great eschatological Restoration that he promised through Jeremiah, and for which the prophet Daniel so fervently prayed (v.24).

Modern proponents of the TFAV include Iain Duguid, Ernst Hengstenberg, Meredith Kline, Edward Pusey, Kim Riddlebarger, and E. J. Young.

A Critique of the TFAV

Because of the fluidity—indeed, the ambiguity—of the language of this prophecy, the TFAV seems, at first glance, to open it up quite well. However, upon closer inspection, we encounter some serious problems.

If, for example, the great Restoration envisioned in verse 24 is fulfilled under the New Covenant, why should the *terminus ad quem* of the prophecy be the *first* advent of Christ, rather than the second, when that restoration will be complete?

What of the sixty-two sevens of verses 25 and 26: Why do the proponents of the TFAV simply add them to the first seven, rather than pause to probe a little deeper for their special significance?

Why do they assert that the “he” of verse 27—the one who will confirm a covenant with many—is Christ, when the person spoken of in the immediately preceding verse (v.26) is the prince (allegedly Titus) who will destroy the city and the sanctuary?

Why, if the “he” of verse 27 is Christ, does the angel again point to his death here (“He will bring an end to sacrifice and offering”), when, in verse 26, he has *already* spoken of the (alleged) destruction of Herod's city and sanctuary?

Why, if this is Christ, will he establish a covenant with many only for one seven, rather than forever (v. 27)?

Why is the prophecy silent as to what occurs in the last half of the seventieth seven, after Christ brings an end to sacrifice and offering (v. 27)?

And why does it conclude with such a great emphasis upon the destruction of the temple? Is this not an odd way of wrapping up a divine revelation meant to unveil the Messianic restoration of all things!

Perhaps, then, in light of all these troubling questions, there is a more satisfying interpretation than the one offered in the TFAV.

The Dispensational Two-Advent View (DTAV)

The second view is the *Dispensational Two-Advent View*. Unlike the TFAV, it holds that here Daniel refers not only to Christ's first advent, but also to his second, when he comes again at the end of a seven year season of tribulation for ethnic Israel. This view has little historic precedent, having arisen in mid-19th century England among the Plymouth Brethren. And yet, for reasons discussed earlier, it has become widely popular in evangelical circles. Far and away, it is the most complex and controversial of the three interpretations. If, however, we confine ourselves to the basics, it is fairly easy to describe and understand. Let us briefly survey it, verse by verse.

Dispensationalists reckon the seventy sevens of verse 24 as 490 calendar years. They acknowledge that the six blessings here promised to Daniel's people are achieved by the earthly work of Christ, and that these blessings will reach their full fruition in the new heavens and the new earth. Nevertheless, in a major departure from the TFAV, they do not agree that Daniel's people and city appear here primarily as OT types of the eschatological People and City of God: the Church. Instead, dispensationalists insist that Gabriel is speaking primarily of spiritual blessings that God will bestow upon ethnic Israel in the Millennium; in the Dispensation of the (earthly, Jewish, and Messianic) Kingdom that is (allegedly) the true theme of all OTKP.

The subject matter of verse 25 is the (events of the) first 69 weeks. These total 483 calendar years. According to (most) dispensationalists, they began in 445 B.C., when king Artaxerxes issued a decree authorizing the restoration of Jerusalem, which was indeed rebuilt in stressful times under the leadership of Nehemiah (Neh. 2:1f). They ended either at the birth of

Messiah the Prince or at his triumphal entry into Jerusalem. Notably, dispensationalists cannot quite make this scheme chronologically viable, and so resort to massaging the numbers involved. Some suggest that Artaxerxes actually issued his decree in 455 BC, while others say that here the Spirit reckons a year as 360 days.⁶

Along with the proponents of the TFAV, dispensationalists hold that verse 26 speaks of (1) the rejection and death of Christ, who thereby “has nothing” of his royal prerogatives, (2) the coming of the Roman “prince” Titus, and (3) the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD by Titus’ legions.

However, upon reaching verse 27, dispensationalists diverge sharply from their traditional brethren. Here, they say, the Spirit suddenly lifts us up and carries us ahead to certain dramatic events that must befall ethnic Israel at the close of the present evil age. Obviously, this raises an important question: What in the world happens during the intervening years?

With scant help from the text itself, dispensationalists respond by asserting that throughout this time God is pursuing a different plan for a different people. The plan is the “mystery” of the Dispensation (or Era) of the Church. The people are the Church itself, the Bride of Christ. According to dispensationalists, the OT prophets—including Daniel—did not foresee or speak of either, since their sole concern was to encourage the OT saints with promises of Christ’s millennial Kingdom.

Moreover, they did not foresee still another mystery, one that will bring the Church Era to a close: the Rapture. At the Rapture, God will send the glorified Christ secretly to lift his Bride into the skies above the earth and then carry her away to heaven, where she will be safe and secure from the vicissitudes of the seven terrible years now to begin: the Tribulation (Mt. 24:6, 15, 1 Thess. 4, 1 Thess. 4:13ff, Rev. 7:14).

In sum, dispensationalists hold that God has placed a great “parenthesis”—a huge temporal gulf, now some two millennia long—between the end of verse 26 and the beginning of verse 27. Again, they call this gulf the mystery of the Church Era. When it began, God’s prophetic time clock—his stated plans for ethnic Israel—stopped (v. 26). But as soon as the Rapture occurs, it will start to tick again (v. 27)!

What will the seventieth week—the Tribulation era—look like? In reply, dispensationalists take us to verse 27. The “he” with which it begins is not, they say, the prince of verse 26 (i.e., Titus). No, it is the “little horn”

of Daniel 7, the Antichrist. This wicked prince will enter into a seven-year covenant with “many” Jews, presumably guaranteeing them certain political and religious prerogatives. However, mid way into the final week, he will break the covenant by suppressing Jewish ritual worship, “desolating” the (restored) temple with his abominable idolatries, and launching a fierce persecution against Israel. In other words, for three and a half years Israel (along with the persecuting world-system) will endure what dispensationalists call “the Great Tribulation.” However, Christ himself—at his visible coming again in power and glory—will bring all hostilities to an end. When he appears, he will pour out complete destruction upon the Antichrist (and his followers), after which he will introduce the manifold blessings of the thousand-year Messianic reign upon the earth (v. 24).

Daniel 9: The Rock of Dispensationalism

Before commenting further, I want very much to emphasize that this text—or rather this interpretation of it—is foundational to the entire dispensational system; that it grounds the dispensational picture of all Salvation History. We can best understand why this is true by considering once again some of the key propositions it involves, propositions that at any number of points put Dispensationalism and orthodox Protestantism in opposite corners of the theological ring.

There are at least seven of them: (1) God does not have one eschatological blessing for one new and unified people (i.e., eternal life for Jews and Gentiles, members together of the Body of Christ), but two different blessings for two different peoples (earthly blessings for Israel and heavenly blessings for the Church); (2) the people of God spoken of in OTKP are not spiritual Israel (i.e., the Church), but ethnic Israel; (3) the sphere of fulfillment of OTKP is not a two-staged spiritual kingdom introduced by Christ under the New Covenant, but a future millennial kingdom introduced by Christ under the Davidic Covenant; (4) there will not be one, but (at least) two eschatological comings of Christ: the first for his Church (the Rapture), and the second for ethnic Israel (the Parousia); (5) God has been pleased to use a single OT text (Dan. 9:24-27), rather than a multitude of NT texts, to reveal the true structure of Salvation History; (6) God has been pleased to use a single OT text (Dan. 9:24-27), rather than a

multitude of NT texts, to give us the key to the Olivet Discourse, the Revelation, and other major NT prophetic passages; and, (7) God's Church—both Catholic and Protestant—has more or less completely misunderstood this crucial OT passage, and has therefore misunderstood his Plan of Salvation for some 1850 years!

A Critique of the DTAV

Yes, for dispensationalists like C. I. Scofield, J. Walvoord, L. S. Chafer, D. Pentecost, C. Ryrie, J. MacArthur, C. Smith, T. Ice, T. LaHaye, D. Jeremiah, and many more, a very great deal rides upon this distinctive interpretation of Daniel 9:24-27. But is it viable? Our previous study of NT eschatology strongly suggests it is not. Moreover, when we closely examine the text itself, we find a good deal to awaken serious doubts about the soundness of the DTAV. Let us pause again to consider some of the major problems involved.

Is it really the case that the seventy sevens are 490 literal years? Do not the particular numbers employed at least hint at a symbolic meaning?

Considering the character, reach, and ultimacy of the blessings promised in verse 24, is it likely that they are temporary, lasting only a thousand years; and that they are reserved more or less exclusively for ethnic Israel and the (physical) Jerusalem below (Gal. 4:25-26)?

Is it exegetically certain that Messiah the Prince appears at the end of the 69 weeks? Could it be that he appears instead at the end of the first seven (v. 25)?

Is it really the case that the people of the prince to come are the soldiers of Titus (v. 26)? Could it be that they are actually the followers of the Antichrist, and that their assault is not against Herod's (physical) city and temple, but against Christ's (spiritual) City and Sanctuary: the Church?

By what possible biblical justification can we insert over 2000 years of Church history between verses 26 and 27, especially since the "he" of verse 27 clearly refers either to the Messiah or to "the prince to come" of verse 26?

And again, seeing that the Spirit's central concern in Daniel is to disclose the stages and *grand finale* of Salvation History, how is it that in verse 27 he takes us, not to the Consummation, but merely to the beginning

of the Millennium, during which—and at the end of which—so much more of eschatological interest is (supposed) to occur?

Questions like these cast long shadows of doubt over the DTAV, even as they hint at a far more satisfying interpretation. We will consider it now.

The Reformed Two-Advent View (RTAV)

I have called our third and final interpretation the *Reformed Two-Advent View*. It is Reformed because it is grounded in the amillennial eschatology of the leaders and creeds of the classic Reformation. It is Two-Advent because it finds Daniel referring both to the first and second advents of Christ. Like the DTAV, the RTAV is a recent historical development, having arisen in the late 19th century, though in its basic hermeneutical approach it is much like the TFAV. Leading proponents include T. Kliefoth, C. F. Keil, and, in our day, C. H. Leupold. My indebtedness to Leupold's fine *Exposition of Daniel* will soon become clear.⁷

By my lights, the RTAV is easily the most satisfying interpretation of Daniel 9. Unlike the other two schemes, it harmonizes perfectly with the details of the text itself, and also with the majestic purpose and contents of Daniel's other prophecies. More than this, it abundantly confirms, and is illumined by, NT eschatology. As a result, it not only fills us with confidence as to its truth, but also gives us, as Leupold declares, "... one of the grandest revelations of the course and climax of Salvation History to be found in the prophetic Word."⁸

Let us take a moment to examine this view in some detail. My approach will be to go through our text verse by verse, offering interpretations guided by the RTAV. The translation, with slight (and significant) modifications imported from other versions, is that of the very literal New American Standard Bible.

Verse 24

Seventy sevens have been decreed over your people and over your holy city, to finish (the) transgression, to make an end of sins, and to make atonement for iniquity; to bring in everlasting righteousness, to seal up vision and prophecy, and to anoint the Most Holy.

In this verse, Daniel gives us the theme of the entire prophecy. It is, as it were, a condensed (and rather cryptic) heading, of which all that follows is a detailed elaboration.

What is that theme? Advocates of the RTAV would sum it up this way: *God has decreed a set period of time in which he will fulfill all his redemptive purpose and plan; in which he will bestow all his redemptive promises upon all his redeemed people.* In other words, here Gabriel declares that the prophecy to follow will give us the remainder of *all* Salvation History, from Daniel's day to the Parousia of Christ, the Judgment, and the advent of the World to Come. It will survey *all* that the LORD will do between now and the Consummation to bring his people and their world into the eternal Kingdom of God.

This soul-stirring interpretation is more than confirmed at the very outset. Gabriel declares that seventy sevens are decreed over the people of God and the Holy City. He says nothing of years, or weeks of years. Manifestly, these numbers are symbolic. But why were they chosen, and what do they mean? Doubtless they allude to the seventy years of Israel's exile and captivity, and therefore appear here by way of a grand promise: In the seventy sevens ahead, God will fully deliver his people from their exile and captivity, and fully restore them to all his covenant blessings.

The key word here is "fully." In the Bible, the numbers seven and ten symbolize fullness, perfection, and completion. Seventy sevens, being $7 \times 7 \times 10$, mystically expresses perfect completeness (see Mt. 18:22). So then, speaking as he did, Gabriel was simply saying, "God has decreed a set period of time within which he will fulfill, perfect, and complete his redemptive purposes. I am about to tell you what will happen in it."

Leupold puts it this way: "The seventy heptads is the period in which the divine work of greatest moment is brought to perfection."² If this interpretation is correct, it means that the *terminus ad quem* of the prophecy is indeed the Parousia of Christ at the end of the age. This in turn implies that the seventy sevens are *not* calendar years, and that henceforth no calculations (or 360 day years) are possible or needed. What a relief!

God's decree concerns Daniel's people and his Holy City. Who and what are they? Here, we must take care. The Jerusalem of verse 25a is indeed earthly Jerusalem, and the people who rebuilt it were indeed ethnic Jews. But as I will argue in a moment, the City of verse 25b, and the City

and Sanctuary of verses 26-27, are different. They appear *after* the coming of Messiah the Prince (25b). They arise in NT times, under the New Covenant. Therefore, according to the NCH, they represent Christ's Church. And as we have seen, Daniel and his godly OT compatriots will be members thereof in excellent standing (John 10:16, Heb. 11:40)!

Gabriel now unveils six redemptive blessings that God will bestow upon his total "Israel" over the course of the seventy sevens (Gal. 6:16). They appear in two triads: The first three pertain to redemptive *rescue* from sin, the second three to redemptive *restoration* to eternal life. While textual peculiarities make the exact translation of some these words difficult, the basic message is clear enough, and the NCH richly helps us to uncover the meanings involved.

My take is as follows. By the end of the seventy sevens—and because of the total redemptive work of Christ, both in his humiliation and exaltation—God will have completely: (1) finished (or restrained) the transgression of his people (i.e., stopped their transgressing, as well as the power of their former transgressions to condemn them); (2) made an end of (or sealed up, concealed) their sins (i.e., stopped their sinning, as well as the power of their sins to condemn them); (3) made atonement through Christ for their iniquity, thereby reconciling them to God; (4) brought in everlasting righteousness (i.e., imputed and imparted Christ's righteousness to his people, so that in the end they may dwell where perfect righteousness dwells, 2 Peter 3:13); (5) sealed up vision and prophecy (i.e., fulfilled all previous canonical visions and prophecies); and, (6) anointed the Most Holy (i.e., bestowed divine glory and perfect holiness upon his eschatological Sanctuary, which is the Body and Bride of his Son, the Church, Eph. 3:21, Rev. 21:1-11).

These are all Kingdom blessings, to be introduced by the New Covenant that will create the Kingdom. Therefore, since the Kingdom comes in two stages, there is a sense in which we Christians already enjoy them; there is a sense (largely forensic) in which we have already taken possession of them. Nevertheless, the accent here definitely falls upon the end, the eschaton, the final state. Commenting on the blessings of the completed Kingdom, and indicating Gabriel's purpose in declaring them to Daniel, Leupold writes:

In these six statements we have the sum of all the good things that God promised to men *perfectly realized*. With this verse we stand at the ultimate goal of the history of the Kingdom of God. What follows will unfold the successive stages by which this goal is realized and present the main features to be looked for and borne in mind by the people of God. We have just seen the essentials of God's program for the ages.¹⁰

Verse 25

So you are to know and discern that from the issuing of a decree to restore and to rebuild Jerusalem until Messiah the Prince there will be seven sevens; and for sixty-two sevens it will be built again with open square and moat (or wall), even in troubled times.

This verse spans the bulk of the remainder of Salvation History: 69 of the 70 sevens. According to the ESV, the marginal reading of the ASV, and the advocates of the RTAV, it is properly divided into two distinct parts: the first seven, and the 62 sevens that follow it. The first seven begins with a decree to restore and rebuild earthly Jerusalem. Most likely it is the decree issued by Cyrus in 538 BC, though the precise date is of little importance, since the first “seven” is not a week of years, but an era of Salvation History whose exact duration we neither know nor need to know (Ezra 1:1-4, Isaiah 44:28; cf., Dan. 9:23). The first seven ends with the coming of Messiah the Prince. This is first advent of Christ, through whose earthly work—through whose humiliation—all the blessings of v. 24 were purchased and are thereafter bestowed.

Now the 62 sevens begin. They too symbolize an era, the era in which Christ builds his Church. However, here Gabriel uses OT typological language to speak of NT realities, casting the growth of the Church in terms of the growth of the City of God. The reference to its open square (or streets) suggests expansive growth outwards. The reference to a moat or wall suggests divine protection. Pointing to the very real but also limited success of world evangelization, Leupold paraphrases, “She shall again be built extensively, yet within fixed limits.”¹¹ The growth shall occur “in troubled times,” a phrase echoed in the Revelation, where the Spirit refers to the Church Era (and indeed to all Salvation History) as “the great tribulation.” Yes, God has decreed the rearing up of Christ's Church; but he

has also decreed much trouble for the saints who will build it (Rev. 7:14; Acts 14:22, Rom. 5:3, 2 Cor. 1:4, 1 Thess. 3:4).

This division of the 69 weeks into two distinct eras (an OT and a New) is decisive for the interpretation of the prophecy as a whole, seeing that it places Christ's first advent at the end of the first seven, rather than at the end of the 69. In particular, it radically challenges the interpretation of verses 26-27 offered in the TFAV and the DTAV. However, the superiority of this approach to verse 25 is so clear that one wonders how we could have missed it for so long! Above all, it immediately helps us to understand why Gabriel did not simply refer to 69 sevens, but instead to seven sevens and 62 sevens. Moreover, as we are about to see, once we accept this framework, it sheds an abundance of fascinating—and eschatologically vital—light on the 70th seven of verses 26-27. We turn to them now.

Verse 26

Then after the 62 sevens the Messiah will be cut off and have nothing, and the people of the prince who is to come will destroy the city and the sanctuary. And its (or, his) end will come with a flood; even to the end there will be war; desolations are decreed.

This is the first of two verses dealing with the seventieth seven; with the third and final stage of Salvation History. Again, it is not a week of seven literal years, as repeated exposure to dispensational claims may incline us to believe. No, it is an era of brief but uncertain duration, the era in which God will bring Salvation History to a close in final conflict, final judgment, and final redemption. This interpretation buttresses the RTAV, since it finds Daniel doing here exactly what we would expect, exactly what he has done before, and exactly what he will do again: giving us nothing less than the Consummation, the dramatic closing scenes of God's plan for the ages. I say it with respect: On this score, the other two views are not worthy to be compared.

The theme of verse 26 is the end time agony of the true spiritual Church of Christ. The close of the present evil age is near. The Great Commission is nearly accomplished. Lawlessness abounds, and deep darkness covers the earth. At this point, says the angel, the Messiah will be cut off and have

nothing. Obviously, this cannot refer to his atoning death, as argued by the two other views. But what does it mean? Leupold suggests that the “cutting off” is best illuminated by the “having nothing”:

(The “having nothing”) implies that he shall not have that which normally might be expected to fall to his lot, such as followers, influence, and the like. If that is the case, then the preceding statement must have involved his being “cut off” in the sense of losing all influence and prestige that he ever had before men. The season of the successful building of the City and the Sanctuary is at an end. As far as the world is concerned, Messiah shall be a dead issue. His cause will seem to have failed.¹²

At that time—amidst such widespread apostasy from the law and Gospel of God—the world-system will take action: The people of the prince who is to come will destroy the City and the Sanctuary (2 Thess. 2:1ff). The prince is not Titus, but the Antichrist, the very Antichrist whom we meet over and over again in Daniel’s visions (7:8, 11, 21-22, 24-26, 11:36ff). His people are the eschatological seed of the serpent (Gen. 3:15), the “sons of the evil one” (Mt. 13:38), the followers of the Beast (Rev. 13:1f). As for the City and the Sanctuary, Leupold opines: “These represent the visible institution called the Church. These shall be destroyed, and with them the influence of the Christ that we now still know and feel to be abroad in the earth.”¹³ Doubtless this destruction will involve a new measure of Christian martyrdom. Nevertheless, the primary meaning is that religious freedom for Christians will be universally denied, and the institutional Church forced underground. Daniel has already seen this coming (7:21, 25). It is explicitly predicted in 2 Thessalonians 2:3-4. It appears also in Revelation 11:7-10, where the Spirit represents the end time Church under the image of two OT witnesses; witnesses whom the Beast kills and leaves for dead on the bloody streets of the City of Man, just as he did their Lord.

Regarding the final sentence of this verse, Leupold contends that it is the Antichrist whose end will come with a flood of divine judgment at Christ’s Parousia. Like Pharaoh and his obedient armies, he will be utterly swept away (2 Thess. 2: 8, Rev. 15:1-4). This could be. However, the context seems to favor the idea that here too the outward, institutional Church is in view: Her end will come with a flood of opposition and persecution (Psalm 18:4, Isaiah 59:19). To the very end of the seventieth seven, there will be war against the saints (Rev. 12:15, 17). Desolations—

both of the institutional Church and her persecutors—are determined (Rev. 11:1-2).

Verse 27

And he will make a firm covenant with many for one week, but in the middle of the week he will put a stop to sacrifice and offering; and on the wing of abominations will come one who makes desolate, even until a complete destruction—one that is decreed—is poured out on the desolator.

Here Gabriel further instructs Daniel about the key events of the seventieth seven, this time with a concluding emphasis upon the destruction of the destroyer, the Antichrist. As the long verse opens, we learn that throughout the final seven, he (the Antichrist) will cause a strong covenant to prevail over “the many.” Leupold explains:

The idea is that as he seeks to take the place of the Christ, so he shall imitate Him in some way. As the Lord made a covenant with his own to give them strong assurances as to what he would do, so Antichrist will inaugurate a covenant that will prevail; which is to say, compel the masses to accept it and abide by it. It shall not, therefore, be a gracious covenant of love, as are the Lord’s covenants, but a covenant of terror, compulsion, and violence.¹⁴

C. F. Keil, an early proponent of the RTAV, concurs. Highlighting the religious dimension of the Antichrist’s “agreement” with the world, he writes, “The ungodly prince shall impose upon the mass of the people a strong covenant that they should follow him and give themselves to him as their God” (Rev. 13:4).¹⁵ The interpretation offered by these two outstanding commentators is compelling, seeing that 2 Thessalonians 2:1f supplies a more or less identical picture of the purpose, character, and career of the Man of Lawlessness.

How will the global rule of the Antichrist affect the Church? In a reprise of the message of verse 26, Gabriel answers by declaring that in the middle of the last seven he will put a stop to sacrifice and offering. This means that (roughly) half way through his hegemony, he will suddenly turn against the Church and suppress her public worship. At this point, he will become “one who makes desolate,” a destroyer. With destructive intent, he will now come against the saints “upon the wing of abominations.” That is, he will

fly into global power and influence—and so to apparent victory over Christ's little flock—riding upon the persuasive force of detestable idols: a counterfeit gospel (i.e., religion, ideology) and counterfeit signs and wonders that seem to validate it (Mt. 24:23-24, 2 Thess. 2:8-12).

This will indeed be the Church's darkest hour (Mt. 24:21, Rev. 13:7). Yet it is, after all, only an hour, and one that her Redeemer himself has triumphantly passed through. Therefore, it is an hour of hope. For no sooner will the counterfeit prince launch his great war against the saints, than the glorified Christ will appear in the skies above the Earth to rescue them. Then, in the Judgment that follows, he will pour out complete destruction upon all who thought to destroy his own: Apollyon, Antichrist, and "the many" who so foolishly followed them into the Last Battle (Mt. 24:29-31, 25:31ff, 1 Thess. 4:13f, 2 Thess. 1:3-10, 2:8, 11-12, Rev. 19:20, 20:10).¹⁶

Conclusion

The prophecy of Daniel's Seventy Sevens—possibly the most difficult in the entire prophetic canon—is a case study in the indispensability of the New Covenant Hermeneutic. Without it, the vision is a maze; a labyrinth from which there is no escape. With it, the way into the open field of truth becomes clear at last.

Our survey of the three main interpretations has made this evident.

Because the advocates of the TFAV have indeed grasped the true structure of NT eschatology, as well as the importance of the NCH, they have produced a fairly viable interpretation, one that has understandably remained popular over the years. However, we have seen that upon closer inspection it fails to do justice to the nuances of the text itself, and also to the grand theme and substance of the book as a whole.

Meanwhile, advocates of the DTAV, having largely misunderstood NT eschatology and imposed an alien OT hermeneutic upon it, have given us an exotic interpretation that is exegetically untenable and theologically flawed. The widespread popularity of this view therefore reflects a serious failure on the part of the modern evangelical church to grasp the true structure of NT theology, and the NCH that naturally flows from it. Happily, it appears that Dispensationalism is now on the wane. I do not think it can be otherwise, seeing that in the end the Spirit of Truth must (and will) draw

Christ's true spiritual Church back to the NT, where alone she will receive the keys to OTKP, Daniel 9, and all the rest of the eschatological truth she will need to stand strong amidst the rigors of the last of the last days.

The NT itself promises this very thing. It tells us that the Lord loves his Bride (John 13:1); that he will prepare her for the Last Battle (John 16:13); and indeed, that one day he will cause her to attain to the unity of the faith, right down to eschatological faith (Eph. 4:11f). When he does, I believe he will draw her to the Reformed Two Advent View of Daniel 9.

Again, the reasons are many. This view includes all the strengths of the other two, while avoiding their weaknesses. It is true to the text, and true to the context: the Book of Daniel as a whole. It harmonizes perfectly with NT eschatology, and draws upon it richly for a right understanding.

But best of all—to my mind at least—is the intriguing fact that the RTAV seems to come *at just the right time*. Somehow, it perfectly suits the dark, difficult, and dangerous days through which the global Church is now passing. In other words, this interpretation of Daniel's prophecy of the Seventy Sevens may well be an eschatological gift from the exalted Lord himself; a special opening of our understanding by which, even now, he is supplying his beloved Bride with just the right mix of tough realism, steadfast hope, and eager expectation, so that she will be fully prepared for the return of her beloved Husband, the High King of Heaven (Luke 24:35, John 16:13, 2 Tim. 3:1f, 1 Peter 4:1-2, 12-13).

OT Kingdom Prophecies Considered: Zechariah

WE TURN OUR attention now to the most prolific—and most fascinating—of the three *post-exilic* prophets: Zechariah (fl. 500 BC). Like his rough contemporaries, Haggai and Malachi, this great OT priest, seer, and martyr comforted a subjugated and much enfeebled nation with visions and prophecies of a glorious future. Over and over again, he spoke of the coming of the Messiah, the final defeat of Israel's enemies, and the final restoration of God's people, land, temple, priesthood, and holy city—Jerusalem.

Our focus in the present chapter is Zechariah 12-14. It is the second of two lengthy prophetic oracles dealing with the future Kingdom of God. In order to understand the second well, let us look briefly at the first.

Zechariah 9-11

In essence, these three chapters constitute a single word of promise: In days ahead, God will send the Messiah, a mighty warrior-king who will lead Israel—fully regathered to her homeland in a Second Exodus from all the nations where God had scattered them—to victory over her perennial foes, and then to the eternal enjoyment of his covenant promises and blessings (9:1-10:12). We observe, however, that this oracle concludes on a dark and mysterious note: Far from following their Messiah, it appears that Israel's wicked leaders will actually reject their God-sent Shepherd-King, thereby annulling the Old Covenant, forfeiting God's protection, and exposing the nation to destruction (11:1ff)! And yet, in spite of all this, God will still have mercy upon a portion of his people, whom Zechariah calls "the afflicted of the flock" (10:2; 11:7, 11; 13:7).

How are we to resolve this apparent contradiction? Here, NT hindsight gives us much-needed insight: The afflicted of the flock are a remnant of elect Jews (Rom. 9:6ff), called by God to recognize the divine-human Messiah (11:11; John 1:14, 6:40), enlist in his spiritual army (10:5f, 2 Cor. 10:4-6, 2 Tim. 2:4), preach his Gospel (9:10, 10:4f, 2 Cor. 2:14-16), gather eschatological “Judah” and “Ephraim” from the four corners of the earth to their spiritual homeland (9:11-17, 10:6; Titus 2:11-14), and—together with their new-born Gentile brethren—follow him to consummate victory on the Day of the LORD (9:11-17; Rev. 6:1-2, 19:11-16).

We find, then, that Zechariah’s first oracle is primarily fulfilled in the first stage of the Kingdom; the stage in which Christ, through his humiliation and exaltation, purchases the “the Israel of God,” gathers her out of the Domain of Darkness, and leads her in triumphant Gospel combat beneath the banner of the High King of Heaven.

Zechariah 12-14

This brings us to Zechariah’s second oracle, found in chapters 12-14. Here again his theme is the coming Kingdom, but this time *with an emphasis upon the Consummation*. I have entitled it “Jerusalem in that Day,” since here the expression “in that Day” occurs some 15 times! To read the oracle itself is to see why: In essence, it is a series of prophetic “snapshots,” most of which look ahead to one or another facet of the eschatological “Day” wherein God will bring his Kingdom purposes to complete fulfillment. As we shall see, the prophet does indeed include a few references to the Era of Proclamation. But again, the emphasis here clearly falls upon the Consummation; upon the Day in which the LORD God will intervene in history one last time to execute final judgment upon Israel’s enemies, administer final redemption to his people, and usher them into the everlasting age of blessing and worship for which they have patiently waited, hoped, and longed, generation after generation.

In short, the “burden” of Zechariah’s final oracle is to reveal the final acts of God in the final stages of Salvation History.

Interpretive Approaches

As every student of the prophetic Scriptures knows, Zechariah 12-14 contains especially difficult and controversial OTKP's. Therefore, we do well to ask at the outset: What method of prophetic interpretation will best guide us through the maze of competing views, and bring us safely to the insight and certainty we desire?

As we have seen, our premillennarian brethren are not shy about answering: We must use the method of *prophetic literalism*. Wayne Grudem, a respected historic premillennarian, is among them. Citing Zechariah 14:5-17, he writes:

Here again the description does not fit the present (Church) age, for the Lord is King over all the earth in this situation. But it does not fit the eternal state, either, because of the disobedience and rebellion against the Lord that is clearly present ... (Passages like this) indicate some future stage in the history of redemption which is far greater than the present church age but which still does not see the removal of all sin and rebellion and death from the earth.”¹

In this defense of premillennialism, Grudem does not openly espouse prophetic literalism. Nevertheless, it is quite clear that he approaches Zechariah's prophecy—and all OTKP—*on the assumption that it is indeed the only valid method of prophetic interpretation*. And if Grudem is right, then his conclusion is also right: Zechariah's oracle *must* be fulfilled in the eschatological agony, conversion, and millennial exaltation of ethnic Israel. For the prophetic literalist who is trying to honor NT revelation, there is simply no other option.

However, as natural as this approach may appear to be, we have seen repeatedly that the NT positively rejects it both by precept and example. For again, both Christ and the apostles consistently teach that the true sphere of fulfillment of all OTKP is the New Covenant, and also the new spiritual nation to which it gives birth: the eschatological “Israel of God,” the Church (comprised of Jew and Gentile). But if this is so, then we *cannot* interpret this or any other OTKP literally. Rather, we must interpret it eschatologically, covenantally, typologically, and ecclesiologically. We must understand it as a “veiled” and “mysterious” representation of life under the New Covenant; life in one or both of the stages of the spiritual Kingdom that the New Covenant creates. Importantly, to adopt this approach is to see immediately that in Zechariah's great oracle, God was

speaking not only to OT Jews, but also—and primarily—to the Christian Church, supplying her with the wisdom, strength, and comfort she will need for her arduous pilgrimage through the Domain of Darkness, especially as she enters the last of the last days (Col. 2:2, Eph. 4:3, 13).

A Critique of Premillennial Approaches

I have suggested that the NCH gives us the best possible understanding of Zechariah 12-14. We should rejoice that it does, seeing that premillennial views involve so many intractable problems. Because of the popularity of those views, let us mention a few of the most important.

First, the oracle says nothing at all about a temporary millennial reign of Christ. Anyone who reads the text objectively, refusing to import millennial presuppositions into it, will see immediately that Zechariah is speaking of the conversion of eschatological Israel, the Last Battle, the Day of the LORD, and the eternal worship of the World to Come. It is completely counterintuitive to think that an oracle so grand—so cosmic—in its scale, should have as its *terminus ad quem* a temporary millennial reign of the Messiah, rather than the ultimate glories of the perfected Kingdom of God.

Secondly, we have already seen that this oracle gives us one of at least five different OT prophecies of the Last Battle. We have also seen that if we interpret them all literally, it is impossible to reconcile the conflicting data. Therefore, the only viable solution is to affirm, with the NCH, that in each such prophecy the Spirit is giving us a symbolic—a typologically veiled—revelation of the final clash between the Church and the World, a clash whose true nature is fully disclosed only in the NT. This approach alone retains the divine inspiration, inerrancy, and perspicuity of Scripture.

Thirdly, there is the problem of anachronisms. Do we really want to say, for example, that in our technologically advanced age the nations of the earth will come up against ethnic Israel riding horses, camels, and donkeys; or that they will bring cattle with them to serve as food (12:4, 14:15)?

Fourthly, there are theological problems. How is it that in the Millennium—when Christ himself is allegedly seated upon his throne in Jerusalem—that Israel and the nations will revert to observing the Mosaic Law; a Law that, according to the NT, Christ himself fulfilled and rendered obsolete (Mt. 5:17, Rom. 10:4, Heb. 8:13)? In particular, will parents really

take it upon themselves to administer Mosaic sanctions by executing the false prophet who sprang from their loins (13:2-4; Deut. 18:20, 13:13)? Will the nations really go up to a physical Jerusalem to join ethnic Israel in observing the Feast of Booths (14:16)? Will they really bring animal sacrifices to a physical Temple; and will priests really lay those sacrifices upon a physical altar, or boil them in physical cooking pots (14:20-21)? The mind steeped in NT revelation simply cannot bring itself to assent to such propositions. Instead, it looks immediately and instinctively for NT antitypes; for the NT spiritual realities of which all these mysterious pictures are OT types, shadows, and symbols.

Finally, what about the bearing of the rest of the book upon the interpretation of this particular oracle? Was there ever an OT prophet whose writing more fully embodied the “apocalyptic” mode of divine revelation than Zechariah? Was there ever a prophet who more consistently edified and encouraged God’s OT people by clothing his great eschatological revelations in vision and symbol? If, as all agree, the first half of Zechariah’s book (Zech. 1-8) is completely devoted to eight mystical visions loaded with Messianic and Kingdom symbolism, is it not likely that the second half of the book (Zech. 9-14), which is devoted to two great prophetic oracles, is loaded with Messianic and Kingdom symbolism, as well? Indeed, since the first half of the book also contains a number of prophecies, and the second half also contains a number of visions, is it not clear that the whole book is apocalyptic through and through, and that we must therefore interpret it symbolically, rather than literally?

We conclude, then, from evidence found both in the OT and the New, that premillennial interpretations of Zechariah 12-14 are fatally flawed, and that our only hope of penetrating to the deep meaning of this great oracle lies in the skillful use of the NCH. In a moment, we will attempt this very thing. First, however, I must offer one further introductory word.

Snapshots Ahead

As mentioned above, Zechariah’s final oracle is composed of a series of prophetic “snapshots.” *The Reformation Study Bible* explains it this way:

Our understanding of the teaching of Zechariah is greatly helped when we recognize that the prophet gives pictures of the future in snapshot fashion, in which the pictures are not placed in

any particular sequence. When we read a passage, we see only what is happening in that snapshot, not how it relates to the other snapshots.²

In this helpful observation, the key word is *sequence*. Yes, the snapshots are related, but thematically, rather than chronologically. We see this vividly in the frequent appearance of the eschatological marker “in that Day.” Through the use of this expression, the Spirit is letting us know that he is now speaking of the two-staged Kingdom of God and Christ. But through its use he is also letting us know that he is now giving us yet another cameo; yet another fresh miniature portrait of some event or characteristic of life proper to that (particular stage of the) Kingdom.

Does the oracle as a whole have any chronological drift or momentum? To be sure. Moreover, once we abandon premillennial literalism and futurism in favor of the NCH, we are able to see it clearly. Broadly speaking, it turns out that the prophecy is much like Ezekiel 36-39: It passes from the Era of Proclamation and Probation (the Kingdom of the Son), through the Last Battle and the Day of the Lord, into the World to Come (the Kingdom of the Father). Nevertheless, even as we bear this overall perspective in mind, we must recognize that each snapshot stands more or less on its own. Yes, its exact place in the total oracle will help us to interpret it; but having received that help, we must look for its essential meaning in the OT symbols themselves, and in the NT truths to which those symbols so mysteriously point.

With all this as introduction, we are ready at long last to begin our exegetical journey through Zechariah 12-14.

Strong in the LORD (12:1-9)

The opening prophecy, highly reminiscent of material found in chapters 9-10, sounds the theme of the oracle as a whole: In the eschatological conflict between “Israel” and the nations (i.e., between the Church and the World), God will be the strength of his people, leading them through much suffering to final triumph. Importantly, here the phrase “in that day” recurs five separate times. The NCH would have us receive this as a sign that we are dealing with events to occur in the eschatological era, which is the New Covenant era, the Kingdom era, and the Church era. We must, then, with

the Spirit's help, endeavor to "decode" the prophecy, so as to discern the NT meanings here embedded in OT language and imagery.

Since each of the nine verses in our snapshot is a prophetic nugget in its own right, I will briefly comment upon them one verse at a time.

In verse 1, Zechariah characterizes the entire forthcoming oracle (chapters 12-14) as "the burden of the word of the LORD concerning Israel." It is a burden not only because it brings heavy tidings, but also because it burdens the prophet with a sense of urgency to deliver it to God's people.

It concerns, not ethnic Israel, but eschatological "Israel:" the Church, which will be composed of Jews and Gentiles living and serving together as one family and one nation under Christ (Gal. 6:16, Eph. 2:15, Rev. 12:1f).

Importantly, the oracle emanates from the Creator and Sustainer of the cosmos, the One who is sovereign over all history for the sake of his people and his glory (Rom. 8:28, Eph. 1:11-12). Since Zechariah will speak of the Consummation later in his oracle, we may safely conclude that here, in the opening snapshot, his focus is largely upon the Church's spiritual warfare throughout the entire Era of Proclamation and Probation; throughout the first stage of the Kingdom; throughout the stage that the Holy Spirit, in the Revelation, refers to as "the Great Tribulation" (Acts 14:22, Rev. 7:14).

According to verse 2, the sovereign God has purposed to make the Church—the NT City of God (Gal. 4:26, Heb. 12:22)—a cup that causes reeling to all the (hostile) peoples around her. All who reject her Gospel and attack her will become drunk with God's judicial blindness, and will therefore stagger and fall beneath his judgments (Jer. 25:15-16, 2 Thess. 2:1ff). Such is the fate of all who would harm his (gospel) prophets; of all who would touch the apple of his eye (Psalm 105:15, Zech. 2:8, Rev. 11:5). The eschatological siege—mounted throughout the Church Era—will not only be against the capital city of the holy nation (i.e., Church leaders and public institutions), but against the tribal villages as well (i.e., the laity themselves). All who would live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution (Mt. 5:10-12, 1 Thess. 3:1-4, 2 Tim. 3:12).

In verse 3 the imagery changes, though the message remains much the same. In the eschatological Era, God will place the Church as a stone before all peoples. Those who build their lives upon this stone—by building them upon the Christ whom the Church proclaims—will live (Mt. 7:24ff; 1 Tim.

3:15). But those who stumble over it (1 Peter 2:4-8) and thereafter seek to “lift” it out of their way *via* persecution, will be severely injured. Indeed, Jesus, the Head of the Church, says that all such persons will be ground to dust and scattered like powder (Mt. 21:44). Throughout the Era of Proclamation, many (unbelieving) peoples will gather against the Church; at the end of the age, all will (14:2).

In verse 4 the Spirit uses OT martial imagery to promise that throughout the Era of Proclamation God will continually watch over—and rise to the defense of—his eschatological “house of Judah,” the redeemed tribe of his Messianic Son, the Church. This calls to mind the many occasions in which God confounded the plans of the enemies of Christ’s apostles, so that they might fully proclaim the Gospel to one and all, and so finish their course victoriously, with great joy (Acts 4:1-27, 5:17ff, 12:1-19, 13:4-12, 16:16-40, 18:1-17, 19:21ff, 20:24, 2 Tim. 4:18).

Verses 5-6 depict the gladness and dynamism of the eschatological “clans of Judah”—that is, of Church leaders serving all throughout the Era of Proclamation. In verse 5 we find them reveling in the spiritual vitality, loyalty, and support of “the inhabitants of Jerusalem;” glorying in the gifts and graces of everyday Christians eager to serve the cause of Christ. Here, one thinks of the apostle Paul, effusing over the prayers, outreach, and generosity of the Gentile assemblies he had founded (2 Cor. 8, 9; Phil. 1:3-11, 4:10ff, 1 Thess. 1, 2).

Verse 6 pictures the great unction and effectiveness of these latter-day Gospel warriors: Ablaze with the Spirit, they will be led in triumph in Christ, diffusing the knowledge of the Redeemer in every place, and infallibly building up his Church (2 Cor. 2:14-17, Eph. 4:7-16). Some (i.e., those who are being saved) they will “consume on the right hand,” torching their opposition to Christ, and so transforming them into spiritual brethren and fellow-citizens of the Jerusalem above (Phil. 3:20). Others (i.e., those who are perishing), they will “consume on the left hand,” consigning them, through their own impenitence, to the fires of judgment (John 3:19-21, 20:23, Acts 13:46). At the end of the Era of Proclamation, when the battle is over and the victory complete, all the inhabitants of Jerusalem will dwell securely in their eternal home(s), with none to frighten or attack again (John 14:3).

The message of verse 7—a prophetic nugget best interpreted in isolation from verses 5-6—is that “in that Day” God will pour a new social dynamic into the eschatological nation: None of his people will glory above the rest. Special honors will no longer be accorded to a royal family, or to the inhabitants of a capital city (let Rome take note!). Instead, God will distribute the gifts of his Spirit in such a way as to preclude divisions in Christ’s Body; in such a way that the members of the Body will have the same care one for another (1 Cor. 12:22-25). Therefore, far from seeking to exalt himself, he who is greatest in that Day will be the servant of all (Mark 9:35); each will regard his brother as more important than himself (Phil. 2:3); and all will seek glory and honor, not for themselves, but for Christ (2 Cor. 10:17, Gal. 6:14).

Verse 8 uses vivid OT imagery to declare that throughout the Era of Proclamation the LORD will defend his NT warriors and make them mighty through God for the tearing down of (spiritual) strongholds (2 Cor. 10:4f). Though their bodies may indeed feed the flames, not a hair of their head (i.e., their regenerate souls) will perish (Luke 21:18, John 17:11, 15, 1 Cor. 13:3). In and of themselves they are a picture of spiritual weakness and poverty, but they can do all things through Christ who strengthens them, even to the extent of casting (spiritual) mountains into the depths of the sea (Zech. 4:6-7; Mt. 5:3, 21:21, 2 Cor. 12:9, Phil. 4:13). Through them, God’s eschatological Zerubbabel *will* build his Church (Zech. 4:1-10, Mt. 16:18).

While verse 9 is indeed applicable to the entire Church era, its contents and position at the end of this prophetic snapshot suggest that here the Spirit is mainly looking ahead to the Day of the LORD, a theme to be taken up in chapter 14. If so, the judgment here in view will be the one which immediately follows the Last Battle, when Christ descends from heaven to rescue his beleaguered Bride and to destroy the assembled enemies of God, once and for all (14:2f, Rev. 19:11ff).

Before Strength, Tears (12:10-14)

How is it that eschatological Jerusalem will become a cup of reeling to the nations (12:2); how is it that God will so zealously come to her aid (12:4, 9); how is it that his people will find such great strength for the battle (12:5-7)? Zechariah’s next prophetic snapshot supplies the answer: They

will enjoy these blessings because “in that Day” *God will grant them deep, Spirit-wrought repentance and faith in Christ* (12:10-14).

This will be the key to their eschatological victory. Why? Because this kind of repentance and faith will be the earmark of their regeneration and justification; because regeneration and justification will make them members of the New Covenant nation; and because the *parties* to the New Covenant are destined to inherit the *promise* of the New Covenant: redemptive rescue from *every* enemy of the Domain of Darkness, and redemptive restoration to *all* the blessings of eternal life. Such a people—with such a covenant-keeping God on their side—cannot fail to triumph in the great eschatological clash of the kingdoms!

When will this beautiful prophecy be fulfilled? Premillennial interpreters, bound by their literalist hermeneutic, feel compelled to interpret it ethnically, and therefore futuristically. John MacArthur writes, “Israel’s repentance will come because they look to Jesus, the One whom they rejected and crucified, in faith *at the Second Advent*.”³ But this view is deeply problematic. How did the Jews described in 12:1-9 enjoy such strength and blessing from God if they were not yet converted to Christ? How shall the houses of David, Nathan, Levi, and Shimei suddenly reappear on the stage of history just prior to Christ’s return? And how can Israel’s national conversion be effected by the visible return of Christ, when, according to pervasive NT teaching, God’s pleasure and purpose in NT times is to save sinners strictly by the “foolishness of preaching” (Mt. 28:18ff, John 17:17, Romans 10:14ff, 1 Cor. 1:21)?

No, premillennial literalism cannot uncover the meaning of this prophecy, nor can it illumine the time of its fulfillment. But the NCH can. Let us therefore bring that hermeneutic to the text for a closer look.

Zechariah’s words will be fulfilled “in that Day,” that is, in the eschatological era, the New Covenant era (12:11). Moreover, as the words themselves make clear, they will be fulfilled in the first stage of that Era: The Era of Proclamation and Probation.

Verse 10 gives us the theme, verses 11-14 elaborate. Each phrase of the long first verse is rich with meaning and deeply affecting.

In that Day, the sovereign God will pour out his Spirit upon the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem. In other words, beginning at Pentecost and continuing right up to the Consummation, he will pour out

his Spirit upon his elect, both Jew and Gentile (Acts 2:1ff). As the NT teaches, these are God's latter-day Israel (Gal. 6:16), his royal priesthood (1 Peter 2:9), and his chosen city of habitation (Gal. 4:26, Eph. 2:22, Rev. 21:1-4).

When the Spirit falls upon them, he will be to them "a Spirit of grace and supplication." That is, he will graciously make known to them the grace of God provided in Christ, and he will move them to supplicate God and Christ for a salvation they desperately need (John 1:14, Acts 2:37, Acts 11:18, 16:30, 20:24, Eph. 2:8-9, Titus 2:11-14).

In this process, the NT saints of all generations "... will look upon (him) whom they pierced." The NT explains: When Christ is lifted up through the preaching of the Cross (John 3:14-15, 12:32), the Spirit will enable God's people to look upon him (Christ), behold his deity (John 1:14, 6:40, 14:9), and see that, in a very real sense, it was they themselves who nailed him to the Tree. How so? Because the (God-ordained) death that he died, he died not for his own sins, but for theirs (Mark 10:45, Rom. 6:10, 1 Peter 3:18, Rev. 5:1ff). Moreover, the same Spirit will enable these newborn saints not only to look *upon* Christ as the God-Man, but also to look *to* Christ as their Redeemer; he will enable them to trust, obey, and believe in Christ—and Christ alone—for the salvation of their immortal souls (John 4:14-15, 6:29, 40, Heb. 12:2).

In the end, the fruit of this spiritual rebirth will be joy unspeakable and full of glory; but the birth itself will not be without mourning and tears (Luke 15:7, John 16:21, 1 Peter 1:8). This is the theme of the rest of the prophecy. Conviction of sin—and corresponding sorrow over all that sin has cost God, Christ, and man—will run *deep*, deep as the grieving of parents over the loss of their only son (12:10); or deep as the grieving of a whole nation over the loss of a godly and beloved king (12:11; 2 Chron. 35:20-27, Mt. 26:75, Luke 7:36-50, John 16:8-14). This sorrow will also be *universal*: It will touch every inhabitant of the land, every marriage, every generation of every family (e.g., David and his son, Nathan; Levi and his grandson, Shimei), and every institution (e.g., kings, priests, people), (11-14). And yet Zechariah's words are indeed glad tidings, for here, draped in OT type and shadow, is yet another proclamation of one of the great promises of the Kingdom: Through the eschatological gift of the Spirit—and the resulting gifts of repentance, faith, and a new, circumcised heart—

all of God's people will be holy (Deut. 30:6, Jer. 31:31-34, Ezek. 36:24-32, 1 Peter 1:16, Phil. 3:3, Col. 2:11, Heb. 8:6-13). *All* of God's people will be born again (John 3:3, 7, 1 Peter 1:23).

In passing, I want to acknowledge an element of truth present in premillennial interpretations of this passage. Premillennarians say that this is an OT prophecy of the latter-day conversion of ethnic Israel. In part they are right, for whenever a Jewish man or woman is called to Christ, it is fulfilled (Rom. 11:5). It will also be fulfilled when God, at the end of the age, through the preaching of the Gospel, calls a great multitude of Jews to faith in the first of Israel's "firstborn" sons, thus grafting (much of) ethnic Israel back into the vine of Abraham, the father of all the faithful (Rom. 4:1ff, 8:29, 11:11-32, Col. 1:18, Heb. 1:6, 12:23).

We must understand, however, that these are only *partial* fulfillments of our text, and that Zechariah 12:10-14 is *fully* fulfilled, neither in Jewish converts alone, nor in Gentile converts alone, but in all converts; in the One New Man and the One New Nation that is the Spirit-filled Body of Christ, composed of believing Jews and Gentiles (Eph. 2:15, 1 Peter 2:9).

So then, our premillennarian brothers are correct when they assert that this prophecy is fulfilled among latter-day Jews. But they err when they say it is fulfilled *exclusively* among latter-day Jews, *exclusively* at the end of the age, and *exclusively* at the Second Coming of Christ. Thanks be to God for the NCH, which helps to see all these things clearly, and so to make our way, together, towards his amazing eschatological truth!

After Tears, Cleansing (13:1-6)

This is the third prophetic snapshot in Zechariah's oracle. Aided by the NCH, we can readily discern its essential meaning: In the New Covenant Era, and as a result of Christ's atoning sacrifice for sin, God will sanctify his Church, purging it—and ultimately the whole world—of idolatry, false religion, and the deceiving spirits that are behind them. God's people themselves will have a role in this, as they use Church discipline—wherever and whenever necessary—to maintain the spiritual purity of their assemblies. Let us look briefly at the text itself to see exactly how the Spirit conveys this encouraging message.

In verse 1 God unveils the basis, or ground, of his sanctifying work in the Church. Every phrase is rich with meaning. “In that Day,” points ahead to the Era of Fulfillment, especially the Era of Proclamation. “A fountain will be opened”—at Calvary, where Christ’s blood will be shed in order to make atonement for sin; in order to secure the regeneration, sanctification, and eventual glorification of God’s covenant people (Mk. 14:24, Rom. 3:25, 8:29-30). “For the house of David, and the inhabitants of Jerusalem”—for the Messiah’s spiritual seed, and for God’s spiritual City: the Church of all ages (Luke 1:32-33, John 10:11, 15, Acts 20:28, Eph. 5:25). “For sin and impurity”—not only to forgive it, but also to wash it away; to cleanse (the souls of) God’s people from all inward defilement. Again, such cleansing—such sanctification—is the focus of our text, a focus shared by the apostle when he wrote of Christ that “... (he) 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 2:14; 2 Cor. 7:1, Eph. 4:26-27, Col. 1:22, John 1:9).

Verse 2 specifies two results of the open fountain of Christ’s blood. First, God will cut off the names of the idols from the land. That is, by the regenerating and sanctifying work of the Spirit, he will remove the names of every false god from the lips of his NT people, seeing that henceforth they will desire only to call upon his name and the name of his Son (Ezek. 36:25, 1 Cor. 1:2, 8:1-6, 2 Tim. 2:22). And secondly, he will remove the false prophets and the unclean spirit from the land. In other words, he will remove false prophets, false teachers, and the deceiving spirits that animate them, from the Church, a people seated in heavenly places in Christ, and therefore justly referred to here as the inhabitants of Immanuel’s Land (1 Tim. 4:1-3, 2 Tim. 3:1ff, Heb. 12:22, 2 Peter 2:1f, 1 John 4:1-6).

Verse 3 intimates one way in which the cleansing will come about. Under the Law, false prophets who enticed Israel to serve other gods were punishable by death; and indeed, relatives of such prophets—including their parents—were specifically warned not to hesitate in delivering them up to that punishment (Deut. 13:6-11). In our text, God is therefore saying that “in that Day” eschatological Israel will, at long last, rise eagerly to the fulfillment of their duty under the Law. Zealous for the presence of the Holy One of Israel in their midst, they will be willing even to hand their own (spiritual) children over to death.

The NT fulfillment of this prophecy is not difficult to see: In the Era of Proclamation, Christian parents will subject even their own children—whether physical or spiritual—to Church discipline, discipline up to and including the spiritual “death penalty” of excommunication (Mt. 18:15-18, 1 Cor. 5:1-5, 1 John 2:19, 4:1-4, Rev. 2:2). However, they will do so in love and hope; love for their souls, and hope that through such discipline they (the children) will again be restored to life among the people of God (1 Cor. 5:5, 2 Cor. 2:3f). Thus shall the Holy Spirit—and the Holy People—preserve the spiritual purity of Immanuel’s Land: the Church of Christ.

Verses 4-6 picture a Day when the Spirit-filled people of God will be so vigilant and so discerning that false prophets will not dare to ply their wicked trade among them. Verse 6, which alludes to the physical self-abuse practiced by the worshipers of pagan gods (Lev. 19:28, 1 Kings 18:28), is a parable of what will occur: When eschatological Israelites confront false prophets wearing the telltale marks of their idolatrous faith (e.g., error, immorality, confusion, disunity, etc.), they (the false prophets) will try, unsuccessfully, to conceal the truth with outright lies. Many NT texts—and the bloody theological battlefield of Church history—display the fulfillment of this prophecy: Always and everywhere, ravenous spiritual wolves—false brethren, false teachers, and false prophets dressed up as Christ’s sheep—have sought to infiltrate the Lord’s folds and win a following, only to be discovered, reprovved, and expelled by the faithful undershepherds of the flock (Mt. 7:15, Acts 20:29, Gal. 2:1-5, 6:13, 2 Peter 2:1, Jude 1:4, Titus 1:10-16, 1 John 4:1f, Rev. 2:2).

The Stricken Shepherd, the Gathered Flock (13:7-9)

We come now to the fourth prophetic snapshot of Zechariah’s oracle. Quite fittingly, it brings the first part of the oracle—the part dealing with the Era of Proclamation—to a close (12:1-13:9), even as it transitions to the second and concluding part, the part dealing with the Consummation and the World to Come (14:1ff).

The great theme here is the God-ordained atoning death of the Good and Faithful Shepherd of God’s flock—the Lord Jesus Christ—and the subsequent gathering of the flock (the Church) that will infallibly issue from it. Accordingly, like those preceding it, this snapshot spans the entire

Era of Proclamation, teaching us yet again (13:1) that through the Work of Christ (in the days of his humiliation) all the previously promised blessings of the Kingdom will flow to God's people: strength for victorious spiritual warfare (12:1-9), tears of repentance in token of justifying faith (12:10-14), and inward spiritual cleansing, resulting in outward covenant loyalty to God (13:1-6). Let us explore these ideas by looking briefly at each of the three verses comprising our text.

As the prophecy opens (verse 7), we hear the voice of the LORD commanding a sword to awaken against his Shepherd, against the Man who is his Associate. This cryptic line anticipates whole tracts of NT theology. The sword of the LORD, emblematic of divine retribution for sin, has been asleep, seeing that in ages past God mercifully "passed over" the sins of his people (Isaiah 66:16, Jer. 50:35-37, Ezek. 21:1ff, Rom. 3:25). Now, however, by his all-controlling Providence, the God of Justice awakens it on Mt. Golgotha, so that it may fall, in mercy and grace, upon a Substitute, the very One he has appointed to be the eternal Shepherd of his people (Isaiah 53:2ff, Zech. 13:1; Mt. 27:46, Mark 10:45, John 3:14-16, 12:27-33, Acts 2:23, 4:27-28).

So that the great work of atonement may be accomplished, this Shepherd will stand before God in two ways. First, he will be "the Man," the Last Adam, who will serve as the Head, Representative, and Substitute of his people; and who, in that capacity, will bear in his own person the just penalty for their sins (John 10:11, Rom. 3:21-26, 5:12ff, 1 Peter 2:24, 3:18). But secondly, he will also be God's *Amith*: not *just* a man, but also a divine (and therefore a holy) Peer, Friend, and Companion to the Father. As such, he will *be* in perfect tune and *walk* in perfect step with the Father's nature, purpose, plan, presence, and power. Therefore, he will win a perfect righteousness for his own, later to be imputed to every afflicted sheep that puts his trust in him (John 8:29, 55, Rom. 3:26, 5:1, 2 Cor. 5:21)!

When God strikes his Shepherd, the sheep will be scattered. There will be two kinds of them. First, there are "the little ones," loyal but frightened and disoriented Jewish disciples of the Good Shepherd who are temporarily scattered but later regathered (Mt. 26:31). But secondly, there are impenitent Jews who ought to have followed their Messiah, but refused to, and who will therefore be scattered permanently, through divine judgment at the hands of Rome (Mt. 8:12, 23:36-39, Luke 21:20-22). Here Zechariah

anticipates NT teaching to the effect that the Good Shepherd's death will indeed result in judgment, but much more in mercy, seeing that, because of it, God will be able to lay his hand upon the little ones—the afflicted of the flock (11:7, 11)—for salvation. He will be able—and he will begin—to gather his eschatological flock, the spiritual Israel of God (Gal. 6:16).

Verses 8-9 speak of this very thing. Note carefully that at this juncture the prophecy enters the eschatological era, the last days; days in which the exalted Christ spearheads the thrust of the Gospel into the earth, so that he may enter into covenant with *all* his people (v.9). Therefore, “all the land” of verse 8 cannot refer simply to Palestine (as premillennarians claim), but rather to that which OT Palestine typified: the whole earth, the earth that in the end will become Immanuel's Land (2:12, 3:9, 9:16, 12:12, 13:2; Rom. 4:13). Says one commentator, “This is not to be taken in a literal sense, but as representing the domain covered by the Kingdom of God.”⁴

If this view is correct, the message of verse 8 is solemn indeed, but comforting as well: By the end of Era of Proclamation, “two parts”—i.e., the larger portion—of all who hear the Gospel will perish from “the land” through their willful disobedience to it. However, through God's sovereign grace (v. 9), one part—i.e., a smaller portion, an elect remnant, a little flock—will be gathered safely into his Shepherd's fold, and will therefore remain in the Land. Having safely passed through the Judgment, they will inherit eternal life in the new heavens and the new earth (Mt. 7:13-14, Luke 12:32, 1 Cor. 1:26-31, Eph. 1:6, 2:8-9, 1 Peter 2:4-10).⁵

This line of interpretation seems thoroughly vindicated by verse 9, where we hear God making marvelous promises that resonate deeply in the heart of every NT believer. First, he *will* bring the Shepherd's flock through the fire: Despite all manner of painful temptations and persecutions, God will preserve his elect in Christ until they safely enter the World to Come (John 10:29, 17:15, 1 Cor. 1:4-9, 10:13, Jude 1:1). And secondly, he will *test* and *refine* them, even as men test and refine silver and gold. This immediately calls to mind the words of the apostle Peter, who encouraged believers to understand that God uses manifold trials as a kind of holy fire by which to purify the faith and character of his people, so that at the revelation of Christ they themselves may receive praise, glory, and honor from him (1 Peter 1:6-9; Proverbs 17:3, Isaiah 43:2, John 15:2, Rom. 5:1-5, Eph. 5:25-27, Heb. 12:1ff)!

Verse 9—and the prophecy as a whole—concludes, appropriately enough, with a reiteration of the great covenant formula. God’s people will call on his Name, and he will answer them; he will say, “They are My people,” and they will say, “The LORD is my God.”

When exactly will all this happen? Doubtless it will happen throughout the entire Era of Proclamation: It will happen when, in the fires of conviction, God’s people first call upon Christ for salvation (Luke 18:13, Acts 2:37f); and it will happen later, when, in the fires of temptation and persecution, they call upon him for strength and deliverance (Rom. 15:30-32, Phil. 4:13, 2 Tim. 4:18). However, to judge from its position in the text, it may well be that the Spirit *especially* has in view the end of the age, when the saints will have *finished* passing through the fires; when they will have *finally* entered the World to Come; when they now call upon the Name of the LORD in eternal praise, thanksgiving, and adoration. The Revelation certainly seems to confirm this: When John beholds the Holy City descending to the new earth as a Bride adorned for her Husband, he also hears these triumphant words: “Behold, the tabernacle of God is among men, and he shall dwell among them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be among them” (Rev. 21:3). Here, the days of fire are over; here the everlasting Day of glory has begun!

Many commentators, and especially premillennarians, assert that this prophecy refers exclusively to God’s dealings with ethnic Israel. However, as I have tried to show in my exegesis of it, the logic of the NCH, the text itself, and the context surrounding it, all argue against it. Will Jewish disciples of Jesus be able to see themselves in this text? Yes. Will God’s latter-day dealings with ethnic Israel fulfill it? To be sure. But again, this is not because Zechariah’s words refer *exclusively* to ethnic Israel. Rather, it is because they refer *comprehensively* to the eschatological “Israel of God”—the Church—and because elect Jews are part of that Church; it is because they are part of the one flock that has the one Shepherd as its Head (John 10:16, Gal. 6:16). Therefore, I would concur with these comments found in the *Reformation Study Bible*:

These verses envision God’s chosen Shepherd who suffers at the hand of God (v. 7). Out of this judgment emerges the true people of God (v. 9). No clearer picture of Jesus and his suffering Church is given in the Old Testament.⁶

The Last Battle (14:1-2)

Like the prophecies of Daniel and Ezekiel, Zechariah's oracle has eschatological momentum: It is ever moving towards the grand finale of Salvation History. Here in chapter 14, which brings both the oracle and the book to a close, Zechariah reaches his goal: a colorful mosaic of five prophetic snapshots, all dealing with the majestic events of the Consummation and with the life of the World to Come. Having already addressed many of these prophecies in earlier portions of this book, my comments here will be somewhat briefer.

I have entitled the first snapshot *The Last Battle* (14:1-2). Here Zechariah picks up a theme first mentioned in 12:1-9, bringing it to its logical conclusion: The age-long warfare between the Church and the World will culminate in a final, decisive clash between the two. As ever, this revelation of the Last Battle is instructive, forthright, and sobering, but also laden with comfort. Indeed, verse 1 sounds the note of final victory at the very outset, a note that resonates throughout the entire chapter: In the end, God will effect a great judicial inversion, such that the manifold "goods" maliciously taken from his people—their work, their property, their health, their honor, their right to public worship, their very lives—will be restored to them once and for all (Mt. 10:29-30, Luke 6:20-26, Heb. 10:34). Like Israel's heroes of old, Christ will plunder the plunderers, and will cause the meek who trust in him to inherit the land (Gen. 14:1ff, 1 Sam. 30:1f, Psalm 37:9, 11, Mt. 5:5).

Verse 2 gives us the Last Battle itself. As elsewhere, so here: The Spirit uses images drawn from Israel's long history of attack by hostile nations to picture the final assault of a consolidated world-system against the visible Church (Psalm 48, Ezek. 38-39; Rev. 20:9). God himself, through the secret workings of his Providence, will bring it to pass, in part to sanctify the Bride of Christ, in part to move sinners to repentance (13:9, Ezek. 38:4, Eph. 5:27, 2 Thess. 1:3f, 2:3, Rev. 13:5-10). Since, according to 1 Cor. 15:46, the "natural" (i.e., physical) events and institutions of OT history were meant to picture spiritual NT realities, we cannot assume that the specific forms of suffering mentioned here will literally come to pass. According to the NCH, the *essential* message of our text is simply that a Satanically controlled world government will maliciously and effectively

suppress—though not completely destroy—the visible Church (2 Thess. 2:1ff, Rev. 13:5-10). Nevertheless, Zechariah 14:2, pervasive NT teaching, Church history, and current events themselves all agree in reminding us that God has indeed appointed his children to holy tribulation, and that the purifying fires of the Last Battle will be as intense as any they have ever known (Acts 14:22, 1 Thess. 3:1-5, 2 Tim. 3:12, Heb. 11:35-40, Rev. 11:7-13). Thankfully, that tribulation will be as brief as it is intense, and will be followed immediately by joy unspeakable and full of glory.

The Day of the LORD (14:3-5)

According to the NT, it is Christ himself who will bring the Last Battle to a close at his Parousia, when he arrives in power and glory in the skies above the earth to destroy his enemies and to glorify both his people and their world (Mt. 13:36-43, 24:29-31, 1 Cor. 15:20-28, 2 Thess. 1, 2, 2 Peter 3, Rev. 11:11-19, 14:14-20, 16:17-21, 19:11-21, 20:7-15). According to the NCH, the snapshot before us is *a symbolic picture of that very thing*. Let us see if our text—and its context—justifies this important conclusion.

Verse 3 tells us that at the time of “Jerusalem’s” eschatological agony, the LORD himself will go forth and fight against her foes, even as he did on many previous occasions in Israel’s history (Exodus 14:1ff, 15:1-18, Isaiah 36-37, Rev. 15:2-3). This will be the last of them, the great and notable Day of the LORD. However, from the NT we know that the Day of the LORD will in fact be the Day of the Lord Jesus Christ at his Parousia (2 Cor. 1:14, Phil. 2:16, 2 Thess. 2:2, 2 Peter 3:4, 10). Therefore, this particular snapshot is indeed fulfilled at Christ’s Parousia, and must be interpreted accordingly.

Verse 4 pictures the LORD creating an unexpected way of escape for his people; verse 5 pictures them using it. This is God’s way with all his people, both OT and New (1 Cor. 10:13). Quite intentionally, the imagery used here reminds us of Israel’s miraculous deliverance at the Red Sea (Exodus 14:1ff). Importantly, verse 4 is not telling us that Christ will literally stand upon the Mount of Olives; or that he will literally split it apart so as to create a literal valley. Similarly, verse 5 is not predicting that literal Jews of a physical Jerusalem will flee to the tiny village of Azel. Those who take this approach fall into confusion by abandoning the NCH,

which teaches us to interpret this prophecy figuratively, in terms of NT truth.⁷

What then is the real message of verses 4-5? We begin to receive our answer when we remember that a number of OT texts picture the God of judgment treading upon the high places of the earth so as to split valleys and melt mountains beneath his omnipotent feet (Psalm 97:5, Isaiah 64:1-2, Micah 1:3-4, Nahum 1:5). Similarly, we remember that in OT times the LORD was faithful not only to rescue his people from coming destruction, but also to provide them with cities—or other places—of refuge, to which they could flee (Gen. 19:20-26, Numbers 35:9f, Joshua 6:1ff, 1 Sam. 24:22). Bearing all this in mind, we can readily discern the essential character of the promise found in these verses: In the Day of the LORD, when the world itself is about to undergo final destruction, the presence and power of the covenant-keeping God of Israel will descend to the earth and draw near to his beloved, persecuted City. Then he will supernaturally open a way for his people to flee eastward towards him (for the LORD likes to come to his children from the East: Isaiah 63:1, Ezek. 43:4, Rev. 7:2), and so find safety in an appointed City of Refuge. When the last of his redeemed children have entered that City, the LORD himself will come, with all his holy ones, executing final judgment upon all of his and Israel's enemies.

It requires but a small step into the NT to see exactly how these broad theological promises will be fulfilled: In the Day of the Lord Jesus, the glorified Christ himself will descend from heaven to the skies just above the earth, circling the globe from east to west, even as the earth and its works begin to melt with intense heat (Mt. 24:27, 2 Peter 3, Rev. 7:2). By his Spirit and through the agency of his holy angels he will swiftly draw near to his people (his Beloved City) wherever they may be, and will supernaturally open a way through the air for his saints to fly to him, who is their one true City of Refuge (Mt. 13:36-43, 1 Thess. 4:13ff). When in this way he has gathered all his children safely to his side, he, they, and all the holy angels will “come” in such a way as to consign the enemies of God—both human and angelic—to the fires of God's eternal judgment (Mt. 13:42, 25:31ff, Rom. 16:20, 1 Cor. 6:2, Rev. 19:20, 20:10).

The World to Come (14:6-11)

Having promised and pictured Israel's victory in the Last Battle, Zechariah's oracle now transitions to the eschaton, to the final state. The remaining verses constitute three large-scale snapshots, all of which feature a series of mini-snapshots. They are (1) the World to Come (14:6-11), (2) the Judgment to Come (14:12-15), and (3) the Worship to Come (14:16-21).

The prophecy of the World to Come is itself divided into two parts: Verses 6-8 use OT imagery to describe the new heavens and the new earth; verses 9-11 use OT imagery to describe (life in) the New Jerusalem.

Our first mini-snapshot (vv. 6-8) points to a radical transformation of the physical heavens, a transformation that the NT says will occur at "the restoration of all things," when Christ returns (Mt. 19:28, Acts 3:21, Rom. 8:21, Phil. 3:21). The Hebrew text of verses 6-7 favors the rendering of the NAS and the NKJV. We may paraphrase it as follows: In the (physical) world to come there will be no natural light, for the luminaries of the former world—the sun, moon, and stars—will have passed away. The result, for God's people, will be something altogether new: a "Day" that is neither day nor night as they once knew them, but an eternal Day whose exact nature is known only to the LORD.

Happily, the NT sheds further light on this mysterious promise, teaching us that it is Christ himself who will "diminish" the luminaries at his Parousia (Mt. 24:29, 2 Peter 3:10, Rev. 6:13); that in the World to Come, the glory of God and the Lamb will illumine all things, both inwardly and outwardly (Rev. 21:11, 23, 22:5); and that this "unique" eschatological Day will stand as a perpetual testimony and reminder: Because of Christ, the Domain of Darkness has passed away once and for all (Rom. 13:12).

Verse 8 reprises the great OT theme of the eschatological River of God (Psalm 46:4, 65:9, Ezek. 47:1-12, Joel 3:18). The living waters are, of course, the very life of the living God, streaming into the new creation from God the Father, through Christ the Son, by the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:33, Phil. 1:19). Interestingly, the prophet sees them flowing out of (New) Jerusalem; that is, out of the Church, the eternal people of God (Rev. 21:2). He also sees that the river will flow both east and west, filling the seas on either side of the City, both in summer and in winter (i.e., year round). However, Rev. 21:1 tells us there will be no seas in the World to Come; meanwhile, Zech 14:6-7 (along with several texts in the Revelation) assures us there will be no seasons. The meaning, then, is figurative and theological: In that Day,

the life of God will continually replenish the creation of God, and will do so through the people of God (see Rom. 8:20-23). Even now, the saints enjoy a foretaste of this life-giving ministry, building one another up through the ongoing exercise of their spiritual gifts (1 Cor. 12:7, Eph. 4:11-16, 1 Peter 4:10). However, to know exactly what this will look like in the World to Come, they shall doubtless have to wait for the Day itself!

The theme of our second mini-snapshot (vv. 9-11) is the eternal security of the eschatological City of God, forever dwelling in the Land of God. The NCH opens it up richly. Verse 9 promises that in the eschaton the completed Kingdom of the Triune God—his direct redemptive reign—will be universal and absolute. For this reason, his Name—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—will be the only name, since all other names and all other gods will have been swept away in the Judgment. God Triune will be all in all (Micah 4:5, John 17:6, Acts 4:12, 1 Cor. 8:6, 15:28, 2 Cor. 10:5, Phil. 2:9-11).

In verse 10 we learn that the exaltation of the sovereign LORD over all creation will bring with it a corresponding exaltation of his people (Mt. 13:33, 1 Cor. 3:21-23, Col. 3:4, Rev. 21:7). Commentator Richard Phillips does a masterful job of addressing the particulars and probing the symbolism:

Verse 10 tells of the exaltation of Jerusalem, which is (presently) situated among larger hills in uneven country ... Jerusalem's surrounding terrain is to be flattened out; the territory of Judah, bounded by Geba and Rimmon, becomes like the Arabah, which is the plain through which the Jordan River flows. The hills are made level to form a plateau wall, while Jerusalem is raised up to be seen by all around. This verse gives the dimensions of the city in its greatest days; the whole city will be made secure and will rise up exalted ... The point here is theological rather than topographical; it is the prophetic ideal achieved in the glorification of God's Mountain and City.⁸

Phillips is telling us that verse 10 is a tightly knit skein of word-pictures mystically depicting events to occur at and after the Parousia. First, the hills and mountains surrounding Zion will be leveled. That is, all that is sinfully high and lifted up will be brought low, even unto destruction (Isaiah 2:12, 17; Luke 1:52, Rev. 14:8, 17:9, 18, 18:1ff). Secondly, the territory of Judah will become a (well-watered) plain: A supernaturally purged and transformed creation will become the inheritance of Messiah's tribe, and will henceforth serve as the staging area for the City of God (Rom. 8:20-21,

Peter 3:13, Rev. 21:1-3). Thirdly, Mt. Zion—and the Holy City that rests upon it—will be lifted up: The natural world will be glorified (thus becoming the Holy Mountain of God), and so too will the saints, who shall have that world as their eternal home (Isaiah 11:9, 65:25, Rom. 8:20-23, Heb. 12:22, Rev. 21:10). Finally, the Holy City will be restored to her greatest dimensions: The dimensions of the Church’s eschatological City are the dimensions of Eden itself, and of all that was offered to man in Eden at the Tree of Life (Rev. 22:1-2, 14).

In passing, we should note, with Phillips, that the exaltation of Jerusalem described here speaks not only of the *consummation* of the saints’ redemption, but also of the great moral *inversion* that it represents. The Holy City—presently small, hidden, despised, powerless, and persecuted amidst “the Great City” that is the fallen world-system—will suddenly be found to praise, honor, and glory at the revelation of Christ (1 Peter 1:13, Rev. 11:2, 8, 17:6, 18:1ff, 21:2). As Jesus taught us: In that Day, the poor will become rich, the hungry will be satisfied, and the sorrowful will rejoice, for the meek, at long last, shall inherit the earth (Mt. 5:5, Luke 6:20-23).

Verse 11 brings the prophecy to a close: Settled on the Mountain of God, secure in Christ, and redeemed from the Curse of the Law, the Holy City will experience the life *of* God, *with* God, forever (Rom. 8:1, Gal. 3:13, Rev. 22:3).

The Judgment to Come (14:12-15)

These verses, which reprise the battle imagery of 12:1-4, draw heavily upon OT Law and history to depict the eschatological defeat of the enemies of Christ’s Church at his Parousia, and the eternal punishment to follow (Mt. 24:29-25:46, 1 Thess. 1, 2 Thess. 2, Rev. 11:7-13, Rev. 14:14-20, 19:11-21, 20:7-15).

Verse 12, a ghastly portrait of the eternal destruction of the wicked in hell, represents their torments in terms of the plagues that formerly befell God’s enemies, whether in Egypt (Ex. 7-12), or, more aptly, at the gates of Jerusalem itself, where the Angel of the Lord struck the Assyrian army and rescued the trembling but trusting people of God (Isaiah 36-37; cf. Lev. 26:16, Deut. 28:22, 2 Thess. 1:9, Rev. 20:10,14).

Verse 13 tells us that, as in OT times, so again at the Last Battle: God will judge his enemies by confusing their thoughts, undermining their unity, and turning their hand one against another (Judges 7:22, 1 Sam. 14:20). The final destruction *of* Antichrist's kingdom will be heralded by the preliminary destructiveness of war *within* his kingdom (Dan. 11:36ff, Rev. 17:16-18). Conceivably, this verse also portrays the eternal hatred and conflict of the wicked in hell.

Verse 14 enlarges upon 14:1, speaking of the eschatological plunder to occur after the Last Battle. The royal tribe (the Church) will fight bravely in defense of the Holy City (also the Church), teaching, preaching, and encouraging one another in such a way that they will endure to the end, and so be saved (14:14, NAS, NIV; Mt. 10:22, Acts 14:22, 1 Thess. 3:2-3, Rev. 2:10). As a reward for their faithfulness, Christ, at his return, will cause the world and its wealth, now purged of sin, to pass forever into the custody of the saints (Luke 19:15f). In that Day, all things will be theirs, they will be Christ's, and Christ will be God's (1 Cor. 3:21-23). The humble in Christ will inherit the earth (Mt. 5:5).

Verse 15 declares that the final plague will fall even upon the animals that carried God's enemies into battle. This recalls the "ban" under which God placed all living things when he sent Joshua into Canaan; into the land of the Amorite, whose iniquity had then grown full (Gen. 15:16, Deut. 20:16-18). The NT meaning is this: When the world's iniquity is finally complete, Christ, God's eschatological Joshua, will return and utterly destroy it. The former things will pass away, so that new and eternal things may spring forth (Isaiah 42:9, 1 Cor. 7:31, 1 John 2:17). God himself will make all things new, and will bestow those things upon his beloved sons and daughters, who will be heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ (Gal. 4:1-2, Rom. 8:17, Rev. 21:1-5, 7).

The Worship to Come (14:16-21)

Our final snapshot pictures worship in the World to Come. It is divided into two parts. The first speaks of the eschatological Feast of Booths (vv. 16-19), the second of the perfect holiness of eschatological Judah and Jerusalem (vv. 20-21). Earlier, we discussed the reasons why a literal, premillennial interpretation of this text is impossible. Let us therefore see

what help the NCH can offer us in disclosing the deep, NT meaning of Zechariah's words.

On the surface of things, the message of verses 16-19 is quite simple: In the World to Come there will be two different kinds of nations (or families). Both of them, at one time or another prior to the Judgment, came up with hostile intent against Jerusalem (v. 16). Now, however, the first group goes up annually (and eternally), not to attack Jerusalem, but rather to worship God as their King, and also to celebrate the Feast of Booths in Jerusalem's holy precincts. Meanwhile, the other group, which apparently has Egypt as its head, consists of stiff-necked nations that persistently refuse to go up. These the LORD will punish with a plague of drought (vv. 17-19).

How can we best understand the meaning of this mysterious prophecy? To begin with, we must ponder for a moment the typological meaning of the Feast of Booths. A look at Leviticus 23:33-34 reveals that this was an especially joyful feast celebrated at harvest time, wherein Israel was to commemorate not only their great deliverance from Egypt, but also God's faithfulness in leading them through the wilderness of Sinai (where they camped in "booths" or "tabernacles") into the Promised Land. Here is the key to understanding Zechariah's prophecy, a prophecy designed to comfort devout OT saints with a picture of the eternal worship of the glorified Church, and so cast in the language and imagery of Israel's most joyful OT feast!

This background information—along with the NCH—enables us to see all things clearly. For example, now we can see that Zechariah's eschatological Feast of Booths will indeed be a *harvest* feast, since here, in the World to Come, all the saints will have been gathered into the barn of God's completed Kingdom (Mt. 13:30, John 4:38, Rev. 14:14-16). Formerly, they were temporary enemies of God and of his people; but Christ, at various times prior to the Judgment, harvested them through the Gospel and turned them into eternal friends (Mt. 9:37, Acts 26:17-18, Rom. 5:8, 1 Tim. 1:12-12, Titus 3:3f). Also, this will be an *everlasting* Feast: The saints will forever "go up" in worship, through Christ, unto God their King (1 Peter 2:5, Rev. 7:9-10, 14:1-4). Finally, this will be a *joyful* Feast: In his City—and *as* his City—Christ's people will ever rejoice, not only in the hour of their own personal deliverance from the Domain of Darkness, but also in the subsequent faithfulness of their Good Shepherd, who safely led

his flock through the deadly wilderness of this present evil age, past the Judgment, and into the Promised Land (John 6:38-40, Gal. 1:4, Phil. 1:6, Rev. 12:7-17, 19:11).

But what are we to make of Egypt, and of the families of the earth that follow Egypt's lead in refusing to go up? Clearly, these typify all men and nations who refused to participate in the eschatological exodus; who refused to accept spiritual rescue from the Domain of Darkness, and spiritual transfer into the Kingdom of God's beloved Son (Col. 1:13); who refused to follow in the footsteps of Moses, who esteemed the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures of Egypt (i.e., of the fallen world-system); who refused to walk with Christ through the wilderness of this world to the Promised Land (Heb. 11:26, Rev. 12:1f).

Puzzlingly, we find these rebellious nations still upon the earth, yet far from Zion and Jerusalem, where the friends of God celebrate the Feasts of God. But in Revelation 22—which also describes the World to Come—the puzzle is solved. Here again we find these nations far from Jerusalem, outside the gates of the Holy City (Rev. 22:15). Now, however, we have learned that in fact they are in the Lake of Fire (Isaiah 66:24, Rev. 19:20, 20:10, 14). It is, therefore, in death (and hell) that the impenitent enemies of God will endure the very plague of drought that they chose for themselves in life, when they refused to drink of the Rock, and to follow the Rock, that God offered them in the Gospel (Mt. 12:43 NAS, Luke 16:24, John 7:37, 1 Cor. 10:4, Rev. 21:6, 22:17).

Part two of our prophecy (vv. 20-22) celebrates the perfect, all-pervading holiness of the World to Come. In that world, the distinction between holy and common, clean and unclean, has completely disappeared (Acts 10:15). The bells on the horses are holy. The cooking pots in the LORD's house are holy—as holy as the altar itself. Yes, even the cooking pots in the houses of the people of Jerusalem and Judah are holy, so holy that men may boil their sacrifices to God in them. Here the boundary between sacred and the profane has been obliterated. Here, every act is an act of worship, every day is the Lord's Day. Here, every Canaanite—a type of unregenerate, sinful man—has been expelled (14:21, Rom. 16:17-20, 1 John 2:19, Rev. 22:15). Here, Israel itself has become the eternal house of the gracious, loving Redeemer who fought triumphantly in their behalf: the LORD of hosts (14:21, Eph. 2:22).

For this reason, in that Day the saints will weep no more, but in an eternal celebration of the Feast of Booths they will rejoice in the Lion of the Tribe of Judah; in the Holy One of Israel who, by his righteous life and atoning death, so mightily prevailed that he made both them and their world forever holy, even as he is holy (1 Peter 1:15-16, Rev. 5:5, 21:2, 22:11).

Conclusion to Part 3

Thank you for joining me in a long, challenging journey over the rough terrain of OTKP. Hopefully, you have found it well worth the time and effort involved.

Speaking for myself, in thinking and writing about these challenging texts I have been impressed over and over again with the power and fruitfulness of the NCH. By way of conclusion to Part 3 of our study, let me touch briefly on four special blessings that come to mind.

First, the NCH wonderfully opens up OTKP. Above all, it does this by clarifying its true sphere of fulfillment, the New (and Eternal) Covenant in Christ, and the two-staged spiritual Kingdom that it creates. Once we are clear on this fundamental point, it is but a small step to mastering the typological method of OT prophetic interpretation, by which we learn to see NT spiritual realities promised and described under a type-laden veil of OT symbolism. The end result is that the NCH gives us skill, confidence, and good success in discerning the Spirit's intended meaning in all OTKP.

Secondly, the NCH properly exalts the New Testament, restoring it to its place of honor in the progress of divine revelation. For too long, huge swaths of the evangelical community have seen the glory of Christ and the Gospel eclipsed by eschatologies mired in a literal interpretation of OT prophetic texts. The sad result has been that the Old Covenant overshadows the New; the Millennium overshadows the two-staged Kingdom of Christ; and ethnic Israel overshadows spiritual Israel, the Church. The NCH heals this theological wound, disclosing Christ and the Eternal Covenant as the one true body towards which all former shadows bent; the one true goal towards which all Salvation History ran (Col. 2:17).

Thirdly, the NCH marvelously discloses and magnifies the Christ-centered unity of the Scriptures. Speaking of the OT Scriptures—and therefore of OTKP—the Lord Jesus himself said, “These are they that

testify of me” (John 5:39). And they testify, not just of him, but also of the New Covenant that he introduced, and the two-staged spiritual Kingdom that it creates. Once we see this—and once we embrace the hermeneutic that it entails—then every tile in the vast mosaic of Scripture falls neatly into place, with the result that we fall down in awe before the majestic portrait of the Person and Work of Christ reflected therein.

Finally, the NCH helpfully prepares the Church for her arduous but victorious Gospel ministry at the end of the age. Henceforth, the sleek, sharply pointed shafts of OTKP—whether pre-exilic, exilic, or post-exilic—are deposited as so many arrows in her spiritual quiver. Henceforth, she can draw them out to warn the wicked, evangelize the lost, and teach, exhort, and encourage the saints. Thus shall Christ’s NT scribes nourish one another with things old and new; thus shall they pass triumphantly through the Greatest Tribulation, the Last Battle, the Resurrection of the Dead, and the Last Judgment; and thus shall they enter the glorious World to Come, where they will live forever with their heavenly Husband and King, who at long last has returned for his beloved Bride and safely brought her home.

Part 4

Understanding the Millennium

The Revelation: Purpose and Literary Genre

AT THE BEGINNING of our journey, we identified four fundamental flashpoints of controversy in the Great End Time Debate: The Kingdom of God, the proper interpretation of OTKP, the Millennium, and the Consummation. Happily, our close study of the Kingdom supplied welcome insights into the other three questions. Having learned that the Kingdom appears in two simple stages—the Kingdom of the Son (i.e., the heavenly, mediatorial reign of Christ) followed by the Kingdom of the Father (i.e., the glorified World to Come)—we realized that the thousand years of Revelation cannot be a third, intermediate stage of the Kingdom sandwiched between the other two, as premillennarians assert. Similarly, having learned that the two stages of the Kingdom are separated by a single Consummation at the Parousia of Christ, we realized that the Consummation cannot be fragmented into multiple comings, resurrections, and judgments, as premillennarians also assert. In short, our study of the Kingdom has gone far towards resolving the End Time Debate in favor of the classic amillennial view of Salvation History.

It remains, however, for us to probe Revelation 20 itself. If it does not describe a future millennial reign of Christ on earth, what exactly does it describe? If, as I have suggested along the way, it speaks of the Kingdom of the Son, is there anything in the Revelation broadly, or in Revelation 20 itself, to support this view? Our purpose in Part 4 of our journey is to find out.

Let us begin, then, by getting a feel for the Revelation as a whole. In particular, let us see if there is anything in the purpose, literary genre, and

structure of the book that will help us better understand the Millennium of Revelation 20.

The Purpose of the Revelation

We begin to discern the purpose of the Revelation when we consider the circumstances in which it was given.

The year, according to most scholars, is around 95 A.D.¹ John, in all probability the last living apostle, is now in his 80's (John 21:21-23). Because of his faithfulness in preaching the Gospel, the Roman authorities have exiled him to a penal settlement on the island of Patmos (1:9, John 21:21-23). It has been over 60 years since Christ's ascension. The Lord is tarrying, and among many believers the expectation of his Parousia is waning (2 Peter 3:1f). The demonic emperor Nero (A.D. 54-68), a vicious persecutor of the Roman Christians, has come and gone. Titus has decimated Jerusalem (70 A.D.). Under Domitian (A.D. 81-89), persecution has spread throughout the Empire and reached Asia (A.D. 81-9). More is now looming (2:3, 10, 13). And beyond this external threat, there are internal, as well. Heretical "Christian" sects have grown in size and number, whose members are seeking to penetrate the orthodox churches and draw away disciples (2:2, 6, 14-15, 20-24). Some churches are even tolerating them in their midst (2:14f, 20f). Meanwhile, others are in decline: The love of certain Christians is growing cold (2:4, 3:1-2); others, having thus far escaped the fires of persecution, are falling in love with the world, and sinking into apathy and hedonism (3:14-21). The situation is dire. The faltering Church needs a word from the Lord.

The Revelation as a Gift to the Universal Church

The Revelation—all 22 chapters of it—is that word. Notably, at the very outset it is described as a *gift*: a gift from God the Father—through Christ, through the Spirit,² through angelic mediation, and through the apostle John—to the seven churches of Asia (Rev. 1:1-6, 9, 22:8). Seven, however, is the biblical number of perfection or completeness (Gen. 2:2,3). The meaning is clear. God gave the Revelation, not just to the seven churches of Asia, but also to what the seven churches represent: the complete Church, the Universal Church. Likewise, the seven lampstands symbolize the one

universal Church, especially in her present ministry as the Light of God and Christ to a world sunk in deep spiritual darkness (Rev. 1:13, 20)

With the benefit of hindsight, we can see that history bears out this important truth. Like the seven churches, the universal Church has always had strengths and weaknesses; like the seven churches, it has always faced persecution, deception, and temptation; and like the seven churches, it has therefore always needed the Revelation. The book is, then, a great gift from the head *of* the universal Church, *to* the universal Church, *for* the help of the universal Church. Note carefully an important implication of this truth: the Revelation was *not* meant to be a closed book—not when it was given, not now, and not ever (Rev. 22:10). The Lord desires his whole Church—past, present, and future—to understand, obey, preach, and profit from the Revelation.

And that includes chapter 20, as well!

The Revelation as a Prophecy to the Universal Church

John also describes the Revelation as a *prophecy* (Rev. 22:10, 18). Now according to the apostle Paul, he who prophesies speaks to men for edification, exhortation, and comfort (1 Cor. 14:3). This short definition wonderfully captures the flavor—and the purpose—of the book. Everywhere we turn, we hear the exalted Christ prophesying to his Church. Everywhere we find him teaching, warning, and encouraging her, so that she may “overcome” all opponents and safely enter the completed Kingdom at his return (2:11, 2:26, etc.).

Since this idea is so important—namely, that the Revelation is essentially an extended prophecy—let us develop it a little further by looking at the three fundamental ways in which the High King of Heaven here prophesies to his beloved Bride.

The Prophet Teaches His Church

First, Christ *teaches* the Church. Here I especially have in mind the way he builds up the Church Militant in her understanding of her true place in the world and in history; in other words, the way in which he gives her a biblical worldview.

In this regard, Revelation 12 is central. It begins with a vision of the Bride, God's elect of all times and places. From the very outset, we see her as God sees her: She is a heavenly Woman with an earthly mission (12:1). In her OT embodiment, she gives birth to the promised Seed of the Woman—to Christ (12:5a; Gen. 3:15). When she does, the Dragon and his demonic minions try to kill the infant Jesus, but cannot (12:4). Indeed, even when they do succeed in killing the Lamb of God, they altogether fail in “devouring” him, for he rises from the dead and ascends to the Father's own right hand, where he now sits as High Prophet, Priest, and King of heaven. And from that heavenly seat he shall soon come again, this time to act the part of a shepherd against the enemies of his flock, shattering them once and for all with a rod of iron (12:5b, Psalms 2:9, 23:4).

For now, however, the Woman (i.e., the Bride in her specifically NT embodiment) must remain upon the earth. Therefore, in an eschatological Exodus from the Domain of Darkness, she flees into the wilderness of this fallen evil world (12:6). There she will remain for “1260 days” (or “a time, times, and a half a time,” or “42 months,” Rev. 11:2, 12:14, 13:5). Recalling the prophet Elijah's three and a half year exile in the wilderness, these symbolic numbers mark the entire inter-adventual era—the Era of Proclamation—as a season of exile and tribulation for the people of God (1 Kings 17:1f). They will not, however, endure it alone: The Lord will faithfully nourish and aid his people all throughout their long wilderness sojourn, even as he did Israel and Elijah in theirs (12:6, 14-16).

But what exactly will the Church in the wilderness be doing as she awaits Christ's return? The answer is found in verses 7-12: She will be waging war. Yes, the text itself says that Michael and his angels will wage war against the Dragon and his angels. But on closer inspection, we realize that this is simply a picture of heaven's part in a war that the saints will be waging on earth. It is not a physical war, but a spiritual (2 Cor. 10:4, Eph. 6:12). It is the fulfillment of the Great Commission; the proclamation of the Gospel; the declaration of the saving power of the blood of the Lamb; the faithful testimony of the people of God to the Person and Work of the Christ of God (12:11). As they preach and teach—and as God's elect everywhere hear the truth and receive it—the Kingdom of Christ continually pours into the earth (12:10). As it does, the kingdom of Satan, who formerly deceived and ruled the whole world, is continually spoiled and cast to the ground

(Mt. 12:29). Hence, Satan's fury against the Woman; hence the Groom's diligent watch-care over his beloved and persecuted Bride (12:13-17).

Here, then, in a prophetic vision of stupendous theological reach and power, we find Christ teaching the Church Militant who she is, what she is about, what she can expect, and upon whom she can count, as she makes her way out of eschatological Egypt, through the eschatological wilderness of Sin, and into the eschatological Promised Land. Fittingly, this rich chapter stands in the *middle* of the book, for in many ways it supplies us with the keys to the *whole* book. Thanks be to God for such a wonderful prophetic gift!

The Prophet Exhorts His Church

Secondly, the Lord *exhorts* the Church. In particular, he exhorts her by teaching and warning about four great enemies that she will encounter over and over again during her long journey through the wilderness of this world.

The first is *the Dragon*, that serpent of old who is called the devil and Satan (12:9). He—along with his host of evil angels—is the invisible spiritual ruler of the fallen world-system through which the saints must pass on their way to the Promised Land. As we have seen, this teaching pervades the NT. However, in the Revelation the Spirit draws upon various OT texts to depict the world-system as an unholy trinity; an unholy idol that fallen, rebellious, and deceivable mankind is all too inclined to worship. It is comprised of the Beast, the False Prophet, and the Harlot. As we are about to see, these OT symbols correspond to God-given institutions, originally designed for the good of mankind, but now co-opted and corrupted by the Dragon (13:1, 4, 16:13). Ever since the Fall, he is the one enemy lurking behind the other three. Let the saints understand and beware (1 Peter. 5:8).

The second enemy is *the Beast* (13:1-4). This is the political or governmental face of the world-system (Daniel 7:1f). The NT teaches that civil government is a good, post-fall gift of God, designed to restrain evildoers through a faithful administration of his retributive justice (Rom. 13:1f). However, it also teaches that sin can and does corrupt human governments, sometimes to such an extent that they become unconscious instruments of the Satanic (2 Thess. 2:1f, Rev. 13:2, 4). When this occurs, deceived sinners will worship the Beast, rather than God (13:4). And when

that occurs, the Beast will wage war against the people of God who, out of loyalty to their heavenly King, refuse to worship the Beast, and urge sinners to turn away from it towards Christ (11:7, 13:7, 17:14).

In the Revelation, Christ repeatedly exhorts his people concerning the Beast. Above all, he warns them not to receive his mark—his name, or the number of his name—on their right hand or on their forehead (14:9, 11, 15:2, 20:4). Here again the Spirit draws upon OT imagery to speak symbolically to God's NT people (Ezekiel 9). The saints now have the seal of the living God on their foreheads (7:3). In other words, because of their faith in Christ they now belong to the Father; they are his adopted sons and daughters, carrying his Name (Rom. 8:15, 1 Peter 1:17). How then shall they give their ultimate allegiance, whether in thought (symbolized by a mark on the forehead) or in deed (symbolized by a mark on the hand), to any mere man or human institution? Note also that in Scripture six is the number of man (Gen. 1:26ff, Rev. 13:18, NIV), and three is the number of God Triune. Therefore, 666 is *the number of man seeking to supplant the triune God*; the number of man audaciously representing himself as the proper object of worship (13:16-18). The implications are clear: Men take the mark of the Beast whenever and wherever they worship the anti-christian, self-deifying State. And again, throughout the Revelation Christ warns his own that they must never do this evil thing.

Additionally, the heavenly Prophet exhorts his people not to succumb to the threats or actual persecutions of the Beast, even if this means the loss of work, supply, reputation, or life itself (2:10, 13:17). He buttresses this exhortation with a twofold promise: The Lord will always be at his suffering people's side, and he has already prepared a victor's wreath for each one who overcomes (2:10, 12:14-16). Note carefully that in Revelation 20, as elsewhere in the book, Christ again exhorts the whole Church concerning the Beast: Those who refuse to receive his mark (of ownership), but instead remain faithful until death, will enter heaven as disembodied spirits, there to reign in life with their High King until he comes again at the end of the age to raise them from the dead and bestow upon them the glories of the World to Come (20:4-6). More on this later.

The third enemy is *the False Prophet*, also called *the Beast from the Earth* (Rev. 13:11-18, 16:12-16, 19:20, 20:10). A careful reading of the relevant texts shows that this beast symbolizes, not simply false religion,

but false religion willingly pressed into the service of the self-deifying State. Energized by Satan (13:11), and authorized by the State itself (13:12), those people who function as the False Prophet use both coercion (13:12, 16-17) and religious deception (13:14-15) to set up “an image” to the Beast. That is, they seek to organize, implement, and encourage the worship of the State and/or the person in whom the State is embodied at any given moment in history.

The False Prophet is present throughout the entire Era of Proclamation. In John’s day he was embodied in “... the emperor cult and the Commune of Asia, a council of distinguished representatives promoting loyalty to the emperor.”³ In our own day, he rears his head wherever government propagandists encourage the adulation of the Chairman, the Fuehrer, the King, or the President. Notably, Revelation 13:13-15 implies that in some instances Satan will actually empower the False Prophet(s) to deceive men with miraculous signs (Exodus 7:8-13).

Most assuredly, this will be the case at the end of the age. The Gospels and epistles warn us that when the (final) Antichrist arises to deceive the whole world, he will perform “false signs and wonders” (Mt. 24:24, 2 Thess. 2:1-2, 9-12). Not surprisingly, we receive the same warning in the Revelation: John sees three unclean spirits coming out of the mouth of the Dragon, the Beast, and the False Prophet. They are demonic spirits, *performing signs* and going abroad to the kings of *the whole world*, in order to assemble them for the battle of the Great Day of God the Almighty (16:12-16). As I will argue later, Revelation 20:7-10, in remarkably similar language, predicts this very thing one final time. Clearly, the High Prophet of Heaven very much desires his Church to be fully prepared for the last (embodiment of the) Beast, the last False Prophet, and the Last Battle.

The fourth and final enemy is *the Great Harlot*, also referred to as *Babylon the Great* and *the Great City* (17:1, 3, 5, 18). The relevant chapters make it clear that the Harlot represents the economic, commercial, and cultural face of the world-system. As such, she is not so much a persecutor or religious deceiver as she is a seductress (17:4). In former times, she tempted the world through such luxurious commercial centers as Babylon, Tyre, and Sidon. In John’s day, she tempted it through Rome. In our own day, she tempts it through wealthy, pleasure-mad cities now situated all over

the globe, and also through omnipresent electronic wizardry wherein she bares her ample bosom and offers herself freely for a simple click.

John sees that at any given moment the entire world-system is in bed with the Harlot, spiritually speaking: Nations, kings, and merchants—all have fallen to her allurements (18:3). As a general rule, she likes to collude with the Beast and the False Prophet, doing all she can to persecute the Church (17:6) and entice saints and sinners alike with her sorceries (i.e., fake, demonic spiritualities, 18:23). Accordingly, no sooner do we begin to learn about the Harlot, than we hear the prophetic word of the Lord to his Church: “Come out of her, my people, that you may not share in her sins, and that you may not receive of her plagues” (18:4, 3:14-22). As he speaks, the saints receive both warning and promise: Satan’s woman, the Harlot, is doomed to destruction. In part, it will come at the hand of the Beast himself, who will one day turn against her (17:14-18). However, in far greater part it will come at the hand of Christ, who, in a single hour, will make her utterly desolate (18:19) and render her an eternal prison house of Satan and his demons (18:2). Meanwhile, Christ’s Woman—comprised of all who hear his call, flee the Great City, and loyally cling to him in faith—is destined for final rescue and restoration; is destined to become a Holy City and a glorious Bride, forever dwelling with God and Christ under brand new heavens in a brand new earth (19:7-8, 21:2). Let all the saints be warned ... and take heart.

The Prophet Comforts His Church

Finally, the heavenly Prophet uses the Revelation to speak *comfort* to his Bride. Yes, as trembling Christians well know, the Revelation repeatedly issues warnings of inevitable tribulation and certain judgment. However, the more they read, the more they realize how much comfort is offered along with those warnings, and how many different forms that comfort takes.

For example, at the very outset of the book, Christ comforts his pilgrim people with a majestic vision of his own divine nature, covenant faithfulness, and Messianic glory (1:9-20).

He then comforts them with manifold assurances of his presence in, and faithful watch-care over, all his churches, even as he manifests the tough love that he feels for each one (2:1-3:22).

He comforts them with rich, symbolic representations of his heavenly, mediatorial reign, the saints share in it, and his absolute sovereignty over all remaining history (4:1-5:14).

He comforts them with scenes of the spirits of departed believers safely home in heaven, praying for divine justice, and waiting eagerly for the resurrection of their bodies at his return to the earth (6:9-11, 20:4-6).

He comforts them with portraits of his own Parousia in power and glory at the end of the age (14:14-20, 19:11-21).

In conjunction with that, he also comforts them with visions of ultimate justice: of final rewards for the faithful saints, and of final retribution against the persecuting and God-hating “inhabitants of the earth” (6:9-17, 11:11-19, 15:1-4, 16:17-21, 20:7-15).

Similarly, he comforts them with several “sneak previews” of the glorified Church surrounding the throne of God Triune, exultantly lifting up the eternal worship that will fill the World to Come (7:9-17, 14:1-5).

And, of course, he comforts them with two luminous chapters supplying mysterious, thought-provoking glimpses of the (eternal) life of the saints in the new heavens and the new earth (Rev. 21-22).

Conclusion

Summing up, we have seen that the great purpose of the Revelation is prophetic; that in it, God, through Christ, speaks to the universal Church in order to teach, warn, exhort, and comfort her, so that she might make a worthy and triumphant pilgrimage through the wilderness of this world into the eschatological Promised Land.

This is highly relevant to Part 4 of our study for the very important reason that *it naturally and powerfully inclines us to an “ecclesiastical” interpretation of Revelation 20*. In particular, it suggests that Revelation 20 cannot possibly be what many premillennarians claim it is: a divine afterthought, in which the Spirit suddenly shifts his focus from the Church to ethnic Israel, and from the Church era to a future Millennium. No, just like the rest of the book, chapter 20 must also focus on the Church, and on the present evil age through which the Church makes her difficult pilgrimage (Rev. 12). As we have just seen, this conclusion flows naturally from the One who gave it (the Head of the Church); from the ones to whom

he gave it (the seven churches, emblematic of the universal Church); and from the purposes for which he gave it (to teach, warn, and comfort the Church). Moreover, as we shall soon see, it also flows naturally from a careful study of the structure, contents, and symbolism of Revelation 20 itself.

The Literary Genre of the Revelation

The Revelation is an outstanding example of a literary genre called *biblical apocalyptic*. The Greek word *apokalypsis* conveys the idea of *the removal of a veil*, so that something once hidden is now revealed. There is, then, a sense in which one might say that *all* Scripture is “apocalyptic,” since in all Scripture there is an unveiling of special God-given truths that sinful man could not otherwise know, understand, or enjoy. However, as a general rule, theologians use this word far more narrowly. That is, they use it to speak of a particular *kind* of Scripture. For such as these, biblical apocalyptic may be defined as *predictive prophecy in which the Holy Spirit—using vision and symbol—unveils divine truth about the course, character, and consummation of Salvation History*.

In our discussion of OTKP, we have run across this kind of literature more than once. For example, chapters 24-27 of Isaiah, which focus on final judgment and final redemption on the Day of the LORD, supply an outstanding example of pre-exilic apocalyptic. From the season of Israel’s exile we have Daniel 7, which is likely the single greatest OT depiction of the course and character of Salvation History. From the same era we also have Ezekiel 38-39, which is likely the single greatest OT depiction of the *consummation* of Salvation History; of the Last Battle and the Day of the LORD. Finally, from post-exilic times we have the visions and prophecies of Zechariah, all of which again make rich use of symbols to display both the course and conclusion of Salvation History.

In the NT, apocalyptic texts are less plentiful, seeing that in NT times there is an *unveiling* of all that God had previously hidden under type, shadow, and symbol. Nevertheless, the NT is not without its apocalyptic elements. Some of Jesus’ parables have an apocalyptic feel to them (Mt. 13:36-43, 47-50). His Olivet Discourse, alluding as it does to a number of OTKP’s, contains the marks of biblical apocalyptic (Mt. 24, Mark 13).

Similarly, Paul's discourse on the Consummation, written to the Thessalonian Christians, draws frequently upon OT apocalyptic texts, even as it teaches on distinctly apocalyptic themes (2 Thess. 2).

And then there is the Revelation—a book that is manifestly apocalyptic, (almost) entirely apocalyptic, and uniquely apocalyptic vis-à-vis the rest of Holy Scripture. Do we wish to understand it properly? If so, we cannot ignore its genre. *Nor can we ignore the unique way in which it embodies this genre.* Therefore, drawing upon the definition given above, let us take a few moments to examine the Revelation as a true but biblically unique instance of biblical apocalyptic. In what follows, I will characterize it as (1) a predictive prophecy, (2) singing the glory of the High King of heaven, (3) communicated by way of vision and symbol, and (4) serving as the Grand Finale of all Scripture.

A Predictive Prophecy

We have already discussed some of the ways in which the Revelation is a prophecy; the ways in which it teaches, warns, and comforts Christ's Church. However, in doing so it frequently incorporates predictions of historical events yet future to the reader/hearer. Therefore, this long prophecy clearly falls into the category of biblical apocalyptic.

It is, however, biblical apocalyptic of an extraordinary kind. Why? Because in making its predictions about the future, *it tells us little or nothing new about the future.* That is, it tells us little or nothing that was not already foretold in OTKP under type, shadow, and symbol; or it tells us little or nothing that was not already unveiled, explained, and practically applied in the Gospels, the Acts, and the Epistles.

Think for a moment about the prophetic themes we just discussed. In the Revelation, Christ gives John—and the Church—visions of the Dragon, the Beast, the False Prophet, and the Harlot. How are we to understand them? The answer is: We could not possibly understand them unless Christ, in the rest of the NT, had already given us keys by which to unlock their meaning; unless he had given us straightforward didactic teaching about all four. And the same is true of OT apocalyptic. How are we to understand the visions and prophecies of Isaiah, Daniel, Ezekiel, and Zechariah? The

answer is: We cannot, apart from the revelations of the Didactic NT. The latter is the hermeneutical key to the former.

This point cannot be overemphasized. Yes, like all biblical apocalyptic, the Revelation contains predictive prophecy. But because of its unique place in the biblical canon—*because it serves as the Grand Finale of all Scripture*—the things it predicts in vision and symbol *cannot* be new. For if, in the Revelation, God meant to give us new truth about the future (e.g., new truth about a seven year Tribulation, or the career of the Antichrist, or a future millennium, etc.), he would also have had to give us *more* didactic revelation by which to interpret the symbols used to convey the new truth. But he did not. Instead, he simply closed the canon with the Revelation. Therefore, we may safely assume that the truth hidden beneath its symbols is *old truth*, and that everything we need to understand those symbols has been given to us previously in the rest of the NT. In short, the Revelation is not a puzzle to be figured out; rather—for those who know their Bibles and understand NT eschatology—it is a celebration to be enjoyed. I will have more to say on this important point below.

Singing the Glory of the High King of Heaven

Biblical apocalyptic is predictive prophecy with a particular theme. It likes to explore the course, character, and consummation of Salvation History, and to do so in ways that encourage God's suffering people with the hope of final justice and redemption: of final rescue from the powers of evil, final retribution against the agents of evil, and final restoration to the promised covenant blessings of God.

In our study of OTKP, we saw the manifold ways in which the Spirit developed these great themes in OT times. In prophet after prophet, he spoke of a final regathering of God's people; of their final restoration to the Promised Land; of the coming of the Messiah; of the advance of his kingdom in the Days of the Messiah; of the conversion of the Gentiles; of ongoing victory over God's enemies; of the Last Battle, the Day of the Lord, the resurrection of the dead, and the eternal World to Come. Importantly, these themes are the sum and substance of NT eschatology, as well. However, in the OT "true truth" on these themes remained largely veiled under symbolic, typological language. Moreover, because of this

veiling, the exact sequence of the great eschatological events also remained obscure. For this reason, God himself pronounced OTKP in general—and OT apocalyptic in particular—a closed book; but a closed book that would indeed be opened in the last days (Jer. 23:20, Dan. 12:4, Heb. 1:1f).

When, however, we reach the NT, the wraps come off. The mysteries of the Kingdom are revealed. The heart of Salvation History (the Eternal Covenant in Christ) is disclosed. The character of Salvation History—that it consists of successive administrations of the Eternal Covenant—is manifested. And the course of the Salvation History—the stages in which it unfolds, and the key events proper to each stage—is illumined once and for all. As a result, *God's people hold in their hands, at long last, the key to understanding all Salvation History, all OTKP, and all OT apocalyptic!*

But if this is so, why, in the Revelation, would God revert to the use of biblical apocalyptic in order to prophesy to Christ's pilgrim Church? I have already suggested an answer to this important question: He did so because he desired not only to teach, warn, and encourage the saints one final time (just as he had in the rest of the NT), *but also to give them the Grand Finale of all Scripture*. That is, he desired to weave the Christ-centered history, poetry, prophecy, and doctrine of the whole Bible into the final movement of the great symphony of Scripture. In the eyes of the High Poet of Heaven, biblical apocalyptic was apparently the perfect vehicle for doing this very thing.

We must, however, look a little closer. Yes, like all biblical apocalyptic the Revelation has as its theme the course, character, and consummation of Salvation History. But here again it is unique, this time because its focus is largely on *a particular portion* of Salvation History: the Heavenly Mediatorial Reign of Christ. Or, to state the case more precisely, its focus is largely on the Exaltation of Christ; on all the eschatological acts and events by which the Father is pleased to honor the One who, out of love for him and his people, humbled himself even to the point of death on a cross (Phil. 2:1-11).

In a moment we will examine the structure of the Revelation, in order to see exactly how God accomplished this. Here it suffices to say that in this unique expression of biblical apocalyptic God was pleased to draw upon all previous biblical revelation in order to focus the saints' attention on the High King of Heaven: on his resurrection, ascension, and session at the

right hand of the Father; on his absolute sovereignty over all the subsequent events of history; on his infallible declaration of the Gospel—through the Church Militant—to “the (sinful) inhabitants of the earth;” on his continual judgments against their enemies; on his rush to the rescue of his little flock in the days of the Last Battle; and especially on his glorious Parousia at the end of the age, when he himself will execute final judgment, administer final redemption, and bring in the new heavens and the new earth, the eternal home of God and the redeemed.

Does all of this help us to understand Revelation 20? Indeed it does! For if the theological focus of the whole book is on the High King of Heaven—on the course, character, and consummation of his heavenly, mediatorial reign—how likely is it that this one chapter suddenly takes up the theme of a future earthly reign? No, the Revelation is a predictive prophecy that sings the glory of the High King of Heaven *through and through*. To see this is to see the meaning of Revelation 20 as well.

Communicated by Way of Vision and Symbol

This is the third element of biblical apocalyptic, namely that it uses vision and symbol to communicate prophetic truth about Salvation History. But once again we find that the Revelation does this in a unique manner, since it uses vision and symbol, not to veil truth yet to come, but simply to celebrate truth previously unveiled in the Gospels, the Acts, and the Epistles. Therefore, its language is not really “mysterious,” since in the Didactic NT we already have the keys by which to understand it. It is, however, still symbolic, with the result that we must interpret its images symbolically, rather than literally.

If there were any doubt about this, it should be quickly dispelled simply by looking at the first verse of the Revelation. There we learn that God “... sent and signified (the Revelation) by his angel to his servant John” (1:1). The Greek word for “signify” is *semaino*, a verb closely related to the noun *semeion*, meaning “sign.” So then, in choosing this particular word to describe the prophecy as a whole, the Spirit teaches and admonishes us to interpret the Revelation as *a book of signs or symbols*. If we will obey him, we will not go far wrong.

It is true, of course, that all interpreters, whatever their eschatological persuasion, are ready to acknowledge that the Revelation *contains* symbols. However, some interpreters, while agreeing that the Revelation contains symbols, refuse to acknowledge that in virtue of its literary genre it is in fact *a book of symbols*, a book that must therefore be interpreted symbolically from start to finish.

The result of this refusal is an inconsistent hermeneutic. For example, pressured by the obvious, the prophetic literalist will readily concede that the sword coming from Christ's mouth is a symbol for the word of God (1:16); or that the Spirit symbolizes the exalted Christ as a Lamb with seven horns and seven eyes in order to remind us that our Sacrifice for sin is now the omnipotent and omniscient High King and High Priest of Heaven (5:6). When, however, the literalist comes to the 144,000 of all the tribes of the children of Israel (7:4); or to the Two Witnesses who prophesy and (briefly) perish on the streets of the Great City (11:8); or to Christ's admonition to the saints against taking the mark of the Beast (13:16-18); or to the gathering of the kings of the whole world at the Mountain of Megiddo (16:14) ... then he suddenly abandons the symbolic hermeneutic for a literal, *thereby abandoning a consistent method of interpretation for an inconsistent*. How well I remember a certain respected prophetic literalist complain that a symbolic, typological hermeneutic will leave the prophetic interpreter "at sea," bobbing up and down on the swells of mere subjectivity. But perhaps it is really the literalist who is at sea, bobbing back and forth at his own good pleasure between two diametrically opposed approaches to the interpretation of apocalyptic literature in general, and the Revelation in particular.

If, then, we hope to understand the Revelation—and especially chapter 20—we must recognize that it is indeed a unique instance of biblical apocalyptic; that it communicates previously revealed NT truth in vision and symbol; that it does so consistently, in all portions of the book (save for chapters 2-3, where didactic teaching predominates); and that in order to understand it, we must consistently adopt an appropriate hermeneutic. That would be the NCH, according to which we see all biblical prophecy as using types, shadows, and symbols to communicate "true truth"—NT truth—about Christ, the Eternal Covenant, and the twofold spiritual Kingdom he introduced under that covenant. When we do, we will immediately

understand the 144,000, the Two Witnesses, the Mark of the Beast, the Battle of Armageddon, and the thousand year reign of Christ proclaimed in Revelation 20.

Serving as the Grand Finale of All Scripture

I have argued that the Revelation is indeed an instance of biblical apocalyptic, but also that it is a unique instance, appearing as it does at the end of the Bible, where it serves as the *Grand Finale of all Scripture*; of all special revelation. Since this point is so important for a proper understanding of the book as a whole, let us pause to consider it more closely.

Think for a moment of your favorite symphony. Now think of its final movement. What is it that makes the final movement a grand finale? Three simple answers come to my mind.

First, it appears at the *end* of the symphony: There is no more music to come.

Secondly, it reprises all the themes heard in the previous two or three movements. However, when it does, it does so very “grandly.” That is, it skillfully, artistically, and majestically weaves together all the earlier motifs, so that we not only hear them again, but also hear them afresh; hear them in new, startling, and beautiful relations with one another; hear them in such a way that the *whole* symphony is somehow poured into the last *part* of the symphony.

And thirdly, because it *is* a grand finale, it does not typically introduce new musical themes, but rather devotes itself more or less exclusively to a fresh, inspirational recapitulation of the old.

All three of these observations apply to the Revelation, and in a way that helps us understand the book to its very depths.

Like a grand finale, the Revelation appears at the end of the great symphony of biblical revelation. Doubtless it was the last book of Holy Scripture to be given by God. Appropriately enough, it therefore appears as the last book of our Bible. Moreover, its contents veritably scream to us that it *should* be the last book, since it is so thoroughly taken up with the Last Things: the character and course of the Last Days, the Last Battle, the Last Resurrection and the Last Judgment, all of which occur at the Last Coming

of the Last Man, the glorified Lord Jesus Christ. The claims of Church History's false prophets notwithstanding, Christians find it unthinkable that God, having given us a book like this, should give us any more, as indeed the Revelation itself implies (Rev. 21:18-19). The Revelation is the Book of the End, and so rightly belongs at the end of the Book; at the end of the symphony of Scripture as its final glorious movement (1:8, 2:26, 21:6, 22:13).

Like a grand finale, the Revelation also incorporates and skillfully weaves together ideas and images from the preceding movements of Scripture, whether OT or New. Here, biblical allusions abound, whether to the Garden of Eden, Moses, the Exodus, Elijah, Mt. Zion, the Temple, the birth of Jesus, the cruelty of Herod, the preaching of the disciples two by two, Christ's resurrection, ascension, session, heavenly reign, and Parousia. Indeed, the Revelation cites or alludes to so many biblical texts that when we delve into it we immediately find the center columns of our reference Bibles bulging at the seams! Westcott and Hort counted nearly 400 references to the OT, and many later commentators argue that they found too few. In Revelation 12 alone, there are quotes from, or allusions to, Genesis, Exodus, Deuteronomy, Psalms, Song of Solomon, Isaiah, Hosea, Micah, Daniel, Zechariah, Matthew, Luke, John, 2 Corinthians, Galatians, 1 Peter, 1 John, and Jude. All of this makes it clear that the Revelation is not historical narrative, law, poetry, gospel, or epistle. Rather, it is something unique, something completely new under the biblical sun: It is a final prophetic word to the universal Church, clothed in raiment from all that has gone before it, and so serving not *only* as a prophetic word, but *also* as the Grand Finale of all Scripture.

If this is true, the implications are truly important. For if the Revelation is indeed the Grand Finale of all Scripture, then we ought not to expect it to introduce any new doctrines. It is not the purpose of a grand finale to introduce new themes, but rather to recapitulate the old. And when we closely examine the Revelation, that is precisely what we find. Here, there is nothing new; nothing other than what Christ and the apostles have already taught us in the Didactic NT; nothing new about the Holy Trinity, the creation, the Fall, the Eternal Covenant, the nature and structure of the Kingdom, or the Consummation at Christ's coming. What we *do* find is the Spirit speaking again—and *over and over again*—about all these “old”

things. However, he does so in new and wondrous ways; in beautiful, powerful, and supremely inspiring visions and symbols; in a Grand Finale that incorporates and weaves together all that has gone before in Holy Scripture, even as it celebrates, one final time, the glory of the High King of Heaven.

The application to our theme in Part 4 is easy to see. If the Revelation really is the Grand Finale of all Scripture, how likely is it that just a few measures prior to its end (i.e., in chapter 20) the Lord Jesus would suddenly introduce a completely new eschatological theme (i.e., a future earthly stage of the Kingdom lasting a thousand years); a theme that would radically modify, if not completely overthrow, all he had previously taught us in the Didactic NT about the nature and structure of the Kingdom, the Consummation, the relationship of the Old Covenant to the New, and the proper interpretation of OTKP? Answer: NOT likely. Why? *Because to do so would be to destroy the Grand Finale*, belatedly and unexpectedly transforming the final movement of Scripture into the vehicle of a whole new movement; a new movement that must radically transform the Christian's understanding of every movement that preceded it, even as it postpones the completed Kingdom—and the Christian's completed joy—for an extra thousand years!

No, not likely at all!

Conclusion

We conclude, then, that a good understanding of the literary genre of the Revelation is most helpful for resolving the millennial controversy.

Yes, this book is an instance of biblical apocalyptic, but it is a unique instance.

Yes, it contains predictive prophecy, but it predicts nothing new.

Yes, it gives us the course, character, and consummation of Salvation History, but it tells us nothing new about them, preferring instead simply to exalt and sing the glories of the One who dwells at the center of them all.

And yes, it communicates in symbols, but in symbols whose meanings are old; symbols whose meanings have been disclosed previously in the Didactic NT, so that (for God's NT scribes) the Revelation is an open book, and not a sealed one.

For all these reasons, I conclude that Revelation 20 cannot possibly be introducing new truth about a future millennial stage of the Kingdom; new truth that would radically modify, upend, and overthrow the old. Rather, Revelation 20—and indeed the book as a whole—must simply be giving us the Grand Finale of all Scripture. It must be recapitulating and celebrating old truths, albeit in a new and breathtakingly beautiful way; a way that, fittingly enough, exalts him who is the living heart of all divine revelation: the High King of Heaven, the Lord Jesus Christ.

The Revelation: Structure and Key Symbols

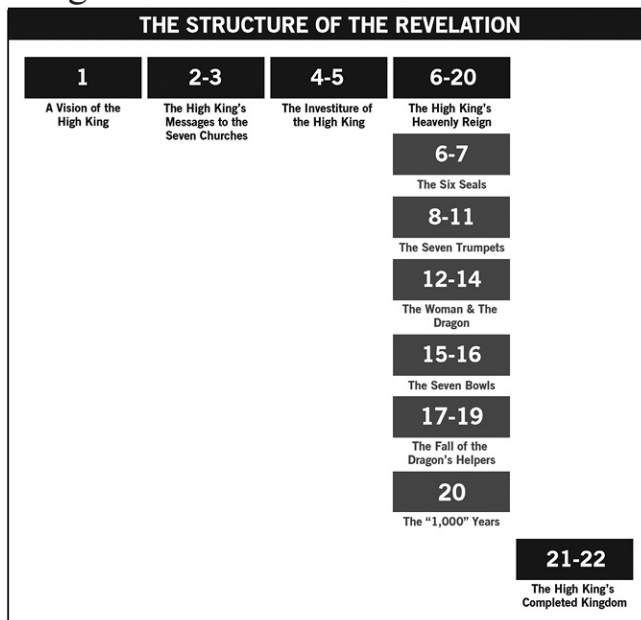
THE REVELATION CAN be an intimidating book. It is long, filled with mysterious visions and symbols, and at times overwhelming with its serial depictions of spiritual warfare and divine judgment. And yet, when we push past our fears and enter into it more deeply, we begin to see things: recurring themes, patterns, and cycles. Suddenly, perhaps after several readings, we realize that this prophecy has a structure; a structure so nuanced, complex, beautiful, and ingenious, that the hand of God himself must be behind it. Moreover, when we fully see this structure, we also see how to interpret the book as a whole, and chapter 20 in particular. We must, then, devote some quality time to this crucial subject.

Having considered a number of different views on the structure of the Revelation, I find that I return over and over again to the ideas embodied in the chart below. In a moment, we will let it guide us through a survey of the book itself. First, however, a few preliminary remarks are in order.

As you can see, I have divided the book into five blocs. The titles beneath each one reflect my best effort to identify the main idea of the bloc, while at the same time keeping in view the central theme of the whole book: the Person and Work of Christ in his Exaltation. Or, to say it more concisely: the High King of Heaven.

I am very pleased with the fact that the third bloc, which gives us the Investiture of the High King of Heaven (4-5), stands mid way between the other two. As we shall see in a moment, this is fitting, since this particular bloc is the theological high point and center of gravity of the whole prophecy. For consider: Because of his coronation as High King of Heaven, Christ can come to John in glory (1), and speak to the seven churches with

supreme authority (2-3). Moreover, because of that same coronation, he can rule over the cosmos throughout the remaining years of Salvation History (6-20), and then, following his Parousia, bring his glorified Bride into the Kingdom of God in its full and final form (21-22). Thus, chapters 4-5 hold the whole book together as one: as a single celebration of the Person and Work of the High King!



For the purposes of our study, the most important—and the most controversial—portion of my chart is bloc four. As you can see, there I suggest that chapters 6-20 are best understood as six separate apocalyptic cycles, each of which describes—in its own unique way, and for its own unique purposes—the course, character, and consummation of the spiritual reign of the High King of Heaven.

Since that's a mouthful, let me break it down a little. The idea here is really quite simple. This large bloc (6-20) is made up of six sub-blocs, or cycles (6-7, 8-11, 12-14, 15-16, 17-19, and 20). But in each of the cycles, the focus of the prophetic Spirit is always on the same time frame: the space of time between Christ's first and second advents; the space of time during which the exalted Christ reigns as High King of heaven and earth. This means that the fourth bloc of the Revelation—and the great bulk of the book—is actually made up of six separate visionary cycles, each one of which uses different ideas and images to cover the same historical ground;

to rehearse, or *recapitulate*, the earthly impact of the heavenly reign of Christ.

In the pages ahead, I will spotlight a number of lines of evidence favorable to this view. For the moment, however, let us assume that the Holy Spirit has indeed structured this bloc of the prophecy as I have suggested. If so, there are a number of important implications for the interpretation of the book as a whole, and for Revelation 20 in particular.

Implications of the Cyclical View

The first implication pertains to the way in which we must interpret the symbols that we meet in each of the six cycles. For example, if the cyclical view is correct, it means that we cannot interpret Revelation 6-20 as the *preterists* do. They say that the focus here is largely, if not entirely, on events that took place at the very beginning of the Church Era; events that, for us, are already past. These include the fall of Jerusalem, the tyrannical power of Rome, and the vicissitudes of the early Church at the hand of Jew and Roman. But if the true focus of 6-20 is the entire inter-adventual era, obviously the preterist interpretation cannot be correct.

Similarly, if the cyclical view is right, we cannot interpret Revelation 6-20 as the *futurists* do. They say that the focus here is largely, if not exclusively, on events that will occur at the very end of the age. Yes, there are some differences among them. Moderate futurists like George Ladd say that the events will befall the Church. Dispensational futurists, like John MacArthur, say they will befall latter-day Jews during a seven year Tribulation, after Christ has secretly carried his Church away to heaven at the Rapture. But again, all futurists agree that chapters 6-20 are largely, if not entirely, fulfilled in the last of the last days. However, if the true sphere of fulfillment of chapters 6-20 is *the entire Church Era*, during which Christ reigns as High King over all, obviously the futurist view cannot be correct either.

This brings us to a second and closely related implication. If the cyclical view is correct, it means that when the Spirit uses a particular symbol to speak to God's people, he is not, as a rule, referring to a concrete historical entity, whether a person, place, thing, or event. He cannot be. Rather, he

must be referring to a *kind* of historical entity that all the saints will encounter again and again throughout the Church Era.

Let us consider an example. Some preterists say that when the Spirit speaks of the Beast (Rev. 13:1f), he is speaking of the arch-persecutor of the early Church, emperor Nero. Meanwhile, most futurists say that when the Spirit speaks of the Beast, he is speaking of the Antichrist who will arise just prior to Christ's return, whether to persecute the Church or ethnic Israel. If, however, we embrace the cyclical view, we immediately realize that it offers us a much richer approach; an approach that engages all Christians of all times; *an approach that is capable of affirming the elements of truth present in both the preterist and futurist views*. For now we see that in speaking of the Beast, the Spirit is actually speaking of a particular *kind* of historical phenomenon—in this case, the political or governmental face of Satan's fallen world system, whenever and wherever it pops up in the course of Salvation History. It is a face that could be embodied in Nero, Domitian, Lenin, Stalin, Hitler, Mao, Ceausescu, Pol Pot, this or that Ayatollah, the (last) Antichrist, or any of the persecuting institutions that these people represent.

We find, then, that the cyclical view of Revelation 6-20 generates a particular hermeneutic, a particular way of understanding and applying the symbols found in this book. Theologians refer to this as an "idealist" hermeneutic. Here, they say, the symbols do not stand for unique historical persons or events, but rather for general ideas or principles that will manifest themselves all throughout the Church Era, *and therefore in any number of historical persons, places, things, or events*. William Hendriksen, an enthusiastic advocate of this hermeneutic, invites us to embrace an idealist approach to Revelation 6-20 when he writes:

The seals, trumpets, bowls of wrath and similar symbols refer not to specific events, particular happenings, or details of history, but to principles—of human conduct and of divine moral government—that are operating throughout the history of the world, especially throughout the new (Christian) dispensation.¹

Now, while these ideas and this approach are extremely helpful, I would nevertheless issue a caveat. The Revelation is concerned not only with the course of the High King's heavenly reign, but also with the Consummation

by which he will bring it to a close. But if this so, it follows that the book can and must use some of its symbols to refer to *unique* historical events. For example, in Revelation 11:3-6 we learn of the spiritual career of the Two Witnesses. Described in language and imagery reminiscent of Moses and Elijah—and also of the disciples whom Jesus sent out two by two to preach the Gospel of the Kingdom to Israel—they represent the witnessing Church. God calls them to prophesy (i.e., to preach the Gospel) for 1260 days, a number symbolizing the entire Church Era as a season of exile and persecution (see 1 Kings 17:1f). So then, all Christians of all times can see themselves in the Two Witnesses.

However, when we reach verses 7-13, the focus narrows. Now the Spirit is speaking concretely about the last generation of witnessing Christians; the generation that will see the completion of the Great Commission (11:7); the generation that will see the Beast (hitherto restrained from thwarting the Church's mission, 20:1-3) rise up out of the abyss (Satan's dwelling), make war with them, overcome them, and "kill" (i.e., thoroughly suppress) them (11:7-10). And yet this is also the generation that will see the return of Christ in glory, the resurrection of the dead, and the Last Judgment (11:11-19). Here, then, the symbols do indeed point to unique events in a unique portion of Salvation History. Here, the universal Church cannot see herself (much as she might like to), but only that portion of the Church that will serve Christ during the days of the Last Battle.

Speaking of caveats, it is also important to understand that while the six cycles of Revelation 6-20 do indeed traverse the same historical ground, there are notable differences between them. Of special importance is the fact that this large bloc of Scripture gives us a *progressive* revelation of divine truth about the Church Era. For example, the deeper we progress into the cycles, the more we learn of the supernatural powers operating behind the scenes of the great cosmic battle; the more intense becomes the Church's suffering; the more severe the world's judgments; and the more vivid the portraits of the Last Battle, the Parousia, and the Last Judgment. Referring to this tendency as *progressive parallelism*, Hendriksen writes:

Although all the sections of the Apocalypse run parallel and span the period between the first and second comings of Christ ... yet there is also a degree of progress. The closer we approach the end of the book the more our attention is directed to the final judgment and that which lies beyond it. The (several) sections are arranged, as it were, in an ascending, climactic order ...

The final judgment is first *announced*, then *introduced*, then finally *described*. Similarly, the new heavens and earth are described more fully in the final section than in those which precede it ... The book reveals a gradual progress in eschatological emphasis.²

The third and final implication of the cyclical view of Revelation 6-20 goes straight to the heart of the Great End Time Debate: If indeed chapter 20 properly falls into bloc four of the Revelation; if indeed, like the previous five cycles, it too describes the course of the reign of the High King of Heaven, then obviously it cannot be speaking of a future earthly kingdom set to appear *after* that reign. In short, if our chart really does give us the true structure of the Revelation, then the Revelation itself rules out premillennialism once and for all!

A Survey of the Revelation

In this section, I want briefly to survey the Revelation as a whole. What follows is not meant as a detailed exegetical commentary. It is, however, meant as a substantive overview for which I have two main goals.

First, I want to show that the structure of the book is indeed as I have represented it in the chart above. More particularly, here I aim to show that the unifying theme of the whole book is the course, character, and consummation of Christ's heavenly reign; that the fourth bloc of the book (chapters 6-20) really is a unit; that this bloc is a collection of six separate visionary cycles, each one of which spans the entire Church Era; that ever-increasingly it speaks to us of events associated with the Consummation (i.e., the Last Battle, the Parousia, the Resurrection, the Last Judgment, and the World to Come); and that Revelation 20 really does belong in this bloc.

Secondly, I want to use the NCH to open up the meaning of some of the key symbols of the book; to show that the Revelation—serving as the Grand Finale of all Scripture—repeatedly uses OT (and NT) symbols to communicate NT meanings, in order to instruct, exhort, and encourage Christ's suffering pilgrim Church.

And now, with Bibles firmly in hand, let us begin!

A Vision of the High King (1:1-20)

Chapter 1 introduces the Revelation, and especially the One through whom God the Father was pleased to give it: the exalted Lord Jesus Christ. It is comprised of a short Prologue (1:1-3), a lengthy greeting (1:4-8), and a lengthier account of John's vision of the glorified Son of Man (1:9-20).

Importantly, the greeting gives us the eschatological framework of the whole book. Even now, the divine Christ is the ruler of the kings of the earth (1:5). Even now the saints are a Kingdom of priests to his God and Father (1:6). No, the Kingdom is not yet consummated. For a season, believers must endure hardship. Like the Lord they serve, they must be faithful witnesses (1:5). Soon, however, there will be a Consummation (1:1, 3, 8). Christ will come again (1:8). When he does, every eye will see him, saint and sinner alike (1:7). When he does, all the tribes of the earth (i.e., the unbelieving persecutors of the Church) will wail, for he will come in final Judgment (8:13, 11:10, 12:12, 13:8, 17:2, 8). And when he does, he will bring in the fullness of the Kingdom, since he who comes is not only the divine Creator (the Alpha), but also the divine Consummator (the Omega) (1:8). So then, even here in his greeting (1:4-8) John affirms the simple, twofold structure of the Kingdom taught in the Didactic NT: the temporary Kingdom of the Son, followed by the eternal Kingdom of the Father (and the Son), separated by a single Consummation set to occur at the Parousia.

Next comes John's account of his vision of the High King (1:9-20). It is readily divided into three parts. In the first, he tells us where he was and what he was doing when the vision came to him (1:9-11). In the second, he tells us what he saw: One like a Son of Man—radiant with divine glory, dressed in priestly attire—standing in the midst of seven golden lampstands, with seven stars in his right hand, and with a sharp, two-edged sword coming from his mouth (1:12-16). In the third, we read of John's reaction (1:17), and of the meaning of the vision: The seven stars are the seven messengers of the seven churches in Asia (presumably sent to confer with the aged apostle); and the seven lampstands are the seven churches (1:18-20).

Very importantly, here we get our first glimpse of the High King—and the High Priest—of Heaven. As I argued earlier, the seven churches of Asia stand for the universal Church of all times and places. Therefore, the vision is telling us that even now Christ rules *from* heaven as High King over all

his people, and *in* heaven as High Priest interceding for his people—this One who in the days of his flesh died in their behalf, but who now lives forevermore, holding in his hand the redemptive keys that have released them from Death and Hades (1:18, 20). So then, here we have our first encounter with the central character of the Revelation: the High King and High Priest of Heaven, the One whom the Spirit will faithfully celebrate in all that is about to come.³

The High King's Messages to the Seven Churches (2:1-3:22)

The second bloc of the Revelation consists of the High King's seven messages to the seven churches in Asia. Here, with special force, we meet the High King as High Prophet; as the One who teaches, exhorts, and comforts not only these particular seven churches, but also the Universal Church that they represent. This point bears repetition and emphasis. Dispensational interpreters—who theorize that chapters 6-20 do *not* speak of the Church or the Church Era, but rather of Israel and the nations during a future seven-year period of Tribulation following the Rapture—effectively make the bulk of the book a mere curiosity to Christians of the Church Era. After all, since they will not be present on earth in those days, why worry too much about what these chapters say?

However, Revelation 2-3 is a rebuke to all such notions. As I argued earlier, here Christ says to the Church in “didactic” prophecy precisely what he will say to the Church in symbolic or apocalyptic prophecy in chapters 6-20. Here he speaks to the Church Universal; there he speaks to the Church Universal. The Revelation is one book for one people. For this reason, every member of Christ's Church who reads, hears, and keeps every part of it will be blessed (1:3).

As a rule, each of the seven prophecies to the churches contains five elements. They include (1) ***An opening self-description***, highlighting one or another of Christ's attributes or offices: his deity, sovereignty, eternal priesthood, or role as coming Judge, (2) whenever possible, ***words of commendation***, whether for diligence, purity, or perseverance in the face of suffering, etc., (3) if necessary, ***words of reproof***, whether for growing lovelessness, compromise, worldliness, etc., (4) if necessary, ***calls to repentance***, usually issued with dire warnings to anyone inclined to ignore

them, and finally, (5) *ultimate promises* to faithful and persevering saints who overcome every opponent, and so enter the completed Kingdom at his return.

Since this last point is so important, let us take a moment to explore it more fully.

As in bloc 1, so here: There is a definite eschatological outlook. When Christ issues his glorious promises to the overcoming Christians, he does not encourage them to look forward to a secret Rapture, or to life in heaven as a disembodied spirit, or to a premillennial Parousia, or to (their privileged role in) a future millennial stage of the Kingdom. No, he consistently places before them the ultimate goal and destiny of Salvation History: eternal life with God and Christ in the new heavens and the new earth, *a destiny that they will inherit at his Coming*. Thus, in the High King's messages to the Universal Church we encounter the same eschatological outlook that we found in bloc 1 of the Revelation and throughout the Didactic NT: There is but one spiritual Kingdom, divided into two simple stages, separated by a single Parousia of Christ in glory, which is the Blessed Hope of the Church.

Let us confirm this point with a brief look at the relevant texts.

The Lord's promise to the church in Ephesus is this: "To the one who overcomes, I will grant to eat of the tree of life which is in the Paradise of God" (2:7). Revelation 22:2 and 14 show that he does not have in mind heaven during the intermediate state, but the new heavens and the new earth.

To the church at Smyrna he declares: "The one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death." A look at Revelation 20:6, 14, and 21:18 shows that the second death is not temporary punishment in Hades, but eternal punishment in the Lake of Fire, administered after the general Resurrection and the Last Judgment. Positively, Christ is therefore promising the overcomers in Smyrna that they will inherit eternal life in the new heavens and the new earth.

To the believers in Pergamum the High King says: "To the one who overcomes I will give of the hidden manna, and I will give him a white stone, with a new name written on the stone that no one knows except the one who receives it" (2:17). Christ himself is the Manna. For the moment, he is hidden in heaven, but at the Parousia he will give himself fully to his

people (John 6:58, Col. 3:1f). The exact meaning of the white stone is not clear: Some say it represents victory, others (final) acquittal.⁴ Certainly its color calls to mind the shining robes of the glorified saints who will appear with their King at his Parousia (19:14), and who will thereafter worship God forever upon Mt. Zion (i.e., in the new heavens and the new earth, 3:4, 7:9, 13, 14:1f). As for the gift of a new name, Revelation 3:12 closely associates it with the World to Come, wherein the New Jerusalem shall dwell (see also 21:2); meanwhile, Revelation 19:2 and 16 suggest that it will be bestowed at the Parousia by the One who also will have a new Name. So then, everything in this promise directs the hope of the Christian to the Parousia, and to the new and eternal world that the Parousia will bring.

To the believers in Thyatira, the Lord says:

Only hold fast what you have until I come. The one who conquers and who keeps my works until the end, to him I will give authority over the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron, as when earthen pots are broken in pieces, even as I myself have received authority from my Father. And I will give him the morning star (2:25-28).

Here again the Lord has in view the closing scenes of Salvation History, the end of all things (1 Peter 4:7). Observe from v. 25 that he closely associates the end with his Parousia. At that time, he will grant believers to have a share in administering the Last Judgment, even as the Father has granted Christ to execute it (John 5:27, Rom. 16:20, 1 Cor. 6:2). It is not, as premillennarians assert, that they will rule over the nations for a thousand years with Christ, of which the text says not a word. Rather, it is that at the Judgment, they too, under Christ, will *act the part of a shepherd* (Gk., *poimaino*); a shepherd who uses his wooden club to destroy the enemies of the flock, even as a potter uses his iron rod to destroy rejected vessels of clay (2:27, Psalm 2:9-12). Observe also from v. 28 that in addition to granting believers a share in the Last Judgment, the Lord also will grant them the Morning Star. The morning star is Christ (22:16), but especially Christ at his Coming, which will mark the dawn of the Age to Come (2 Peter 1:19). So then, this rich passage rivets the hope of the Thyatirans—and all Christians—on the end: the Last Judgment and the dawn of the new world that will come at the Parousia of the High King of Heaven.

To the overcomers at Sardis, Christ promises that they will walk with him in white, that he will never blot out their name from the Book of Life, and that he will confess their name before the Father and his holy angels (3:5). The last of these three blessings is a recurring theme in the NT: The saints are to maintain their good confession firm until the end, so that when Christ returns with all the holy angels for the Last Judgment he can confess them as true believers, and therefore grant them eternal life in the consummated Kingdom (Mt. 25:31, Mark 8:38, Luke 9:26, 12:8, 1 Tim. 6:12-13). For Christ to confess their name in that Day is for them to enter the eternal World to Come (Mt. 25:31-46).⁵

To the overcomers at Philadelphia the High King promises that he will make them a pillar in the temple of his God; that they will never leave it; and that he will write on them his name, the name of his God, and the name of the City of his God, which is New Jerusalem (3:12). Here again the imagery anticipates John's later depictions of the glorified Bride of Christ living *with* God—and *as* the Temple of God—in the new heavens and the new earth (21-22).

Finally, to the overcomers in Laodicea the King promises that he will grant them to sit with him on his throne, even as the Father granted that he should sit with him on his (3:21). Admittedly, this could be construed as a promise to the effect that the disembodied spirits of the saints will have a share in the heavenly mediatorial reign of Christ during the intermediate state (Rev. 20:4-6). However, all the preceding promises, which have had in view the final destiny of the saints, militate against this. It seems best, then, to view this as an echo of other NT texts that promise the victorious saints a measure of cosmic authority “in the regeneration,” in the Day when the kingdoms of this world will have become the Kingdom of our LORD and of his Christ (11:15; Daniel 7:18, 27, Mt. 28, Luke 19:17).

Summing up, we have seen that bloc 2 of the Revelation is indeed a Message of the High King (and Prophet) of Heaven to his Universal Church. Moreover, we have seen that this bloc reflects a definite eschatological outlook, an outlook no different from that of the first bloc, and no different from that of the rest of the NT. According to this outlook, there is but one spiritual Kingdom, divided into two simple stages, separated by a single Parousia of Christ at the end of the age, when he himself will consummate Salvation History in final judgment and

redemption. This perspective is especially evident in the Lord's promises to the seven churches, which say nothing at all of multiple comings, multiple resurrections, multiple judgments, or a future millennial reign upon the earth. No, for the High King of Heaven the Blessed Hope of his Church is simply "the end," when he comes again in glory to judge the world in righteousness and bestow upon his beloved Bride eternal life in the new heavens and the new earth.

Does the rest of the Revelation confirm all of this? Does the High King of Heaven here say in "didactic prophecy" anything different from what he later says in "apocalyptic prophecy"? Is the eschatological outlook here any different from the eschatological outlook of the rest of the book? Let us continue our survey in order to find out!

The Investiture of the High King of Heaven (4-5)

Arguably, these two chapters constitute the Mt. Everest of all Holy Scripture. They take us to the highest place, to heaven itself. They plant us upon the supreme vantage, and give us the supreme vista—a sighting of all cosmic history, and of the sovereign God who ordained it. Like nowhere else in the Bible, we behold Him: the all-glorious, all-sovereign, triune Creator, Judge, and Redeemer of the universe. Small wonder, then, that at every turn we find both men and angels falling down before him, gratefully exalting the One who so graciously created them, and so mercifully redeemed them. When we see what they see, we are moved to do the same.

While much could be said about these rich chapters, our primary concern here is to inquire into the role they play in the overall "argument" of the book. What is their function in relation to the rest of the Revelation; and how, if at all, does this illuminate its structure?

My response to these questions involves three closely related theses.

First, these chapters are clearly *transitional*. They take us from the things that John has seen (chapter 1), and from the things that are (chapters 2-3); and they prepare us to behold the things that will be throughout the remainder of Church era and beyond (chapters 6-22; 1:19).

Secondly, they are *central*, in the sense that they give us the Master Theme that holds the rest of the book together. As we are about to see, that theme is the exaltation of the Lord Jesus Christ. More particularly, it is the

exaltation of Christ as the High King of heaven and earth, with God-given authority to oversee and superintend all that remains of Salvation History up to and including his Parousia, when he will consummate all things in final judgment and redemption.

And thirdly, these chapters are *unifying*. That is, they enable us to see how every bloc of the Revelation, each in its own way, is devoted to exploring the many-faceted glory of the High King.

And now—with all this to prepare us—let us take a few moments to see how chapters 4-5 communicate these glorious themes.

1. The Glory of God the Father (Rev. 4)

In essence, chapter 4 is a revelation, in vision and symbol, of the glory of God the Father, especially in his role as the sovereign Creator and Judge of the universe. Accordingly, John beholds him seated upon a throne, a symbol of his universal sovereignty (4:2). His appearance is as of jewels, representing the glory of his being and the riches of his character (4:3). Surrounding him are 24 elders dressed in white, wearing crowns, and seated upon thrones. These picture the Universal Church (12 patriarchs representing the OT saints, plus 12 apostles representing the NT saints), which God has predestined to behold his glory and share in his eternal reign (4:4, 7:9-17). Very importantly, flashes of lightning and peals of thunder emanate from his throne, tokens of the dreadful wrath and terrifying judgments poised to go forth against all who rebel against Him (4:5-6, 5:6). The cherubim and seraphim who always surround his throne understand this quite well, having profound insight into God's holiness, eternity, and sovereignty—and who therefore worship him accordingly (4:6-8). So too does the Church, here pictured in her eternal calling as a worshiper of the Fountainhead of all creation (4:9-11).

We see, then, that chapter 4 sets the stage. Yes, the holy Creator and Judge of the cosmos is radiant and majestic beyond description. However, for this very reason he is also a mortal threat to the company of guilty sinners on the earth below, a mathematical set that includes every human being born to woman, save One.

Happily, that One is about to take center stage.

2. The Triumph of the Lamb (Rev. 5)

Chapter 5 gives us the Triumph of the Lamb and his Investiture as the High King of Heaven. It too uses vision and symbol, this time to show us God fulfilling his part in the Covenant of Redemption; to show us what happened when the resurrected Christ ascended into heaven and sat down at the right hand of the Father so as to become the High Priest, High Prophet, and High of King of the cosmos. Let us briefly explore the vision itself in order to see how the Spirit signifies these great truths.

In verse 1 John notices a scroll in the right hand of God, written within and without, sealed with seven seals. According to many interpreters, it is a last will and testament, upon which is written, very fulsomely, the promise of the Eternal Covenant: Eternal life with the Triune God in the new heavens and the new earth. When at last we reach chapters 21-22, we will learn more about its exact contents. First, however, the seven seals must be opened; first the residue of Salvation History—the Era of Proclamation and Probation, the period of time between Christ’s Session and his Parousia—must run its course.⁶

In verses 2-4 the apostle receives a terrible shock: Precious as the gift is, it appears that the people of God are in no position to receive it! Certainly the loving Father *desires* to give it to them, seeing that he holds it in his hand. Yet just as certainly, this righteous Judge *cannot* give it to them, not unless he can find someone to *mediate* between them and him: someone to fulfill the righteous requirement of his law on their behalf, someone to pay the penalty for their having broken it, and someone who thereby both secures their righteousness and placates God’s wrath against them. But as the apostle scans the cosmos, he finds no creature of God—neither man nor angel—who is “worthy” (i.e., qualified) to become such a mediator. There is no one in heaven or upon the earth who can win the prize of Eternal Life for the people of God. Seeing the dreadful implications of this, the apostle sobs uncontrollably, despairing not only of the salvation of sinners, but also of the fulfillment of God’s original purpose for his creation.

However, at this point one of the 24 elders brings John great good news: Weep not! There is indeed such a Mediator! He is the Lion of the Tribe of Judah (i.e., the triumphant Messiah himself) and the Root of David (i.e., the Divine Creator of the Messianic prototype). This One—the Messianic God-Man—has indeed prevailed, so as to open the scroll and bestow its blessed contents upon the saints.

How exactly has he done this? Verse 6 supplies the answer. In the days of his flesh, the Divine-Human Messiah fulfilled all righteousness; then, at the close of those days, he freely became the Lamb of God, an atoning Sacrifice who took away the sins of his people. Thus did he prevail to redeem them: to rescue them from every spiritual and physical enemy introduced at the Fall, and to restore them to every spiritual and physical friend promised at the Tree of Life. In short, the Lord Jesus Christ prevailed by fulfilling his part in the eternal Covenant of Redemption.

For this reason, John now sees him standing, all-triumphant, between the throne and the 24 elders, effectively serving as the (priestly) Mediator between God and man, shielding his children from the wrath to come, and granting them eternal life in the presence of his Father. Importantly, he has seven horns, symbolizing his perfect power and authority. He also has seven eyes, symbolizing his perfect knowledge and his perfect spiritual union with the omnipresent, seven fold Spirit of God. But what exactly will he do with such great powers and privileges?

In verse 7 we receive our answer. Having prevailed on earth for the redemption of his people, the Lamb now boldly approaches the Father to take the scroll from his right hand. The Father gladly yields it (5:7). Here, then, in vision and symbol, we behold yet again one of the great “hinges” of Salvation History; the brief, God-appointed season when Salvation History swings out of the Era of Promise and into the Era of Fulfillment; the holy moment when God the Father gives all authority in heaven and earth to his triumphant Messianic Son, so that he (Christ) might bring in the Kingdom of God (Mt. 28:18ff, Acts 2:33-35, Eph. 1:15-23, Phil. 2:1-11).

As the rest of the NT has taught us, much indeed will flow from this climactic event. Now the Lord Jesus Christ is High King of Heaven and Earth. Now he has a commission from the Father to *apply* the redemption that he purchased on earth. Now he must send forth the life-giving Spirit; and now, by that same Spirit, he must beget his Church, empower her preaching, gather in her penitent believing members, and nourish, cherish, guide, equip, and protect her as she makes her pilgrim way through the wilderness of the world below.

Moreover, according to that same commission, he must not only apply the redemption that he purchased in his humiliation, but also *consummate* it at the end of the age. This will occur at his Parousia, when he descends

from heaven in power and great glory to destroy his enemies, glorify his Bride, recreate the cosmos, and welcome his Beloved Bride into her eternal home: the new heavens and new earth. All of this and more were hidden away in that holy “season” of Salvation History when the triumphant Messianic Son boldly strode forth to receive the scroll from his Father’s hand!

Small wonder, then, that at this juncture all heaven breaks loose in highest praise to the conquering Lamb (5:8-10). Observe how their song yet again discloses the outworking of the Covenant of Redemption: Because Christ has been faithful to complete his God-ordained work of humiliation, the Father—and all the Father’s sentient creatures—now reckon him worthy to be exalted as the High King of Heaven; worthy to be the One who applies the redemption that he purchased for them in the days of his flesh, and to create a Kingdom of Priests who will forever worship and reign upon the earth (Exodus 19:6, Rev. 5:10, 22:5).

The remainder of the chapter gives us a foretaste of that worship. First, John hears all the holy angels—gathered close around the throne—declaring the worthiness of the Lamb to be so highly exalted (5:11-12). And then, as if in ever-widening circles, he hears all the rest of creation, which, in one way or another, even now is fulfilling the supreme purpose for which they were made: that they should be to the praise of the glory of God and the Lamb (5:13-14; Ex. 9:16, Psalm 76:10, Rom. 9:14f).

Earlier, I suggested that these two chapters serve as the theological core—the conceptual center of gravity—of the entire Revelation. Now we can see the reasons why.

On the one hand, they give us the *theme* of the whole book. That is, by singing and celebrating Christ’s investiture, they introduce us to the High King of Heaven, the One who showed himself in supreme glory to John (chapter 1), spoke with supreme authority to the Universal Church (chapters 2-3), and will henceforth rule with supreme power as the sovereign Lord of all remaining Salvation History (chapters 6-22).

On the other hand, through the symbol of the sealed scroll these chapters give us valuable insight into the *structure* of the book (6-22). In particular, they teach us that the conquering Lamb is about to do two things: (1) remove the seals of the scroll, and (2) open it, with the result that all of God’s (redeemed) creatures can read, receive, and enjoy their contents. This

in turn suggests that the material ahead will likely be divided into two basic parts: (1) that which pertains to events *prior to* the saints receiving their inheritance, and (2) that which pertains to events *at* the receiving of their inheritance.

And this is precisely the case. In chapters 6-20 we will indeed find Christ—on six separate occasions—disclosing what will take place *prior to* the advent of the new heavens and the new earth; giving us—on six separate occasions—*the course, character, and consummation of the residue of Salvation History*. Then, in chapters 21-22, we will find him disclosing *the ultimate goal of Salvation History*: Eternal Life in the new heavens and the new earth themselves. In other words, chapters 6-20 correspond to Christ's breaking the seven seals of the scroll; chapters 21-22 correspond to his making manifest its contents. Observe carefully that the *whole* story is therefore *his* story—his to tell, and his to bring to pass. And with this the Father is exceedingly well pleased, since it accords with his eternal purpose and plan, which is to bestow the highest possible glory and honor upon his beloved Son, whom he (the Father) has now exalted as High King of Heaven and Earth.

The Course, Character, and Consummation of the High King's Heavenly Reign (6-20)

We turn our attention now to the fourth bloc of the Revelation, chapters 6-20. For reasons mentioned above, I have entitled it *The Course, Character, and Consummation of the High King's Heavenly Reign*. Is this title accurate? Is this portion of the Revelation really comprised of six visionary cycles, each running parallel to the other; each traversing the era spanning from Christ's session to his Parousia? Can we see the beginning of the Church Era in the beginning portions of these cycles? Can we see the end at the end? Also, is it true that the cycles are "progressive;" that the deeper we go into them, the more we behold "last of the last days," the great eschatological events associated with the Consummation?

But most importantly of all, is Revelation 20 really a part of this bloc? Does it really describe the Church Era? Or is it the case, as premillennarians assert, that this is actually a fifth bloc in its own right; that it describes (and suddenly introduces into NT eschatology) a second, intermediate stage of

the Kingdom (i.e., a future Millennium); that it therefore properly occupies a position mid way between earlier prophecies about the Church Era (chapters 6-19) and later prophecies about the new heavens and the new earth (chapters 21-22)?

With these crucial questions ever before us, let us briefly survey each of the six visionary cycles of Revelation 6-20, looking for answers.⁷

1. The Six Seals (Rev. 6-7)

Chapter six gives us Christ breaking six of the seven seals. As I will argue in a moment, chapter seven then gives us a preview of the glorified Church in the World to Come. If so, it means that chapter six should take us from the beginning of the Era of Proclamation to its end. Let us now see if it does.

When Christ breaks the first seal, John beholds a rider upon a white horse. Both text and context confirm that this is Christ. The imagery is rooted in Psalm 45:3-5, a Messianic psalm. It is also nearly identical with Rev. 19:11, which clearly depicts the glorious Christ at his Parousia. The rider wears a crown: This is the High King of Heaven, who now holds all authority in heaven and on the earth (Mt. 28:18ff). He goes forth from heaven, conquering and to conquer. How? By the Spirit and through the Church, which proclaims a finished gospel that, in the case of God's elect, releases Satan's hold upon them, thereby shattering his evil kingdom (Mt. 12:29, John 12:31).

Historically, this verse *began* to be fulfilled at Pentecost, and has been being fulfilled ever since (Acts 2:1ff). To the very end, the High King will go forth from heaven—by the Spirit, through the Church, into the world—triumphantly gathering in his own (John 10:16, Titus 2:14). We see, then, that the first seal does indeed correspond to the beginning the Era of Proclamation.

The next four seals may be briefly summarized. Importantly, they follow the opening of the first, showing that they represent the *consequences* of Christ's going forth into the world with the Gospel.

The second seal therefore speaks of "war"—not war generically, but war against the saints; persecution for the sake of the Gospel (6:3-4; Mt. 10:34, Mk. 10:30, John 15:20, 2 Tim. 3:12).

The third speaks of the penury of believers forced to live at the margins of society, even as their persecutors enjoy the oil and wine of worldly wealth (6:5-6; 13:17; Heb. 10:34).

The fourth, cast in OT imagery, speaks of the whole spectrum of judgments that will befall sinners (and especially persecutors) throughout the Church Era; judgments that will indeed impact believers with a view to their sanctification, but will never engulf them, as they will be the enemies of God (6:7-8; Ezek. 14:21, Mt. 24:6-8, Rom. 8:28).

Finally, the fifth seal warns of the inevitability of Christian martyrdom, even as it comforts the whole Church with assurances of final justice and public vindication at Christ's return (6:9-11; Luke 21:16-18, 2 Thess. 1:3-10). Its position near the end of chapter 6 hints at what later visions will make explicit: persecution and martyrdom will greatly increase at the end of the age (11:7-10, 16:12f).

This brings us to the sixth seal, and to what is manifestly a description of the Consummation at the Parousia of Christ (6:12-17). Importantly, the accent here falls on the judgment and misery of the wicked, while in chapter 7 it falls upon the reward and blessedness of the saints. Drawing upon a wide array of OT prophecies of the Day of the LORD—and also reminding us of Christ's own climactic promise in the Olivet Discourse—the Spirit here depicts the break-up of the physical cosmos (6:12-14), along with the terror that sinners will experience as they behold Christ appearing in the heavens in power, glory, and great wrath to judge the world in righteousness (6:15-17; Mt. 24:29-31). This is indeed the end of the present evil age, which means that Revelation 6 does indeed traverse the entire Era of Proclamation, from Christ's Session to his Parousia.

At first glance, Revelation 7 seems to do the same.

In verses 1-3, we learn of a divine decree: God will not release the four winds of final (universal) judgment until all his elect children are sealed; until, by the inward work of the Spirit, they are all marked for divine ownership and protection (Rev. 14:1; 2 Cor. 1:22, Eph. 1:13; John 17:6, 11, 2 Peter 3:9, 1 John 3:1).

Verses 4-8 then use OT imagery to depict this sealing, to signify the ingathering of the entire "Israel of God," both OT saints and New (Gal. 6:16). This interpretation is indicated by the rich numeric symbolism involved: 12 (standing for the OT saints, who were represented by the

patriarchs) x12 (standing for the NT saints, who were represented by the apostles) x1000 (standing for magnitude and divine completeness) = 144,000 (standing for the great, divinely completed multitude of Old and New Testament saints).

Verses 9-17 go on to confirm this interpretation, for again they speak of “the 144,000,” this time identifying them for what they really are: a numberless multitude (as many as the stars in the sky for abundance), divinely rescued from “the great tribulation” (i.e., from the trials and persecutions that have befallen the saints of God throughout all Salvation History, from the Fall to the Parousia), and now gladly worshiping God and Christ before the throne (7:9), upon Mt. Zion (14:1), and in the Temple (7:15). As other portions of the book make clear, all three are OT symbols of the joys of eternal life in the new heavens and the new earth (7:17, 21:3-4, 22, 22:3, 14).⁸

We find, then, that the true thrust of Revelation 7 is *not* to recapitulate the Era of Proclamation or the course of the King’s heavenly reign. Rather, it is to give us our first major glimpse of what awaits the saints on the other side of that Era; on the other side of the Parousia by which Christ will bring his heavenly reign to an end: eternal life with the Triune God in the World to Come. For this reason, Revelation 7 cannot be reckoned as a fresh visionary cycle, but is an especially happy ending to the one that immediately precedes it.

2. The Seven Trumpets (8-11)

It is clear that chapters 8-11 constitute a single cycle of visions, seeing that the motif of the seven trumpets manifestly binds them together as one (8:7, 11:15). Moreover, it is equally clear that this cycle concludes with a symbolic depiction of the last Judgment at Christ’s return (11:15-19). What is not so clear is where, historically, the cycle begins. Ladd, for example, argues that from this point on, the Revelation speaks primarily of events to occur at the very end of the age.

However, there are good reasons to question this. The first cycle (6-7) patently begins at the beginning of the Era of Proclamation (6:1-2); so too does the third (12:1-6) and (I will argue) the sixth (20:1-3). If so, how likely is it that the other cycles would begin elsewhere? Also, we have seen that in the Revelation Christ means to address all Christians of all times. Why,

then, would he speak here exclusively to believers living in the last of the last days? Most compelling of all, however, is the evidence found within the text itself, evidence indicating that this awesome vision speaks *both* to the Church Universal and—with special solicitude—to the portion of the Church that will go through the Last Battle. But rather than elaborate further here, let us briefly survey the cycle as a whole, lingering over the points of special relevance to our study.

As chapter 8 opens, John beholds Christ breaking the seventh seal. Since the breaking of the sixth seal manifested the Last Judgment, it is evident that the breaking of the seventh cannot manifest something to follow; that, in fact, it must be manifesting something *similar in nature* to what came previously. In other words, here we have our first hint that the forthcoming cycle will indeed traverse the same historical ground as the one preceding it.

When Christ breaks the seal, seven angels stand forth and receive trumpets. But, as verses 3-4 reveal, they will blow the trumpets only in response to the Spirit-filled prayers of the saints, saints who are crying out to God for protection and succor amidst their manifold persecutions (6:9-11, Luke 18:1-8). This too illumines the historical scope of the cycle: Whenever and wherever Christ's persecuted Church calls out to God, he will respond with a blast of the trumpet; with *partial judgments designed to warn of the Final Judgment to come*. As we are about to see, it falls to the Church to interpret these judgments to the unbelieving world, even as she preaches the good news of the Gospel, in hopes that men might repent and find eternal safety in the arms of Christ (Mt. 3:7, 1 Thess. 1:10).

Verses 6-12, which describe the sounding of the first four trumpets, also constitute a unit. In symbolic language drawn largely from the Exodus event, the Spirit here reveals that throughout the Era of Proclamation God will respond to the pleas of his saints by sending down judgments upon “the heavens and the earth”; that is, upon the entire natural order, the physical support system of the inhabitants of the earth (8:13). The recurring numeric symbol, one third, signifies that these are only *partial* judgments, and therefore warnings of a future judgment that is more complete and far worse (Joshua 6:4, Isaiah 58:1, Joel 2:1f).

Revelation 8:13 is transitional. It announces that the remainder of the cycle will be devoted to examining three “woes,” woes that are identical

with the last three trumpets. Here, we are put on notice: The final three trumpets will bring especially painful (woeful) afflictions upon the inhabitants of the earth; the first two will loudly *trumpet* the final judgment, the third will actually *be* the final Judgment (Mt. 11:12).

Chapter 9, which describes the fifth and sixth trumpet judgments, is yet another unit. Here, judgment is not upon nature by the hand of God, but upon man and society by the instrumentality of Satan. Verses 1-11, which give us the fifth trumpet judgment, draw upon the prophecies of Joel to picture God delivering Gospel-hardened sinners over to Satan, who in turn commissions his demonic hosts to darken and torment the minds of his willing human subjects.

Verses 12-21, which describe the sixth trumpet judgment, give us much the same, but with this difference: Now Satan is authorized, not only to torment, but also to kill (9:18). The martial imagery employed here strongly suggests that their deaths will occur as a result of demonically inspired war and/or social and cultural collapse (Dan. 11:36ff, Rev. 17:6). Observe from verse 18 that only one third of men are killed, a fraction that has already appeared in the first four trumpet judgments (8:6-12). This signals that here too we are dealing with judgments that will befall unbelieving and unrepentant (9:21) humanity *throughout the entire Era of Proclamation*, whether in ancient Rome, modern Iran, or any other nation that turns against Christ and his Church. Note, however, that in reading these verses, one cannot help but feel they apply with special force to the generation of the end (see 11:14; Mt. 24:15-28, Luke 21:25-26).

The stage is now set: We are ready to hear the seventh trumpet and see the third woe. But strange to tell, there is an unexpected interlude; or rather, there is a prelude—and it is nearly two chapters long! Why so? It is because Christ has something of great importance to tell the Church about events immediately preceding the end.

This is evident from the contents of chapter 10. In verses 1-7, John sees a strong angel—very Christ-like—straddling, as it were, the whole world. Lifting his right hand, he swears by the (omnipotent) Maker of heaven and earth that when the first six trumpets have sounded “... there shall be delay no longer, but in the days of the voice of the seventh angel, when he is about the sound, the mystery of God is finished, as he announced to his servants the prophets” (10:7). We dare not miss the significance of this.

Here Christ is telling us that at the end of the Era of Proclamation, after the six trumpet judgments have done their work, *the Consummation will come*. The “mystery of God”—his entire redemptive plan, announced in the Gospel—will be fully accomplished.² However, as verses 9-11 reveal, before it is accomplished, something bittersweet must occur. It is written in the little book in the angel’s hand, which John now eats, and then, in chapter 11, declares to us all. Since it is global in its scope, affecting all men and nations, the saints do well to listen with care (10:11)!

There follows one of the most amazing and illuminating chapters in the Revelation. As we shall see, it spans the entire Era of Proclamation (11:1-6), but focuses largely upon the Last Battle (11:7-10) and the Consummation quickly to follow (11:11-19). Here is yet another line of evidence favorable to the view that chapters 8-11 must not be interpreted futuristically, but as spanning the whole reign of the High King of Heaven.

In symbolic language drawn from the book of Ezekiel and also from Israel’s history, verses 1-2 tell us that throughout the Era of Proclamation (symbolized by 42 months) God will measure his true spiritual Temple (the Church) for eternal protection from the wrath to come; nevertheless, as to her outward existence, she (and her public institutions) will suffer a more or less continual “trampling” (i.e., persecution) beneath the feet of unbelievers (Luke 21:16-19).

Verses 3-6 use Old and New Testament imagery to explain why the Church will receive such ill treatment: Just as Jesus authorized his disciples to go forth two by two as his witnesses to the cities of Israel, so now he authorizes his Church to go forth as Gospel prophets to the whole world (11:3; Luke 10:1, Mt. 28:18ff, Rev. 1:2, 5). Clothed in sackcloth, they will interpret to men the signs of the time (God’s trumpet judgments), warn of the final Judgment, and so call the nations to repentance and faith throughout the entire Era of Proclamation, here symbolized as 1260 days (11:3, 12:5-6, 14). Ever standing before her Lord, she will be his proxy in the earth, the Spirit-filled light of the world (11:4, Zech. 4, Rev. 1:20). Like Jeremiah, Moses, and Elijah, she will have authority, not to destroy, but to pronounce destruction, over all the impenitent persecutors of God, Christ, and the NT Israel (11:5; Exodus 7:20, 1 Kings 17:1f, John 20:23, Acts 9:4, 13:46). This is the “sweet” part of the prophecy: The Church *will* complete her testimony, and she *will* gather in Christ’s flock.

Now, however, comes the bitter. In verses 7-10 we arrive at the end of the age, and at the season of the Church's greatest tribulation. When she has completed the Great Commission, an increasingly lawless world-system will suddenly go over to Satan, who, through the Antichrist's lawless regime (i.e., the final incarnation of the Beast), will destroy the visible, institutional church (11:7, 9:2, 17:8, 23, 20:3, 7-10). For a very brief season—"three and a half days"—the Great City of the present evil world, formerly embodied in Sodom, Egypt, and Jerusalem, will gloat over her demise, and rejoice that the convicting words of the Gospel will never again fall upon their ears so as to torment their conscience (11:8-10). Again, this is the Revelation's first clear depiction of the Last Battle. With a view to her comfort, the Lord would have his Bride understand that he himself has ordained it, that it will be very brief, and that it will usher in her Blessed Hope, the Consummation of all things. Here is still more sweetness, with which the bitter is not worthy to be compared (Rom. 8:18).

We behold this good news in verses 11-19, where the prophecy of the Seven Trumpets is brought to a close. With the help of NT eschatology, we can readily decipher the true meaning. Verses 11-14 speak of the initial stages of the Consummation. When Christ appears in glory he will raise the dead saints, transform the living saints, and gather them all to his side in the skies above the earth (11:11-12; Mt. 24:31, 1 Cor. 15:51f, 1 Thess. 4:13f). Meanwhile, as his enemies watch in terror, the first waves of divine judgment will strike the earth below, shaking all things, killing many, and setting in motion the collapse of the City of Man (11:13; Rev. 6:12, Heb. 12:25-29). With this, the second woe (pictured in 9:13-21) is fully fulfilled, leaving the remnant of living humanity to glorify God. They will do so, however, not because they love him, but because Christ at his Parousia forces them to confess that he is indeed Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Phil. 2:9-11).

Verses 15-19 give us the third woe, the seventh trumpet, and (according to verse 18) the Last Judgment. It is celebrated by the angels (11:15) and the glorified Church (11:16-18). In both cases, the celebrants mark it as the commencement of the Kingdom in its full and final form. This is particularly evident from the words of the angels, who declare that once the Judgment is complete the kingdom of the world will become the Kingdom of God and of his Christ, at which time he will fully reign, forever and ever

(Daniel 2:44, 7:7:14, 27). Observe from verse 16 that the 24 elders give thanks to Him who was and is, but not to Him who “is to come,” for now both He and His eternal Kingdom *have* come! Verse 18 is also very valuable for our study, agreeing as it does with the rest of the NT that immediately following the Last Battle there is but *one* (i.e., final) judgment, at which time the saints will receive their eternal reward, even as the wicked are destroyed forever.

Finally, under cover of rich OT imagery, verse 19 tells us that Christ himself will execute that judgment. At the Parousia, heaven—which has hitherto concealed the High King—will be opened at last, so that every eye will see him, this One who is the true Ark of the Covenant, the true meeting place of God and all his redeemed children (Ex. 25:22; Col. 3:1-3, 1 Tim. 2:5, Heb. 9:24, Rev. 1:7). However, when he appears, those who refused to enter that Covenant will meet only with God’s wrath and retribution, typified here by such OT manifestations as lightning, thunder, earthquake, and hail (Rev. 4:5). Thus does the cycle end, by giving us the end.

Summing up, we have found that Revelation 8-11, just like 6-7, does indeed depict the course, character, and consummation of the reign of the High King of Heaven. Moreover, as in 6-7, it teaches us that when the High King comes again, so too will the Kingdom in its full and final form. Here, however, there is something new, a measure of “progress.” For here the Spirit introduces the theme of the Last Battle, and also begins to lay a greater emphasis upon the last of the last days.

So far, then, it appears that our chart gives us a good description of the true structure of the Revelation.

3. The Woman and the Man-Child, Persecuted by the Dragon and His Helpers (12-14)

We come now to the third of the six cycles depicting the course, character, and consummation of the High King’s heavenly reign. This one is notable for giving us a unique glimpse of OT Salvation History, introducing the main antagonists in the Battle of the Ages, and supplying important keys to the proper interpretation of Revelation 20. Keeping these themes in mind, let us survey it briefly.

As we saw earlier, chapter 12 uses the Exodus motif to give us a compelling paradigm by which the Universal Church may think of

Salvation History as a whole, and also of her day-to-day experience in the earth. It includes three elements: (1) rescue from spiritual Egypt (i.e., the Domain of Darkness), (2) a long and difficult pilgrimage—with the Lord at her side—through the wilderness of this world, and, (3) a joyous, triumphal entry into the Promised Land.

Verses 1-6, astonishing for the conciseness with which they manage to convey so much redemptive truth, give us the three chief actors in this great cosmic drama, even as they depict the course of Salvation History as a whole. First, we meet the Woman. Adorned as a heavenly Bride for her Betrothed, she is the Woman prophesied in Genesis 3:15: the Church of all times and places, in both her Old and New Testament embodiments (12:1, Rom. 11:11-24, Rev. 7:1f, 21:10-14). Beautiful as she is, she is nevertheless crying out in pain, emblematic of the sufferings of the OT saints, whose costly faithfulness ensured the delivery of the Messiah into the world (12:2).

Next, we meet the Dragon and his host of fallen evil angels. This is Satan, but Satan with a full complement of heads, horns, and crowns: Satan as the invisible power and authority who seeks to destroy the Woman and her Child through his human helpers in the world (12:3-4).

Here, too, we meet the protagonist of the drama: the Man-Child, the Last Adam. Does Satan strike him on the heel? To be sure. Is he destroyed? Far from it, for following his resurrection, he ascends into heaven, where, for an appointed season, he will reign as High King of the cosmos, and then return to judge the nations with a rod of iron, at which time he will crush the serpent's head once and for all (12:5, Gen. 3:15, Psalm 2:9, Rom. 16:20, Rev. 19:15).

But alas, the Woman, having work to accomplish on earth, cannot follow him—at least not yet (John 13:33, 14:1-3). Therefore, like Israel at the Exodus, or like Elijah in the days of Ahab, the evangelistic Church flees into the wilderness of the fallen world-system, where God and Christ faithfully nourish her by Word, Sacrament, and Spirit, until, at the end of “1260 days” (i.e., the appointed season of their pilgrimage), she enters the Promised Land.

We find, then, that this cycle clearly begins at the beginning of the Era of Proclamation, and that it symbolically designates that era as 1260 days.

As I argued earlier, verses 7-12 use apocalyptic symbolism to speak of the cosmic dethronement of Satan; of his being “cast out” of his lawful position as king over all the unbelieving nations (12:9, Mt. 12:22-29). *In principle*, this was accomplished when Christ, having secured both righteousness and pardon for his people by his earthly life and death, took his seat in the heavenlies as their High Priest and King. This we see in 12:5. However, *in practice* it is accomplished progressively, over the course of the whole Era of Proclamation, wherein the Church, amidst much persecution, effectively preaches the Gospel so that God’s elect are brought into his spiritual Kingdom. This we see in 12:7-12.

Here, then, we have an exact parallel to, and apocalyptic illustration of, the words of Jesus in John 12:31-32: “Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be cast out. And I, if I am lifted up from the earth (i.e., in death, exaltation, and preaching), will draw all (God’s elect) to myself.” In this text, Christ looks ahead to the Cross and describes its aftermath; in Revelation 12, the Spirit looks back at the Cross, and also describes its aftermath. In both cases, the premises are the same. Prior to Calvary, Satan had deceived the nations, holding them, unawares, in his grip and kingdom (12:9a; Luke 4:5-8, Rev. 20:3, 8). Now, however, by his life, death, and resurrection, the Redeemer has triumphed, so that Satan’s hold is broken and his kingdom is henceforth in slow-motion collapse. This happens through the preaching of the Church, by which the sovereign God transfers his (Satan’s) former subjects into the Kingdom (and *new world*) of his beloved Son (12:9b-10, Col. 1:13). Verses 11-12 assure us that the saints will indeed persevere under Christ’s benevolent reign, that heaven ever rejoices in this fact, and that throughout the Era of Proclamation the devil will sooner or later turn his frustration upon his own subjects, “the inhabitants of the earth” who have refused to enter Christ’s heavenly kingdom (Rev. 9:1ff).

Verses 13-17 elaborate upon verse 6. Throughout the Era of Proclamation, an infuriated Adversary will indeed persecute the Woman and her seed: the Church and her believing offspring, begotten down through the centuries by the preaching of the Gospel (12:13, 17; Gen. 3:15, 1 Peter 1:3). However, as in the case of Israel and Elijah, so here: Christ, by the Spirit, will always be with her, giving her escape, nourishment, and help amidst all her trials and temptations (12:14-16; Ex. 16:1ff, Deut. 32:11-12,

Psalm 124, 1 Cor. 10:13). Note carefully from verses 12:6 and 12:14 that “1260 days” and “a time, times, and a half a time” are equivalent. Like 42 months, these figures symbolize the entire Era of Proclamation, during which the Church, like Israel and Elijah, remains in exile (from worldly acceptance) and under tribulation.

In chapter 13 we are introduced to the first two of the Dragon’s helpers, the worldly instruments by which he will persecute the Woman.

Verses 1-10 speak to us of the Beast. Having a full complement of horns and crowns, and summing up the four beasts of Daniel 7, this monster clearly represents the political or governmental face of the world-system in NT times, especially when it goes over to Satan in order to persecute the people of God (13:1-2). Verses 3-5 tell us that throughout the Era of Proclamation (symbolized by 42 months) this proud, pretentious, and powerful usurper will pop up its ugly head over and over again—reviving, as it were, from the dead—with the result that the inhabitants of the earth (i.e., unbelievers) will over and over again marvel, fear, follow, and thus (unconsciously) worship the Dragon. While verses 6-9 can be read as describing the antagonism of the Beast towards the Church throughout the whole Era of Proclamation, here there is also a subtle change of emphasis. Allusions to Daniel 7 and 2 Thessalonians, a shift to the future tense in verse 8, and the global dimensions of the conflict here predicted, all signal that the accent now falls upon the *final* embodiment of the Beast under the Antichrist. In short, we have again arrived at the Last Battle (11:7, Dan. 7:8, 19-28, 2 Thess. 2:1-12). Verse 10 steels the persecuted Church of all ages with a strong assurance of final justice upon her foes.

Verses 11-18 introduce us to the second of the Dragon’s helpers, the Beast from the Earth, or the False Prophet (Rev. 16:13, 19:20). This is the religious face of the world-system, especially insofar as it encourages the deification of the State and/or its rulers. Having already discussed this section at length, I will not repeat myself here, except to stress once again that we must not interpret this passage literally or futuristically. Rather, following the lead of closely related texts, we must see the Spirit here using apocalyptic symbolism to warn the Church of all generations (and the world as well) *never* to turn one’s back on Christ by giving ultimate personal allegiance to the State (Rev. 7:1ff, 14:1-5, 20:4-6). Yes, down through the centuries many have fallen, heeding the voice of the False Prophet, taking

the mark of the Beast, and replacing the worship of God with the worship of man (Daniel 3:1f, John 19:15, Acts 12:22). And yes, in the days of the Last Battle, many—indeed, most—will do so again (13:8, Mt. 24:15-28, 2 Thess. 2:1-10). But the Christian must not. In the face of every false gospel, every fake miracle, powerful peer pressure, strong economic coercion, and ugly threats against himself and his loved ones, he has but one response: “We must obey God rather than men” (Acts 4:13-22, 5:25).

Having taught the Church what to expect in the Era of Proclamation, the Heavenly Prophet now brings this cycle to a close with a well-balanced blend of encouragement and exhortation (14:1ff). Four steps are involved.

First, he gives the Church Militant yet another soul-stirring glimpse of life on the eschatological Mt. Zion; of life in the new heavens and the new earth (14:1-6; Isaiah 11:9, 65:25, Rev. 21:10). The saints of all time are there: all “144,000” (14:1); all whom the Lamb has purchased from the earth (14:3-4); all who did not commit acts of immorality with the Harlot (14:4, 17:2); all who remained pure and faithful to their Betrothed, cherishing the Day of the Bridegroom’s Coming and the celebration of the Marriage Feast (21:2); all in whose mouth there was found no lie—neither false gospel nor false profession (16:13); all who are blameless through the Blameless One, who is Christ (14:5, 1 John 2:1). These will forever belong to God and Christ (14:1), worship before his throne (14:3), and follow the Lamb wherever he goes (14:4). Let the suffering saints remember and take heart.

Having encouraged the saints, the Lord next exhorts and warns them (14:6-13). In so doing, he gives John a vision of three angels. The first has an everlasting gospel to preach to all nations, a gospel by which men may escape the almighty Creator’s judgment to come. In the fear of the Lord, the Church is to preach it (14:6-7). The second heralds the imminent destruction of the Harlot, or Babylon the Great, both of which symbols represent the world-system as temptress. In the fear of the Lord, the Church is to come out of her, and stay out of her (14:8, 18:4). The third—using some of the weightiest language in all Scripture—depicts the eternal punishment of those who worship the Beast (and the Dragon), thereby taking his mark of ownership upon them. In the fear of the Lord, the Church must stand strong against every temptation to do so; she must faithfully persevere with Christ to the end (14:9-12). Moreover, as she does, let her

recall the blessedness of all who die in faith throughout the Era of Proclamation, for in heaven their spirits will find rest from their toil, even as they await the Resurrection and their eternal reward.

In 14:14-16, the Lord yet again offers encouragement, this time bringing us to the Consummation itself, where we behold the ultimate ingathering of God's elect. The motif employed here, first sounded in the Gospels, is that of the harvest (Mt. 3:12, 13:30). At his Parousia, the High King himself will appear in the skies above the earth to bring his wheat into his barn; to send forth his angels to gather his risen, transformed, and glorified saints to his side (14:14, 16; Dan. 7:13, Mt. 24:30, 26:64, 1 Thess. 4:17).

In 14:17-20 we arrive at the closing scenes of the cycle. Here, the Lord warns and encourages the saints with a prediction of the final judgment of the wicked. This time it is the angel with the power of fire who swings the sickle (14:18); nevertheless, the continuing use of the harvest motif assures us that this Judgment also occurs at the Parousia, and that Christ is the Agent behind it, just as the rest of the NT teaches (Mt. 13:36-43, 47-50, 24-25, 2 Thess. 1:1ff). Passing over the resurrection of the wicked and the universal assize before the Judgment Seat of Christ (20:11-15), the vision runs to the eternal punishment of the wicked in the great winepress of the wrath of God, which is the Lake of Fire (14:10, 20:14-15). The difficult final verse, with its mention of horses, alludes to certain OT texts depicting the world's final assault against the Israel of God (14:20; Ezek. 38:4, 15, Zech. 14:5). The message is: As soon as Christ's enemies launch their Last Battle against his Church, so soon will he return to engulf them—and all their (resurrected) predecessors—in utter destruction (16:12-16, 19:11-16). The finality of this judgment is seen in its universality: It extends in all four directions with “complete completeness” ($4 \times 4 \times 10 \times 10 = 1600$), leaving *all* of the wicked of *all* the earth forever outside the City of God (Rev. 22:15).

Summing up, we have seen that this cycle does indeed traverse the entire Era of Proclamation. It clearly begins with the Session of Christ (12:1-5) and clearly ends with his Parousia (14:14-20). In subtle ways, it again warns of the Last Battle (13:6-10, 14:20), but also offers great comfort, whether of life with Christ in the Intermediate State (14:13) or, following his return, life with Christ in the World to Come (14:1-5). Nowhere is there the least hint of a future Millennium. Here, the theology

of the (structure of the) Kingdom and the Consummation is identical with that of the rest of the NT.

However, we do observe something of great interest and importance: The cosmic dethronement of Satan in principle and practice, depicted in 12:1-12, bears a striking resemblance to the binding of Satan, depicted in 20:1-3 (see especially 12:9 and 20:3). Does this mean that the 1260 days of 12:6, the 42 months of 13:5, and the 1000 years of 20:2-3 all refer mystically to the Era of Proclamation? Does it mean that 20:4-6, like 14:13, refers to the Intermediate State? Does it mean that 20:7-10, like 13:6-10 and 14:20, refers to the Last Battle? And does it mean that 20:11-15, like 14:14-20, refers to the Last Judgment, with an emphasis upon the eternal punishment of the wicked?

Our journey so far would certainly suggest it. But let us continue that journey, in order to see if the pattern will hold.

4. The Seven Bowls of God's Final Wrath (15-16)

Chapters 15-16 give us the fourth cycle in which the Spirit depicts the course, character, and consummation of the High King's reign. A brief look at 16:12-21 makes it clear that the cycle does indeed end with a picture of the Consummation. However, the opening verse tells us that the theme of the visions to follow is the seven last plagues in which the wrath of God is finished (15:1). Moreover, many of the judgments described certainly look both cosmic and cataclysmic. Accordingly, some interpreters, like George Ladd and Dennis Johnson, argue that here the Spirit speaks exclusively about the end, about the last of the last days. Others, however, such as William Hendriksen and Greg Beale, contend that this cycle, like all the rest, once again traverses the entire Era of Proclamation.¹⁰

For a number of reasons, I favor the latter view. First, there is a natural presumption that this cycle will again give us the whole course of the High King's reign, seeing that the previous three (not to mention the next two) do this very thing. Secondly, the first four bowl judgments (16:2-11) closely parallel the first four trumpets judgments (8:7-12), suggesting that they both cover the same time frame. Thirdly, it is almost impossible to see how the world-system could mount the Last Battle (16:12-16) if the previous four bowl judgments, more or less literally interpreted, had already fallen upon the earth, or if they were falling upon it concurrently with a final assault

against the Church. And finally, the text itself seems quite clearly to teach that these judgments are poured out upon *all* the impenitents who worship the Beast (16:2), persecute the Church (16:5-6), and blaspheme the God who is now sending them to their death (16:9, 11). It appears, then, that the focus here is indeed upon all of God's final judgments as they are administered throughout the entire Era of Proclamation, not just at the end.

Keeping these preliminaries in mind, let us now briefly mine this cycle for further insights into the course of the High King's heavenly reign.

As we just saw, 15:1 serves as a heading in which the theme of the coming cycle is stated: the final outpourings of God's wrath, both during and at the end of the Era of Proclamation. Observe here that John once again beholds a great and marvelous *sign* (1:1, 12:1). As Dennis Johnson well remarks, this implies that his message comes to us in symbolic impressions, not photographic reproductions.¹¹

Strikingly, 15:2-4 gives us yet another glimpse of the saints in glory, but this time at the very head of the cycle, rather than at its conclusion. The contents of the text itself help us to understand why. Here we have a latter-day Song of Moses; the eschatological celebration of all that was typified by Israel's miraculous deliverance at the Red Sea; the onset of the Church's eternal glorying in the righteous acts of God and the Lamb, who, at the Parousia, brought them safely through the Red Sea of God's Judgment, deposited them securely on the shores of the World to Come, and engulfed their enemies in a fiery cataclysm of divine retribution (Exodus 15:1f). In the visions immediately ahead, we will read—with fear and trembling—of many such (final) judgments. Here the suffering Church is taught to expect them, understand them, preach them, and—so much as may be possible on this side of glory—celebrate them (15:3,4).

In richly symbolic OT language, 15:5-8 shows us God preparing to administer his final judgments against impenitent humanity. Importantly, the angels who are about to pour them out look much like Christ (15:6, 1:13). This hints at what we saw earlier: All throughout the Era of Proclamation, the Father redeems and judges the world by the hand of the High King of Heaven (6:1ff). In the recurrent use of the number of completeness, we see that these are indeed final judgments: Seven angels are about to pour out seven plagues from seven bowls. We observe the same finality in the fact that the bowls are *full* of the wrath of God, and that no

one is able to enter his sanctuary (presumably to plead for mercy) until the seven plagues have run their course (17:7-8; Jer. 7:16, 11:14, 14:11, 1 John 5:16).

In 16:1, we hear a heavenly voice—likely that of Christ—sending the seven angels to their task. In verses 2-11 there follows a description of the outpouring of the first five bowls, along with their consequences. Here, the temporal sphere of fulfillment is the entire Era of Proclamation; later, in 16:12-21, it will be the last of the last days. As a rule, these judgments are framed in terms of the plagues wrought against ancient Egypt, though in NT times their actual fulfillment is more spiritual than physical (Exodus 7-11, 1 Cor. 15:46). Again, these judgments run roughly parallel to the trumpet judgments of Revelation 8-11, though their enlarged scope and increased severity signal final retribution as opposed to preliminary warning. Interestingly, in no case do the five judgments actually result in physical death. Nevertheless, it is clear that they are indeed judgments unto death, not least of all because they do not lead sinners to repentance, but to a further hardening of their hearts against God, just as in the case of Pharaoh (16:9, 11, Rom. 9:14-18).

With a view to confirming that the time frame of 16:2-11 is indeed the entire Era of Proclamation, I would offer the following suggestions about the interpretation of these challenging verses.

The first speaks of *all* who have worshiped the Beast, and who therefore suffer and die from the malignancy of their own sin, whether spiritually or physically (16:2; Exodus 9:8-12, Rev. 13:15-17, 20:4).

The second may indeed speak of all who die at sea, or at the hands of the sea, as in the case of devastating hurricanes or tsunamis. Alternatively, it may speak of the death of the “sea” of sinful, impenitent humanity, from which the Dragon calls forth the Beast, and upon which the Harlot sits (16:3, 13:1, 17:1, 15).¹²

The third bowl may represent all who die by poisoned rivers and springs. However, the cry of the angel of the waters, in which he affirms the righteousness of this judgment, could well indicate that these waters symbolize the destruction, in kind, of those who “destroyed” the saints, and who must therefore drink down the wrath of God (16:4-7, Exodus 7:21, Rev. 11:18, 13:10, 17:6).

The fourth bowl does not speak of lethal global warming, which would consume saints and sinners alike, but rather of the withdrawal of God's common grace from the impenitent; of a fatal intensification of the effects of the curse, such that these people now experience life as though the sun were fiercely beating down upon them (16:8-9, 7:16, 9:2; Psalm 38:1-8, Isaiah 4:6, 25:4).¹³

Finally, the fifth bowl appears to speak of the suffering and death unleashed upon society when God "darkens the throne of the Beast;" when he removes from wicked rulers the skill and favor necessary to govern effectively, so that henceforth war and anarchy reign (16:10-11; Exodus 10:21-23, Psalm 11:1-3, Rev. 17:16).

Interpretations like these, which acknowledge the structure and literary genre of the book, make it easy to see how the first five bowl judgments are fulfilled throughout the entire Era of Proclamation.

Coming as they do at the end of this cycle, it should not surprise us that verses 12-16, which portray the sixth bowl judgment, bring us to the end of the age and the Last Battle. Importantly, we see this pattern in four out of the six cycles, a line of evidence that strongly confirms our view of the structure of chapters 6-20 (11:7-10, 16:12-16, 19:11ff, 20:7-10).

Beneath the OT surface of our text we find a rich NT meaning. I would sum it up as follows: Near the end of the age, the sovereign God will remove from before his enemies every spiritual and circumstantial impediment to their dark ambitions, setting the stage for the Last Battle (16:12; Ezek. 38:1f, 2 Thess. 2:6-7). At that time, Satan will use the Antichrist, the State, the religious arm of the State, a compelling religious ideology, and false signs and wonders to win the allegiance of the entire world-system, thereafter moving it to war against the only dissenter, the true spiritual Church (16:13-14; 2 Thess. 2:1ff, Rev. 11:11-19, 17:14, 19:19). In this toxic environment, where lawlessness and deception super-abound, Christians must remain doubly vigilant, remembering that it is precisely when things are at their worst that Christ will return, just as he promised (16:15; Mt. 24:23-37, 44, 1 Thess. 5:1-4). Therefore, let believers keep in mind that in that Day the scene of unprovoked attack will suddenly become a scene of unexpected deliverance, even as it was in the days of Deborah, when the people, watching from the heights of Mount Meggido, saw God

mightily intervene in behalf of Israel's armies fighting on the great plain below (Judges 4-5, 5:19; Rev. 20:7-10).¹⁴

Verses 17-21, as expected, once again give us the Consummation, though here the accent altogether falls upon the punishment of God's enemies. We know this is the Last Judgment because in it the wrath of God is finished (15:1, 17:2). We also know that Christ, at his Parousia, is the Agent of this Judgment, for though he is not explicitly mentioned here, verse 20 alludes to 6:12-17, where he is indeed explicitly mentioned. The earthquake of verse 18 is the same as that of 6:12: It is the eschatological shaking of all created things, with the result that only holy and unshakable things remain (Psalm 125:1, Ezek. 38:19-23, Hag. 2:6, Heb. 12:27-28, 2 Peter 3:9-12). The Great City of verse 19 is none other than Babylon the Great, which is the City of Man, the tri-partite world-system comprised of the Beast, the False Prophet, and the Harlot. John will again describe its fall, at length, in chapter 18. In verse 21, the Spirit once again draws upon Exodus imagery in order to depict the eternal punishment of the wicked, and also (the wretchedness of) their eternal enmity against God (Exodus 9:18-15, Ezek. 38:22).

Summing up, we have seen that this cycle, like the previous three, certainly appears to traverse the entire Era of Proclamation. It definitely ends at the end of the age, with the Last Battle and the Consummation. As for its beginning, one must admit that here, as opposed to chapters 6 and 12, the opening scenes of the Era of Proclamation are not easily discerned. However, this is not because the time frame has changed, but rather because the emphasis has changed. Here, there is progress—a greater emphasis upon final judgments, and upon *the* final Judgment at the end of the age. This, along with the cosmic imagery involved, accounts for the futuristic feel of these two chapters, though in fact the temporal sphere of fulfillment remains the same as all the rest. Importantly, we have also seen once again that when the Spirit desires to encourage the saints with a revelation of what lies beyond the Consummation, he makes no mention whatsoever of a future millennial reign of Christ on earth, but points instead to life in glory in the new heavens and the new earth (15:1-4; 7:9-15, 14:1-5).

It appears, then, that the pattern proposed in our chart still holds. But in order to make sure, let us take a few moments to probe the fifth cycle. Only

then will we be in a position to look the sixth and most controversial cycle squarely in the face!

5. The Fall of the Dragon's Helpers (17-19)

The fifth and (I would argue) penultimate cycle of chapters 6-20 is devoted to the final destruction of all of the Dragon's helpers, especially the Great Harlot, Babylon. It is marked by a high degree of progressivity: While there are certainly allusions to the large-scale course of Salvation History, here the emphasis is decidedly upon the Last Battle and the Last Judgment. The cycle falls into two parts: 17:1-19:10 focuses on the fall of the Great Harlot; 19:11-21 focuses on the destruction of the Beast and the False Prophet. Let us briefly survey the cycle in order to highlight its structure and primary symbols.

In 17:1-2, the Spirit announces the theme of the bulk of the cycle: the Judgment of the Great Harlot, previously mentioned in 14:8 and 16:19. As we saw earlier, she represents the world-system as seductress. Unlike the Woman of chapter 12, who seeks to draw men *to* their Creator and Redeemer (and so to their good), this wicked woman draws men *away* from God and Christ to herself (and so to their destruction). Therefore, she will be destroyed, along with all the (unrepentant) spiritual adulterers who have committed acts of immorality with her (James 4:4).

In verses 3-6, John describes his vision of the Great Harlot. She is seated upon the Beast of 13:1-10. Here is the world-system as temptress, working in concert with the world-system as persecuting political power (17:3). Gorgeously arrayed and holding in her hand a golden cup full of abominations, she is like the Rome of John's day, enticing men to lives of idolatry, materialism, drunkenness, and sensuality (17:6). But this is more than Rome. This is Babylon the Great, the Mother of *all* spiritual harlots and *all* the abominations of the earth; this is, as it were, the satanic prototype that begets every historical incarnation of the world-system as temptress (17:5, Luke 4:6). The saints of every generation have met and struggled with her corrupt children: Sodom, Egypt, Tyre, Sidon, Babylon, Rome, and the wealthy, sin-besotted cities of the modern world. Therefore, we see that she is drunk, not only with the wine of her own immorality, but also with the blood of the saints. She cannot abide the light that emanates from them, light that pierces the darkness of her own soul. Therefore, as for

Christ, so for the saints: She seeks to extinguish their light by putting them to death (17:6; John 1:5, 3:16-21, Rev. 11:10).

In verses 7-13 the angel opens up the meaning of the vision to the wondering apostle. There is more here than the perennial collusion of the Beast and the Harlot. John is seeing a *mystery*, a previously hidden truth about the *destiny* of the Harlot, and the destiny of the saints as well. The details are notoriously difficult to interpret, and therefore disputed. My take is as follows: The Beast that John sees has indeed been around for ages, but it is not the Rome of his day; it is a final political power yet to come, one that both leaders and laity the world over will admire and follow (17:8). Its seven heads are seven mountains, both of which symbolize the “high” power centers of the earth; in the last of the last days they will be united as one. For a season, the Harlot (i.e., the economic and cultural system) will be comfortably seated upon them, enjoying favor with the final embodiment of the Beast, who recognizes her usefulness in the pursuit of his evil goals (17:9). The seven heads also represent seven kings (i.e., kingdoms). Here we learn something about the *history* of the Beast: five (of his previous incarnations) have fallen, one is (i.e., Rome), and one (the final one) is yet to come. However, it will endure only briefly, for Christ himself will destroy it at his Parousia (17:10, 19:20). The final incarnation of the Beast will be an eighth king, yet one of the seven. In other words, the final kingdom will be the *same* as one of the others (i.e., a revival of one of the others: Rome, according to Daniel 2 and 7), yet also *different* from it, in that, for power and geographical extent, it will sum up and surpass all the rest (17:11). In those days, all the power-centers of the world-system (symbolized by the ten kings) will join with the Beast and embrace his great purpose, which is to crush the true spiritual Church and exalt itself as God over all (17:12-14, 2 Thess. 2:ff).

In verses 14-18 the angel continues his exposition of the eschatological mystery, but now turns to the theme that will dominate the rest of the cycle: the final destruction of the Harlot, the Beast, and the False Prophet. He begins by tersely announcing the Last Battle, and then, as usual, the triumph of the Lamb and his faithful followers that will immediately ensue (17:14). Notably, in those days the Harlot will finally sit as queen over all the nations, much as Rome (nearly) did in John’s time (17:15, 18:17). However, just prior to Christ’s return, God will put it into the heart of the Beast and

his violent retinue of world leaders to devour her flesh. Presumably, this is the desolation of the global economy and culture as a result of the rampant militarism of the Antichrist's one-world government (17:16-17). As a prelude to the divine destruction of sinners at Christ's return, Providence will first display the self-destructive power of sin itself.

In chapter 18, we reach the threshold of the Judgment of the Great Harlot. It opens with an angel descending from heaven, heralding her imminent demise: She is about to become a dwelling place of demons, a prison-house of every unclean spirit and hated bird. In short, she is about to be cast into hell (18:2; Isaiah 13:21f, 34:11, 13-15, Rev. 19:20). For this reason, a heavenly voice issues a final warning to God's people: Like Lot of old, and like the Israelite remnant of Babylon, they must come out of her lest they share in her plagues. These are the final, eschatological plagues: God Almighty himself, with his arm fully bared, will requite her for her sins once and for all (18:4-8; Isaiah 48:20, Jer. 51:45).

Drawing heavily upon OT oracles of the doom of Tyre (Ezekiel 27) and Babylon (Jeremiah 50-51), verses 9-20 give us all the inhabitants of the earth, both princes and people, lamenting the sudden, fiery destruction of the Great City and its treasure-trove of merchandise, both material and human. It is a graphic picture of what the apostle Paul called "the sorrow of the world" (2 Cor. 7:10). Yes, these who weep and wail and throw dust on their heads are sad, but not over the manifold ways in which they have dishonored their Creator, or over their vicious treatment of his saints, or even over their failure to enter heaven. No, here in hell itself (which is the true locus of their cries of woe) they can think of nothing to lament besides the loss of their (former) goods. It has happened to them according to Jesus' parable of the rich man and Lazarus: In their brief lifetime on earth they received their good things, while the saints received their evil things. Now, however, the saints are forever comforted, while they themselves are tormented (Rev. 18:10, 15; Luke 16:25). This is an administration of perfect justice, in which God calls the suffering saints to rejoice (18:20).

Verses 21-24 bring the chapter to a close with yet another vision: A strong angel takes up a huge stone and casts it into the sea. Just so, great Babylon will be thrown down with violence, and will be seen no more. Moreover, in hell God will remove from her denuded precincts every one of his good gifts, gifts that ought to have led her to repentance, but that instead

she made into idols: music, craft, the pleasures of married life, light itself. If only the Great City had listened to the message of the saints and prophets who pleaded with her to repent, instead of spilling their blood in her streets. For now, at Christ's coming in judgment, her time for repentance is past.

In 19:1-10 John brings the vision of the fall of the Harlot to a close. Christ has come again. The Judgment of the Harlot has just occurred. The Marriage Supper of the Lamb is at hand. All the saints and angels are celebrating the Consummation (7:9ff, 15:1-3). In this celebration, we find the Spirit sharply contrasting the opposing destinies of the two women of the Revelation: the Harlot (19:1-5) and the Bride (19:6-10).

One by one, four exultant "Hallelujah's" flow forth. First, John hears the angelic hosts praising God for the Judgment by which he has just brought the Harlot's corrupting influence to an end, avenged the blood of his servants, and secured their eternal salvation (19:1-2). Next, he hears them yet again, this time affirming the complete justice of the Harlot's eternal punishment (19:3). Then he hears the 24 elders (representing the Church as a whole) and the four living creatures (representing the cherubim) worshiping before God's throne, adding their "Amen" to what the angels have just declared (19:4). Finally, John hears a voice emanating from the throne—is it Christ's—exhorting all of God's bondservants to praise him (19:5). Praise him they do, in a thunderous chorus that rocks the universe itself (19:6a). An eternity of glory, praise, and celebration has now begun!

But what exactly is the source of their joy, the theme of their praise? Verses 6b-7 give us the all-important answer: The Lord God Almighty has begun to reign! His Kingdom—*in its fullness*—has come at last! In the ears of the Bride of Christ, no sweeter words were ever heard. They mean that her long season of waiting is at an end, that her Betrothed has finally come for her, that her Beloved is about to take her to his eternal home, and that he will now consummate their redemptive marriage by way of resurrection, transformation, and glorification, so that in complete spiritual and physical perfection they will forever live together in the new heavens and the new earth. Soon, John will receive a vision of their conjugal bliss (Rev. 21-22). Here, however, he simply beholds the Bride receiving her wedding gown at the resurrection: the (perfect) righteousness of Christ, along with rewards for all that she allowed him to do in and through her during her days upon

the earth (19:8, 21:2). Solemnly, a holy angel reminds John of the blessedness of all whom the sovereign God invites to the Marriage Feast of the Lamb (19:9, Mt. 22:1f).

As the cycle draws to a close, the Spirit now takes a small step backwards in time, and slightly modifies his theme. As previously, he will again speak of the Coming of Christ and the Last Judgment of the world-system. Here, however, the spotlight is no longer upon the Harlot, but upon her companions in rebellion and persecution: the Beast and the False Prophet. In other words, with these closing verses, the Spirit brings the history of the Dragon's three helpers to its appointed end.

Three closely related visions are involved. The first depicts the Parousia, the descent of the glorified Lord Jesus Christ from heaven (19:11-16). This is Matthew 24:29-31, 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18, and 2 Thessalonians 1:3-10, but in apocalyptic language. Again John sees the Rider on the white horse. This time, however, he is not coming by the Spirit and through the Church to conquer hearts for the Gospel. No, he is coming bodily—in power, glory, and faithfulness—to judge and wage war against his (and her) enemies (19:11-13, 6:2). With him are the armies of heaven: certainly the holy angels, and almost certainly the spirits of the departed saints, who have just been, or who are about to be, raised from the dead (19:14; Mt. 25:31, Rom. 16:20, 1 Thess. 4:13-18). This is the Word of God—he who created the cosmos—now fulfilling Psalm 2 by speaking final destruction upon his foes, just as his Almighty Father has given to him (19:13, 15; Psalm 2, John 1:1, 5:22, Rev. 2:27, 12:5). This is also the King of kings and the Lord of lords; for now, at his Parousia, the High King puts every earthly enemy under foot, and so becomes absolute Head over all (19:16; 1 Cor. 15:25-27, Eph. 1:10, 22, Rev. 17:14, 19:12).

In the second vision, John beholds an angel summoning all the birds of mid-heaven to the great supper of God, that they may feast on the flesh of all Christ's enemies, great and small (19:17-18, 21). Here again the Spirit uses OT apocalyptic language to speak of the torments of the wicked in hell (Ezek. 39:17-20, Rev. 18:2). The third and final vision confirms this interpretation (19:19-21). John sees the Beast and his armies arrayed against Christ and his army. This is yet another picture of the Last Battle, wherein the consolidated world-system pits itself one final time against the (NT) people of God (19:19; 17:17). But it is all in vain, for no sooner have they

gathered themselves for war, than Christ appears in glory, seizing the Beast, the False Prophet, and all their followers, and casting them into the Lake of Fire (19:20-21; 2 Thess. 2:1ff). Thus, at the Parousia, Christ completely sweeps away all three of the Dragon's helpers from the earth. In the next cycle we will see Him sweep away the Dragon with them.

Summing up, we have found that the fifth cycle of Revelation 6-20 deals largely with the Consummation of the High King's heavenly reign, emphasizing as it does of the final judgment of the Harlot, the Beast, and the False Prophet. Nevertheless, in doing so, it specifically speaks of the ancient Roman embodiment of these enemies, alongside which John and the early Christians lived and toiled (Rev. 17:10). Moreover, from its various exhortations to the people of God, it is clear that this cycle is meant to speak to Christians of all generations, since they too must stand firm against the manifestation of the Dragon's helpers proper to their own time (Rev. 18:4-5, 20). Therefore, we may conclude that in a limited but very real sense this cycle does indeed span the entire Era of Proclamation.

Finally, let us note once again that when the Spirit reminds the saints of their Blessed Hope, he says not a word about ruling and reigning with Christ in a future millennial stage of the Kingdom. Rather, he speaks of the Parousia, at which time the Lord will rescue his people from the Last Battle (17:14, 19:19-21), decisively judge his (and their) enemies (18:1ff, 19:11-21), and welcome his glorified Bride to eternal life together with him in the World to Come (19:1-10). Therefore, as in the previous four cycles, so here: The classic NT eschatology is presupposed. The Kingdom is divided into two simple stages, separated by a single Parousia of Christ, who, at his appearing, will consummate all things. Is this not the true Blessed Hope of the saints?

Conclusion

Our examination of the structure of the Revelation is nearly complete. We have seen that the text itself conforms very well to the chart with which we began our journey. Chapter 1 does indeed give us a Vision of the High King. Chapters 2-3 give us his message to the Universal Church. Chapters 4-5, the center of gravity of the book, give us his coronation, his investiture as High King of Heaven and Earth. Very importantly, chapters 6-19

certainly seem to give us five visionary cycles, each of which recapitulates the course, character, and consummation of Christ's heavenly reign, with increasing emphasis upon the Consummation. Also, in our journey thus far we have repeatedly seen that the Spirit presupposes the simple two-staged eschatology of the NT; that he *never* presents a future millennial reign with Christ as part of the Blessed Hope; but that he *always* exalts the Parousia of Christ—wherein he himself will effect the Consummation of all things—as the true Blessed Hope of the Church.

Therefore, we must ask once again: Is it likely that in the sixth and final cycle of Revelation 6-20 (i.e., chapter 20), the Spirit would do anything other than give us the course, character, and consummation of Christ's heavenly reign one final time? And is it likely—or even possible—that in this, the second to the last chapter of the entire Bible, he would introduce, for the very first time in the NT canon, an idea that must completely revolutionize, if not overthrow, both the eschatology of the Revelation and the eschatology of the entire NT?

No, the great current of NT theology, and the current of the Revelation itself, sweep us along to the only possible conclusion: Revelation 20 *must* give us still another symbolic depiction of the heavenly reign of Christ.

But does the text itself actually support this most reasonable conclusion? Now, at long last, it is time to find out.

Revelation 20: The Meaning of the Millennium

IN THE PRECEDING two chapters we have laid a good foundation for the study of what is arguably the most controversial text in all Holy Scripture: Revelation 20. Along the way, we considered the purpose and literary genre of the Revelation, as well as its structure and the key symbols involved. In particular, we looked long and hard at the idea that Revelation 20 is a sixth and final recapitulation of the central theme of chapters 6-20, and of the book as a whole: the course, character, and consummation of the spiritual reign of the High King of Heaven. Now, with our foundation solidly in place, we are ready to plunge into the text itself, in order to see how well or poorly the material found therein confirms our thesis.

Interpreting Revelation 20

Revelation 20 falls nicely into four sections of roughly equal length, each one containing a mini-vision that is closely related to the others. The unifying theme is the thousand years. The first speaks of the binding and imprisonment of Satan for a thousand years (20:1-3); the second of the saints reigning with Christ in heaven throughout the thousand years, and also of the first and second deaths, and the first and second resurrections, (20:4-6); the third speaks of the Last Battle and the Judgment of Satan at the end of the thousand years (20:7-10); and the fourth of the Last Judgment of all mankind at the Great White Throne, also at the end of the thousand years (20:11-14). In surveying this rich material, I will first offer a brief amillennial interpretation of each section, and then address, at some length, the key questions, interpretations, and arguments of our premillennial brethren.

The Binding and Imprisonment Satan (20:1-3)

According to premillennarians, Revelation 20 follows Revelation 19 chronologically; that is, it speaks of events that will happen *after* the Parousia described in 19:11-21. Amillennarians disagree. They argue that in Revelation 20 the Spirit is once again tracing the course of the whole Era of Proclamation, but for a very special purpose, and with a high degree of “progressivity.” The purpose, as we shall see, is twofold : to inform the saints that the Era of Proclamation may indeed last longer than they expect, and also to assure them that even if they should die before the Lord’s return, they will know the unspeakable joy of living and reigning with Christ in heaven during the Intermediate State. As for “progressivity,” we will see that this chapter speaks uniquely of the ultimate demise of Satan, and also—in extraordinarily sobering terms—of the Last Judgment of all mankind. Revelation 20 serves, then, as a fitting conclusion to the serial visions of the course, character, and consummation of Christ’s heavenly reign, even as it prepares the way for a glorious revelation of the full inheritance of the saints: Eternal Life with the Triune God in the new heavens and the new earth (Rev. 21-22).

Bearing these preliminaries in mind, let us now consider 20:1-3 in amillennial perspective.

In verse 1 John sees an angel coming down from heaven, having the key of the abyss and a great chain in his hand. The language is apocalyptic and therefore symbolic. The angel symbolizes divine agency. Certainly the events here in view could involve an actual ministry of angels, but in the end they are preeminently a ministry of the Spirit of God. The keys symbolize divine authority to act (1:18, 14:6-7), the chain divine power to restrain (2 Thess. 2:6).

Verses 2-3 depict a temporary binding and imprisonment of Satan. The holy angel lays hold of the evil angel, binds him with the chain, throws him into the abyss, shuts it, and seals it over him, so that for a thousand years he can no longer deceive the nations. A job decidedly done! As we shall see, the whole picture is highly reminiscent of 12:7-9, and, according to amillennarians, conveys much the same message: Throughout the Era of Proclamation, here symbolized by a thousand years, the High King of Heaven, by the hand of the Holy Spirit, will restrain Satan in such a way

that he can neither prevent the spread of the Gospel throughout the earth, nor gather together the nations for the Last Battle against Christ's Church. However, at the close of the thousand years (i.e., at the end of the Era of Proclamation), Christ himself will indeed, for wise reasons, remove all spiritual restraints on Satan and his demonic hosts. This will result in the stupendous climactic scenes of Salvation History: The rise of the Antichrist, the Last Battle, the Parousia, the destruction of Satan and his evil angels, and the Last Judgment of all mankind—all followed by the advent of the new heavens and the new earth (20:7-15).

Needless to say, our premillennarian brothers sharply disagree with this characterization of the Millennium. The controversy swirls around four crucial questions. Let us carefully address each one now.

1. In this text, where are we, chronologically speaking? Are we dealing here with events subsequent to the Parousia of 19:11-21, as premillennarians hold; or are we back at the beginning of the Era of Proclamation, as amillennarians hold?

For a number of reasons, I would argue that the amillennial view is much to be preferred.

First, a close reading of 19:11-21 makes it quite clear that the judgment there described is *not* partial, such that any men or nations could safely pass through it and enter a subsequent millennial stage of the Kingdom. To the contrary, Revelation 19:15 strongly implies that when Christ comes, he will smite *all* the nations, shattering them with a rod of iron and treading them down in the winepress of the wrath of God (Psalm 2:7-9, Rev. 2:27). Similarly, 19:18 explicitly states that the birds of mid-heaven will feast upon the flesh of *all* men, both free and slave, small and great. Who, then, would be left to enter a future millennium, such that God might protect them by binding Satan from his deceptive work?

Based on a faulty reading of Matthew 25:31-46, dispensationalists reply that the survivors are individual Gentiles (or nations) who have treated Israel well during the Tribulation (see chapter 23). However, neither Revelation 19 nor any other NT text describing the Judgment teaches this. As for historic premillennarians, many say that the survivors are the children of unbelievers. But again, Revelation 19 says no such thing.

Moreover, we cannot find a single NT text to support this highly speculative solution. Who would raise such children? Angels? Glorified saints? Truly, the premillennarian thesis strains all credulity. Far better, then, to see 19:11-21 and 20:7-15 as parallel passages; to see them both depicting the Last Battle (19:19, 20:7-9), the Parousia (19:11-16, 20:9), and the Last Judgment of men and angels (19:20-21, 20:10-15). Far better, also, to assume that in that day all children beneath the age of accountability will be found among the elect, brought to faith, transformed and glorified with the living saints, and so spared from the wrath to come (Psalm 68:5, Mt. 19:14, 1 Cor. 15:50f, 1 Thess. 4:15f).

Secondly, in the course of our survey I have tried to show that *all* five cycles found in chapters 6-19 begin at the beginning of the Era of Proclamation and end with the last Judgment. Admittedly, this pattern is clearer in some cycles than in others. Nevertheless, there is more than enough evidence in each to suggest that the pattern is indeed pervasive. Is it not reasonable, then, after such a majestic depiction of the Parousia and the Last Judgment (19:11-21), to expect that 20:1-3 begins a new cycle, taking us back to the onset of the Era of Proclamation?

Along these lines, consider also how counterintuitive it would be for the Spirit to give us only *five* cycles depicting the Era of Proclamation, rather than *six*. Because of its symbolic power, the number six definitely makes better sense. Six reminds us of the six days of God's creative work, followed by a seventh, in which he rested. Analogously, six cycles of the Era of Proclamation would speak of Christ's redemptive work, while a seventh (found in 21-22) would speak of redemptive rest, both Christ's and ours (Heb. 4:1-13). Biblical numerology clearly favors the 6-1 structure of amillennialism over the 5-1-1 structure of premillennialism.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, we have the evidence found in the text itself; evidence that repeatedly carries us to parallel passages, both in the Revelation and the rest of the NT; evidence that shows beyond any reasonable doubt that Revelation 20 does indeed traverse the same familiar ground: the Era of Proclamation. In the next three questions, we will examine this evidence with some care.

2. What is the Binding and Imprisonment of Satan?

With insufficient regard for the apocalyptic character of the imagery involved, premillennarians interpret the binding and imprisonment of Satan more or less literally: A literal angel will literally throw Satan into the literal abyss, thereby *removing* him from the earth, so that he can no longer deceive any men or nations into following him. “This refers to Satan’s complete banishment from earth, so that while sin is still to exist in individuals, it is no longer to be a power forming a fellowship, and thus making a kingdom of sin and Satan.”¹ Not surprisingly, such an interpretation emboldens premillennarians to envision a vastly improved world, one befitting the presence and rule of Christ upon the earth: “The Millennium is ... a time of universal peace, prosperity, long life, and prevailing righteousness.”² It also emboldens them to poke fun at their amillennial brothers, asserting that if Satan is *presently* bound and imprisoned, he must be attached to a very long chain!

It is easy to see, however, that the literal approach has weighty problems of its own, and not a few. Yes, there is indeed such a place as the abyss (Luke 8:31), just as there are also such things as keys and chains. But do we really want to say that the key in the angel’s hand is literal, rather than a symbol of God-given authority; or that the chain is literal, rather than a symbol of divine power? Also, how exactly would an angel shut the abyss, or seal it over the devil’s head? Clearly, we are dealing here with a spiritual event befalling a spiritual being or beings. Therefore, we must try to discern the spiritual meaning behind the physical imagery used to convey it. Moreover, we must do so consistently. If the key is a symbol, and the chain is a symbol, then hermeneutical consistency requires us at least to ask if here the Spirit uses Satan himself as a symbol (e.g., of all the fallen angels, Satan included), or the abyss as a symbol (e.g., of spiritual imprisonment, confinement, restraint), or the thousand years as a symbol (e.g., of the Era of Proclamation, in which Satan is indeed restrained as never before).

It appears, then, that sensitivity not only to the literary genre of the Revelation, but also to the minutiae of the text itself, requires a symbolic interpretation along the lines given above. If so, the message here is that throughout the “thousand years” God will *restrain* the activity of Satan and his demonic hosts, rather than *remove* it (and them) altogether. Importantly, this approach corresponds very well to the world in which Christians now live. On the one hand, it is a world in which Satan is present and active,

sometimes painfully so (1 Peter 5:8). On the other, it is also a world in which God does indeed restrain Satan, and has for two millennia, preventing him from achieving two of his most cherished goals: (1) deceiving all the nations by means of false religion and philosophy, so as to keep the whole world in the dark about the one true God and his plan of salvation, something he *was* allowed to do prior to the first advent of Christ and the completion of his redemptive work (20:3; Mt. 16:18, 24:14, Luke 4:4-6); and, (2) deceiving the nations so that he can summon and fashion an eschatological Beast capable of suppressing the missionary outreach of the Church and launching the Last Battle against the NT people of God (2 Thess. 2:6, Rev. 9:14, 16:12).

When we consult the rest of the Revelation, as well as related NT texts, we find that they consistently favor this more symbolic approach. On the one hand, neither of these two Scriptural witnesses says a single word about a future, intermediate stage of the Kingdom from which Satan has been temporarily banished. On the other hand, they have a great deal to say about a world in which Satan has been temporarily restrained from deceiving God's elect about the truth of the Gospel, and also from gathering "the inhabitants of the earth" to the Antichrist for a final spiritual and physical war against the Church.

Considering the importance of this question, let us pause for a moment to consider some of the more relevant NT passages.

Beginning with the Revelation itself, we have seen that in a number of places the Spirit richly pictures the infallible worldwide spread of the Gospel throughout the Era of Proclamation. Even now the Rider upon his white horse is going forth into the earth, conquering and *sure to conquer* in the cause of the Gospel; and he has been doing so from the very beginning (6:2). Even now God is holding back the four winds of eschatological judgment (and conflict) until all his servants are sealed upon their foreheads; and he has been doing so from the very beginning (7:1-8). Even now the powers of hell are restrained from moving the nations to join forces with the Beast in order to prosecute the Last Battle; and they have been thus restrained from the very beginning (9:14). Even now the Two Witnesses—measured for spiritual protection—are prophesying to the nations; and they have been doing so from the very beginning (11:1-6). Each of these texts depicts the infallible progress of the Gospel in the Era of Proclamation.

Why is that progress so certain? *Because even now Satan is bound from deceiving the nations; and he has been from the very beginning!*

In this connection, we must not fail to pay special attention to Revelation 12, a chapter that runs closely parallel to our text at many points. There we first read of the exaltation of Christ, which occurred at the beginning of the Era of Proclamation (12:1-6). Then we read of a great spiritual war that immediately ensued, a war in which Satan—*the deceiver of the whole world*—is cast down to the earth (12:7-9). As I argued earlier, these three verses picture the progressive collapse of Satan's worldwide Kingdom throughout the entire Era of Proclamation. Because of the preaching of the Gospel, he is no longer able to deceive the elect of all nations about the identity of the true God, or about the way back into fellowship with Him. This is confirmed by 12:10-12, which announces the advent and infallible progress of (the first stage of) Christ's Kingdom through the faithful testimony of the saints. Observe also from 12:14-17 the many ways in which the Spirit restrains Satan from destroying the Woman, and from hindering her fruitfulness in begetting children for Christ. He gives her the wings of the Great Eagle (12:14), he nourishes her in the wilderness (12:14), and he opens up the earth in order to swallow the floods of ungodliness that pour forth from the Dragon's mouth (12:15-16, 16:13).

Here, then, we have nothing less than *an inspired commentary on 20:1-3*. What does the Spirit mean by the binding and imprisonment of Satan, such that he can no longer deceive the nations? According to 12:1-17, he means that beginning with the exaltation of Christ—and all throughout the Era of Proclamation—God will restrain Satan from deceiving his worldwide elect about the truth of the Gospel, and will also restrain Satan from decimating the true spiritual Church until all her children are born from above and her work on earth is done (Rev. 11:7f).

This brings us to other NT texts that illuminate the binding and imprisonment of Satan. They are legion, but two are of special importance.

First, we have Matthew 12:22-29, in which we find Jesus healing a demon-possessed man. Speaking of this power-encounter, he likens himself to a holy thief who has just entered a strong man's house, tied him up, and carried off his property. In a microcosm, Jesus has just invaded and torn down Satan's kingdom, and plundered his (human) goods (Luke 10:18). After Pentecost, when the New Covenant has been sealed in his blood and

the Spirit has been poured out on the Church, he will do so in a macrocosm; that is, on a global scale, through the universal proclamation of the Gospel. Through the foolishness of preaching, the High King of Heaven will invade Satan's worldwide kingdom, restrain him from deceiving the elect any longer, open their hearts and minds to the truth of the Gospel, and transfer them into his own spiritual Kingdom of light and love (Col. 1:13). This is the binding of Satan pictured in Revelation 20:1-3, a binding that begins at the beginning of the Era of Proclamation and lasts until its dramatic closing scenes at the end.

Similarly, we have the testimony of John in 12:20-33. John relates that towards the end of Holy Week certain Greeks desired to talk with Jesus. The disciples brought him the news, but Jesus, having been sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel, refused to grant the interview. Rather, he chose instead to speak at length about his imminent death. Concerning that death, he said, "Now judgment is upon this world; now the ruler of this world shall be cast out. And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all to myself" (12:31-32). What was the Lord saying here? He was saying that on the Cross, the Father will judge Jesus for the sins of his chosen ones; for the sins of the world of elect sinners presently living under Satan's rule, but whom the Father has predestined to become a *new* world of saints living under the rule of Christ. In short, Christ will die so that God's people may be transferred from Satan's kingdom into Christ's kingdom, and live.

But how will this transfer be accomplished? It will be accomplished, Jesus says, by his being "lifted up"—first in death, then in exaltation to the Father's right hand, and finally in preaching. *Here then is how God binds Satan from deceiving the nations any longer.* First, he destroys Satan's evil kingdom at the cross—in principle. Then, throughout the entire Era of Proclamation, he further destroys it—in practice. How? By sending the Church with the message of Christ's finished work to every land; by restraining Satan from blinding the eyes of his people any longer (2 Cor. 4:4); by casting down the devil from his former place of rulership over them (Rev. 12:9); and by infallibly drawing them into the Kingdom of his Beloved Son (John 12:32, Col. 1:13). How marvelously, then, this rich NT text illumines the deep meaning of Revelation 20:1-3!

We must briefly mention some other NT passages, as well.

Preaching to the Athenians, the apostle Paul declares that formerly God “winked” at the times of ignorance, in which they foolishly worshiped their idols. Now, however, he is commanding all men everywhere to repent. Why? Because Christ has been exalted, the Gospel is going to the nations, and God is binding Satan from deceiving his people any longer, with the result that they can and will be saved (Acts 17:30-31, 26:17-18).

Writing to the Corinthians, Paul states that through the preaching of the Gospel he and his fellow apostles are casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ (2 Cor. 10:5). Here again we see the hand of God binding Satan from deceiving his elect among the Gentiles.

In 1 Cor. 15:20-28, the apostle speaks of the heavenly reign of Christ, and of how, throughout that reign, the High King is placing all his enemies underfoot. This also pictures the binding of Satan, which results in the progressive demise of his worldwide kingdom through the preaching of the Gospel.

Finally, we have such texts as Ephesians 1:19-23 and Colossians 2:8-15, which associate the exaltation of Christ with the subjection of the demonic rulers and powers in the heavenly places. This in turn leads to the gathering of Christ’s elect out of every tribe, tongue, people, and nation. Such didactic passages give us the rich NT theology underlying Revelation 20:1-3. The Holy Spirit assumes that we understand it well.

We conclude, then, that Revelation 20:1-3 does indeed take us back to the beginning of the Era of Proclamation; that it uses apocalyptic symbolism to depict, one final time, the assured results of the finished work of Christ and the subsequent proclamation of the Gospel. Henceforth, God will continually restrain Satan in such a way that he can no longer deceive the elect of all nations with false religion or philosophy, nor hinder them from coming to Christ, nor gather the world-system against them in order to prevent them from completing their mission. The OT prophecies of the Messiah’s universal Kingdom *will* be fulfilled (Psalm 2:7-8, Isaiah 42:1-4, Amos 9:11, Micah 4:1-5). Christ *will* build his Church (Mt. 16:18, 24:14, John 10:16, Rev. 5:9). How do we know this? Because until the very end of the age, Satan *will* be bound.

3. What is the meaning of the thousand years?

I have suggested that the thousand years of Revelation 20 is a symbolic number depicting the entire Era of Proclamation, a number characterizing it *as a lengthy season in which God, through Christ, will complete his redemptive work by fully gathering in his elect*. This is clear both from the biblical use of the number and from its mystical meaning.

As to its biblical use, the OT repeatedly employs the number 1000 to convey the idea of magnitude (Gen. 24:60, Ex. 20:6, Deut. 1:11, 32:30, 33:2, Psalm 68:17, Dan. 7:10). The NT follows suit (Heb. 12:22, Jude 1:14, Rev. 5:11). Notably, Revelation 7 equates the 144,000 eschatological Israelites (7:4) with “a great multitude whom no one could count” (7:9). All this invites us to see the thousand years as a symbol of temporal magnitude. In particular, the Spirit apparently chose this number in order to teach the saints that the Era of Proclamation and Probation would be lengthy: much longer than first-century Christians believed, and significantly longer than Christians of most any century might expect. It therefore serves as a warning. The saints must not interpret “the beginning of birth pains”—the tokens of final judgment scattered all along the length of the Era of Proclamation—as signs that the Parousia is imminent (Mt. 24:6-8). Nor must they allow themselves to be disheartened by scoffers if the Lord seems to tarry: To the Lord, a thousand years is as a single day (2 Peter 3:1f)! Rather, they must persevere in worship, prayer, and service, trusting that Christ will delay no longer than the demands of his own redemptive purpose require (Luke 18:1-8, 2 Peter 3:15).

As to its mystical meaning, we have discussed this earlier. $1000 = 10 \times 10 \times 10$. That is, 1000 is the number of completeness (10) raised to a power of three, the number of the triune God. Therefore, in addition to magnitude, it symbolizes the designated space of time within which the triune God will complete his redemptive purpose; within which he will bring all of his chosen ones into the fold, after which the end shall come (Mt. 24:14). As we have seen, this is the supreme purpose of the Heavenly Reign of the exalted Lord Jesus Christ, and also of the Church Militant: the fulfillment of the Father’s good pleasure in the plan of salvation, which is the heading up of all things in and under his Son through the preaching of the Gospel (Eph. 1:10, 22, Col. 2:10).

Is there further evidence to support this interpretation of the thousand years? Yes there is, and not a little.

First, there is the reasonable presumption, discussed above, that Revelation 20 is indeed a recapitulation of the course of the heavenly reign of the High King of Heaven. If so, it is clear that the thousand years must symbolize that reign, which is now some 2000 literal years old.

Secondly, there is the literary genre of the book: biblical apocalyptic. Recognizing this genre, we ought immediately to incline to the view that not only are the images of the Revelation symbolic, but its numbers as well. Careful study bears this out. The book contains a whole host of numbers—2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 10, 12, 42, 144, 666, 1240, 1600—which, as I tried to show in the preceding survey, are *all* used symbolically. In view of such precedents, it would actually be quite unreasonable to interpret the thousand years literally.

Thirdly, we have the numeric evidence found in Revelation 12-14, a cycle that runs closely parallel to Revelation 20. For example, in Revelation 12 the Spirit very clearly designates the Era of Proclamation as 1260 days (12:6; 11:3, 13:5), and also as “a time, times, and half a time” (12:14). By means of these two numbers, he characterizes that Era as a time of exile and tribulation, but also as a time that the Lord, in his mercy, will cut short.³ We see, then, that for wise reasons the Spirit uses different numbers to characterize the same period; but it is the *same* time period, after all. Might not 1000 be among them?

Finally, we have the evidence of parallel passages depicting the Last Battle. Especially notable are 11:7-10, 16:12-16, and 19:19-23. In each case, it is clear that we are indeed dealing with the Last Battle, a battle that will take place *prior* to the Parousia, at the end of the Era of Proclamation. However, Revelation 20:7-10 also gives us a battle. Moreover, when it does, it uses OT language and imagery, just as its three predecessors did. Indeed, Revelation 20:8 speaks of this battle as “*the* war,” as if to say that this war is the very same war spoken of earlier in the prophecy (16:14)! Is it not reasonable, then, to assume that “the war” of Revelation 20:7-10 is the Last Battle itself? If so, the thousand years must be symbolic, depicting the period of time between the binding of Satan at Christ’s first advent, and the loosing of Satan just prior to his Second.

For all these reasons we conclude that the evidence weighs heavily in favor of the view that the thousand years of Revelation 20—just like 1260 days, 42 months, and “a time, times, and a half a time” found in related

passages—symbolize the entire Era of Proclamation, the full course of the spiritual reign of the High King of Heaven.

4. What is meant by the release of Satan?

Revelation 20:3 states that after the thousand years, Satan must be released for a short time. Verses 7-10 explain what will happen when this occurs. I have just shown that evidence found in other portions of the book favors the view that this release occurs at the end of the Era of Proclamation, immediately prior to the Last Battle. In a moment, we will see if verses 7-10 support this conclusion. So far, however, we have certainly found nothing to indicate that Revelation 20 speaks of a future thousand-year reign of Christ upon the earth, but much to indicate that it does indeed recapitulate, one final time, the entire Era of Proclamation.

The Reign of the Saints with Christ (20:4-6)

Of the four mini-visions comprising Revelation 20, this is certainly the most difficult and controversial. Nevertheless, I would argue that the amillennial approach gives us a remarkably clear, consistent, and exegetically natural interpretation of this notoriously challenging text.

Having opened the chapter with a revelation of the temporary binding of Satan, the Spirit now addresses a question that will naturally arise in the minds of every reader and hearer: A thousand years is a long time; what will happen to the saints who die while Satan is still bound and imprisoned? As if in response, John now sees “thrones and those who sat upon them,” of whom it is written, quite cryptically, that “judgment was given to them” (20:4). Then, by way of explanation, he sees the souls of two categories of believers: (1) martyrs, and (2) those who refused to worship the Beast or his image, and who had not received his mark upon their forehead or their hand. These, John tells us, “came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years” (20:4). Verse 5 completes the thought, telling us that “the rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were completed,” and that this “coming to life to reign with Christ” is called “the first resurrection.” Verse 6 pronounces a great blessing upon all who have a share in “the first resurrection,” since in their case “the second death” has

no power over them, and since they will be priests of God and Christ, reigning with him (Christ) for a thousand years.

Very briefly, the amillennial interpretation is as follows: Those seated upon the thrones are indeed souls, the souls of all who remained faithful to Christ during their portion of the Era of Proclamation. Because of their faithfulness—because they refused to follow Satan acting through his three worldly helpers—these died in the Lord, and so, in “the first resurrection,” came to life in heaven as disembodied spirits, there to await the resurrection of the body at the end of the age. Throughout this Intermediate State their blessings are many: They reign “in life” with Christ over all the power of sin and death; they serve as priests in the heavenly worship of their God and King; they now have a share in the Last Judgment at Christ’s return; and—unlike “the rest of the dead” who will “come to life” in the second (bodily) resurrection only to experience eternal punishment—they are forever secure against the second death, which is the Lake of Fire.

Needles to say, our premillennarian brothers are not enthusiastic about this interpretation.⁴ Indeed, they would challenge it at no less than five separate points. Let us therefore take a close look at their arguments, and see where the weight of biblical evidence actually leads us.

1. Who are these saints?

According to most premillennarians, John is beholding the resurrected people of God of all generations: the patriarchs, the apostles, and the saints of Old and New Testament times. This interpretation flows naturally and necessarily from their assumption that here the Spirit is unveiling the onset of a future millennial reign of Christ: Who else could or would rule with Christ in such a Millennium? Dispensationalists, bound by their commitment to a pre-tribulation Rapture, assert that these particular saints are the Tribulation martyrs. However, they too, like their historic premillennarian brethren, hasten to add that the saints of all ages will also rule with Christ during the Millennium.

We have already shown why this view is untenable: Numerous lines of evidence indicate that the temporal sphere of fulfillment of Revelation 20 is not a future millennium, but the Era of Proclamation. But does a sound exegesis of the text itself (20:4-6) support this conclusion?

Indeed it does. Note first that 20:4 swiftly supplies the best explanation of the occupants of the throne: They are souls, souls who have “come to life.” At the very least, this is a broad hint that here we are dealing with believers in the Intermediate State; believers who are living with Christ in heaven as disembodied spirits throughout the course of his mediatorial reign, even as many other NT texts so richly promise (2 Cor. 5:8, Phil. 1:21-3, Heb. 12:22-24, Rev. 6:9-11). The rest of verse 4 favors this interpretation. Why are these saints in heaven? Why are they privileged to live and rule with Christ? Because on earth they had been faithful unto death (Rev. 2:10); because they had not worshiped the Beast or his image, or taken his mark, but had taken only the mark of Christ and worshiped him faithfully to the end, in some cases even unto martyrdom (Rev. 2:13, 7:3, 9:4, 14:1, 22:4).

Observe also that while this is the most extensive promise of the blessings of the Intermediate State to be found in the Revelation, it is not the only one. Much like our present text, Revelation 6:9-10 also pictures the souls of the martyrs dwelling safely in heaven, albeit crying out to God for justice and vindication. Similarly, in Revelation 14:13, we hear the Spirit saying, “Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on ... that they may rest from their labors, for their deeds follow with them.” Revelation 20:4 is clearly meant to depict this very blessedness; to give tempted and persecuted saints of all times and places an encouraging peek at the rich rewards awaiting them in heaven, should the Lord tarry and they die in the faith.

2. Where are they living?

While acknowledging that John begins by beholding the *souls* of the saints, the majority of premillennarians assert that in “the first resurrection,” which allegedly occurs at the Parousia (19:11-21), these saints will “come to life” in their new glorified bodies and live and rule with Christ upon the earth for a literal thousand years (20:5-6). However, even some premillennarians disagree. These interpreters are honest enough to admit that the text itself says nothing about an earthly reign, and that the commingling of glorified saints with mere natural men upon the earth poses grave difficulties. Accordingly, they argue that the saints will reign from heaven, with Christ, during the thousand years. However, this view is even

more problematic than the first, since the vast majority of OTKP's, literally interpreted, require Christ and the saints to dwell upon the earth. Troubles like these suggest that the root of the problem is the premillennial scheme itself. Is there, then, a better solution, built upon a better foundation?

Yes there is, and our text points the way. Observe first that these saints are seated upon *thrones*. According to Sam Storms, this word occurs 47 times in the Revelation.⁵ On three occasions, it refers to the throne of Satan and the Beast (2:13, 13:21, 16:10). On four it refers to God's throne situated in the new, glorified earth (21:3,5, 22:1,3). However, on the other 40 occasions it refers exclusively to heavenly thrones, whether God's, Christ's, or those of the 24 elders. *Whenever and wherever the saints are mentioned, the thrones are heavenly (3:21, 4:4, 11:16)*. We may safely assume, then, that these saints are indeed living in heaven.

Moreover, we also may safely assume that they are living in heaven, *not during a future millennium, but throughout the entire course of Christ's heavenly reign*. Why? Because our text says that they will reign with Christ for a finite period of time (20:6), and because every other passage in the Revelation that depicts a temporary reign of Christ refers, not to a future earthly reign, but to a present heavenly reign spanning his two advents (Rev. 5:1f, 6:1-2, 12-17, 12:1-6, 14:14-20). Again, this idea of a temporary, heavenly reign of Christ is the central theme of the entire Revelation. Would it not be strange, then, if the reign of Christ depicted in 20:4-6 was something other than the central theme of the book? Moreover, if any doubt remained on this matter, the Gospels, the Acts, and the epistles would clear it up completely, seeing that the only temporary reign of Christ *they* acknowledge is his heavenly Messianic reign (Mt. 13:1ff, Luke 19:11-27, Acts 3:19-24, 1 Cor. 15:20-28, etc.). Concerning a future, earthly, thousand-year reign of Christ they are completely silent, as, indeed, all premillennarians will confess.

We conclude, then, that our text itself, along with various parallels in the Revelation and the rest of the NT, confirms that the saints of 20:4-6 are living in heaven during the Era of Proclamation, during the course of Christ's heavenly mediatorial reign.

3. What does the Spirit mean when he says that the souls of the millennial saints "came to life?"

Speaking of the souls he has just seen, John tells us, “They came to life and reigned with Christ a thousand years” (20:4). Then, in verse 5, he goes on to identify this “coming to life” as “the first resurrection.” What do these expressions mean?

Premillennial interpreters insist that the reference is to a *bodily* coming to life; to the *bodily* resurrection of all the saints at Christ’s premillennial return. They base their case on the first part of verse 5, which says, “The rest of the dead did not come to life (*Greek: ezesan*) until the thousand years were completed.” This particular “coming to life” is “the second resurrection,” and all interpreters agree it is indeed a bodily resurrection that will occur at the end of the millennial era, however that era is understood (20:11-15). Therefore, if the Spirit used the same word (*ezezan*) to describe both the first and second resurrections, does it not stand to reason that the first, just like the second, is bodily? On this point, premillennarian George Ladd is emphatic:

The language of the passage is quite clear and unambiguous. There is no necessity to interpret either word spiritually in order to introduce meaning into the passage. At the beginning of the millennial period, part of the dead come to life (*ezezan*); at its conclusion, the rest of the dead come to life (*ezezan*). There is no evident play on words. The passage makes perfectly good sense when interpreted literally. Natural, inductive exegesis suggests that both uses of *ezezan* are to be taken in the same way, as referring to a literal (i.e., bodily) resurrection.⁶

These are forceful words, words that have persuaded many. However, is it really true that there is “no necessity” to interpret either word spiritually in order to introduce meaning into the passage? Does not the text itself make an evident and potentially significant distinction between the two “comings to life”? Indeed it does. The first coming to life, which is also the first resurrection, occurs prior to the second coming to life, which is a second resurrection. Surely, then, we ought not to let the fact that the Spirit (no doubt quite intentionally) used the same Greek word to describe the two “comings to life” blind us to an equally important fact: These are two *different* “comings to life,” which may well differ not only in timing, *but also in nature*.

And as a matter of fact, both our text and the Revelation as a whole strongly indicate that they do differ, and that the first coming to life is indeed spiritual, while the second is bodily.

Consider first the logic of verse 4. John sees thrones and “they” who sit upon them. Who are “they,” and how is it that they are sitting upon these thrones? In the sentence that follows, the Spirit answers: They are the *souls* of the martyrs, and of all who remained faithful against every temptation of the Dragon and his helpers. Therefore, at the moment of death, they “came to life.” That is, *they entered heaven as disembodied souls*, sat down upon thrones, and began living and reigning with Christ throughout (the remainder of) his thousand-year reign. While this may not be the only possible exegesis of verse 4, it is at least as “natural” and “inductive” as Ladd’s.

Moreover, verse 5 supports this interpretation. It speaks of “the rest of the dead;” of those whose souls are presently in Hades, but who, at the end of the thousand years, will “come to life” bodily, though only to experience a second death in the Lake of Fire (20:14). This implies that the souls whom John sees in verse 4 are also among “the dead,” but the dead who presently live in heaven with Christ till the end of the age. Importantly, it appears from the overall teaching of the NT that these souls actually “come to life” three separate times: Once at the new birth (Eph. 2:4-5, 1 Peter 1:3), once at the moment of death when they enter heaven (Rev. 20:4), and once at the bodily resurrection, when Christ returns to usher them into the World to Come (Rev. 20:12, 14). More on this in a moment.

Further confirmation for our view is found in verse 6. John writes, “Blessed and holy is the one who has a part in the first resurrection; over these the second death has no authority.” Why are the saints who attain the first resurrection blessed? Because, having entered heaven at the moment of death, they are henceforth delivered from every temptation of the Dragon’s helpers, made perfectly holy in spirit, and therefore rendered eternally secure in their salvation. They can now rest in complete assurance that the second death has no authority or power over them whatsoever, and never will.

All of this harmonizes perfectly with the prophetic nature of the book. Why has the glorified Christ given his people the Revelation? He has given it so that they will remain faithful until death; so that they will be able to enter God’s consummated Kingdom (2:10). Therefore, he instructs, warns, and promises. And here in 20:4-6, he does that very thing, warning them one final time against succumbing to the Beast and his image, but also

promising heaven to all the faithful who die before the Parousia. “If you persevere until the end,” says the heavenly Prophet to his pilgrim Church, “you will ‘come to life’ and attain ‘the first resurrection.’ In other words, at the moment of your death, your spirits will rise into heaven, where you will live with me, seated on thrones, fully secure from the second death, and eagerly awaiting the resurrection of your bodies at the end of the ‘thousand years’—at the end of my heavenly reign—when I come again. Therefore, see to it that you persevere.”

This promise is not new. Why did Christ earlier show us the souls of the martyrs beneath the altar of heaven (6:9-11)? Because they were faithful until death, and therefore “came to life” (6:9-11). And why did he say that from now on the saints who die in the Lord are blessed (14:13)? Because if indeed they die *in the Lord*, their souls will attain “the first resurrection.” But here in 20:4-6, for those with eyes to see it, he gives us what is arguably the richest biblical picture (and promise) of the blessedness of the saints in the Intermediate State. As ever, he does so because he loves his people, and because he wants them to attain that blessedness.

It remains, however, to ask, with Ladd, why the Spirit would use the same Greek word to describe two different kinds of coming to life, two different kinds of resurrection. In reply, I would suggest that the answer is found in the progress of biblical revelation concerning the Intermediate State, and also in the prophetic purpose of the Revelation.

Think back to the days of the early Church. Having been well taught by the apostles, most Christians would have understood that at the end of the age all (deceased) mankind will “come to life” in a single bodily resurrection (Luke 20:27-40, John 5:26-29, Acts 24:15, 21, 1 Cor. 15:50-58, 1 Thess. 4:13ff). However—as the NT itself makes clear—many were confused and uncertain about the condition of believers after death but *prior* to the resurrection (2 Cor. 5:1-10, 1 Thess. 4:13f). As we have seen, in their letters the apostles addressed this uncertainty more than once. However, as the NT canon neared completion, it appears that the High Prophet of Heaven was pleased to do so one final time, and that quite fulsomely.

Accordingly, here in Revelation 20 he offers a climactic word of instruction, exhortation, and encouragement on the theme of the Intermediate State. I would paraphrase it this way: “Yes, in the general resurrection all people will come to life bodily. However, should I tarry,

always remember that for those who believe, overcome, and die in the faith, there awaits a ‘first resurrection’ of their spirit, one that supplies a foretaste and a guarantee of the final resurrection of their body; a first ‘coming to life’ of their spirit in heaven, one that supplies a foretaste and a guarantee of their final coming to life—body, soul, and spirit—in the World to Come; a first reigning in heaven with Me, one that supplies a foretaste and a guarantee of their final reigning with Me in the new heavens and the earth (2 Tim. 2:12, Rev. 3:21, 5:10, 22:5). Therefore, armed with these glorious promises, see to it that you overcome!”

We find, then, that the Lord used the same word to describe two different “comings to life” *because the two—much like the two stages of the one Kingdom—share the same fundamental nature*, though the first is only temporary and spiritual, while the final is eternal, spiritual, and physical. Thus did it please the High Prophet of Heaven to speak to his people, further illuminating the glories of the Intermediate State, giving them fresh hope, and moving them to gospel faithfulness throughout all the days of their pilgrimage upon the earth (John 11:26, Rev. 20:6).

4. What does the Spirit mean when he says that the millennial saints “reigned with Christ for a thousand years” (20:4b, 6)?

Premillennarians understand the millennial reign of the saints in terms of verse 4a: To reign with Christ is to receive from him the right to rule and judge the nations during the millennial era. As we have seen, there is considerable debate among them as to where, exactly, this ruling and judging will occur. Some, like Biederwolf, say the saints will reign from heaven. Most, like Ladd, say they will reign upon the earth. Walvoord, trying to reconcile quarrelling brethren, argues that the commingling of glorified saints with men on earth “... seems to be limited to a few specific functions, while the primary activity of the resurrected saints will be in the new and heavenly City (above the earth).”⁷ All agree, however, as to the *governmental* nature of this reign: In ways that the NT does not spell out—and that we can barely imagine—the resurrected saints will allegedly rule over the nations as princes of the High King himself, giving and administering judgments and decrees at his command.

In the paragraphs ahead, I will argue that the reigning and judging of the millennial saints are actually two completely different things. Here, however, it is important to touch on some of the NT Scriptures offered in support of the premillennial view, in order to show that in fact they do not support it at all.

Ladd, for example, assumes that in Rev. 2:26-27 Christ is promising the Thyatiran overcomers authority to rule over the nations in a future millennium, when in fact he is speaking of the role the saints will play in the Last Judgment. He also argues that Rev. 5:9-10, which promises that the saints will reign upon the earth, is fulfilled in an earthly millennium, when in fact it is fulfilled in the new heavens and the new earth (11:15, 22:5). He states that 1 Cor. 6:2 looks ahead to the millennial rule of the glorified saints, when both the context and several parallel NT passages indicate once again that the Last Judgment is in view (Rom. 16:10, 1 Cor. 6:1-4).

Meanwhile, Walvoord cites Mt. 19:28 as proof that in the Millennium the apostles will sit on twelve (earthly) thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. But this text says nothing whatsoever about a millennium. To the contrary, it explicitly states that the apostles' rule will occur "in the regeneration." In other words, it will occur in the new heavens and the new earth, when the former things have (completely) passed away, and when all things have been made new (Rev. 21:1-5; Rom. 8:18-22, 2 Peter 3:8-13, Rev. 21:14). He also cites 2 Timothy 2:12, which says nothing at all about a millennium, but simply looks forward to the eternal reign of the saints with Christ in the World to Come (Luke 19:15f, Rev. 5:9-10, 22:5).

But if the millennial reign of the saints has nothing to do with ruling over the nations or giving judgments upon the earth, what does it mean? While the Revelation itself does supply some important clues, I reckon that on this score the single most helpful NT text is Romans 5:17. It reads:

For if, by the transgression of the one (i.e., Adam), death reigned through the one, much more those who receive the abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness will reign in life through the One, Jesus Christ.

Here, Paul is saying that through the work of Christ the saints will (note the future tense) reign over sin and death *in life*. And when, exactly, will

that be? The NT offers this answer, and this alone: First it will be in the Intermediate State, and then it will be in the new heavens and the new earth.

Revelation 20:4 and 6 certainly seem to say the same thing: When overcomers die and their spirits enter heaven, they will receive, as it were, their first share in Christ's absolute victory over sin and death; they will reign with him, in life, in heaven, as perfected spirits, for the duration of his heavenly reign (styled as "a thousand years"). Then, following the bodily resurrection of the dead, they will *fully* reign with him over physical death as well in new glorified bodies perfectly fitted for the World to Come.

Several texts in the Revelation itself support this view. Revelation 11:15 closely associates the (eternal) reign of God and Christ, not so much with governing authority over the nations, as with final victory over the forces of evil. Similarly, 22:5 associates the (eternal) reign of the saints, not with rulership over their brethren, but with final rescue from the curse, and with complete enjoyment of the fullness of the light and life of God (22:1-5). Again, these texts appear to illuminate 20:4-6. If so, the message of the latter is this: Just as there are two different but closely related "comings to life"—a spiritual, followed by a physical—so also there are two different but closely related "reignings with Christ." The first—the millennial reign of the saints—is spiritual. It begins when the believer's spirit enters heaven and partakes of Christ's complete victory over all *spiritual* evil, suffering, and death. The second is physical. It begins at the end of the "thousand years," when Christ comes again to raise the dead and make all things new; when he welcomes believers into the World to Come, where henceforth they will partake of his complete victory over all *physical* evil, suffering, and death. Blessed is he who attains to the first "reigning," for it is certain that such a one will attain to the second, as well!

5. What does the Spirit mean when he says that judgment was given to the saints?

Our text opens as follows: "And I saw thrones, and they sat upon them, and judgment was given to them" (20:4a). As we have seen, premillennarians interpret this as saying that Christ will give the saints a right of governance and judgment in his earthly millennial kingdom. However, we have also seen that the text does not really support this view;

that whatever this judgment is, it does not belong to resurrected saints living *after* the return of Christ (whether they live in heaven or on the earth), but to the souls of those who die in the Lord and enter heaven *prior* to his return. What, then, might this judgment be?

In order to arrive at a reliable answer, we cannot fail to interact with Daniel 7, to which the Spirit here alludes no less than three times. Daniel 7:9 depicts the Ancient of Days taking his seat for final judgment. But just before he does, “Thrones were set up.” Then, a few verses later (7:21-22), Daniel again refers to the Consummation, telling us that the Ancient of Days “came” in order to rescue his beleaguered people, after which “judgment was given in favor of the saints of the Most High,” so that they took possession of the Kingdom. Finally, we have Daniel 7:26-27. This again refers to the Last Judgment, telling us that in that Day “the court will sit,” the rule of the Antichrist will be destroyed forever, and dominion over every kingdom under the whole of heaven will be given to the saints of the Most High, not just for a thousand years, but forever. What light do these three texts shed upon Revelation 20:4a?

It is tempting to follow Dennis Johnson, who says that the decisive text is Daniel 7:21-22. He writes:

As in Daniel, so in the Revelation: The thrones appear before their royal occupants ... The wording of the last clause (“judgment was given to them”) so closely resembles Daniel 7:22 in the Septuagint (i.e., the Greek Old Testament), that we should probably translate it, “Judgment was given in their behalf”—the verdict of the heavenly court came down in their favor and against their persecutors,” (see Rev. 18:20).

So then, Johnson, modifying the text itself, has 20:4 depicting a definitive acquittal or vindication of the (spirits of the departed) saints.⁸

The difficulty with this approach—quite apart from the modification of the text—is that it does not harmonize well with the rest of Scripture. On the one hand, Daniel declares that judgment is passed in favor of the saints, not when they die and enter heaven (as here in 20:4), but at the Last Judgment (Dan. 7:22). On the other hand, our Lord himself tells us that the saints receive the favorable verdict of heaven, not when their souls enter heaven, but when they believe in God’s Word about his Son, and so pass from death to life (John 5:24-25). From the moment of faith, God’s verdict is: There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ

Jesus (Rom. 8:1)! Yes, it is true that the believer who takes part in “the first resurrection” is thereafter perfectly secure against the second death (20:6). But to judge from the rest of the book, this security results from his having overcome and persevered in life, rather than from a special verdict given in his favor at the moment of death (1:9, 2:7, 11, 17, 14:13; John 17:15, 1 Peter 1:5, Jude 1).

We do best, then, to follow what the Greek actually says: Judgment was given *to* them (Greek, *autois*). But in what sense? The answer, I think, is found both in Daniel and the Revelation. Daniel 7:9 tells us that prior to the Last Judgment thrones were set up. Why? So that the saints could sit on them and participate in the judgment. Similarly, Daniel 7:26-27 tells us that at the Last Judgment “the court will sit.” But who constitutes “the court”? The context strongly suggests that it is the saints themselves. As we have seen, other passages in the Revelation confirm this idea. It is particularly clear in 3:26-27, where the Lord promises to the overcomers in Thyatira that they will have a share in the Last Judgment. We also see it in a closely parallel text, 19:11-15, which tells us that the armies of heaven, clothed in fine linen, will follow the glorified Christ as he returns to the earth, at which time both he and the armies will be to the nations as a shepherd wielding a rod of iron. From their attire, we know that these armies are (or at least include) the saints (19:8). And again, we have the teaching of the rest of the NT to the effect that believers will definitely have a role in the administration of final judgment at Christ’s Parousia (Rom. 16:20, 1 Cor. 6:1f).

We conclude, then, that the meaning of 20:4a is this: At the moment of death, overcoming saints not only enter heaven, but also enter into their privileged role as co-executors of the Last Judgment at Christ’s coming again. Yes, for a little while they must wait patiently while their brethren on earth suffer, and while the High King of Heaven gathers in his elect (Rev. 6:9-11). But they can rest assured that in due season they will indeed fulfill their judicial role. Already they know that Christ has seated them upon thrones; already they know he has appointed them to shepherd the nations with a rod of iron; already they know that judgment has been given to them. And when they administer it, the entire world will know that God himself has indeed given judgment in favor of the saints of the Most High (Dan. 7:21-22, Rev. 20:12, 15).

The Last Battle and the Judgment of Satan (Rev. 20:7-10)

In verse 3 John told us that at the end of the thousand years Satan must be released for a short time. Revelation 20:7-10 explains what he will do when he is. Once we realize that the thousand years symbolize the Era of Proclamation, it is quite easy to see that this is the Revelation's final depiction of the Last Battle, followed by its first depiction of the judgment of Satan. Let us take a moment to mine our text for further details.

Verses 7-8 tell us that at the end of the thousand years, Satan will be released from his prison; that he will come out to deceive the nations in the four corners of the earth—Gog and Magog—and that he will gather them together for “the war.” They will be as the sand of the seashore for multitude.

I would interpret verse 7 as follows: At the end of the Era of Proclamation, symbolized by the 1000 years, the Holy Spirit will cease to restrain Satan as previously. As a result, the situation, in some respects, will revert to what it was at the beginning of the Era of Proclamation: Apart from Christ's flock—which, owing to increased eschatological lawlessness, will be relatively small—the whole world will lie in the power of the evil one (1 John 5:19; Luke 4:6). At this point, few if any new believers will be added to the Church. She will have finished her testimony, and all or most of God's elect will have been gathered in (11:7).

All this, however, is not the true burden of our text. Its true burden is found in verse 8, where we learn *why* the Spirit will cease to restrain Satan: *so that he (Satan) might gather the nations together for “the war.”* As we learned earlier, throughout world history Satan has attempted to consolidate the world-system into a single religious, economic, and political empire, a counterfeit Kingdom of God (Rev. 13:1f). Throughout world history he has also tried to use his serial empires to destroy the Woman and her Seed (Rev. 12:1f). And throughout world history, he has been frustrated in his efforts (12:5ff). Now, however, the Spirit of God, for wise reasons, will stand aside, letting the Adversary gather together all nations for “the (final) war” against Christ and his Church.

The Spirit has already spoken of this. It is none other than the war to be waged by the Beast who will rise out of the bottomless pit to overcome the Two Witnesses (Rev. 11:7-10). It is none other than the Battle of Har-

Magedon (Rev.16:12-16). It is none other than the war from which the Heavenly Rider will deliver his beleaguered people at his Coming (19:19-23). In short, it is the Last Battle: the battle by which Satan purposes to destroy the Church, but also the battle by which God—with a view to the largest possible display of his glory—purposes to destroy both Satan and his Domain of Darkness at the Parousia of Christ.

Again, verse 8 states that in order to wage this war Satan will deceive the nations. How exactly will he do this? The High King has already told us: He will put lying spirits in the mouth of the Beast and the False Prophet, in order that he (Satan) might gather together the kings of the whole earth for (what will turn out to be) the war of the great Day of God, the Almighty (16:12-16). The apostle Paul, in 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12, gives us the meaning of these images: When the Spirit finally removes all restraints, Satan will raise up, indwell, speak through, act through, and even perform miracles through the Man of Lawlessness, a personal Antichrist who will both imitate and oppose the one true Christ. When he arrives on stage for the closing scenes of Salvation History, God will send a deluding influence upon the truth-rejecting multitudes, so that they will worship him (the Man of Lawlessness) as God, believe his false Gospel, and persecute the true spiritual Church of Christ to her apparent destruction. Our text speaks of the power and scope of this deception: It will reach to “the four corners of the earth” (20:8; Mt. 24:5, 11, 24); the whole world will be taken in: “as many as the sands of the seashore” (20:8; Rev. 16:14). Just as the prophet Ezekiel had foretold, Gog and Magog—the Antichrist and his subservient nation of (confederate) nations—will launch a suicidal attack against the Church, the eschatological Israel of God (Ezek. 38-39, Gal. 6:16).

Very succinctly, verse 9 depicts that battle one final time (11:7-10, 16:12-16, 19:19-21). John writes, “They came up upon the breadth of the earth.” This means that under the leadership of the Antichrist, the nations will assault Christian people and institutions worldwide, wherever they may be found. Observe John’s mixed metaphor for the Church, which confirms our need of interpreting the passage symbolically and ecclesiologically: The nations will “surround the camp of the saints,” as Amalek did when he came out against Israel in the wilderness (Ex. 17:8); and they will surround “the Beloved City,” as Assyria did in the days of Hezekiah and Isaiah (Isaiah 36-37). The Church is that Camp, the Church is that City (Rev. 12:6,

21:2). Drawing yet again from Ezekiel's prophecy, the Spirit here casts the final deliverance—to be wrought at Christ's Parousia—in terms of fire coming down from heaven to devour the adversaries (Ezek. 38:22, 39:6; 2 Thess. 1:6-10). Importantly, here the last reference to the Last Battle is rendered in a single verse, as if to underscore its brevity; as if to remind us that Satan's release is indeed for a very "short time" (20:3).

In verse 10 the Revelation reaches a climax of sorts, in that the great spiritual Adversary of Christ and his Church—the devil, the Dragon, Satan himself—is finally judged and forever swept off the stage of cosmic history. And how will this occur? At his Parousia the High King of Heaven—no doubt at the hand of the holy angels, and perhaps at the hand of the saints themselves—will crush the head of the Serpent, casting Satan, his demons, and all his human political and religious puppets (the Beast and the False Prophet) into the Lake of Fire, where they will be tormented day and night forever and ever (Gen. 3:15, Mt. 13:39, Rom. 16:20).

We find, then, that Revelation 20:7-10 is very simply and reasonably interpreted along amillennial lines. It remains, however, briefly to pose three challenging questions, two of which provide some very rough going for our premillennial brethren.

1. Assuming that premillennialism is true, how could the thousand-year reign of Christ and his saints prove so ineffectual that it ends in near universal apostasy?

This is, or should be, a deeply troubling question for premillennial interpreters. The whole premise of their system is that OTKP's must be fulfilled literally in a future millennium under (a modified form of) the New Covenant. If so, then we may reasonably assume that during the Millennium God will pour out his Spirit upon all flesh; that he will circumcise all hearts, both Jew and Gentile (Isaiah 19:24-25, 32:15, Joel 2:28-32, Jer. 31:33f, Ezek. 36:26). How then, at the close of such a richly spiritual reign, shall "as many as the sand of the seashore" fall away, especially when Jeremiah so pointedly stressed that the glory of the New Covenant consists, above all, in the fact that saints living under its control *cannot* fall away? Does the Millennium take us back to the Old Covenant

after all? And besides all this, how shall the Father allow his Son's visible reign upon the earth to come to such an inglorious end (John 5:20f)?

In response to these criticisms, some premillennarians assert that only the nations that have not heard of Christ will rebel; only those living in "the four corners of the earth," at a great distance from Jerusalem (Rev. 20:8). Alas, this solution raises more questions than it answers. How is it that Christ would let these nations remain untouched by the Gospel, seeing that they are so densely populated? What will the believing nations—and the resurrected saints—be doing when multitudes of these far-flung infidels arrive at Jerusalem to attack the little camp of the saints? And how can we square all of this with OTKP itself, which says that in the days of the Kingdom, God will gather *all* nations and tongues to behold Christ's glory (Isaiah 2:2-4, 66:18f); that "*all* the ends of the earth will remember and turn to the Lord; and *all* the families of the nations will worship before him" (Psalm 22:7)?

2. Assuming that premillennialism is true, why does the Bible give us two attacks of Gog and Magog?

It is obvious that Revelation 20:8 references Ezekiel 38-39. However, nearly all premillennarians agree in saying that Ezekiel's prophecy is fulfilled at the end of the Era of Proclamation, just prior to Christ's return. For example, commenting on Ezekiel, dispensationalist John MacArthur writes, "The time of the invasion is best understood as the end of the future tribulation period of 7 years."⁹ Similarly, historic premillennarian A. R. Fausset places its complete fulfillment in the days of the Antichrist. Accordingly, Revelation 20:8 requires our premillennarian brothers to assume that there are *two* attacks by Gog and Magog: the first at the end of the Era of Proclamation, and the second at the end of the Millennium. Thus, MacArthur writes, "The battle depicted in verses 8-9 is *like* the one in Ezekiel 38-39; it is best to see this one as taking place at the end of the Millennium."¹⁰

But surely it is simpler—and far more reasonable—to say that both texts refer to the one Last Battle. On this view, the Spirit mentions Gog and Magog in Revelation 20 quite intentionally, in order to confirm in our minds precisely what the whole structure of NT eschatology, and the whole

structure of the Revelation, would lead us to believe: There is only one Last Battle, and the OT prophets, Christ, and the apostles all spoke of it. By referencing Gog and Magog, it is as if the Spirit were saying, “Yes, Ezekiel’s prophecy does indeed refer to Last Battle, the very same battle that Christ and the apostles predicted, and the very same battle I referred to earlier in the Revelation, (Mt. 24:20-27, 2 Thess. 2:1ff, Rev. 11:7-10, 16:12-16, 19:19-21).”

In sum, the premillennial view of our text has the Spirit introducing new eschatological information (i.e., information about a second attack of Gog and Magog at the end of the Millennium), while the amillennial view simply has him confirming old information, found both in the Old and New Testaments. But if the Revelation is indeed the Grand Finale of the Bible—not meaning to introduce new eschatological truth, but simply to sing the glory of the High King of Heaven in the language of all Scripture—then surely the amillennial view is correct.

3. Does Revelation 20:10 assume that the Beast and the False Prophet were cast into the Lake of Fire a thousand years prior to the devil himself?

Premillennarians cite Rev. 20:10 as proof of a literal thousand-year hiatus between the judgment of the Beast and the False Prophet on the one hand, and the judgment of Satan (and his evil angels) on the other. John Walvoord writes:

As Revelation 20 makes plain, Satan is to be loosed at the conclusion of the Millennium, at which time he will be cast into the lake of fire and brimstone, *into which the beast and the false prophet had been previously cast at the beginning of the Millennium (Rev. 20:10)*. The final judgment of the wicked angels apparently occurs at the same time as Satan’s final judgment, when he is cast into the lake of fire and brimstone.^{[11](#)}

It cannot be denied that Walvoord’s reading is possible. But is it *necessary*? Does the rest of the Revelation, and the NT as a whole, teach and require it? In my view, the answer to these important questions is a resounding “no.”

As for the Greek text itself, the relevant phrase has no verb at all. Quite literally, it reads, “And the devil who deceived them was thrown into the

lake of fire and brimstone, *where also the beast and the false prophet*; and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever.” Clearly, the emphasis here is not upon *when* these two were thrown into the Lake of Fire, but upon the comforting fact that they *also* will be in the Lake of Fire with their master, the devil. For this reason, the NAS rightly translates, “Where the beast and the false prophet *are* also.” Indeed, one could just as well translate, “Where the beast and the false prophet also *were thrown*.” Walvoord claims to deduce premillennialism from this text, when in fact he is reading premillennialism into it.

Nevertheless, the question remains as to which reading and which interpretation is best. How shall we decide this? Obviously, we have no choice but to look to the context, and to the rest of NT theology. When we do, our answer quickly comes into focus. As we have seen, the Revelation itself has already given us five depictions of a single judgment at the end of the age. Surely it is more than reasonable to infer that here in 20:10-15 we have a sixth. Moreover, if there were any doubt about this, the rest of the NT should remove it completely, teaching as it does, over and over again, that there is but a single universal judgment of men and angels at the Parousia of Christ (Mt. 11:22, 12:36, 41f, 25:31ff, Acts 17:30-31, Rom. 2:3-11, 2 Thess. 1:3-12, 2 Peter 3:7, Jude 1:6). Along these lines, Romans 16:20 is of special importance, for there Paul tells us that Christ, at his Parousia, will “crush” Satan; which is to say, he will finally and completely judge him (Gen. 3:15, NIV). Similarly, we have 1 Cor. 15:24, where Paul states that Christ, at his Parousia, will “abolish all rule, authority, and power.” How then shall Christ crush and abolish Satan’s rule, authority, and power *a second time* at the end of a future millennium?

We conclude that the theological sense of 20:10 is as follows: “And the devil who deceived them will be thrown into the lake of fire and brimstone, where the beast and the false prophet also will join him; and together they will be tormented day and night forever and ever.”

The Judgment at the Great White Throne (20:11-14)

Our chapter concludes with the Revelation’s final—and most solemn—vision of the Last Judgment, this time of all human beings who have ever lived, saints and sinners alike. Once again I will offer a brief exegesis in

amillennial perspective, and then probe some of the more controversial questions involved.

In verse 11, John beholds a great white throne, and One seated upon it. The imagery is drawn from the judgment scene of Daniel 7. There, the divine Personage upon the throne is clearly the Father, the Ancient of Days (Rev. 4:2). Here, however, we may safely surmise that it is the Father indwelling and acting through Christ, who, according to the entire NT, is the divinely appointed executor of the Last Judgment (1:8, 11, 19:11f, 21:6; Mt. 3:12, 13:41-43, 25:1f, John 5:27, Acts 17:31, Rom. 14:10, 2 Cor. 5:10). Will Christ actually sit upon a visible throne suspended in vacant space, as depicted here? It is entirely possible (Mt. 25:31, 2 Cor. 5:10). Nevertheless, this throne is above all an emblem of Christ's sovereignty: of his God-given right to judge, and of the perfect holiness with which he will do so (14:14). Verse 11 also tells us that earth and heaven will flee from the face of the Righteous Judge. Here, as elsewhere in the Revelation, we have an apocalyptic picture of the final conflagration; of the dissolution of the created cosmos by fire, in preparation for the emergence of the new heavens and the new earth (Rev. 6:12-17, 11:11-13, 16:17-21; Rom. 8:21, 2 Peter 3:10-12).

In verse 12, John sees the dead, both great and small, standing before the throne of Christ. Who are they? According to amillennarians, they are all human beings who have ever lived, raised from the dead by the voice of Christ at his Parousia, in order to stand before him for final judgment (John 5:28-29). Revelation 11:18 confirms the universality of this judgment, teaching as it does that "the dead" (and "the great and the small") include the prophets, the saints, and all who fear God's name. Here John also sees multiple books being opened, as well as a single book: the Book of Life. The multiple books—one for each person—contain the record of everything that person thought, said, or did during his days upon the earth (2 Cor. 5:10). All the dead—both saints and sinners—will be judged from their individual book, that is, (as the Belgic Confession teaches) from the contents of their own memory and conscience, illumined by the Spirit of Holiness (Rom. 2:6). In the case of the saints, their evil deeds will have been forgiven by Christ—blotted out of their book—while their good deeds will receive a reward (1 Cor. 3:12-25). In the case of sinners, their evil

deeds remain to condemn them to one degree or another of eternal punishment (Luke 12:47).

Verse 13 backtracks just a little, and reiterates the thought of verse 12: All will be raised, all will be judged by their works. Here too the NT doctrine of a general resurrection and judgment is apparent: The sea—which certainly contains both saints and sinners—gives up its dead. As for Death and Hades, these two appear together elsewhere in the Revelation. The risen Christ holds the key to Death and Hades, and delivers the saints from both (1:18); the ashen horse called Death—sent forth from heaven to judge the wicked oppressors of the Church—is closely followed by Hades (6:8). These precedents illumine the meaning of our text: Hades, which holds the wicked in a condition of spiritual death throughout the Intermediate State, will also give up its dead in the general resurrection. Thus shall all—both saints and sinners—appear before the throne of Christ, there to be judged according to their deeds.

In verse 14, John tells us that Death and Hades were thrown into the Lake of Fire. Note carefully that he does not say “the dead” were thrown into the Lake of Fire, for some of the dead—the saints—are now alive forevermore, and will soon inherit the World to Come (1:5, 11:18, 14:13, 20:12). What, then, does he mean? As we have just seen, Death is the *condition* of the wicked in the Intermediate State, and Hades is the *place* of the wicked in the Intermediate State. Thus, John is telling us that with the advent of the Lake of Fire, the Intermediate State of the wicked is brought to a close. The “first death” of the souls of the wicked in Hades is swallowed up and abolished by the second death of the resurrected wicked in the Lake of Fire.

Verse 15 discloses the true basis of salvation. John writes, “If anyone’s name was not found written in the Book of Life, he was thrown into the Lake of Fire.” The rest of the NT fills in the meaning. If judgment were based on “the books” alone—upon the deeds done in the body—all would perish, for all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God (Rev. 5:3-4; Rom. 3:23, Gal. 2:16). However, to the saints’ everlasting joy, the Father graciously and mercifully provided a way of salvation: the Lamb of God, whose righteous life and atoning death purchased men from every tribe, tongue, people, and nation (5:9; John 3:16). Throughout the Era of Proclamation, the Church announced this way of salvation (11:3, 14:6). If

anyone believed, his name was written in the Lamb's book of life (John 3:36, 6:47). Or rather, if he believed, he soon came to see that God had written his name in the Lamb's book of Life before the foundation of the world; that he had ordained them to eternal life (13:8, 17:8). However, he also saw that in order to inherit that life, he must "overcome" (2:17, 11, 17, 26, etc.); he must persevere in the faith (3:5; John 15:6, Rom. 11:22)—as indeed he will, through the preserving purpose and power of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (John 6:37-40, 17:15, Jude 1:1).

Here, then, in Revelation 20:15, we have all such believers—and all the rest of mankind—appearing in their resurrection bodies before Christ, who makes, as it were, a final inquiry into each man's standing before God (3:10). If that man believed, if he overcame, if he died in the faith and thus attained the first resurrection—or if he was found alive and faithful at the Lord's return—then his name will appear in the Lamb's book of life, and he will enter the World to Come (3:51; 21:1f). If not, he will be thrown into the Lake of Fire. It is certainly not easy to preach the Gospel from this unspeakably weighty text. However, amidst the growing lawlessness of these last days, it may be more necessary than ever.

Disagreements over Revelation 20:11-15 center around two main questions. As we bring our survey of Revelation 20 to a close, let us briefly consider both.

1. Are "the dead" of 20:12 the same as "the rest of the dead" in 20:5, the unbelieving wicked only? Or are "the dead" all human beings who have ever lived and died?

With rare exceptions, premillennarians assert that the theme of 20:11-15 is the resurrection and final judgment of the unbelieving wicked. John MacArthur writes:

These verses describe the final judgment of all the unbelievers of all ages ... Our Lord referred to this as the "the resurrection to judgment" (John 5:29) ... All the unrighteous dead will appear at the Great White Throne. None will escape. All the places that have held the bodies of the unbelieving dead will yield up new bodies suited for hell.¹²

Expressing considerably less dogmatism, George Ladd nevertheless agrees with MacArthur, saying, "This statement (verse 12) clearly implies,

if it does not explicitly affirm, the resurrection of ‘the rest of the dead’ (verse 5) who did not experience the first resurrection.”¹³

It is easy to see why this issue is so important to premillennarians: If 20:11-15 is giving us the general resurrection and the general judgment of historic Catholic and Reformation eschatology, then “the first resurrection” of 20:5 *must* be spiritual only, and the entire premillennial scheme is robbed of its most important biblical foundation. We must, therefore, examine this matter with some care.

Summing up the arguments of premillennial commentators, Biederwolf offers four reasons for believing that our text refers to the wicked dead only. I will cite and respond briefly to each one.¹⁴

First, he asserts that the phrase “the dead” as used by John in the Revelation always refers to the wicked only. In proof of this, he cites 11:18 and 20:5. However, the truth is that John explicitly uses this expression not only to refer to the saints who die in the Lord (14:13), but also to Christ himself (1:5)! Furthermore, it is not at all evident that 11:18 uses “the dead” to describe unbelievers only. To the contrary, the exact words of 11:18, along with its close association with 20:11-15, argue forcefully that *all* the dead—saints and sinners alike—are in view in both passages.

As for 20:5, we remember that it reads, “The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were completed.” Here, amillennarians and premillennarians agree: The reference is indeed to the souls of the unbelieving dead in Hades, souls that will “come to life” in the resurrection on the Last Day. Note, however, that this verse demonstrates the exact opposite of what Biederwolf claims, for it clearly presupposes that *some* of “the dead” are saints (i.e., those who have attained the first resurrection), while the *rest* of the dead are the unbelieving wicked. We conclude, then, that in the Revelation the phrase “the dead” can indeed refer both to saints and sinners, *and that it usually does!* Amillennarians, reasonably enough, contend that 20:11-15 is no exception.

Secondly, Biederwolf appeals to John 5:24, which states that the believer in Christ does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life. His thought is: If believers do not come into judgment, how can they be present in 20:11-15, which is clearly a judgment scene? The answer to this question involves a crucial distinction, one that appears throughout the NT: The believer in Christ does not come into judgment *for his sins*, since

he has savingly believed on the One who paid for them all (Rom. 8:1f). However, he does come into judgment *for the quantity and quality of his works*, since it will please God to reward him for all he did in life through Christ (Rom. 2:6, 2 Cor. 5:10). As we have seen, Rev. 20:11-15 depicts both of these judgments, for both are involved in the one judgment that Christ will administer at his return. Therefore, John 5:24 does not rule out the participation of the saints in the judgment depicted in our text.

Thirdly, Biederwolf observes that, “The judgment takes place according to (i.e., it is based upon) what is written in ‘the books,’ and the books are expressly distinguished from ‘the book of life.’” This is a true statement. However, in making it Biederwolf is operating according to a false assumption, and therefore draws a false conclusion. He assumes that the judgment based upon “the books” is with a view to determining one’s legal standing before God. Therefore, with Hengstenberg, he regards them as “books of guilt, condemnation, and death.” And if they are books of condemnation, then the unbelieving wicked must be the ones who are judged out of them.

But again, Biederwolf is making a false assumption. One’s legal standing before God is *not* based upon “the books.” Rather, it is based upon his faith in Christ, or lack thereof. *It is based upon the presence or absence of his name in the Book of Life.* As for the judgment based upon “the books,” it is meant only to determine degrees of reward or punishment based upon deeds done or left undone. In the case of the saints, no punishment is involved, for Christ was punished for their every sin upon the cross. For them, this judgment is simply an evaluation of their works, made with a view to determining the measure of their reward. Thus, contrary to Biederwolf, there is no biblical or theological problem with the saints being judged out of “the books.”

With respect to this important question, it remains only to review, one final time, all the positive evidence favorable to the idea that 20:11-15 does indeed give us the general resurrection and judgment of the classic Protestant eschatology. It includes (1) the numerous NT texts teaching a single general resurrection followed by a single general judgment, cited above, (2) the Revelation’s five preceding depictions of the Consummation, all of which either presuppose or explicitly teach a single general resurrection and judgment at the Parousia, (3) the contents of the text itself,

affirming that the saints, as well as the unbelieving wicked, are very much on the scene (e.g., the saints are among “the dead” (vv.12-13), they arise out of the sea (v. 13), they are judged out of “the books” (v. 12), and their names are found in the Book of Life, vv.12, 15)), and, (4) Rev. 11:18, the seed-text out of which 20:11-15 grows, and a verse that explicitly posits the presence of the saints at the Last Judgment, where they will be rewarded for their good works.

We conclude, then, that “the dead” of 20:12 are *not* the unbelieving wicked of 20:5, but rather all who have ever lived or died, saints and sinners alike. Therefore, sound exposition of Revelation 20:11-15 does not support premillennialism, but actually favors the classical amillennial eschatology of the Reformation.

2. If 20:11-15 speaks only of the resurrection and judgment of the unbelieving wicked, when will the saints who live and die during the Millennium be raised and judged for their works?

As is clear from the marked differences of opinion among them, this question greatly troubles premillennarians.

Some say the millennial saints will be raised and glorified all throughout the Millennium, each at the moment of his or her death. Such a procedure is barely imaginable, and totally incredible. More importantly, there is not a shred of biblical evidence to support it, and much to speak against it, since, as we have seen, the NT consistently teaches a single general resurrection at the end of the age.

Others say the millennial saints will be raised close to the end of the Millennium, just prior to the resurrection and judgment of the wicked described in 20:11-15. If those who hold this view are historic premillennarians, they are effectively positing *three* separate resurrections (one at the Parousia, two at the end of the Millennium). If they are dispensationalists, they are effectively positing *four* resurrections (the three of historic premillennialism, plus an additional one at the Rapture)! Here again we see that premillennialism, by its very nature, shatters the glorious unity and simplicity of the Consummation, even as it breeds unwarranted speculation and a needless multiplication of eschatological acts and events.

Far better, then, to hug closely to the pervasive NT doctrine of a single general resurrection, and to let it shape our interpretation of Revelation 20.

Finally, some premillennarians concede that the millennial saints will indeed be raised and “judged” (i.e., rewarded) at the same time as the unbelieving wicked (i.e., at the end of the Millennium); however, they insist that 20:11-15 says nothing at all about these saints, but focuses exclusively on the unbelieving wicked. We have seen, however, that the text itself readily accommodates the idea of a general resurrection and judgment, that other passages in the Revelation do the same, and that this is, in fact, the eschatology of the whole New Testament. Why, then, should we look for anything else?

The High King’s Completed Kingdom (Rev. 21-22)

Before summing up what we have learned about Revelation 20, it remains to add a few words about the fifth and final bloc of the book, Revelation 21-22, in which the heavenly Prophet comforts his Church with a vision of the Kingdom to come; a vision of the Kingdom in its complete and eternal form.

These chapters are, of course, the Grand Finale of the Grand Finale of all Scripture. Here the river of Salvation History finally empties into the infinite ocean of the new heavens and the new earth.

Previously, we had six difficult but short “days” of God’s redemptive work through Christ and the Church; here we have an eternal seventh Day, in which they and all creation enjoy the manifold blessings of complete redemptive rest.

Previously, we had the High King of Heaven opening the seven seals on the Father’s last will and testament; here we behold the lavish fullness of the inheritance that he prepared for his covenant children before the foundation of the world.

Previously—and especially in OTKP—we read of the promise of the Eternal Covenant: full deliverance from the curse of God, elevation of the Mountain of God, glorification of the City of God, Beatification of the Bride of God, and eternal restoration of the Paradise of God. Now we see all these promises fulfilled.

In sum, these two concluding chapters give us the end of all the former things, and the goal towards which they ever flowed; but they also give us the beginning of all new things, and the fountainhead from which they will flow forth into all eternity future. They are indeed the Grand Finale of the Grand Finale of Salvation History, but also a divine Overture to the World to Come.¹⁵

This final bloc of the Revelation may be divided into three parts. As we are about see, each one is loaded with OT imagery, usually drawn from OTKP. In what follows, I will try to open up the rich spiritual meaning that shines through the manifold symbols employed.

1. The Covenant is Fulfilled (21:1-8)

In 20:11-15 John beheld the dark side of Christ's judgment: retribution to his enemies, who were all consigned to the Lake of Fire. Here he beholds its bright side: reward and rest to his friends, all who have faithfully endured the rigors of the Great Tribulation. The controlling idea of this pericope is found in verses 3 and 7: Henceforth, the saints will *fully* be God's people, and God will *fully* be their God. In the glorious World to Come, the promise of the Eternal Covenant will be *fully* fulfilled.

How exactly does this occur? Christ, at the judgment, will create new heavens and a new earth (1). Then the Church, adorned as a Bride with the beauty and glory of God, will descend to the earth, her eternal home (2). In this World, every burden of the curse will be lifted, every spiritual and physical defect cast off (4). In this World, God and Christ, by the Holy Spirit, will dwell with their people in perfect fellowship; heaven and earth will become one (3). For all who overcome, this promise is sure; so too is the threat of the Lake of Fire to all who spurn the covenant blessings of the Gospel in order to walk in sin (5-8).

2. I Will Show You the Bride (21:9-22:5)

In this long section the Spirit draws richly from OT history and Kingdom prophecy to depict the eternal blessedness of the Church in the World to Come. Two metaphors dominate: the Church as the Bride of Christ, but also—and especially—the Church as the Holy City, the New Jerusalem (9-10). Let us call her the Bride-City.

Henceforth, the Bride-City has the glory of God: Having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing, she shines like the sun in the Kingdom of her Father (11; Mt. 13:43, Eph. 5:26-27).

Because of the work of her heavenly Husband, she is eternally secure in the enjoyment of God's blessings: He safely surrounds her with high walls of salvation (12, 17; Isaiah 26:1, John 10:28-29).

Here she enjoys complete and perpetual access to God, and he to her: Twelve gates, with the names of the twelve sons of Israel inscribed upon them, remain forever open (12-13, 21, 25; Rom. 5:2, Eph. 2:18, 3:12).

Here she is settled forever upon the sure foundation of Christ's Person and Work, and also upon the apostolic testimony about them that she savingly believed: Twelve precious foundation stones, each with a name of one of the twelve apostles of the Lamb written upon them, undergird the City (14, 19-20; Eph. 2:20, 1 Thess. 2:13).

The Bride-City fills the whole earth with the people of God; it is laid out as a square, 12,000 *stadia* on each side. Like the Sanctuary in Ezekiel's vision, she is also a perfect cube, signifying that she is perfectly holy (16). God and Christ themselves are the Temple in which she lives (22; John 14:20, 17:21, Thess. 1:1, 2 Thess. 1:1); she herself is the Temple in which God and Christ live (3; Eph. 2:22).

Here there is no night, and hence no luminaries; for God and Christ, by the Spirit, are the Light emanating from all things (21:3, 5, 22:25; John 8:12).

By this light the nations of the redeemed—the City herself—will walk forever, therein bearing the glory of God to one another (21:24-26; Mt. 5:14).

Here in the eschatological Eden, the Bride-City will perpetually drink from the river of the water of the divine life; water given by God, secured by Christ, and bestowed by the Holy Spirit (22:1-2; John 4:10, 7:37).

Here in the eschatological Paradise, she will fully partake of Christ—the fruit of the Tree of Life—so that to all eternity she remains healed from every wound of her former sins (22:2-3).

Here, God in Christ is King; here, his servants will serve him; and here—seeing his face and fully belonging to him—they will reign in life, through Christ, with Christ, forever (22:3-5).

3. Concluding Affirmations, Promises, Warnings, and Exhortations (22:6-21)

The third and final section of Revelation 21-22 brings the book to a close with various affirmations, promises, warnings, and exhortations. Verses 6-9 assure the saints that the entire prophecy is true and trustworthy. Also, they pronounce a blessing—the supreme blessing—upon everyone who takes it to heart. Verses 8-9 warn against a besetting NT temptation, the worship of angels, even as they remind and exhort the saints to worship God alone (Col. 2:18, Heb. 1:1ff).

Verses 10-15 serve a number of purposes. They assure Christians that “the time is near,” that the fulfillment of these visions does not lie in the distant future, but is already upon them. Indeed, by God’s reckoning, the Parousia itself is at hand (10, 12). They warn the reader that his response to the Gospel—and especially to the contents of the Revelation—will set and seal his course into eternity. They also give us the voice of the High King himself, affirming his soon return (12), reminding us of his divine role in Creation and Consummation (13), promising believers access to God and the Tree of Life, and warning the impenitent wicked of eternal exclusion from the City of God (14).

Verses 16-17 supply a holy antiphony: Christ affirms that he is the divine-human Messiah, the God-appointed King of the World to Come (16). In reply, the Spirit-filled Church not only beseeches Christ to come to her, but likewise beseeches the (unconverted) elect to come to him, so that they might receive from him the water of life.

In verses 18-19 John places the words of this prophecy in the category of sacred Scripture, threatening eternal destruction to any who would add to them or subtract from them.

Verse 20 gives us still another antiphony: Christ declares that he is coming quickly; in reply, John sounds forth the heart-cry of the Universal Church itself, beseeching him to do that very thing.

In verse 21 the apostle concludes the book with a benediction, praying God’s grace upon all, not only that they should hear, but also that they should continue to believe, trust, and obey. He desires them ever faithful to the end, ever hopeful of a new and glorious beginning.

Summary and Conclusion

We have completed our expository journey through Revelation 20. My primary goal has been to show that its theme is indeed the course, character, and consummation of the spiritual reign of the High King of Heaven. We have encountered many lines of evidence favorable to this conclusion. Let us briefly summarize them.

Like all the other chapters, Revelation 20 is a prophecy. This means it was given for the edification, exhortation, and comfort of Christ's Church. This in turn means that it *concerns* Christ's Church, and says nothing at all about ethnic Israel in a hitherto unmentioned stage of the Kingdom yet to come.

It is also an instance of biblical apocalyptic, a literary fact of life that requires its images and numbers to be interpreted figuratively. As we have seen, many of the difficulties into which premillennarians plunge themselves arise from a failure to understand the genre of the book, to interpret it accordingly, and to do so in a consistent manner. Moreover, the NT itself—and especially the epistles—commend this figurative approach: Having explicitly taught us to employ the NCH in our interpretation of OTKP, it implicitly teaches us to do the same here in the Revelation, where OT Kingdom prophecy so frequently reappears in the NT itself!

As for its key ideas, we found that they run closely parallel to those of the other visions in bloc four of the book, implying that this vision also recapitulates the course of the Era of Preparation, just like its predecessors. In particular, we saw that its symbols speak yet again of the infallible march of the Gospel through the earth; the promise and comfort of the Intermediate State to all believers who remain faithful till death; the certainty—and brevity—of the Last Battle; and the still greater certainty of the Consummation to follow, which consists of the Parousia, the Resurrection, the Last Judgment of men and angels, and the purging of the created cosmos by fire, all leading up to the manifestation of the new heavens and the new earth.

In sum, we have found that premillennial interpretations of Revelation 20 shatter the simplicity, vitiate the power, and becloud the glory of NT eschatology, thereby plunging Christ's Church into needless confusion and controversy. Meanwhile, the amillennial interpretation achieves the exact

opposite: It wonderfully opens up the meaning of the text itself, further illumines the structure and message of the book as a whole, harmonizes perfectly with the rest of NT theology, sheds precious light on the interpretation of OTKP, and prepares, strengthens, and encourages Christ's pilgrim Church with a simple, powerful, and unspeakably majestic vision of the Consummation of all things at the end of the age.

Have we not therefore arrived at the true NT meaning of the Millennium?

Part 5
Understanding
the Consummation

The Design, Structure, and Unity of the Consummation

WE HAVE REACHED the fifth and final stage of our journey to a good understanding of biblical eschatology. Hitherto, we have sought, above all, to discover the true course and character of Salvation History. We learned that it has a goal: the manifestation of the Eternal Covenant in Christ. We learned that the Covenant creates a Kingdom: a direct reign of God over his redeemed creatures. We learned that this Kingdom appears in two stages—a temporary spiritual reign of the Son, followed by an eternal, spiritual and physical reign of the Father with the Son. We learned—or at least gleaned from many NT texts pertaining to the structure of the Kingdom—that its two stages are separated by a single Consummation set to occur at the Parousia of Christ at the end of this present evil age. And—in Parts 3 and 4 of our journey—we also learned that OTKP and the Revelation abundantly support this conception of Salvation History.

There is, then, but one remaining step before us: We must closely examine the Didactic New Testament to see if Christ and the apostles really do teach the Church to hope for a single Christ-centered Consummation at the end of the present evil age. Here in Part 5 we will take that step. Here—in various degrees of detail—we will look at every major NT text dealing with the Consummation; here we will see if they really do support the classic amillennial eschatology; here we will interact with the arguments and evidence offered by those who believe it does not.

In order to accomplish this ambitious task, we will look at the Consummation from three different angles.

In this chapter I will offer a brief summary of NT teaching on the design, structure, and unity of the Consummation. My main purpose will be

to show that the Father has designed the Consummation with a view to securing the maximum possible glory and honor for the One who will accomplish it, the Lord Jesus Christ; that he (the Father) means it to be the climax, zenith, and capstone of the exaltation of the High King of Heaven.

Secondly, in chapters 23 and 24 I will survey all the major NT texts dealing with the Parousia and other elements of the Consummation. My goal here is to show that each and every one supports the classic amillennial expectation of a single Momentous Event at the end of the present evil age. Also, I will show how these same texts, properly interpreted, positively rule out various competing views.

Finally, in chapter 25 I will try to paint, with a few broad strokes of the biblical brush, a clear picture of the Consummation. In particular, I mean to highlight the unique way in which each element of the Consummation contributes to the blessedness of the Blessed Hope of the Church.

The Design of the Consummation

The Consummation is the completion, or wrap-up, of God's dealings with sinful man and his world. It is the goal and capstone of Salvation History, the latter being understood as that tiny but all-important parenthesis between eternity past and eternity future, wherein God, according to a definite plan, has been continually at work in his creation to prepare for, accomplish, apply, and consummate the redemption that is in Jesus Christ, for the display and eternal praise of his glory.

The Consummation is comprised of two elements: final judgment and final redemption. In final judgment, God, through Christ, bestows final rewards upon the saints for their faithful labors on the earth, and final retribution upon the impenitent and unbelieving wicked for their manifold sins. In final redemption, God, through Christ, perfects his saints and their world, both spiritually and physically, thereby completing the application of the the redemption that Christ purchased for them during his days upon the earth.

In this short definition, we can see much of God's purpose or design for the Consummation. Let us take a moment to highlight the key points.

First, at the Consummation God designs to bring closure to Salvation History. It is not his pleasure to see his creation—the universe, life, and

man—continually groaning under the burden of sin and judgment. There must be an end to it. In particular, there must be an end to the Era of Proclamation: As soon as the Gospel of the Kingdom has been preached to all nations—as soon as all peoples have had their opportunity to hear and respond—then the end will come (Mt. 24:14).

Secondly, at the Consummation God designs a public vindication of the Gospel; a universal manifestation of the truth of the testimony of the Church to the effect that Israel's God really is the one true living God; that Jesus Christ really is his only-begotten Son; and that Christ really is the Savior and Judge of the whole world. When this manifestation occurs, all unbelief, idolatry, false religion, skepticism, arrogance, mockery, persecution, and every other high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God will recoil and wither away before the blazing light of the Truth himself, rushing earthward on clouds of glory (Rev. 1:7). In that Day, all who ever lived will know and confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father, and that every (unbelieving) man who ever claimed otherwise was a liar (Rom. 3:4, Phil. 2:11).

Thirdly, at the Consummation, God designs a final administration of justice. At the Fall, a horrible moral inversion occurred, an inversion that ever since has marred life in the present evil age: Justice is turned back and righteousness stands far off. Truth has fallen in the streets, and uprightness cannot enter in (Isaiah 59:14). The godly are hungry, mournful, hated, ostracized, insulted, spurned, and sometimes even murdered, while the worldly are fat, happy, and lauded by all men (Luke 6:20-26). Multitudes call evil good, and good evil (Isaiah 5:20). While the God of judgment seems not to see, care, or even exist, the wicked and the ruthless rush ahead, crushing the innocent and prospering in their evil ways (Psalm 73, Isaiah 5:20).

But at the Consummation, Christ will invert the inversion. Placing the cosmos in a perfectly just balance, he himself will scatter the proud in the imagination of their hearts, bring down rulers from their thrones, and send away the rich empty-handed; after which he will exalt the humble, fill them with good things, and make them to inherit the earth forever (1 Samuel 2, Luke 1:46-55, Mt. 5:3-12). In that Day, the saints will exult, crying, "Even so, Lord God Almighty: True and righteous are Your judgments" (Rev. 16:7).

Finally, at the Consummation God designs a climactic administration of the redemption that is in Christ. At his Parousia, the High King of Heaven will complete, crown, and cap all that he *accomplished* in the days of his humiliation, and all that he *applied* in the years of his exaltation. In particular, he will raise, transform, glorify, and eternally reward the saints, even as he delivers the creation itself from the futility of the curse into the freedom of the glory of the children of God (Romans 8:18-25, 2 Peter 3).

The Glory of God

The Scriptures teach that in all of these things God has a high and eternal purpose: a consummate manifestation of his many-faceted character; a majestic display of his attributes; a universal show of his glory. This is especially clear from Romans 9:19-24, in which we find Paul defending God's right to elect sinners to salvation. He opens by directing his readers' attention to the Exodus event, at which time God purposely hardened Pharaoh's heart, but was pleased to shower his mercy and grace on Israel. Pressing his point home, he concludes by saying: "So then, God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden" (Rom. 9:17-18). But Paul is not done. Anticipating objections that he had doubtless heard many times during the course of his ministry, he continues:

One of you will say to me, "Why then does he still blame us? For who can resist his will?" But who are you, O man, to talk back to God? Shall what is formed say to him who formed it, "Why did you make me like this?" Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for noble purposes and some for common use? What if God, *desiring to display his wrath and make his power known*, bore with great patience the objects of his wrath prepared for destruction? And what if he did this *in order to make known the riches of his glory to the objects of his mercy, whom he prepared in advance for glory*—even us whom he also called, not only from the Jews, but also from the Gentiles?

—Rom. 9:19-24

These astonishing words go far towards unveiling the supreme purpose of God in Salvation History. Bear in mind that for Paul the Exodus event is a type, a picture of the redemption—or eschatological exodus—that has now come about through Christ. More particularly, it is a picture of the Consummation, of the Last Day in which God will display his holiness, wrath, justice, and destructive power over the wicked, just as he did over

Pharaoh and his armies. However, it is also a picture of the Last Day in which he will display his sovereignly bestowed love, mercy, and grace to his Church, whom Christ will safely lead through the fires of final judgment into the World to Come, even as Moses safely led Israel through the waters of the Red Sea to the Promised Land.

We see, then, that for Paul the overarching purpose of the Exodus, the Cross, and the Consummation is this: *the display of the glory of God*. In the first, the display was partial, being concealed from the rest of the world; in the second, it was partial and largely hidden, being concealed from the eyes of all but his elect; but in the third, it will be complete, universal, and fully manifest to the naked eye, whether of saints or sinners. Accordingly, there is a real sense in which the Consummation will be the single greatest manifestation of the glory of God in the history of the universe.

Why will God do this? Why, in the Consummation, will he seek a universal display of his glory before all sentient beings? Paul has given us the answer: He will do this so that the objects of his mercy—his elect family, the appointed Bride of his Son, the community of the called who are the Church—may be to the praise of his glory, and especially to the praise of the glory of his saving grace (Rom. 9:23-24, Eph. 1:6, 12, 14). In other words, as at the Cross, so at the Consummation: God will so thoroughly show forth his glory through the prism of his judicial and redemptive work that he will incite and excite the worship of his people to all eternity. Christ will come again so that there may be glory (i.e., grateful praise, joy, and adoration) to God in the Church and in Christ Jesus, throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen! (Eph. 3:20-21)

The Glory of Christ

This brings us to a final and crucially important point. The eschatological display of the glory of God is a profoundly trinitarian event. At the Consummation, God the Father specially designs the glory of his Son; at the Consummation, the Son specially designs the glory of the Father! In the pages ahead, I will focus on the first part of this equation; upon the manifold ways in which the Father has ordered the Consummation with a view to the maximum glorification of his Son.

That he should do so is hardly surprising. Our Lord himself told us that the Father loves the Son and desires all to honor him, even as they honor (or should honor) the Father (John 5:23). Very fulsomely, the apostles go on to tell us exactly how the Father secures this cherished end: *He secures it by appointing his Son to co-labor with him in each and every facet of cosmic history.* Through the Son, he created the world (John 1:1-5); through the Son he now holds it together (Col. 1:17, Heb. 1:3); through the (humiliation of the) Son he accomplished the redemption of his people (John 19:30); and through the Son he now applies that redemption, pouring out the Holy Spirit on all his children (Acts 2:33), imparting to them new spiritual life (John 5:26), and granting them repentance, faith, forgiveness, justification, and sanctification (John 5:24). So again, it should hardly surprise us that the Father has planned to effect the Consummation through his Son, whether in final judgment or final redemption.

It is important to understand, however, that at the Consummation the glory of Christ will shine forth in a very special way. Yes, even now God's purpose for his Son is being fulfilled; even now, by faith, through the window of the Word, God's people behold, love, and honor him. However, at the Consummation God will see to it that his Son is honored as never before. How exactly will he accomplish this? Again, in the pages ahead we will address this crucial question from many angles. Here, however, a few introductory thoughts will open the way.

First, God has appointed Christ to execute *all* the great eschatological acts and events. In a moment, I will list them one by one.

Secondly, God has appointed Christ to execute those acts and events *all at once*. As I have argued throughout our journey, God does not effect the Consummation piecemeal; he does not divide it into stages, or spread it out over decades, centuries, or millennia. No, he is pleased instead to cluster the several elements of the Consummation around a single radiant center—the Parousia of Christ—so that Christ may accomplish them “thoroughly and quickly,” thereby receiving the greater glory (Rom. 9:28).

Thirdly, God has appointed Christ to effect the Consummation *publicly, visibly*. In the days of his flesh, the Father intentionally veiled his glory: Only a very few, by God's grace, caught a glimpse of his divine nature and prerogatives (Mt. 16:13-17, 17:1f, John 1:4). Following his exaltation to heaven, many more beheld it—and presently behold it—but only by faith,

through the window of the Word, because of the illuminating work of the Spirit (1 Cor. 13:12, 2 Cor. 3:18). However, at the Consummation—when Christ descends from heaven bodily, with power and great glory—every eye will see him just as he is (1 John 3:2, Rev. 1:7). Lavish NT terminology describing the Parousia underscores this important point: When the heavenly King arrives in the skies above the earth, he will be *revealed* (1 Peter 1:7, 13, 4:13), he will be *made manifest* to all (Isaiah 40:5, 1 Tim. 6:14, 2 Tim. 1:10, 2 Tim. 4:1-8, Titus 2:13). At the Consummation, the God who hides himself will hide no more!

This brings us to a fourth, final, and closely related point: God has ordained that when Christ consummates all things, the Consummation will *include all things*. When the Lord Jesus comes again, he will lay his divine hand, in judgment and redemption, upon all men of all times, all angels, and all creation: the heavens, the earth, the seas, and all that are or ever were in them (Rom. 8:18f, 2 Cor. 5:10, Phil. 3:21, Col. 1:20). In short, the Consummation will be absolutely *universal* in its scope. It will represent the end of the old universe, but also the beginning of the new (1 Peter 4:7, Rev. 21:5).

And what is the upshot of all this? What does it mean that Christ will execute all of God's eschatological acts, all at once, in the sight of all men and all angels, with an eternal impact upon all creation? Simply this: All sentient beings—whether angels or demons, saints or sinners—shall indeed honor the Son, just as they honor the Father. Willingly or not—whether in glad adoration or abject surrender—every knee shall bow and every tongue shall confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Phil. 2:11). Truly, at the Consummation, God's eternal design for the maximum possible glory of his Son will be fully fulfilled.

The Structure of the Consummation

We have seen that the Consummation is a deeply purposeful and highly structured event. In this section, I will offer several theses about its structure. In chapters 23 and 24—where we survey a host of NT texts dealing with the Consummation—I will support these theses from Scripture.

In order to understand the structure of the Consummation, we need first to recall the several elements of which it is composed. Fundamentally, there are six.

Elements of the Consummation

First, there is *the Last Battle*, the final historical clash between God and Satan, Christ and the Antichrist, the Church and the World. Arguably, one ought not to include the Last Battle as an element of the Consummation, seeing that, unlike the other elements, Christ does not accomplish it by a supernatural exercise of his power, but instead by the regular exercise of his all-controlling providence. Nevertheless, I have chosen to include it here because the Bible repeatedly cites it as the single most important sign of the imminence of Christ's appearing; as the unique historical event that, in effect, triggers the Consummation proper.

Secondly, there is *the Parousia*: the arrival, or coming again, of the Lord Jesus Christ, bodily, in power and great glory, to the skies above the earth. As we have seen, the apostles also refer to the Parousia as the *revelation* of Christ (Greek: *apocalypsis*, 1 Peter 1:7, 13, 4:13), and as his *manifestation* or *appearing* (Greek: *epiphaneia*, 1 Tim. 6:14, 2 Tim. 1:10, 2 Tim. 4:1-8, Titus 2:13). The Parousia is the living heart of the Consummation, since it brings onto the stage of universal history the Alpha and the Omega, the Creator and the Consummator, the One whom the Father is pleased supremely to honor by making him the Agent of all the remaining eschatological acts and events (Rev. 1:8, 11, 21:6).

Thirdly, there is *the Resurrection of the dead*. This is a single, general resurrection of all human beings who have ever lived and died. Closely associated with the resurrection is the glorification (or transformation) of the living saints: those privileged believers who will never taste death, but who will live to see Christ coming in the clouds, and their own bodies glorified in "the twinkling of an eye" (1 Cor. 15:51ff, 1 Thess. 4:15-18, 1 John 3:2). Also associated with the Resurrection is the Catching Up (or Rapture) of *all* resurrected (or transformed) men and women into the skies above the earth, where they will appear before the Judgment Seat of Christ. In our study of the relevant NT texts we will seek fresh, clarifying light on this controversial theme.

Fourthly, there is *the Last Judgment*. As we have seen, it is cosmic in scope, falling upon all men of all time, all angels, and all nature. For men and angels, it is, in essence, a final separation, with Christ welcoming the saints and holy angels into the World to Come, but sending unbelieving sinners and evil angels (demons) to eternal punishment in the Lake of Fire. The Judgment also will involve the destruction of the present heavens and earth by fire (2 Peter 3).

The fifth element of the Consummation is *the Regeneration*, or *the Restoration of All Things* (Mt. 19:28, Acts 3:21). By this the NT means the removal of the curse from the realm of nature, resulting in its eternal renewal; it means the eschatological deliverance, healing, and final glorification of the natural world. Just as God, in the beginning, created the first heavens and earth for the family of the first Man, so here, in the Regeneration, he will bring his redemptive program to a close by creating new heavens and a new earth for the family of the Last Man, the Lord Jesus Christ. And as we shall see, it is *through* Christ that he will do it!

Finally, we have what the apostle Paul called *the Delivering Up of the Kingdom*. The idea here is that the High King of Heaven will bring his heavenly reign to a close by submitting both himself and the full fruitage of his redemptive work—his glorified Bride and the glorified World she is about to inherit—to God the Father, so that he (the Father) may again (together with Christ) be “all in all” in the World to Come (1 Cor. 15:24-28).

Here, then, are the six central elements of the Consummation, along with some of their key accompaniments. Again, we shall examine them more closely in the pages ahead. But first, let us turn our attention to the structure by which they are held together.

The Structure of the Consummation

God has structured the Consummation according to its purpose. Its purpose is supremely to glorify the Son as cosmic Redeemer, Judge, and Re-Creator. In order to accomplish this purpose, God has designed the Consummation to be a profoundly *Christ-centered* event. Christ-centeredness is the very essence of the structure of the Consummation. We see it in at least three different forms.

First, God has centered the Consummation around Christ *dynamically*. That is, the Father has decreed that the returning High King of Heaven will be the omnipotent divine Agent through whom he will execute each and every aspect of the Consummation. We have touched on this point over and over again. Christ will raise the dead and transform the living. Christ will judge the world in righteousness. Christ will destroy the present earth and its works with fire. Christ will create new heavens and a new earth, the eternal home of the redeemed. Through Christ, God will accomplish “all things” pertaining to the Consummation, thus securing his maximum possible glory and honor (John 5:20, 1 Cor. 8:6, Col. 1:16).

Secondly, God has centered the Consummation around Christ *temporally*. The Parousia is, as it were, the first domino to fall, after which all the others fall in very rapid succession. This too fulfills the Father’s purpose and pleasure: By concentrating all the great eschatological acts and events around the Parousia, the glory of the One who accomplishes them will shine forth with incomparable brilliance. In passing, let us note again that the temporal Christ-centeredness of the Consummation exposes one of great defects of Dispensationalism and historic premillennialism: their tendency to fracture and fragment the Consummation; to spread it out over years or even centuries, with the result that the glory of Christ is correspondingly diminished. Even if the Bible did not clearly and repeatedly teach a temporally Christ-centered Consummation, careful students of the NT would expect the Father to structure it that way, seeing that such a plan would manifestly advance the purpose nearest to his heart: the greater glory of his Son (Mt. 3:17, 17:5, John 5:23).

Finally, God has centered the Consummation around Christ *spatially*. Modern cosmological views notwithstanding, the Bible teaches that the Earth is the center of the universe. There is good reason for this: It is the apple of God’s eye, the home of his most cherished creation (man), and the stage upon which the great drama of cosmic judgment and redemption is played out. If, then, the Earth lies at the center of God’s interest and affection, it only stands to reason that it should lie at the center of his cosmos as well. However, at the Parousia, God will effect a dramatic cosmological change. In that Day, Christ will not only destroy the earth, but also the sun, moon, and stars that formerly served the earth’s inhabitants. Where, then, will the cosmic center be? The answer is as breathtaking as it

is obvious: *Christ himself will be the center*, seated upon his throne amidst a vast sea of men and angels, all gathered before him for the Judgment. In other words, at the Consummation Christ the Judge will become the absolute center of the universe, just as even now he is the absolute center of the Father's heart, purpose, and plan.¹

Later in our study I will cite a number of biblical texts in support of these extraordinary claims. Possibly, my exegesis will not persuade all. Nevertheless, all would have to admit this much: If such claims *were* true, the spatial Christ-centeredness of the Consummation would *staggeringly* glorify the High King of Heaven, and the High Judge of the Cosmos!

There is more to say about the structure of the Consummation, but in order to understand it we must turn now to a brief discussion of its unity.

The Unity of the Consummation

The Consummation displays a multi-faceted unity that contributes powerfully to the glory of Christ. On the one hand, *each* element is marked by unity, since there is one Parousia, one Resurrection, one Judgment, and one Regeneration of all things. On the other hand, *all* the elements are marked by unity, since they are dynamically, temporally, and spatially centered on Christ at his Second Coming. Leaving aside the Last Battle, and focusing our attention on the four cardinal elements of the Consummation proper, let us take a few moments to demonstrate these important truths from Scripture.

1. The One Second Coming

We begin with the heart of the Consummation, the Second Coming of the Lord Jesus Christ. There is one such coming, and one only. As we have seen, the NT usually refers to it as the Coming (*parousia*), but also as the Revelation (*apocalypsis*) and the Appearing (*epiphaneia*). Yes, the words convey different shades of meaning, but it is quite clear that all three are used to describe one Momentous Eschatological Event.²

Three outstanding NT passages confirm this important statement.

First, we have Paul's second letter to the Thessalonians, in which he encourages persecuted believers to wait for justice and relief when Christ is revealed (Greek: *en te apokalupsei*) from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels (2 Thess. 1:7). Then, just a few paragraphs later, he fleshes

out his thought by reminding them that when Christ returns he will destroy the lawless one (i.e., the Antichrist) “by the *appearance* of his *coming*” (the *epiphaneia* of his *parousia*, 2 Thess. 2:8). Paul uses three different words to describe one event.

Secondly, we have the two letters of the apostle Peter, in which he directs believers’ hopes to the Coming of Christ (2 Peter 3:4), the Revelation of Christ (1 Peter 1:7, 13, 4:13), and the Appearing of Christ (1 Peter 5:4). We look in vain for him to make any theological distinction between the three terms.

Finally, we have John’s first epistle, in which he urges believers to abide in Christ, so that when he appears (*phanerao*, the verb underlying *epiphaneia*) they might have confidence, rather than shrink back in shame at his Coming (*parousia*, 1 John. 2:28).

Again, not one of the apostles gives us the tiniest hint that he is using these terms to describe separate eschatological events. On the contrary, they use them essentially interchangeably to describe the one Second Coming of Christ.

We also see the unity of the Second Coming in the copious NT use of the definite article before each of the words used to describe it. Thrice in his Olivet Discourse the Lord himself speaks of “... *the* coming of the Son of Man” (Mt. 24:27, 37, 39). In his letters to the Thessalonians, Paul talks repeatedly about *the* coming of Christ, as, for example, when he prays that God may preserve their hearts “... unblamable in holiness at *the* coming of the Lord Jesus with all his holy ones” (1 Thess. 3:13, 4:15, 5:23; 2 Thess. 2:1). James urges believers to be patient till the end, assuring them that “... *the* coming of the Lord is at hand” (James 5:7-8). In the same vein, various apostles refer to Christ’s return as “*his* coming,” clearly assuming that there is but one of them (1 Cor. 15:23, 1 Thess. 2:19, 2 Thess. 2:8, 1 John 2:28). As for the other two words, the pattern is identical. Over and over again, the apostles speak of *the* revelation (*apokalupsis*) of the Lord Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 1:7, 2 Thess. 1:7, 1 Peter 1:7, 13, 4:13), and also of *the* (or *his*) appearing (*epiphaneia*, 2 Thess. 2:8, 1 Tim. 6:14, 2 Tim. 1:10, 4:1, 8, Titus 2:13). In effect, the definite article turns these three terms for Christ’s return into an eschatological trinity: They are different, yet they are one, since all three speak of the same Coming of the Lord Jesus Christ, albeit from slightly different angles.

In this connection, we should take note of Hebrews 9:27-28, an especially powerful text dealing with the Parousia. It reads:

And just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment, so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear *a second time*, not to deal with sin, but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him.

The presuppositions of the writer are crystal clear: It is appointed to men to die once; it is appointed to them to be judged once; it was appointed to Christ to die once for their sins; *and it is appointed to him to appear once more*, to complete their redemption. The text reads: Christ will appear *a second time*. The second appearing is the second of two, and *only* two. For the writer to the Hebrews, there is *one* Parousia; *one* second coming of Christ.

Dispensationalists, historic premillennarians, and partial preterists—all of whom teach multiple comings of Christ—would do well to ponder these texts carefully. In every case, the reference is clearly to a single, visible, bodily return of Christ in glory. In this, the apostles were only passing along what their Lord had taught them: “For as lightning that comes from the east is visible even in the west, so will *the* coming of the Son of Man be” (Mt. 24:27). They also based their eschatology on what the two angels told them at Christ’s ascension: “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into the sky? This Jesus who has been taken up from you into heaven will *come* (once) again in just the same way as you watched him go into heaven” (Acts 2:11). A single, visible, bodily return of Christ in glory was the apostles’ Blessed Hope, the sole object of their eschatological longing. Should it not be ours, as well?

2. The One Resurrection

Next comes the Resurrection. The NT says there is only one of them, in which all who have ever lived and died will rise to the Judgment. In other words, it is a single *general* resurrection. On this point, the most compelling NT text is John 5:28-29:

Do not marvel at this, for an hour is coming in which all who are in the tombs will hear (the voice of the Son of Man), and they will come forth: those who did what is good, to a resurrection of life, and those who did what is evil, to a resurrection of judgment.

Since it occurs in a single “hour” (i.e., over a very brief span of time), there is but *one* such resurrection. When it occurs, *all* who are in the tombs will hear the voice of Christ: It is one *general* resurrection. And when it occurs, it will lead immediately to reward or retribution: It is one general resurrection *unto the Judgment*. So then, our Lord teaches here that at the end of the age, when he comes again, he himself will accomplish a single, brief, general resurrection leading to the Last Judgment.

Other NT texts confirm this view. Paul, for example, speaking before the Roman governor Felix, declared that he had a hope in God which his Jewish opponents themselves cherished, “... that there shall certainly be a resurrection of both the righteous and the wicked” (Acts 24:15). Likewise, we saw that the apostle John, in Revelation 20:11-15, anticipates one general resurrection of the saved and unsaved, leading to the final Judgment. And in the OT, the unity of the Resurrection is especially clear from Daniel 12:2.³

As in the case of the Parousia, so here: The definite article is highly instructive. Christ, the apostles, and the Jews of Jesus’ day all spoke of *the* Resurrection, as though it were a single brief event scheduled to occur at the end of Salvation History (Mt. 22:28-32, Luke 14:14, John 11:24-25, Acts 17:18, 32, 24:21, 1 Cor. 15:21, 42, Phil. 3:11, 2 Tim. 2:18). Why? Because that is exactly what it is! Yes, a close study of these texts reveals that in most cases the focus is upon the resurrection of the believing righteous; upon resurrection unto eternal life in the new heavens and the new earth. However, this certainly does not entail, or even imply, as some premillennarians assert, that the resurrection of the believing righteous occurs a thousand years prior to the resurrection of the unbelieving wicked. The texts we have just looked at altogether preclude this view. Rather, it simply means that Christ and the apostles like to use the phrase “the resurrection” as shorthand for “the resurrection of all who are righteous by faith in Christ”; they like to use it to set before believers the goal, the hope, and the eternal blessedness towards which they should faithfully strive day and night (Acts 26:6-8, Phil. 3:1).

So then, it certainly appears that the NT constantly assumes and proclaims a single general resurrection of the dead. If so, it is the end of all premillennialism.

3. The One Judgment

Just as there is a single general Resurrection, so there is a single general Judgment (John 5:28-29). As we shall see later, it includes not only all human beings, but also all the angels and the whole physical creation. It is cosmic in scope because it is consummate in purpose.

As in the case of the Parousia and the Resurrection, so here: The use of the definite article is prominent and significant. Our Lord, for example, warned often of “*the* Judgment” (Mt. 5:21-22, 12:42, Heb. 9:22). Drawing upon OT prophecies of the Day of the LORD, he also spoke of “*the* Day of Judgment” (Mt. 10:15, 11:22, 24, 12:36). Peter and John did the same (2 Peter 2:9, 3:7, 1 John 4:7). Paul, preaching to the Athenian philosophers, declared that “God has fixed *a* Day in which he will judge the world in righteousness through a Man whom he has appointed, having furnished proof to all men by raising him from the dead” (Acts 17:31). Later, addressing the Roman governor Felix, he discoursed about “*the* judgment to come” (Acts 24:25). In his letter to the Roman Christians, he wrote of “... *the* Day in which God will judge the secrets of men’s hearts by Jesus Christ” (Rom. 2:16). Meanwhile, Jude, in a manner reminiscent of the OT prophets, thundered about “*the* Judgment of the Great Day” (Jude 1:6; Joel 2:31, Mal. 4:5). And finally, we have the Revelation, wherein we find John purveying visions of “*the* great Day of God, the Almighty” (Rev. 16:14). In all these varied expressions—and especially in the use of the definite article preceding them—we see the Christ-centered unity of the Judgment shining forth with clarity and great power.

The NT gives us a number of didactic passages dealing at considerable length with the Judgment. These include Mt. 25:31ff, Romans 2:3-16, 2 Thessalonians 1:3-12, and 2 Peter 3:1-13. Later we will look closely at each one. Here, however, I would encourage you to look them over now, keeping three crucial questions in mind: (1) Is the author/speaker looking for a *single* judgment; (2) Is he looking for a single *universal* judgment; (3) Is he looking for a single universal judgment *to be accomplished by Christ at his coming*? This little exercise should raise grave doubts about premillennial scenarios, all of which divide the one Judgment into several lesser judgments, thus separating what the Lord and the Scriptures have so clearly joined together (Mt. 19:6)!

4. The One Cosmic Regeneration

Following the Judgment—which includes the destruction of the present heavens and earth by fire (2 Peter 3, Rev. 20:11)—there is a single cosmic Regeneration, or Restoration of All things. In the Regeneration, God will lift the curse that he himself laid upon the natural world, and then create new heavens and a new earth, where he and his redeemed people will live together in perfect wholeness and holiness, forever.

The expression “the Regeneration” occurs only once in the NT. Matthew 19:2 reads, “And Jesus said to them, ‘Truly, I say to you, in the Regeneration, when the Son of man will sit on his glorious throne, you also who have followed me will sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.’” As several related texts reveal, the Regeneration is a discrete eschatological *event*. Here, however, the Lord uses the word to describe *the eternal state that the event will introduce*. Thus, his message is: In the new heavens and the new earth—where all things will have been fully reborn and restored—the twelve apostles will enjoy a privileged role in the administration of the Kingdom. This comports with the promise of Revelation 3:21, which looks, not to a millennial stage of the Kingdom, but to the World to Come; and also with Revelation 21:14, a text that may also hint at the special prerogatives of the twelve apostles in the completed Kingdom (Luke 19:15-19).

If, however, the term itself occurs only once, the *idea* of a single, sudden, cosmic regeneration appears repeatedly. Peter, for example, preaching to his Jewish brethren, urges them to trust in Christ, “... who must remain in heaven until the time comes for God to restore everything, as he promised long ago through his holy prophets” (Acts 3:21, NIV). Here, the Regeneration is styled as a (single) Restoration of all things, a Restoration that will occur at the Parousia of Christ. This is precisely what the apostle describes at much greater length in his second epistle (2 Peter 3:1-13).

As for Paul, he tells us that at the Resurrection, the whole creation will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God (Rom. 8:18-25). In other words, the one Resurrection leads immediately to the one cosmic Regeneration. In Philippians 3:20-21, he says much the same: When Christ returns from heaven, he will exercise his

mighty power to raise the dead; but at that time he will also exercise it “to subject *all* things to himself.” The same idea is also present in 1 Corinthians 15, where Paul tells us that at his Parousia Christ will place all his enemies—including death itself, which is the supreme emblem of the curse—beneath his feet (1 Cor. 15:25, 26-27).

Finally, and quite dramatically, we have the testimony of the writer to the Hebrews. Addressing wavering Christians tempted to depart from the faith, he solemnly admonishes:

See that you do not refuse him who is speaking. For if they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, much less shall we escape if we reject him who warns from heaven. At that time his voice shook the earth, but now he has promised, “Yet once more I will shake not only the earth, but also the heavens” (Haggai 2:6, 21). This phrase, “Yet once more” indicates the removal of those things that can be shaken—that is, created things—in order that those things that cannot be shaken may remain. Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us show gratitude, by which we may offer God acceptable service with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire.

—Heb. 12:25-29

Here the unity of the final cosmic transformation shines forth with extraordinary brilliance. Following Haggai, the writer affirms that God will shake the earth *once* more, and with it the heavens as well. Obviously, this shaking is cosmic in extent. But just in case there is any doubt, he gladly explains further: This shaking will involve the removal of *all* that can be shaken. As verse 29 suggests, here he has in mind the destruction of the present cosmos by fire, a destruction that Peter describes very fulsomely in his second epistle (2 Peter 3:10-12). However, the coming Consummation will also have a creative side, for it will also involve the appearance of “things that cannot be shaken.” In other words, at Christ’s return, God will create new heavens and a new earth, an unshakable Kingdom that will never again be cursed or destroyed (2 Peter 3:13, Rev. 21:1). So then, the writer to the Hebrews hopes for a single Cosmic Transformation; a single Restoration of all (physical) things, just as the OT prophets had promised.

Premillennarians teach that at his Second Coming, Christ will *partially* restore all things; then, at the end of the Millennium, after the (last) Judgment, he will *fully* destroy and *finally* restore all things. However, the NT texts we have just considered do not agree, affirming with one voice the promise of a single Cosmic Restoration at a single Second Coming of

Christ. And as we saw earlier, the Revelation itself has no other view (Rev. 2-3, 7, 14, 20-21).

Summing up, we have seen that the NT clearly and repeatedly teaches the unity of each element of the Consummation: There is one Second Coming of Christ, one Resurrection, one Judgment, and one Cosmic Restoration. We have also seen that if this is so, none of the premillennial scenarios can possibly be true.

The Unity of the Consummation Around the Parousia

Beyond the unity of each element of the Consummation we have the unity of the Consummation as a whole. According to the NT, it is like a wheel whose spokes converge in a single central hub. By God’s design, the several elements of the Consummation are temporally, spatially, and dynamically centered on the glorified Lord Jesus Christ at his Parousia. The table below is designed to illustrate this crucial eschatological idea. Let us take a few moments to consider it carefully.

New Testament Texts: The Christ-Centered Unity of the Consummation									
√ = Explicitly Mentioned (√) = Strongly Implied									
NT Texts: Consummation	Return		Resurrection		Judgment		COSMIC RESTORATION	DELIVERY OF THE KINGDOM	
	COMING	REVEL- ATION	APPEAR- ING	RESUR- RECTION	TRANS- FORMATION	CATCHING UP			MEN & ANGELS
Mt. 13:37-43	√			(√)	(√)	√	√	√	(√)
Mt. 24-25 Mark 13, Lk. 21	√			(√)	(√)	√	√	√	(√)
Luke 17:22-36	(√)					(√)	√	√	
John 5:21-9	(√)			√			√		
Acts 3:19-24	√							√	
Rom. 2:1-16		√					√		
Rom. 8:18-25				√	(√)			√	
1 Cor. 15:20-8 50-58	√			√	√		√	√	(√)
2 Cor. 5:1-10	(√)			√	(√)		√		√
Phil. 3:20-21	√			√	√			√	
1 Thess. 4:13- 5:11	√			√	√	√	√		
2 Thess. 1:3-12	√	√					√		(√)
2 Thess. 2:1-12	√		√				√		
1 Pet. 4:7-19		√					√	√	
2 Pet. 3:3-13	√						√	√	√

As you can see, this table lists, in canonical order, what are arguably the 15 most important NT texts dealing with the Consummation.⁴ A simple

check in the row beside a text indicates that the text explicitly mentions the element of the Consummation beneath which the check appears. A check enclosed in a parenthesis indicates that the text *strongly* implies the presence of the element beneath which it appears. For example, John 5:21-29 explicitly states that Christ will accomplish the Resurrection and the Judgment; it strongly implies that he will do so at his Second Coming, on what he later refers to as “the Last Day” (John 6:39, 40, 44, 54, 12:48).

Note also from the headings above the columns that I have broken down the Consummation into five basic elements: the Second Coming, the Resurrection, the Judgment, Cosmic Restoration, and the Delivering Up of the Kingdom to God the Father. In the case of the Resurrection, there are three sub-elements: the Resurrection of the dead, the Transformation of the living, and the Catching Up of those so raised (or transformed) to the throne of Christ. In the case of the Judgment, there are two sub-elements: the Judgment of men and angels at the throne of Christ, and the Destruction of the present heavens and earth by fire (cosmic destruction). Please recall from the discussion above that the Coming, the Revelation, and the Appearing of Christ are *not* sub-elements of the Second Coming; rather, they are simply different terms used to describe the one Second Coming from slightly different angles.

Let us now consider three ways in which this table helps us to see the unity of the Consummation; a Consummation that is temporally, spatially, and dynamically centered on Christ at his Parousia.

First, we notice that *all* the texts (with the exception of Romans 8:18-25) refer to the Second Coming of Christ, in a few cases implicitly, but in most cases explicitly. This immediately creates a strong presumption that all the other elements of the Consummation occur at the Second Coming, and that Christ is the One who will administer them. In other words, the table exalts Christ as the dynamic center of the Consummation, and his Parousia as the spatial and temporal center of the Consummation. For this not to be the case, it would be necessary to show, from explicit NT teaching, that the words Coming, Revelation, and Appearing do not designate a single Return; that they speak of different events separated in time and space. We have already seen, however, that no such teaching exists, and that the NT does indeed use the three terms essentially interchangeably.

Again I would invite my premillennarian brothers to ponder this with great care. For the message of the table is this: In the 15 most important eschatological texts of the Didactic NT, *there is not a single reference to the multiple resurrections or judgments that premillennialism requires*. Rather, each one states or strongly implies that when Christ raises the dead, transforms the living, catches up all humanity, and judges the world in righteousness, he will do so *at his one Second Coming*. In other words, the table affirms that there is indeed only one Consummation, centered on the one Parousia of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Secondly, our table guides us to a number of *outstandingly* important eschatological texts; important because they explicitly refer to all or most of the elements of the Consummation, and because they depict the Consummation as a single Momentous Event set to occur at the Parousia of Christ.

Earlier I argued that Jesus' parable of the Wheat and Tares was one of the premier eschatological passages in the Bible. Our table helps us to see why: Though short and a bit cryptic, this parable nevertheless refers or alludes to every single element of the Consummation (Mt. 13:24-30, 36-43)! So too does the much longer Olivet Discourse, found in all three synoptic gospels (Mt. 24-25, Mark 13, Luke 21). Finally, note carefully that 1 Corinthians 15, commonly thought to teach more or less exclusively on the Resurrection, actually gives us a startlingly comprehensive picture of the entire Consummation. Again, these three texts are of special importance in that they display the Consummation as a single mega-event centered on Christ at his Coming.

Along these lines, we must not fail to take note of the three long eschatological texts found in 1 and 2 Thessalonians. While it is true that none of them gives us the Consummation as a whole, it is equally true that *between them all* we have what may well be the single most comprehensive picture of the Consummation in the entire NT. And this is to say nothing of all that Paul here tells us about certain events that must *precede* the Consummation. If, then, a good Berean desired quickly to discover the gist of Paul's theology of the Consummation, he could do no better than to read these three texts, and then to follow up with a close examination of 1 Corinthians 15. In so doing, he would arrive swiftly and inescapably at the

conclusion that the great apostle looked for a single Consummation set to occur at the one Parousia of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Thirdly, and very importantly, our table enables us to see that all the NT authors, in all their eschatological statements, presupposed a single, unified Consummation. In order to appreciate this point, take a moment to scan the table again. With the possible exception of 1 Cor. 15, there is not a single text that *explicitly* has Christ administering all the elements of the Consummation at his Parousia. And yet, despite this want of explicit teaching, the chart positively forces us to conclude that there is indeed but a single Consummation. Why? *Because shared references to one or more elements of the Consummation compel us to fill in all the blanks in any given row, and ultimately in the whole table!*

To understand this better, let's consider a few examples.

Our table shows us that in Romans 8:18-25 Paul associates the glorification of nature with the resurrection (and transformation) of the saints.⁵ However, in this particular text he says nothing about who will accomplish these things, when they will happen, and what else will occur when they do. Such a text, standing alone, could therefore lead to eschatological confusion. Happily, our table averts such confusion by requiring us to put checks in *all* the empty fields. Why? Because the table tells us that in 1 Corinthians 15 Paul has much *more* to say about the resurrection and its concomitants. In particular, there we learn that it is Christ himself who will raise the dead, and that when he does he will also glorify the living saints, judge the world in righteousness, root all evil out of his creation, and deliver up the completed Kingdom to God the Father. Thus, 1 Corinthians 15 enables us to fill in the blanks in the row for Romans 8. It enables us to see that Paul presupposed *a single Consummation* in which Christ himself would accomplish all the great eschatological acts and events. And here is the icing on the cake: It also enables us to see that Christ will do this *at his Parousia* (1 Cor. 15:23).

Now let us consider a more controversial example. Our table shows that in 1 Thess. 4:13-5:11 Paul speaks explicitly of the Coming of Christ, the Resurrection, the Transformation of the living saints, the Catching Up of the saints, and the Judgment. As we shall see later, it is altogether fitting for us to regard these verses as a unit. However, our dispensational brethren disagree. They insist upon detaching 4:13-18 from 5:1-11, arguing that the

two texts describe entirely separate events, and that in 4:13-18 Paul is actually unveiling the great NT “mystery” of the Secret Rapture, wherein Christ, unseen and unheard by the world, will unexpectedly return to Earth for His Church and take her to heaven with him prior to a seven year season of global Tribulation. Later we will examine this text closely, to see if it really supports such a view. For the moment, however, let us defer to our dispensational brothers, focus our attention on 4:13-18, and see what light our table might shed upon its true meaning.

If the table included 1 Thess. 4:13-18 standing alone, we would see four check marks beside it, indicating that here Paul speaks of a Coming of Christ, a Resurrection, a Transformation, and a Catching Up. Now, where else in the NT do we see these same four events? Well, we see them in Matthew 13:37-47, a text that closely associates them with the Judgment, Cosmic Destruction, the Restoration of All Things, and the Delivering Up of the Kingdom. Moreover, we find much the same thing in the Olivet Discourse (Mt. 24-25) and in 1 Corinthians 15. In short, our table supplies us with ***three closely parallel passages***, passages that enable us to fill in ***all*** the boxes beside 1 Thess. 4:13-18, and that illuminate Paul’s true eschatological outlook in 1 Thess. 4. Most assuredly, it was not the dispensational outlook. Rather, our table informs us that Paul—like the Master he served—clearly presupposed a single (very visible, very audible, and very public) Consummation at the Second Coming of Christ.

Now let us consider a final example. In John 5:21-29 the Lord says nothing about cosmic destruction, cosmic restoration, or the Delivery of the Kingdom to the Father. He does, however, address the Resurrection and the Judgment. So too does Paul in 1 Corinthians 15. Paul, however, associates the Resurrection and the Judgment with cosmic destruction, cosmic restoration, the Delivery of the Kingdom ... and associates all of these with the Parousia, as well! Similarly, Peter, like his Master, speaks of the Judgment. But like Paul, he also associates it with cosmic destruction, cosmic restoration ... and the Parousia (2 Peter 3:1-13). We see, then, that Jesus, Paul, and Peter were all referring to the same multi-faceted Momentous Event, but describing it from different angles, for different purposes, and with different emphases.

The upshot of all this is clear: These 15 texts are *parallel*. All the texts—and all the writers who wrote them—are referring to the same

Momentous Eschatological Event. How do we know this? Again, we know it because none of the writers ever said a single word about multiple Comings and multiple Consummations. But beyond this, we know it from the way in which their statements overlap one another. We know it because shared references to one or more elements of the Consummation positively force us to conclude that all the NT writers do indeed presuppose a single Consummation set to occur at the one Parousia of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Conclusion

Our theme in this chapter has been the design, structure, and unity of the Consummation.

We began by defining the Consummation as the goal or wrap-up of Salvation History, and also as the cosmic hinge upon which the present evil age swings into the Age (or World) to Come.

Next, we explored the design of the Consummation. We saw that here God means to: (1) bring the present evil age to a close, (2) vindicate the truth of the Gospel, (3) secure an administration of perfect justice through the final judgment of all men and angels, (4) complete the redemption of all who are in Christ, and (5) bestow the maximum possible glory upon his beloved Son.

With regard to the glorification of his Son, we saw that God will accomplish this by making Christ the living center of the Consummation. It is Christ, at his Parousia, who will administer all the great eschatological acts and events, all at once, in the sight of all men and all angels, and with an eternal impact upon all creation. In other words, the Consummation will be dynamically, temporally, and spatially centered on him whom the Father delights to honor: the High King of Heaven at his Return (Esther 6:9, 11, John 5:23).

Concerning the unity of the Consummation, we have seen that it is manifold: *Each* of its elements is marked by unity, and *all* of its elements are marked by unity, since all are tightly woven around Christ at his Second Coming. Moreover, we saw that all 15 of the New Testament's most important eschatological texts agree!

However, despite all this good evidence, several important questions remain: Do the texts cited in my table really prove what I claim they prove?

Am I understanding them correctly? What about other interpretations of these passages (e.g., premillennial, preterist, etc.)? And what about other texts; texts that seem not only to support premillennialism, but also to cast a shadow of doubt over the truth of amillennialism?

Desiring *fully* to resolve the Great End Time Debate, I do not want to dodge these important questions. In the next two chapters, we will meet them head on.

Crucial NT Texts Pertaining to the Consummation (1)

THERE ARE ROUGHLY 70 NT texts touching on the Consummation (see Appendix 8). Of these, I reckon 16 to be “crucial,” in the sense that they shed important—even essential—light on one or another element of the Consummation, or upon the Consummation as a whole. My purpose in the next two chapters is to look briefly at each one of them, showing that they do indeed support the classic Reformation eschatology.

My treatment will be limited. I will cite the text, give the gist of it, and then highlight the various ways in which it teaches or confirms the idea of a single, Christ-centered Consummation. When appropriate, I will also interact with other interpretations of the texts, especially premillennial.

Having already delved into the Revelation at length, my focus here will be upon the Didactic NT. That is, I will focus on major Consummation texts found in the Gospels, the Pauline Epistles, and the General Epistles. To save space, I will not usually write out the texts, so please be sure to have your Bible in hand!

1. Preaching to Israel Until the Son of Man Comes

(Mt. 10:23)

In Matthew 10, we find Jesus commissioning his twelve disciples to preach the good news of the Kingdom to Israel (10:1-15), warning them of inevitable persecution, but also promising divine support (10:16-42). Having done all this, he then declares, “Truly, I say to you, you shall not finish going through the cities of Israel before the Son of Man comes” (10:23).

How are we to understand this promise?

Some interpreters, such as George Ladd, appeal to hints of the global evangelistic mission of the Church, and therefore argue that here Jesus had in mind his Parousia at the end of the present evil age; that he is therefore exhorting the Church (for which the Twelve apostles stand as an emblem) faithfully to reach out to God's OT people until he returns.

Others, however, observe that the Lord is in fact speaking to the Twelve; that he is in fact sending them to the cities of Israel; and that they did not in fact finish going through the cities of Israel before he—the High King of Heaven—came, by his providence, to destroy Jerusalem in 70 AD through the Roman general Titus. The exact verbiage of the text seems to support this view. Jesus does not speak here, as elsewhere, of *the* Coming of the Son of Man, which he says will be in the sky, in supernatural power and glory, with all the holy angels, etc. (Mt. 24:37, 37, 39). Rather, he speaks of *a* coming. In other words, he may well be speaking of a lesser coming, a providential coming in which he will judge the nation that has largely rejected him and the Gospel (Mt. 23:38, Luke 13:34-35). Foreseeing this lesser coming, Jesus therefore warns the Twelve: They have only a little time, and so must work quickly, to bring the Gospel to as many of the cities of Israel as they can.

Whichever of these two interpretations is best, both are fully compatible with the amillennial view of the Consummation.^{1,2}

2. The Transfiguration

(Mt. 16:27-17:8, Mark 9:1-13, Luke 9:28-36)

The Transfiguration was a dramatic *didactic* event, meant to teach all God's people important eschatological truths. To understand it, we must recall a related event that occurred just six days prior.

Jesus had been speaking with his disciples about the cost of discipleship (Mt. 16: 24-26). Then, seeking to move them to take up their cross and follow him into Gospel ministry, he reminded them of the Consummation. "The Son of Man," he said, "will come in the glory of his heavenly Father, with all the holy angels, and reward each person according to his works" (Mt. 16:27). Moreover, he concluded by making this mysterious promise: "Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in his Kingdom" (Mt. 16:28). Mark's

Gospel says it this way: "... until they see the Kingdom of God after it has come with power" (Mark 9:1, ESV).

These words were fulfilled at his Transfiguration. Shortly after exhorting them as he did, Jesus took some of his disciples—Peter, James, and John—up to a high mountain, where he suddenly became radiant before them; where Moses and Elijah appeared with him in glory; where God himself appeared to them in a cloud of glory; and where they themselves entered the glory (Luke 9:34)! Truly, there was glory everywhere! All things were shining like the sun in its strength (Mt. 13:43)!

The meaning of all this is as clear as it is thrilling. At the Transfiguration, Jesus was giving his followers a sneak preview of the eternal reward of Christian discipleship; the glorious Kingdom of God; the Kingdom in its full and final form; the Kingdom after it has come with power. But when does this Kingdom appear? Jesus had told them, just six days earlier: It will appear at the Coming of the Son of Man with all the holy angels; it will appear after he raises the dead (as he will Moses), and after he transforms the living (as he did Elijah); it will appear after he recompenses each person according to his works. In short, the completed Kingdom of God will appear at the Parousia, after a general Resurrection and general Final Judgment.

Thus, the three Gospel narratives of the Transfiguration teach us that there is a single Consummation set to occur at the Parousia of Christ.

3. In the Regeneration

(Mt. 19:27-28, Luke 22:28)

This is one of the two or three texts in the Didactic NT to which premillennarians appeal in support of their eschatology. Here they find Jesus saying that in his earthly, millennial Kingdom, the twelve apostles will govern with him over ethnic Israel.

However, this view is problematic. Jesus says, "In *the* regeneration," or, as the ESV translates, "In *the* New World." There is only one such world, ushered in by one cosmic transformation, whereas premillennialism, as we have seen, requires two of each. Furthermore, the premillennial interpretation greatly strains credulity, requiring us to imagine twelve glorified apostles sitting on earthly thrones, ruling over mere men; for if

natural flesh and blood cannot inherit the glories of the Kingdom of God, how likely is it that glorified men will inherit a world of natural flesh and blood (1 Cor. 15:50, Rev. 1:12-17)? Also, why will the Twelve rule over ethnic Israel, and not over their natural constituency, the Church, of which they are the foundation stones (Eph. 2:20, Rev. 21:14)? Surely, then, it is best to conclude that here Jesus speaks of the eschaton, the final state. His message is: In the New World to Come, I will award my twelve apostles a privileged role in the administration of the completed Kingdom of God (Rev. 3:21).

4. The Olivet Discourse

(Mt. 24-25, Mark 13, Luke 21:5ff)

Shortly before his passion, the Lord Jesus sat with his disciples on the Mount of Olives and taught them about the Consummation. All agree that his lengthy discourse, recounted by three of the four Gospel writers, is the single most important dominical teaching on this theme. It is also the most difficult and controversial. If, however, our grip on biblical eschatology is firm, and our understanding of prophetic diction clear, the difficulties are actually quite surmountable and the controversies easily laid to rest.

My approach in this section will be as follows. First, we will look closely at the disciples' Question, a question that both elicited the Lord's reply and determined the prophetic principles by which he gave it. Secondly, we will briefly survey the Discourse itself, using those principles to help us interpret his meaning. Thirdly, we will address some of the more difficult questions involved, even as we interact with different interpretations of controversial passages. And finally, we will summarize our findings, showing how richly they support the amillennial view of the Consummation.

The disciples' Question (24:1-3)

In his final confrontation with the scribes and Pharisees, the Lord Jesus has just predicted—and lamented over—the coming destruction of Jerusalem and the desolation of the house of Israel (23:37-39). As he leaves the temple area, his disciples comment on the grandeur of the buildings. In

reply, he urges a second look, telling them that not one stone will be left upon another. Having often heard their Master teach about his coming to judge the world, and now learning that this judgment involves the destruction of the temple and the city, they quickly surround him on the Mount of Olives, eagerly desiring to know, “When will these things be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the close of the age” (Mt. 24:1-3)?

The Olivet Discourse is Jesus’ answer to this question. But in asking it the disciples have one thing in mind, while in answering it Jesus has another. Rather like John the Baptist a few years prior, the disciples are thinking of a single coming in the near future, when Jesus, acting in God’s power, will bring the present evil age to a close and usher in a global theocratic Kingdom (Mt. 3:11-12). However, with the benefit of biblical hindsight, we know better. We know that Jesus is actually thinking of *two* comings, separated by at least two millennia, yet united by a common character and purpose. The first is a *providential* coming at the hand of the Roman general Titus, a coming that will destroy Jerusalem and seal the abolition of the Jewish theocracy (Mark 11:12-14). The second is a *supernatural* coming at the hand of the glorified Christ, a coming that will destroy the entire evil world system and bring in the World to Come. Knowing all this, Jesus must therefore frame his reply in such a way as to meet the needs of *all* his disciples; the needs of *all* who will be looking for his Coming in glory and the signs that will herald it. In other words, Jesus must now speak to the needs of the generation that will live through the destruction of Jerusalem, the needs of subsequent generations that will experience the sundry tribulations of the Gospel era, and the very special needs of the last generation that will pass through “the greatest tribulation” that must occur immediately prior to his Parousia.

He did so. The fabulously rich result was yet another Kingdom prophecy characterized by *prophetic perspective* (or blending, or foreshortening). Earlier in our journey I spoke of this phenomenon at some length. Prophetic perspective appears when the Holy Spirit refers to two or even three distinct historical events; events widely separated in time, yet blended into a single prophecy because they all share a common character. As we saw, this pattern is especially prominent in certain OT prophecies of the Day of the LORD, wherein the prophets spoke not only of an imminent

local judgment (whether on Israel or her neighboring nations), but also of a final global judgment (Isaiah 2:5-22, 13:1ff, Joel 2:1-20, Zeph. 1:1ff).

Such is the case here. In the Olivet Discourse, the Lord blends predictions of an imminent (and providential) coming of Christ in 70 AD with predictions of an eschatological (and supernatural) coming of Christ at the end of the age. He blends predictions of a local judgment of the city of Jerusalem with predictions of a global judgment of the City of Man; indeed, of the universe itself. Speaking of the Olivet Discourse, C. E. B. Cranfield well says, “Neither an exclusively historical nor an exclusively eschatological interpretation is satisfactory. We must allow for a double reference, for a mingling of historical and eschatological.”³

Bearing this principle in mind and applying it freely, let us now survey the remainder of the Olivet Discourse. I will comment on Matthew’s version, which is the most extensive, but will also reference Mark’s and Luke’s where appropriate.

The Signs of his (twofold) Coming (24:4-28)

Verses 4-28 of chapter 24 give us the *signs* of the Lord’s twofold coming. Here, a notable progression is evident. Verses 4-8 tell of “the beginning of the birth pains.” All throughout the Church era, the world will experience false Christs (5), wars and rumors of war (6), famines and earthquakes (7), and pestilence (Luke 21:11). These are indeed signs of the final Judgment soon to come, and also of the new world that is sure to be born after it. They are not, however, signs that the end—or the birth—is imminent; that it is “right at the door.” To the contrary, they are signs that the end and the birth have not yet come (Mark 13:7). Therefore, when the saints see them, they are not to be deceived, overly excited, or discouraged. Rather, they are to occupy till he does come, interpreting the meaning of the signs to their own generation, so that people may be taught, warned, and saved.

In verses 9-14, the eschatological labor pains intensify. Yes, in most cases the signs mentioned here were fulfilled among first century Christians living in Palestine. However, in this section the accent begins to fall on the middle and later portions of the Church era. The signs mentioned here include persecution, martyrdom (9), apostasy (10), more (and more

deceptive) false prophets (11), increasing lawlessness, corresponding lukewarmness (12), and—on a happier note—the universal proclamation of the Gospel, after which the end (i.e., the Consummation) will come (14). Happy is the man who endures to the end (13).

In verses 15-28 we reach transition. Now the labor is most intense. Now there is great tribulation. Now the Coming, the end, and the birth are indeed at the door. By and large, these predictions again have a double fulfillment. The near-term fulfillment, emphasized by Luke (Luke 21:20-24), is at the coming of Titus and the judgment of the Israelite nation, epitomized in the destruction of their city and their temple. The far-term fulfillment, emphasized by Matthew and Mark, is in the Parousia and the Judgment of the whole world-system; the destruction of the City of Man and its counterfeit “temple” (i.e., its man-made, man-centered religion). As one commentator aptly writes, “The destruction of Jerusalem was a foretaste of the Last Judgment, and so is a sign of the coming wrath.”⁴ Importantly, all three versions of the Discourse clearly refer or allude to both comings and both judgments; contrary to the claims of our preterist brethren, none of them confines its attention to the (providential) coming of Christ in 70 AD.⁵

The prophetic particulars in this section are challenging to interpret, but the overall picture is quite clear. The Lord begins by instructing his disciples to watch for “the Abomination of Desolation, standing in the holy place” (15). Using terminology found in the prophecies of Daniel, he is indeed referring to Titus’ desecration of the temple in 70 AD, but also (and more especially) to the career of the Antichrist, who will attempt to suppress and usurp the worship properly belonging to God (Dan. 11:31, 12:11; 2 Thess. 2:1ff).⁶ Next, he warns the disciples quickly to flee at the sight of these things (16-17). The early Jewish Christians obeyed implicitly, many of them escaping to Pella; perhaps, at the rise of the Antichrist, many latter-day Christians will be led to do similarly. In verses 19-20, the Lord pronounces a woe upon women who are pregnant or nursing in those days, also urging his own followers to pray that their flight may not be in winter or on the Sabbath. These verses seem largely to apply to the siege of Jerusalem (though again, one can readily imagine analogues suitable to the dark days of the Last Battle). However, in the remainder of this section (vv. 21-28), the accent definitely falls upon events set to occur at the end of the age.

In verses 21-22, Christ now warns of “the greatest tribulation,” a tribulation more severe than any the world has ever known, or ever will. The siege of Jerusalem, dire as it was, only pictures it. Here, then, Jesus primarily has in mind the manifold judgments that will fall upon nature and society in the last of the last days; judgments designed to warn the whole world of the wrath that is very shortly to come. However, the Lord has already hinted that he also has in mind the severe persecution that will befall the Church during the Last Battle (9). Happily, because of his love for the elect, God will cut those dark days short (22).

With the greatest tribulation especially in view, the Lord now issues solemn warnings to all his followers (23-26). Do not be taken in by false Christs or false prophets, even if they can perform miracles (24-25). If anyone claims that the Christ is already upon the earth, do not believe him (23, 26). Always remember that the true Christ will descend from heaven, illuminating earth and sky like a lightning bolt on a stormy night (27-28). On that Day, do not be found as vultures gathered on a dead carcass. That is, do not be found feasting on the religious rot of the Antichrist and his false prophets; or, alternatively, do not be found as objects of wrath, upon which the angels will fall in judgment (28; Ezek. 39:4, Rev. 19:17, 21). Instead, be found looking up to heaven, eagerly watching and waiting for the glorious return of your King (Luke 21:28)!

The Parousia (24:29-31)

These three verses are the summit of the Olivet Discourse. Everything prior leads up to them, everything following flows down from them. Since they do not reference the Resurrection or the Judgment (25:31-40), they do not give us the Consummation as a whole; nevertheless, they do give us the Agent of the Consummation as a whole: the High King of Heaven at his Parousia.

With the same passion and urgency by which he brought his discourse on the mysteries of the Kingdom to a close, our Lord here represents the Parousia as cosmic in its scope and climactic in its impact on man and nature (Mt. 13:51). Let there be no misunderstanding: This is the absolute end of the former world, and the absolute beginning of the new. Accordingly, just prior to his appearing, the break-up of the old cosmos will

begin. There will be signs in the sun, moon, and stars; upon the earth there will be dismay among nations, and great perplexity at the roaring of the sea and its waves; men's hearts failing them for fear and for the expectation of the things now coming upon the earth (Luke 21:26-26). Finally, God will set the stage: He will completely extinguish the luminaries so that darkest night falls upon the cosmos. At that point, all will be in readiness for the glorious appearing of the one true Light of the World (29).

Verses 30-31 give us the Parousia itself, while 25:31-46 give us the Last Judgment that will immediately ensue. Here, then, (in vv. 30-31) he has in view the lead-up to the Last Judgment. However, he does not go into great detail. In part, this is because he has already given the disciples many of the details; in part, it is because he will give them still more after his departure (John 16:13). In what follows, I will therefore draw upon both of those streams of NT revelation to suggest what our Lord likely had in mind when, in the Olivet Discourse, he spoke of his Parousia.

First, "the sign of the Son of Man" appears in the sky. Probably, this is the brightness of the glory clouds that attend him; if not, its exact nature remains undisclosed (30). Next, Christ himself appears, proceeding steadily towards the earth upon "clouds" (i.e., visible manifestations) of the Father's power and glory, with all the holy angels at his side (30; 25:31, Rev. 14:14f). As he draws nearer still, there is a cry of command, the voice of the archangel, and the sound of a great trumpet (31; 1 Thess. 4:16). At this, all people who have ever lived hear the High King's voice, rise from the dead, and come forth from the graves (John 5:28-29, 1 Thess. 4:13-17, Rev. 20:13). Also, the Lord himself transforms and glorifies the bodies of the living saints (1 Cor. 15:50-54, 1 Thess. 4:17). Henceforth, *every* eye is beholding him: The saints of all ages, who marvel and rejoice; and the hostile and unbelieving of all ages, who mourn and recoil in terror (30; Mt. 26:64; 2 Thess. 1:10; Rev. 1:7, 6:16). As they all watch, the holy angels now fly earthward to their appointed task of harvesting the earth. First, they gather in God's elect, catching them up into the air and bringing them safely to Christ's right hand (31, 41; Mt. 24:40-41, Thess. 4:13-17, Rev. 11:12, 14:14-20).² Then they gather the wicked, possibly casting them immediately into the (newly created) Lake of Fire, but probably bringing them first to the (left hand of the) Judgment Seat of Christ (Mt. 13:41-42, 25:33, Rev. 14:14-20). The earth and its works below are now being consumed with fire

(2 Peter 3:8-13, Rev. 20:11). Christ is enthroned in glory at the center of the universe (25:31:ff, Rev. 20:11-15). All men and all angels are assembled before him (2 Cor. 5:10). The Judgment of the Great Day has begun (Jude 1:6).

The Lesson of the Fig Tree (32-35)

In a moment, the Lord will conclude his Discourse by describing the Judgment itself (25:31ff). However, in light of the unspeakable weightiness of the Consummation here in view, he must first issue a number of exhortations. He begins by pressing upon his disciples the importance of carefully watching for the signs of his Coming. To this end, he bids them learn a lesson from the fig tree: When they see it put out its leaves, they know summer is near. Likewise, when they see “all the things” he has just spoken of, they are to know that the Parousia is near, even at the door (32-33). In other words, when there is a confluence of *all* the signs, including those that specially belong to the end of the age (15-28), they are to understand that their full redemption—the manifestation of the Kingdom in its full and final form—has drawn nigh (Luke 21:28, 31).

Verses 34-35 are difficult and controversial. Here Jesus solemnly assures his disciples that “... this generation will not pass away till all these things take place.” What does he mean by “all these things”? Verse 33 makes it clear he has in mind the *signs* he has spoken of, *but not the Parousia itself*. What does he mean by “this generation”? Certainly he means the people living in his day, the people who will experience Titus’ invasion and the lead-up to it; for *in one form or another* they did indeed see “all these things.” We know, however, that here too Jesus is using prophetic perspective to speak to his whole Church. Therefore, we also know that “this generation” must mean something more, something larger. On this score, some interpreters argue that he means “this race of unbelieving Jews.” Others say he is referring to unbelieving humanity as a whole, of which the wicked, evil, adulterous, faithless, and perverse generation of Jesus’ Jewish contemporaries stands as a type (Mt. 12:39, 45, 17:17). Still others suggest that he is referring to the whole human race: the beloved, sinful, but eminently redeemable “generation” of Adam and Eve. Given the Lord’s global and cosmic perspective in this passage, I favor the

latter view. In any case, the practical thrust of the saying is clear, and made explicit in verse 35: As surely as his words will never pass away, so surely will all these things be fulfilled—and then the end will come.⁸ Amidst all their tribulations, the saints must reckon it to be so, and take heart.

A Day Unknown and Unexpected (36-44; Luke 17:26-27)

Here, the exhortations begin. In essence, they come to this: Stay awake (24:36-25:13) and stay busy (25:14-30)! In this section, the emphasis is on staying awake. Why must the disciples always keep alert? Jesus gives us two main reasons. First, no one—not even the Son himself (at least in the state of his humiliation)—knows the day or hour of his Parousia (36). By God’s good decree, the saints do not know *the exact time* of his coming, in order that they may be ready *at all times* for his coming. Secondly, as it was prior to the Flood, so it will be prior to the Parousia: People will be spiritually asleep, conducting business as usual, unaware of the disaster that is at the door (37-42). In such an environment, it will be all too easy for believers to slumber as well (Luke 18:8). Ominously, the Lord warns that if certain people *had* known the hour of his coming, they would have prepared themselves, so destructive were the results of that visitation. Let no saint be among them; let every saint stay on the alert (43-44).

Three Parables of the Judgment (24:45-25:30)

Jesus’ exhortations continue in the form of three parables focusing on the Last Judgment: the Parable of the Servants (24:45-51; Luke 12:42-46), the Parable of the Ten Virgins (25:1-12), and the Parable of the Talents (25:14-30; Luke 19:12-27). Very importantly, all three clearly reveal his underlying assumptions about the structure of the Kingdom and the Consummation. Soon, via Calvary, the Master, Bridegroom, and King of his people will journey to the far country of heaven (25:14; Luke 19:12, 20:9). Once there, he will be delayed for a long time (24:48, 25:5,19). Though necessary, this delay is dangerous, exposing his followers on earth to various temptations. Therefore, let them always remember: In the end, he *will* return to settle accounts with those who call themselves his own. When he does, he will richly reward the watchful, faithful, and diligent, welcoming them into his eternal Kingdom (25:34); but the foolish, wicked,

and lazy he will judge, appointing them their proper portion in hell with the hypocrites and unbelievers (24:51, 25:41; Luke 12:46). Thus, in all three parables Jesus shows that he presupposes a simple two-staged Kingdom, separated by a single Consummation at his Parousia. He also shows how much he desires his disciples to remain alert and faithful, so that at his Coming—when the Resurrection and the Judgment occur at last—they may fully and finally enter into the joy of their Lord (25:21, 23)!

The Last Judgment (25:31ff)

Having issued both promises and warnings, the Lord now completes what he began in his description of the Parousia, bringing the Olivet Discourse to a close with his most extensive teaching on the Last Judgment. It will occur at his Coming, when he arrives in the skies above the earth with all his holy angels (31). It will be universal in scope: Having raised the dead, all nations of all people of all time will be gathered before him (32; John 5:28-29, Acts 24:15, 1 Cor. 15:23, 2 Cor. 5:10, Rev. 20:13). It will involve a final separation (32-33): Those who loved and served his brethren, he will welcome into the Kingdom prepared for them before the foundation of the world (34-40); those who did not, he will turn into Gehenna, the eternal (lake of) fire prepared for the devil and his angels (who are judged at this time as well) (41-42). Contrary to dispensational teaching, Jesus' "brethren" are not the (tribulation) Jews. Rather, as he himself taught, they are loyal believers in Christ, whether Jew or Gentile (Mt. 10:42, 12:48-49). Those who received them received Christ, and so became Christians themselves (Mt. 10:40-42).⁹ Finally, the Judgment will send all men to their eternal destiny: The wicked will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life (46). Clearly, this is not a partial or preliminary judgment, ushering in a temporary earthly millennium. No, this is the one final, universal judgment that ushers in the eternal Kingdom of God.

Questions and Answers

The Olivet Discourse raises a number of questions that have troubled modern Christians, in some cases opening a door to unorthodox views of

the Consummation. Let us take a moment to examine three of the most important.

1. What exactly did Jesus have in mind when he spoke of “a great tribulation” (24:21)?

Above, I suggested that he had in mind a brief season just prior to his Coming at the end of the age, a season characterized by unprecedented judgments upon the world and unprecedented persecution for the Church; it is a season pictured by the fall of Jerusalem, but not (fully) fulfilled in it. Here, I want to stress the fact that our Lord did not tell us how long this tribulation will be, only that God has cut it short for the sake of the elect. This is the biblical pattern. There is not a single biblical text telling us the duration of “the greatest tribulation”. For over 150 years, dispensationalists have taught that it will last three and a half years. We have seen, however, that they base their assertion on a faulty exegesis of Daniel 9. Also, we have seen that in the Revelation there is nothing whatsoever to justify such a notion. The “Great Tribulation” of Revelation 7:14 is the present evil age as a whole, out of which God has taken his suffering but faithful elect—both Old Testament and New—so that they might dwell with him in the World to Come. As for the permutations of three and a half, found throughout the Revelation, they all refer symbolically to the Era of Proclamation as a season of tribulation and sustenance for Christ’s pilgrim Church. If, then, we wish to speak of “the Great Tribulation”, we shall have to be very careful about defining our terms!

2. Does Jesus really teach that his Parousia is “imminent,” in the sense that it could come “at any moment?”

We have seen that in the Olivet Discourse the Lord told his disciples that no one except the Father knows the day or hour of his Coming (24:36); that he will come at a time when neither the world (24:38-39) nor the saints (24:40-43) expect him; and that his Coming will indeed catch certain professing believers unawares (24:45-25:13). From texts like these, some have concluded that true watchfulness requires the saints to believe that Christ could return *at any moment*. However, this is not at all what the Lord had in mind; indeed, he had in mind quite the opposite. As Mt. 24:23-28

makes clear, Jesus understood that faith in an “any moment return” sets the saints up for all kinds of “winds” of prophetic doctrine, one of which powerfully blew through the church at Thessalonica (2 Thess. 2:1-3). Therefore, his point here—and Paul’s in 2 Thessalonians 2—is to insist that he will *not* return until certain definite signs appear on the historical horizon. When the saints see them, they will still not know the day or the hour of his Coming; but they *will* know—or at least very strongly suspect—that the day and hour have drawn nigh. So then, Christians are indeed to watch: *for the signs*, signs that could quite suddenly appear on the stage of world history, with the return of their Lord following close behind (24:32-33, Mark 13:37).¹⁰

3. If, at the end, the world is going through “the greatest tribulation”, how can the Parousia spring as a trap on people going about business as usual?

The Olivet Discourse predicts both of these developments: unprecedented upheavals in nature and society, but also people eating, drinking, working, and marrying as usual, apparently oblivious to the Judgment coming their way. How can we reconcile these seemingly contradictory phenomena? The best answer, I think, is to recall that Jesus spoke of the latter-day tribulation in terms of birth pains (24:28). Birth pains come in waves, with each one more intense than its predecessor. It seems reasonable, then, to conclude that as the end approaches, the birth pains will intensify, yet still be marked by ebb and flow. Immediately prior to the end, they will ebb. Then, when the world says, “Peace and safety!” (presumably because of the power and promises of the Antichrist) sudden destruction will come upon them as (transitional) labor pains come upon a pregnant woman, and they will not escape (1 Thess. 5:3).

Summary

Because of its great importance and difficulty, I have lingered long over the Olivet Discourse. In a few words, what have we learned? Simply this: When we understand that Jesus was answering the disciples’ Question in prophetic perspective, and when we closely examine how he answered it, we immediately see once again his underlying assumptions about the

structure of the Kingdom and the Consummation. To be specific: He sees the Kingdom as coming in two simple stages, separated by a single Consummation at his Parousia. The first, which is coextensive with his heavenly reign, is a lengthy but finite season of mission, testing, judgments, signs, persecutions, and Kingdom growth. The second is an eternal season, whether of reward in the World to Come, or retribution in the fires of Gehenna. Fittingly enough, the two stages are separated by a single Consummation that is cosmic in scope and climactic in its impact on man and nature. It will include the appearance of the glorified Son of Man in the darkened skies above the earth, a general resurrection of the dead, the transformation of the living saints, the gathering of all men and angels before the throne of Christ, the last Judgment, and the inauguration of the eternal Age to Come.

This is the premise of the Olivet Discourse; this is the teaching of the Olivet Discourse; this is the premise and teaching of all NT eschatology; and this is the premise, teaching, and heart of amillennial faith.

5. I Will Come Again

(John 14:1-3)

This is one of the most comforting eschatological texts in all of sacred Scripture. It is also one of the most controversial, since here dispensationalists find a primitive revelation of “the Rapture,” the secret coming of Christ in which he will allegedly resurrect and glorify his Church, and then remove her to heaven immediately prior to a seven year Tribulation. Let us once again examine the text itself—this time a bit more closely—and then address the dispensational argument.

The disciples are troubled. Jesus has just said that one of them will betray him (13:21-30), and that another, their leader, is about to deny him three times (13:37-38). Worst of all, he has told them that soon he will go away to his Father, and that they themselves cannot (yet) join him (13:33, 36). Aware of their fears (and forgetful of his own), he therefore devotes what remains of the Upper Room Discourse to preparing and encouraging them for all that lies ahead.

He opens with three commands: “Let not your hearts be troubled: Believe in God, believe also in me” (1). The antidote to their fears—and to

ours—is implicit trust in the character, sovereignty, promises, and salvation of God; and not only of God, but also of his Christ, in whom all of these precious gifts and remedies are found (2 Cor. 1:20).

Next, he makes a very special promise, a promise designed to cheer their hearts and further strengthen them in the face of their fears:

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 take you to myself, that where I am you may be also.

—John 14:2-3

To receive the extraordinary comfort of these words, we must understand Jewish marriage customs, for they were very much in Jesus' mind when he thus spoke. Broadly, an ancient Jewish marriage had three components. First came *the betrothal*. Here the parents of a young man arranged a suitable marriage for their son. This involved the father paying a certain “price” to the bride's parents, after which the families usually exchanged gifts and drank a cup of wine to seal the marriage covenant. At this point, the couple was legally married. Next there came *a period of waiting*. During this time, which could be quite lengthy, the groom prepared a house (or rooms) for his bride, sometimes on his father's estate. Meanwhile, the bride prepared herself to live and serve with her husband as a skillful keeper of his home. Finally, there came *the wedding ceremony*. At night the groom and his friends would make their way through the streets to the bride's house in a joyful procession. When they arrived, she and her maids would then join the groom, usually returning to his father's house for the marriage ceremony, the marriage feast, the consummation of the marriage, and more festivities when the couple emerged from the *chuppa*, or bridal chamber, to rejoin the party. Henceforth, they would live together as husband and wife.

Time would fail us to comment on the many ways in which the Holy Spirit drew upon these ancient customs to depict the great Romance of Redemption in Scripture. However, for our present purpose there is but one thing needful: to see that here, in John 14:2-3, Jesus was doing so, as well. He knew that at Calvary the Father would pay the Bride-price; he knew that immediately thereafter he would return to his Father's heavenly house to prepare a dwelling place for his Beloved; and he knew that at the appointed

time(s), he would return to receive his Bride to himself, so that she might be with him where he is (Mt. 25:1-13).

We must pause, however, to probe Jesus' words very carefully, for as we are about to see, they are fabulously rich with eschatological meaning.

First, he says, "In my Father's house there are many dwelling places" (14:2). The reference here is twofold : not only to heaven above, but also to the new heavens and the new earth that Christ will create at his return. In this twofold heaven there are (and will be) many dwelling places. In other words, in both of these heavenly realms God has carefully prepared, not physical shelters, but *spiritual niches*; spheres of life and service specially designed for each of his dear children. And there are many such spheres, for the world up above, and the world up ahead, will be filled with a great multitude of people whom no man can number, taken from all nations, tribes, and tongues (Rev. 7:9f). As one commentator aptly put it, "The phrase means that (in the heavenly places) there is room, and room to spare, for all the redeemed of the Lord."

Next, Jesus assures the disciples that "I go to prepare a place for you" (14:2). Again we have a twofold meaning. First, he goes to prepare a place for the saints in heaven above. That is, he enters heaven as their High Priest and Sacrifice, there to make intercession for them, with the result that the Father now can welcome them into heaven as his beloved children (Rom. 8:34, Heb. 6:19-20, 7:25). But secondly, at his return he will create new heavens and a new earth, thus "preparing" an eternal *chuppa* (or dwelling place) for himself and his beloved Bride (Phil. 3:20-21, Rev. 21:1-2).

Finally, Jesus promises all his fearful disciples that "... if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and take you to myself, that where I am you may be also" (14:3). Again, these words are layered with eschatological meaning, meaning that our study has equipped us to see and enjoy. The promise is that Jesus will come again and take his Bride to himself.

William Hendriksen well captures the romantic spirit of these words:

Observe that instead of saying what one might expect him to say, namely, "And when I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and take you to that place," Jesus says something that is far more comforting: "I will take you to Myself (or, to be face to face with me)." So wonderful is Christ's love for his own that he is not satisfied with the idea of merely bringing them to heaven. He must needs take them into his own embrace.¹¹

But how exactly is this romantic promise to be fulfilled? This time our answer is *three-fold*!

First, at the moment of their new birth, Christ will come to his disciples in the Spirit and receive them to himself (John 14:16-18). For the eleven, this occurred on the Day of Pentecost. For the rest of us, it occurs in the centuries following. As a result of this coming, the saints' bodies continue to live and serve the Lord upon the earth, but their spirits are raised to newness of life, so that now they are seated in the heavenly places in Christ (Rom. 6:4, Eph. 2:5-6, Phil. 3:20). Even now they are "with Christ where he is." Even now—though only in a mirror dimly—they behold his glory (John 17:24, 1 Cor. 13:12, 2 Cor. 3:18).

Secondly, at the moment of their physical death, Christ will yet again come to his disciples in the Spirit, this time to take their disembodied spirits to live with him in heaven. In other words, Jesus' words are also fulfilled in the Intermediate State, when the spirits of the departed saints live and reign with Christ in heaven until the Day of his Return (Luke 23:43, 2 Cor. 5:8, Rev. 14:13). This, as we saw earlier, is the true burden of Revelation 20:4-6. In all such texts, the Lord would teach us that throughout the Intermediate State, where he is, we will be also: in heaven itself. But there we will be like him, for there we will see him face to face (1 Cor. 13:12, 1 John 3:2)!

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, Christ will come to his disciples on the Day of his Parousia, when he descends from heaven to raise the dead, judge the world in righteousness, destroy the present earth and its works, and create new heavens and a new earth. When he does, he will take his Beloved Bride to himself one final time, so that henceforth she may be with him *forever* in the glorious new World to Come (Rev. 14:1, 21:1-5).

Here, then, we have a mighty host of reasons why the Bride of Christ must not let her heart be troubled. When fear and sorrow threaten to overwhelm, she is to steady herself by listening afresh to the voice of her heavenly Husband: "Beloved, always remember that in your new birth I have *already* come for you, and that even now you are with me where I am, and always will be. But more than this, never forget that great things are waiting up ahead; that at the moment of your death—and also at the resurrection of the dead—I will come yet again and receive you to myself,

so that where I am—and *as* I am—you may be also. My darling, be faithful until death, for truly, it will be worth the wait!”

The Dispensational View

We have seen that John 14:1-3 harmonizes quite well with amillennial eschatology. How does the dispensational view fare? To find out, let’s begin by hearing John MacArthur on our text:

This is one of the passages that refers to the Rapture of the saints at the end of the age when Christ returns. The features in this description do not describe Christ coming *to* earth with His saints to establish His kingdom (Rev. 19:11-15), but taking believers *from* earth to live in heaven. Since no judgment on the unsaved is described here, this is not the event of His return in glory and power to destroy the wicked (Mt. 13:36-43). Rather this describes his coming to gather his own.¹²

In reply, I would offer the following three observations.

First, if it were true that the rest of the NT explicitly taught a pre-tribulation Rapture, then one would have to admit that this text *could* be referring to it. Certainly, there is little here to rule out the idea of a pre-tribulation Rapture, though the opposite is also true: There is little here positively to affirm it. In other words, the text is something of a blank eschatological slate, amenable to different interpretations. We have seen, however, that the rest of the NT *always* teaches a single Coming of Christ at the end of the age. Therefore, we may be quite certain that this text does *not* refer to a pre-tribulation Rapture. With reference to the end, what it *does* refer to—and *must* refer to—is the one Parousia.

Secondly, MacArthur states that our text does not describe Christ coming *to* earth with his saints to establish his kingdom *on* earth (Rev. 19:11-15). But how can he be so sure of this? Jesus simply says, “I will come again and receive you to myself, that where I am, there you may be also.” Why, then, could Jesus not have in mind a scenario like this: At his final coming for his Bride he descends from heaven with the spirits of the departed saints (Rev. 19:11-15); then he raises them from the dead, joining their spirits to their new resurrection bodies; then he transforms the living saints; then he receives them all to himself in the skies above the earth; and then, following the judgment, he descends with them to the new heavens and the new earth, so that ever after they may be with him where he is (Rev.

21:1-4)? In short, why could Christ not be referring to the Consummation, and to eternal life with his own in the World to Come?

Thirdly, MacArthur says that no judgment on the unsaved is described here, so that this event cannot be Christ's return in power and glory to destroy the wicked. But what if Jesus, in this saying, meant only to describe *one facet* of his Coming: his return in power to consummate the redemption of his Bride and welcome her into the World to Come? What if the destruction of the wicked does indeed occur at this time, but remains unmentioned simply because Jesus desired to focus on comforting his disciples? MacArthur's argument from silence is not persuasive; moreover, any number of NT texts refutes his conclusion by positively affirming that the destruction of the wicked *will* occur at the one Parousia of Christ (Mt. 13:37-43, Mt. 24-25, 1 Cor. 15:20-28, 50-58, 1 Thess. 4:13-5:11, 2 Thess. 1:3-12, 2:1-12, etc.).

We conclude, then, that in this saying Jesus once again presupposes a simple two-staged Kingdom, separated by a single Consummation at his Parousia; that he definitely desires his suffering disciples to take comfort in the thought of being with him in heaven throughout the Intermediate State; but that he also desires them to embrace the Parousia as their supreme eschatological hope. When the heart of the Bride is troubled, she is therefore to think above all of the supreme joy of eternal life with her heavenly Husband at the Marriage Feast of the Lamb (Rev. 19:7).

6. To Every Man According to His Deeds

(Romans 2:1-16)

Among New Testament texts dealing with the Judgment, this is one of the lengthiest and most important. In his grand exposition of the Gospel, Paul has begun by demonstrating Gentile guilt before the God of general revelation (1:18-32). Now he turns to the beneficiaries of God's special revelation, the Jews (2:1ff). He knows they agree that God's judgment rightly falls on Gentile sinners. He wants them to understand, however, that it rightly falls on them as well, since they themselves do the very same things as the Gentiles (2:1-3). It is not the mere possessors of the Law who are justified before God, but the *doers* of the Law—and that mathematical set is empty of all human beings save One (2:13). In sum, without the gift

of Christ's righteousness, the Jews, as well as the Gentiles, are headed for disaster on the Day of Judgment (3:19-20).

I cite this text because it powerfully depicts the Day of Judgment as just that: a *single* Day in which God, through Christ, will weigh and recompense both the motives and deeds of *all* who have ever lived. Paul speaks of it as "*the* day of God's wrath, when his righteous judgment will be revealed" (5). He speaks of it as "*the* day in which God will judge the secrets of men through Christ Jesus" (16). Alluding to its universality, he says that on that day, God will render to *every* man according to his deeds. There will be rich rewards to the (believing) good (7, 10), but terrible retribution to the (unbelieving) evil (8-9), whether Jew or Gentile (11-16). Good and evil, Jew and Gentile: All will be there.

It is, then, virtually impossible to think that here Paul had in mind anything other than a single universal Judgment, to be administered by Christ at his Parousia. If, however, there were any remaining doubt about this, it would quickly be dispelled by consulting other Pauline texts on the same theme, most of which *explicitly* associate the Judgment with the Parousia (Acts 17:31, 1 Cor. 15:20-28, 50-58, 2 Cor. 5:10, 2 Thess. 1:3-12, 2:1-2). Once again the amillennial doctrine of a single general judgment at the Parousia of Christ is abundantly confirmed.

7. The Creation Freed and Lifted into Glory

(Romans 8:18-26)

This is a major NT text dealing with the Regeneration, or the Restoration of All Things. Rightly understood, it is also a mighty bulwark of amillennial eschatology.

Paul has just told the Roman Christians that they are heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, if indeed they faithfully suffer with their Master, so that they also may be glorified with him (17). In order to equip and strengthen them for such suffering, he now sets before their eyes the ultimate eschatological hope of the Church, a hope whose unspeakable blessedness will cause all previous earthly afflictions to pale into insignificance (18). This hope is neither life with Christ in heaven after death, nor even his Parousia at the end of the age. Rather, it is "the glory

that is to be revealed in us.” What exactly does this expression mean? What exactly, for Paul, is the saints’ “ultimate eschatological hope”?

In verses 19-25 he answers. Presently, the whole creation—and especially its various life forms—eagerly waits for the revealing of the sons of God (19). In other words, it eagerly waits for the manifestation, in glory, of the resurrected (or transformed) saints (23; Col. 3:4). But what is the source of this cosmic longing? By way of explanation, Paul takes us back to the beginning. At the fall of Adam, God placed a curse upon the whole creation, subjecting it to the “futility” of natural evil, suffering, and death, all of which have sundered the creation from God’s original purpose for it (20). However, the curse was by no means God’s last word. For even as he subjected the creation to futility, he also placed within it, as it were, a spirit of hope; a spirit that moves all things to yearn for something that he himself has purposed, and that he will one day surely bring to pass: universal release from the fetters of the curse, and a full and final entrance into “the freedom of the glory of the children of God” (21).

For this reason, says the apostle, the creation is like a woman in labor: she groans and suffers, but she does so in hope, hope of an ultimate eschatological rebirth (22). Very importantly, in all of this she and the Church are one. For the Church herself, indwelt by the same Spirit of eschatological hope and desire, earnestly awaits her own rebirth. Paul calls this rebirth “our adoption as sons,” expressly stating that it will occur at the resurrection, when the bodies of the saints, as well as their spirits, are fully and finally redeemed (23; Eph. 1:14). Therefore, let every suffering Christian fully understand and embrace this hope; and despite every obstacle encountered in his pilgrimage through this broken world, let him persevere in faith until he inherits the promise at last (24-25).

The eschatological premises underlying this profoundly comforting passage are both clear and richly applicable to our study. The premises are these: At the sin of the first Adam, God (partially) absconded from his creation and temporarily imposed a dreadful curse upon it. However, at the return of the Last Adam he will *completely* lift the curse, *completely* heal his creation, and *completely* return to it, filling it with his own presence and glory *once and for all* (1 Cor. 15:20-28, 50-58; Phil. 3:20-21).

As for the application to our study, it is found in the words “completely” and “once and for all.” Premillennarians assert that when Christ returns, he

will *partially* lift the curse, and *partially* glorify the world; and that he will do so *temporarily*, for a thousand years, until the final glorification of all things. However, that is not what our text says. Nor is it what Paul says in any of his other letters. What he actually says—both here and elsewhere—is this: When Christ returns to raise, transform, and glorify his Bride, he will raise, transform, and glorify her world—her new and eternal home—as well.

Here, then, is Paul's ultimate eschatological hope: the glorious and eternal World to Come, a world that the High King of Heaven himself will create when he comes again to consummate all things. A shorter, sweeter summary of amillennial eschatology would be difficult indeed to find.

8. Life from the Dead!

(Romans 11:11-36)

Though this passage touches only indirectly upon the Consummation, it is of great importance, since here we encounter yet another outstanding sign of its imminence: the latter-day conversion of ethnic Israel at large, leading swiftly to the Parousia and the Resurrection of the dead. Later, I will touch on some of the practical implications of this unique revelation for Christian life and ministry. First, however, we must examine the text itself, in order to see if this really is the apostle's message.

Introduction

In Romans 9-11 Paul is addressing the problem of Jewish unbelief. Yes, the primitive Church was comprised almost exclusively of Jews, some of whom were laid into her very foundation (Eph. 2:20, Rev. 21:14). Nevertheless, they represented a small minority of the nation. Moreover, once the Gospel overflowed the borders of Israel, multitudes of Gentiles began to receive Christ, while most of the Jews, both inside and outside of Palestine, continued to reject him. So it was in NT times, and so it has been up to the present day: Always there has been a small remnant of believing Jews, while the large majority of Abraham's physical seed continues in unbelief.

From the length and ardor of his remarks on this troubling providence, it is clear that Paul was quite exercised about it, in large part because he knew that the opponents of Christianity would point over and over again to Jewish rejection of the Gospel as a sign of its illegitimacy. Here, then, we find him explaining large-scale Jewish unbelief, clearing himself of charges of anti-Semitism, and equipping believers of all generations to respond wisely to this apparent obstacle to faith.

Four Reasons for Jewish Unbelief

In essence, Paul offers four explanations of the problem of large-scale Jewish unbelief.

First, contrary to present appearances, God's OT predictions that he would create a vast new nation of believers in himself and his Messiah have not failed. Why? Because ". . . they are not all Israel who are descended from Israel" (9:6). In other words, even now God is indeed fulfilling his OT Kingdom promises, but is doing so among *spiritual* Israel. He is doing so in the One New Nation comprised of all believers in Jesus, whether Jew or Gentile (9:1-29; Gal. 6:16, Eph. 2:1ff, 1 Peter 2:9). He is doing so in the Church.

Secondly, despite having heard the Good News of God's free gift of righteousness through simple faith in Christ, the majority of Jews stubbornly cling to the Mosaic Law for right standing with God. They do not realize that the Law was actually fulfilled in Christ, and that it too proclaims righteousness by faith in Christ, rather than by our own obedience to its lofty precepts (9:30-10:21).

Thirdly, God has by no means (altogether) rejected his OT people, since even now he has granted the gift of saving faith to a small remnant of Jews, one of whom is the apostle himself (11:1-10)!

This brings us to Paul's final reason, and the one that concerns us here. He refers to it as a "mystery," a previously hidden truth now revealed through the apostle himself. He also regards it as a vital truth that the Church must never forget. It is this: While, for the moment, the majority of Jews have indeed stumbled over Christ, they have not utterly fallen; while they have indeed been temporarily broken off from the olive tree rooted in father Abraham, it is only so that in the end they may be grafted in again.

Moreover, when God does graft them in again, it will be an event of enormous eschatological significance, for it will mean nothing less than “life from the dead”!

In Romans 11:11-36, Paul explores this mystery at some length. Let us briefly survey his teaching, focusing upon the many different ways in which the apostle seems powerfully to affirm a latter-day conversion of ethnic Jews just prior to the Consummation at Christ’s return.

Israel’s Rejection is not Final (11-16)

In verses 11-12, Paul begins to open up the mystery. Has ethnic Israel stumbled over Christ so as permanently to fall into perdition? By no means (Prov. 24:16)! Indeed, their stumbling is actually part of God’s larger purpose and plan; for through Israel’s trespass, salvation will come to the Gentiles; but then, through the salvation of the Gentiles, salvation will also come to Israel (11)! Moreover, if Israel’s trespass means redemptive riches for the Gentiles, think what their fullness—the incorporation of the full number of elect Jews into the New Covenant Church—might mean (12)! In a moment, Paul will tell us what it means (15). Here, however, only two verses into his meditation, we already are getting a feel for the gist of the mystery: God is not done with ethnic Israel; indeed, he has something great in store for them, something that will herald the end of the age and the advent of the World to Come.

In verses 13-15, Paul pauses to let his Gentile audience in on a strategic secret about his evangelistic ministry: Whenever he ministers Christ to the Gentiles, he makes every effort to magnify (i.e., show off) the joy of his converts, if by any means he might provoke some of his Jewish kinsmen to jealousy, so that they too will desire Christ and be saved (13-14). In so doing, he consciously aligns himself with the purpose and plan of God outlined in verses 11-12.

In verse 15, he gives us still another reason for doing what he does, a reason full of eschatological interest: If Israel’s rejection means spiritual life for the Gentile world, then what will their final acceptance mean, if not “life from the dead”? Obviously, “life from the dead” is something good, and something whose time Paul desires to hasten. But what is it? In the verses ahead, he will answer. There we learn that ethnic Israel’s latter-day return to

the faith of their father Abraham—which is none other than faith in Christ—will mark the completion of God’s redemptive ingathering. It will mark the attaining of the full number of elect Jews and elect Gentiles, the completion of the Body of Christ. But what exactly will happen when this fullness is attained? The One Shepherd, whom the Father appointed to gather his one flock, has told us: “This Gospel of the Kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come” (Mt. 24:14, John 10:16).

So then, for Jesus the completion of the evangelistic ministry of the Church brings “the end,” the Consummation; and for Paul, the completion of that same ministry—which is marked by a final ingathering of ethnic Israel—brings “life from the dead.” Should we not therefore conclude that “life from the dead” means exactly what we thought it meant when we first read this text, and exactly what many commentators take it to mean: the Resurrection of the Dead? If so, the latter-day conversion of ethnic Israel is indeed a great sign: a sign that the Parousia, the Resurrection, the Judgment, and the World to Come are at hand, even at the door!

The Mystery of the Wild Olive Tree (17-24)

In verses 16-25 the apostle elaborates on these ideas, but with a special pastoral emphasis. He desires that his Gentile readers should never become “puffed up” against ethnic Israel. To the contrary, he wants them fully to appreciate God’s “unfathomable” strategy for forming the Body of Christ, the gratuitousness of their salvation, his abiding love for ethnic Israel, and his ultimate purpose for the same, so that they (i.e., Gentile believers) may walk in due humility, gratitude, and holy fear with respect to their own salvation; and also in abiding love for—and ministry to—the Jews.

He sounds this theme in verse 16: If the dough offered as first fruits is holy, so too is the whole lump; if the root is holy, so too are the branches. Though the words are cryptic, the context makes the meaning clear: If God regarded Abraham—the physical father of ethnic Israel—as holy, then surely he still regards Abraham’s children as holy. But how can this be, seeing that Israel is presently in large-scale unbelief? Already, Paul has begun to unveil the answer: ***In God’s heart and in his redemptive plans he has set them apart.*** He is not done with them. Abraham’s salvation was, as

it were, a guarantee of great things to come: the salvation of “the whole lump,” the restoration of beloved “branches” temporarily broken off.

Very much liking the metaphor of the olive tree, Paul now develops this motif at some length (17-24). In verses 17-18 he asks: “How appropriate is it for you Gentiles to be puffed up against poor fallen Israel, when the Jews belong naturally to the divinely cultivated tree that is Abraham’s family, whereas you, like branches cut from a wild olive tree, have been grafted into Abraham’s tree ‘contrary to nature’ (24; 9:3-5)? Moreover, if you are not yet duly impressed by the sheer gratuitousness of your salvation, then consider this as well: God did not launch and develop his redemptive program for the world from among you Gentiles. No, he launched it from father Abraham, and developed it among Isaac, Jacob, Moses, and David; he launched and developed it from the Jewish ‘root’ that in these last days, by God’s mere good pleasure, presently supports you in your saving faith in Christ (Eph. 2:11-13)!” In a moment, Paul will bring this line of reasoning to its conclusion, but already it is easy to see what the conclusion will be: “Since it is only natural for the natural branches to belong to the cultivated olive tree, ***it is certain that one day soon they will!***”

Anticipating persistent Gentile contempt for unbelieving Israel, Paul uses verses 19-22 to bring yet another argument, and to unveil yet another (aspect of the) mystery. Yes, it is true that Jewish branches were broken off so that Gentile branches could be grafted in (19). But why should this be an occasion for Gentile haughtiness? Who, after all, left Israel in (temporary) unbelief (11:7)? And who, after all, granted the Gentiles the grace of faith (20; 9:16; Eph. 2:8-9)? The answer is clear. But in case they doubt God’s absolute sovereignty in salvation, let puffed up Gentiles consider this mystery as well: Just as God has broken off Jewish branches in order to make room for Gentile branches, so too in days ahead will he break off Gentile branches in order to make room for Jewish (20-21)! For modern Christians living in the West, this is a sobering thought indeed: The ingathering of ethnic Israel will apparently be preceded by the large-scale collapse of historic Christendom (Luke 18:8). Therefore, let every Gentile believer in Jesus humble himself. Let him cultivate holy fear, gratitude, and compassion. And by all means, let him continue in God’s kindness, lest he too should fall (20, 22).

In verses 23-24, Paul prepares us for the full unveiling of the mystery of God's plan for ethnic Israel. Their current unbelief is not set in stone (23). God is well able to graft them in again (23). Moreover, we are wise to expect that he *will* graft them in again, seeing that they, unlike the Gentiles, belong naturally in the cultivated olive tree that is the family of father Abraham (24).

The Mystery Unveiled (25-27)

In verses 25-27, Paul reaches the climax of his discourse, wherein the mystery is now openly proclaimed. It is this: ***A partial hardening has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in*** (25). Having already spoken at length about God's intention to restore Israel, he leaves it to us to draw the obvious conclusion: When Christ has finally gathered in the full number of elect Gentiles, he will then turn his attention to ethnic Israel at large, soften their hearts to the Gospel, and bring them into the New Covenant. ***“And thus (i.e., when the fullness of the Gentiles has been attained) all Israel (i.e., latter-day ethnic Israel at large, joining elect Jews of previous generations) will be saved”*** (26). In other words, at this point “the fullness” of the Gentiles and the fullness of ethnic Israel will have come in (12). Small wonder, then, that Paul associates that happy day with “life from the dead” (15)!

Support for this line of interpretation is found in the rest of verses 26-27. Here Paul cites from—and boldly modifies—a number of OT Kingdom prophecies, but chiefly Isaiah 59:20-21 (cf., Isaiah 27:9, Jer. 31:33-34). Again, he is not speaking here of the Parousia (as some premillennarians assert), for the NT is clear that the Parousia will bring conversion to no one, whether Jew or Gentile. Rather, it will simply ratify one's response to the Gospel throughout the Era of Proclamation, whether by reward or retribution. Moreover, all throughout this passage Paul has been speaking of the grafting of ethnic Israel back into the olive tree of the *spiritual* family of father Abraham—the very same kind of grafting that the Gentiles have experienced *by faith*. We conclude, then, that here Paul has in mind the latter-day conversion of ethnic Israel at large under the preaching of the Gospel (cf. v. 23). To paraphrase it as he might: By the Spirit, and through the preaching of the Gospel, the Deliverer will come to ethnic Israel from

the Zion above; when he does, he will grant them faith in himself; and when they believe, he will take away their sins and remove from them all ungodliness, through the great New Covenant gifts of justification, sanctification, and glorification (8:29-30).

In passing, we should note that some commentators interpret verses 26-27 as referring to the Parousia and the final “salvation” (i.e., the glorification) of the Church, which is the spiritual “Israel of God,” comprised of Jew and Gentile (Gal. 6:16). However, while this view is fully compatible with amillennial eschatology, I do not favor it. Throughout chapter 11 Paul’s concern has been to predict ethnic Israel’s restoration to the olive tree, which must come by faith in the message preached, and which cannot come at the Parousia (20, 23; 10:17; Rom. 10:14f, 1 Cor. 1:21). At his Parousia, Christ does not take away sins; he glorifies saints (v. 27). Also, verses 28-32 seem to rule out this interpretation, for here too we find Paul speaking, not of the Church as a whole, but of ethnic Israel.

The Mystery Summarized (28-32)

In verses 28-29, the apostle briefly summarizes what has gone before. From the point of view of the historical progress of the Gospel, the (majority of the) Jews are now God's enemies, so that God may make friends of the Gentiles. But from the point of view of divine election, this situation cannot continue indefinitely. For just as God loved father Abraham, so He loves his physical children, the Jews. Just as God chose father Abraham, so he has chosen (many of) his physical children, the Jews (28). Electing love does not change. Therefore, the gifts and calling of God towards ethnic Israel do not change: They are irrevocable (29).

In verses 30-32 Paul draws out the eschatological implications of these great truths. In his wise purpose and plan, God had previously “shut up” (i.e., imprisoned) the sinful Gentiles in disobedience by means of his Law written on their hearts, while Israel enjoyed his special mercies under the Old Covenant (Rom. 1:18ff). Now, however, under the New Covenant, he has shut up sinful Israel in disobedience through their rejection of the Gospel, so that the Gentiles may be shown mercy. But that is not the end of the story. For through the mercy now being shown to the Gentiles, he is now showing—and will soon show in far greater measure—mercy to the

Jews, first provoking them to jealousy, and then to salvation in Christ (Acts 28:28)! Thus, surveying the vast course of the ages, we see that the sovereign God has shut up both Jew and Gentile in disobedience, so that in his own times and ways he may have mercy on both (31). But in all this we also see his abiding love for—and election of—ethnic Israel, whom, under their Messiah, he has made to be the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End, of Salvation History!

The God of the Mystery Glorified (33-36)

The revelation of these decrees, which raises as many questions as it answers, utterly abases the finite human mind. Such things cannot be (fully) understood, but—among God's grateful elect, both Jew and Gentile—they can be adored. And indeed that is one of God's great purposes in revealing them. Small wonder, then, that at the close of this towering meditation on the redemptive purpose and plan of God, the apostle is flat on his face, undone by His unsearchable wisdom, knowledge, and judgments, but also raised to the glad and grateful worship of the One who is sovereign over all things (33-36)!

Conclusion

We have seen that in this challenging text the apostle speaks over and over again of a great NT mystery. Just prior to the Parousia, when the fullness of the Gentiles has come in, God will turn again to his Old Covenant people. By Christ, through the Spirit, and through the proclamation of the Gospel, he will again visit ethnic Israel at large, open their spiritual eyes, and grant them saving faith in their Messiah. He will draw them into the Eternal Covenant, so that spiritually, as well as physically, they may be the children of their father Abraham (4:1ff). When this happens, it will mean “life from the dead.” With the full harvest now in, the High King will be free to descend from heaven, raise the dead, judge the world in righteousness, and bring in God’s eternal Kingdom in its full and final form.

For a number of reasons, this is vital information for the (largely Gentile) Church of our day. Again, it keeps us humble and makes us grateful. It fills us with compassion and hope for our Jewish neighbors. It moves us afresh to pray for them, and to reach out to them, and to all men

(10:1). Finally, it supplies us with one of the most important signs of the imminence of our Lord's Parousia. Let us therefore stay on the alert. For when at long last we see the great mass of world Jewry turning to Christ, we can lift up our eyes, knowing that our redemption—even life from the dead—has drawn near!¹³

9. Behold, I Tell You a Mystery!

(1 Corinthians 15:50-58)

In the course of our journey, we have seen that 1 Corinthians 15 is one of the top two or three eschatological texts in the Didactic NT. Like the parable of the Wheat and the Tares (Mt. 13), the Olivet Discourse (Mt. 24), and Paul's eschatological remarks to the Thessalonians, it touches on every aspect of the Consummation. Moreover, as I argued earlier, verses 20-28 are of special importance in establishing NT eschatology, supplying as they do Paul's most explicit teaching on the structure of the Kingdom of God. Examining it carefully, we found that he, like his Master, understands the Kingdom as appearing in two simple stages, separated by a single Parousia of Christ. And we found that this understanding positively precludes the twin premillennial theses of a three-staged Kingdom and two or more comings of Christ.

We have not, however, dealt at any length with verses 50-58, wherein Paul unveils, for the first time, the "mystery" of the transformation and glorification of the living saints at Christ's Parousia. Since this text is both fascinating and relevant to our study, let us take a moment to examine it more closely.

In verse 50 Paul begins by supplying the rationale for God's glorifying the bodies of his saints at the Parousia (23): Mere flesh and blood, as presently constituted, could not possibly survive the weight of glory that will pervade the (consummated) Kingdom that Christ will introduce. The earthly bodies of the saints must be conformed to their new heavenly environment. To live in the Sun, one must be a creature of fire.

Paul's teaching here clearly rules out the premillennial scenario, which explicitly asserts that at his coming Christ will introduce a temporary kingdom that *is* to be inhabited by "flesh and blood" (e.g., children, tribulation Jews, tribulation converts, etc.). Note also that Paul refers to the

coming Kingdom as *incorruptible*. As with the saints' future bodies, so with their future world: Because both are glorious, both are incorrupt; because they are incorrupt, they are eternal, unchanging, and imperishable. Again, this leaves no room for that strange mingling of the temporary and the eternal, the corruptible and the incorruptible, that fills the premillennarian's dreams.

In verses 51-52 Paul unveils the new eschatological mystery. It is this: Not all the saints will sleep the sleep of death (though in the case of those who do, it is only their bodies that will sleep, for throughout the Intermediate State their souls will be awake in heaven with Christ); but all the saints *will* be changed (i.e., glorified). In other words, immediately after the resurrection of the dead, the living saints—those “who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord”—will simply, and *very* suddenly, be changed, glorified (1 Thess. 4:15). Here then we find Paul elaborating on verse 23, explaining in greater detail exactly what will happen to *all* “... who are Christ's at his coming.” Observe carefully that this great transformation occurs not simply at the Parousia, but also at *the last trumpet*, which Paul clearly assumes to be *simultaneous* with the Parousia (52; Mt. 24:31, 1 Thess. 4:16). If, however, “last” means “last,” then certainly there cannot be *another* sounding of the resurrection trumpet at the end of a future Millennium. Still less can there be millions of such soundings, scattered over a thousand years, occurring every time a millennial saint dies and is instantly glorified! No, the far horizon of Paul's eschatology is the Parousia, when the whole Church—“those who are Christ's at his coming”—is glorified, and so enters the eternal Kingdom of God.

Verses 53-55 bring the disclosure of the mystery—and Paul's entire discourse on the resurrection—to their glorious climax. First, he reiterates what he said moments earlier: This corruptible (Adamic flesh) *must* put on incorruption, and this mortal *must* put on immortality, above all because it is God's own purpose and plan, but also because the very nature of the Kingdom requires it (50; 42-44). Then, in language brimming with celebration and doxology, the apostle affirms that when the resurrection occurs, *God will fulfill his ancient Kingdom promise to the effect that death will be swallowed up in victory* (Isaiah 25:8, Hosea 13:14).

It is vital to understand what Paul has in mind here. Importantly, he has already explained it in verses 20-28. What he has in mind is *final, ultimate* victory. What he has in mind is the abolition of the *last* enemy, which is death (26). And what he has in mind is the abolition of *every other enemy*, for which death stands as the supreme emblem (25). How, then, can he not be exultant at the thought of the resurrection, seeing that when it occurs *Christ will completely expel all evil, suffering, and death from the cosmos, and completely glorify all (redeemed) things?* In short, Paul exults because the Parousia brings the Resurrection, and the Resurrection brings complete cosmic victory: the Consummation and Restoration of all things (23, 27-28).

Again, this is the end of all premillennialism. Premillennialism envisions the persistence of *many* enemies, including death itself, for a thousand years subsequent to Christ's return. But here in 1 Corinthians 15, Paul says that at the Parousia and the Resurrection God will place *all* of Christ's enemies, including death itself, beneath his feet, once and for all, thereby bringing in the eternal Kingdom of the Father.

Verses 56-58, which bring the chapter to a close, elaborate upon the theme of victory, drawing out its practical application for the saints. Through Christ, God has already given us the victory over death, sin, and the power of the law to condemn us. Therefore, in what remains of the present evil age, let us be steadfast and immovable in our faith, always abounding in the work of the Lord. Why? Because we know that our labors are not in vain, but that they will be richly rewarded at the Parousia, when Christ raises the dead, transforms the living, triumphs over every spiritual and physical enemy, and bestows full and final victory upon his glorified people and their world.¹⁴

10. An Eternal Building from God

(2 Corinthians 5:1-10)

In his second letter to the Corinthians, we find the apostle Paul defending himself against the malicious attacks of certain false brethren (10:1ff), thereby also defending the Corinthian church against their destructive influences. The opponents complain, above all, about his frequent persecutions, citing them as marks of divine disapproval. Paul,

however, turns the tables on them, framing them as the marks of a true minister of God (4:7-15, 6:4-10, 11:23-33).

But why—and how—does he endure such terrible trials? In 4:16-18 he answers: Through them, God is producing in him—and in all the saints—an “eternal weight of glory”, a glory that cannot be compared with anything they have ever known on this earth; a glory not worthy to be compared with the light and momentary afflictions they are now experiencing (Rom. 8:18)! Moreover, this is precisely how God means for the saints to endure such afflictions: by remembering his purpose in them, and by fixing their eyes, not upon their temporary troubles in this present evil world, but upon the eternal rewards awaiting them in the glorious World to Come. In short, here Paul again commends to his suffering brethren the ultimate hope of the Church: the eternal weight of glory that Christ will bestow upon his saints at the Judgment, a judgment destined to occur at the Parousia and the Resurrection of the dead (5:9-10; Rom. 5:1-2, 8:18-21, 1 Cor. 15:35ff, Col. 3:4).

This perspective enables us better to understand a text that has challenged many interpreters: 2 Corinthians 5:1-10. What is the apostle’s goal in this passage? My answer would be this: simply to expound what he had in mind in 4:16-18! In other words, his goal is to strengthen the saints’ hearts by reminding them yet again of their Blessed Hope, a hope that includes not only life with Christ in heaven as a disembodied spirit during the Intermediate State (5-8), but also (and especially) life with Christ in the glorious World to Come after the Resurrection and the Last Judgment (1-4, 9-10). A closer look at the text itself will confirm that this is indeed Paul’s eschatological outlook.

In verse 1, he opens by presenting to the Corinthians their ultimate hope: life with Christ in a new resurrection body in the new heavens and the new earth. They already know this, for he has taught it to them in person and by letter (1 Cor. 15:1ff). In particular, they know that if their present earthly body—a temporary tent for their soul—is destroyed, they have (waiting for them at the Resurrection) a far more permanent and enduring structure: a building from God, a resurrection body not created by human hands, but by the Risen Lord himself.

Very importantly, this house is “eternal in the heavens.” The phrase is telling and decisive. Obviously, the house Paul has in mind cannot be

heaven itself, for he says it will be *in* the heavens. It must, then, be the resurrection body, a body that will exist forever “in the heavens.” But does this mean, as some have argued, that Christians will receive their resurrection bodies when they die and go to heaven above? No, for Paul himself consistently teaches that the saints will receive their resurrection bodies at the Parousia, in the general Resurrection of the dead (John 5:21-29, Rom. 8:18-25, 1 Cor. 15:20-28, 50-58, 1 Thess. 4:13f). So then, in this context, “the heavens” serves as shorthand for “the World to Come,” a world so full of God and his glory that it is, henceforth and forever, heaven itself (1 Cor. 15:50, 1 Peter 1:3-5).

Verses 2-3 abundantly confirm this interpretation. Paul’s main goal here is to speak further about the *ultimate* blessing for which the saints, indwelt by the forward-looking Spirit of God, now groan. According to Romans 8:23, that blessing is the redemption of their body. And with this verses 2-3 agree perfectly. The Christian groans and longs for his soul to be “clothed” with its ultimate dwelling place: his resurrection body. It is a dwelling place “from heaven”—created from above, by the power of the One who, at his Parousia, will descend from above.

Verse 3 is difficult. The NKJV reads, “... if indeed, having been clothed, we shall not be found naked.” If this is the correct translation, Paul is warning that the Resurrection may expose professing (but hypocritical) Christians to wrath, unless, even now, they sincerely clothe themselves with the righteousness of Christ. However, while such a rendering is possible, it seems to inject a strain of doubt that is alien to a text otherwise devoted to the instruction and encouragement of suffering believers. For this reason, I favor the NAS translation, which reads, “... inasmuch as we, having put it on, shall not be found naked.” On this view, Paul is celebrating the fact that the saints, having put on their new resurrection bodies, shall not, like unbelievers, be found naked in the sight of Christ the Judge (9-10; Heb. 4:14, Rev. 3:17, 16:15).

Verse 4, which continues to explore the object of the saints’ groaning, strikes a blow at Greek conceptions of the afterlife and the final state. Unlike the Gentiles, God’s saints are (joyfully) “burdened,” not because they want to be unclothed (i.e., exist in heaven as disembodied spirits), but because they want to be *further* clothed with their new, glorified bodies. Note carefully that as in 1 Cor. 15:54, so here: The one Resurrection at the

Parousia of Christ brings the *full and final* abolition of all mortality. Death, the fearsome swallower of man and nature, will itself be *altogether* swallowed up by life (Isaiah 25:8, Heb. 2:5)! How then can death continue to swallow up life in a Millennium that (allegedly) comes *after* the Resurrection?

Still further illuminating the eschatological longings of the saints, Paul now tells his readers in verse 5 that such desires actually come from God. God himself has foreordained the saints to eternal resurrection life, and, in preparation for it, has given them the indwelling Holy Spirit as a down payment or guarantee. Because the eternal Spirit knows God's ultimate purpose for his people, he graciously creates in them not only a desire for it, but also a stubborn determination to attain it (Acts 23:6, Rom. 8:26-27, Phil. 3:11)!

In verses 6-8, Paul shifts his focus, directing his reader's thoughts to the Intermediate State. Because God has given the Holy Spirit to his people, they can always be confident, even in the face of death itself (Heb. 2:14-15). For just as the Spirit teaches them to long for the resurrection, so too he teaches them that while they are "at home in the body" (i.e., in their present tents here on earth), they are "absent from the Lord", that as soon as they die, their spirits will immediately ascend to join Christ in heaven. So wonderful is this knowledge, that it completely changes their attitude towards the last enemy. Henceforth, they are *eager* to be absent from the body and present with the Lord (vv. 7-8; Phil. 1:21-23)!

Observe, then, from Paul's overall teaching in vv. 1-8, the profound blessedness of the believer's eschatological hope: From the moment of death, *he will be present with the Lord forever*, whether in heaven during the Intermediate State, or at Christ's side during the Consummation, or upon a beautiful new earth in the glorious World to Come. Small wonder that those whose outer man is perishing (4:16), and those who are being handed over to death daily (4:11), eagerly desire, not death itself, but the eternal company of the One into whose joyful presence death will obediently usher them.

In verses 9-10, Paul concludes his meditation by confessing its practical effect upon his own life and the lives of the other apostles. Knowing that he, they, and all believers must, at the end, stand before the Judgment Seat of Christ, he makes it his ambition always to be well pleasing to the Lord (1

Cor. 3:12-15). Here we find Paul again returning to the outermost horizon of his eschatology. Likely as not he will die; likely as not he will enter heaven as a disembodied spirit; likely as not he will tarry there, with his Lord, for many days. But at the end—the *very* end—Christ will come again to the earth, and the spirits of the departed saints with him, so that having been raised from the dead they may stand before his Judgment Seat, receive their eternal rewards, and enter the glorious World to Come. Let every saint be diligent to prepare himself for that soon-coming Day!

Summing up, we have seen that in this difficult passage Paul's goal is to encourage suffering saints with their twofold eschatological hope: life with Christ in heaven as a disembodied spirit throughout the Intermediate State, and life with Christ in the World to Come as a resurrected saint throughout all eternity. Close parallels with related texts assure us that this is indeed the sum and substance of the apostle's eschatology; that he has no notion whatsoever of a future millennial kingdom; that the farthest horizon of his eschatological hope is simply the Consummation followed by the new heavens and the new earth.

Here, then, as everywhere else in his writings, Paul's eschatology and the classic Reformed eschatology are one.

Crucial NT Texts Pertaining to the Consummation (2)

IN THIS CHAPTER we will continue our look at crucial NT texts pertaining to the Consummation, paying special attention to the eschatology of the Thessalonian letters and the epistles of Peter.

11. All Things Subjected to Christ

(Philippians 3:17-21)

We have touched on this text several times, but here I want to probe a little deeper, seeing that in two short (and very inspiring) verses the apostle marvelously encapsulates, reiterates, and confirms his entire eschatological outlook.

Paul is exhorting the saints to imitate him and their other leaders (17). In order to move them to holy obedience, he brings before their eyes the final destiny of both sinners and saints. As for worldly, gluttonous, and licentious men who walk as enemies of the Cross of Christ, their (final) end is destruction. This is not annihilation, but rather an eternal “tearing down” (i.e., punishment, loss of well-being) of body and soul in Gehenna (Mt. 7:13, Rom. 9:22, 1 Cor. 5:5, 2 Cor. 10:8, 1 Thess. 5:3, 2 Thess. 1:9).

In verses 20-21, he turns his attention to the (final) end of the saints. Again, here his whole eschatology is compressed into a single short sentence. The wicked set their minds on earthly things (19). But with the saints it is not so, for because of the new birth their citizenship, even now, is in heaven (20; Eph. 1:3, 2:6, Col. 3:1-4). In other words, God’s Kingdom has *already* come, and he has *already* transferred his believing people into it, with more to come (Col. 1:13). Therefore, while owing a real measure of honor, deference, and obedience to emperor Caesar, the saints are, above all

else, the happy and willing subjects of the High King of Heaven (Rom. 13:1f).

Yet Paul is no preterist. Yes, the Kingdom has already come; but it has *not yet* fully come. Why? Because the High King himself has not yet come again! This is the mind-set of the true spiritual Church throughout all generations: Now we are seated with Christ *in* heaven, even as we eagerly await his return *from* heaven (20; 1 Thess. 1:10, 4:16, 2 Thess. 1:7).

And what exactly do God's people expect Christ to do when he finally does return to the earth? Verse 20 tells us in a single word, verse 21 explains. When he comes again, he will be his people's *Savior*, but this time to the uttermost (20; Heb. 7:25). That is, he will not only deliver them from the wrath to come, but will also rescue them from every enemy introduced by the Fall, even as he restores them to the glory of God (Rom. 13:11, 1 Thess. 1:10, Heb. 9:28).

According to verse 21, this consummate salvation commences with the Resurrection: Christ will conform the saints' lowly bodies (literally, "the body of their humiliation") to his own glorious body (Rom. 8:29, 1 Cor. 15:20-28). However, in that Day he will also use that same resurrection power to subject "all things"—i.e., the whole cosmos—to himself. This stunningly expansive promise raises a crucial eschatological question: Once Christ has subjected "all things" to himself, *where will all of his enemies be?* The answer—which I would invite my premillennarian brothers to ponder with great care—is self-evident: They will be altogether gone, for the Kingdom will have altogether come, and the whole creation will have been altogether set free into the freedom of the glory of the children of God (Rom. 8:21, 1 Cor. 15:20-28, 50-58)!

Yes, here in Philippians 3 we do indeed find Paul's whole eschatology in a nutshell. And as we have seen so many times before, it is nothing other than the eschatology of Christ, the rest of the writing apostles, and the fathers of our glorious Reformation faith.

12. The Comfort of His Coming

(1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:10)

Paul's two letters to the Thessalonian Christians contain some of the New Testament's richest veins of eschatological gold. Written from Corinth

around AD 50-51, they reveal that the apostles' early ministry to the European Gentiles was charged with a lively expectation of Christ's soon return (1 Thess. 1:10, 2:19, 3:11-13; cf. Acts 17:16ff, 1 Cor. 15). However, they also reveal a problem: Paul's Jewish opponents had forced him quickly to flee the city, with the result that some of his Thessalonian converts were left confused (or ignorant) about his teaching on the afterlife and the Consummation (Acts 17:1-9). These two letters represent his painstaking effort to clear up every such misunderstanding. Not surprisingly, they therefore speak often and in great detail about the Last Things: the signs of Christ's Parousia, the nature and purpose of the Parousia, the Resurrection, the Judgment, and the World to Come (1 Thess. 4:13-18, 5:1-10; 2 Thess. 1:3-12, 2:1-13). Accordingly, they are indeed a vast and precious treasure-trove of eschatological truth for the whole Church of Christ!

In the pages ahead we'll be looking at three major texts from the Thessalonian letters. The first is 1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:10. As I mentioned earlier, this is one of three NT passages upon which our dispensational brethren base their doctrine of a pre-tribulation Rapture (cf., John 14:1-3, 1 Cor. 15:50f). Therefore my approach in this section will be twofold. First, I will offer a straightforward exegesis of the text itself, showing that it both presupposes and richly undergirds the traditional Reformation eschatology. And secondly, I will discuss the dispensational interpretation, seeking to address all its main arguments for a secret, pre-tribulation Rapture.

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

Our text begins in verse 13, where Paul states his purpose for the remarks to follow. In essence, it is to give hope to Christians whose (believing) loved ones have recently "fallen asleep"; that is, who have died in the Lord. He knows that some of the brethren are troubled about this. Perhaps they fear their departed loved ones will not be included in Christ's Kingdom when he comes again. Certainly they fear they will never see them again. Therefore, Paul writes to instruct them once again, so that they will no longer grieve as unbelievers do, but will awaken instead to a lively hope of being reunited with their Christian family and friends—soon!

In verse 14, Paul succinctly states the healing truth; then, in the verses that follow, he carefully explains it. In essence, it is this: "When Jesus

comes again, he will bring your departed loved one(s) with him, *and back to you!*” Observe how Paul, in declaring this truth, builds on the Thessalonian’s pre-existing faith: They already believe that God has raised Jesus from the dead. But if they can believe that, surely it is no great stretch to believe that he can raise their departed loved one(s) as well. And, says Paul, that is exactly what he has promised to do: At the Parousia, God will bring with Christ the souls of all who have fallen asleep in Jesus, so that they, just like their Lord, may rise from the dead, and then be reunited with the saints who are still living upon the earth at that time.

Importantly, Paul has already touched on this subject in 3:11-13, where he prayed that God would establish the Thessalonians’ hearts “... unblamable in holiness before our God and Father at the Parousia of our Lord Jesus with *all* his holy ones.” Note the comprehensiveness of that final phrase: When he comes again, Christ will empty heaven, bringing *all* the holy angels, and *all* the spirits of *all* the departed saints whom he has redemptively separated to himself. Thus will he set the stage for cosmic history’s most Momentous Event!

In verses 15-17, the apostle delves deeper into the Consummation, supplying a detailed description of the portion of it that lies uppermost in the minds of his flock: the reunion of the departed saints with the living saints. As we shall see in a moment, in 1 Thess. 5:1-11 he immediately goes on to complete the picture by turning to the subject of the Last Judgment. Thus, Paul’s theme in his eschatological remarks is not a secret Rapture of the Church; it is the one Consummation of all things at the Parousia of Christ.

In verse 15, Paul begins by declaring that the instruction he is about to give is “the word of the Lord”. That is, it comes, at least in part, from the earthly teaching ministry of Christ himself (Mt. 13:37-43, 24:29-31, etc.). Possibly it also includes some new, “mysterious” truth, vouchsafed to his apostle by special revelation (1 Cor. 15:51f). In any case, the Thessalonians can trust implicitly in what he is about to say, since it is God’s very own word.

Next, he affirms that “... we who are alive and remain until the Parousia of the Lord shall not precede those who have fallen asleep.” As the subsequent verses make clear, he means that the living saints will not precede those who have died *in receiving their glorified bodies*. There is,

then, a definite sequence in the glorification of the Church: First, Christ will join the souls of the departed saints to their new, resurrected and glorified bodies; then—and only then—he will transform and glorify the bodies of the living saints. A little later in his teaching ministry, Paul will say much the same thing to the Corinthians: “For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we (who are alive and remain) shall be changed” (1 Cor. 15:50-53).

Observe carefully that all of this happens at “*the Parousia of the Lord*” (15). There is only one of them. And according to every other Pauline text touching on this event, it has nothing to do with Christ secretly removing his Church to heaven for seven years; rather, it has everything to do with his raising (all) the dead, judging the world in righteousness, and bringing in the completed Kingdom of God.¹ More on this in a moment.

In verses 16-17—which closely parallel his Master’s own descriptions of the Consummation—Paul now elaborates on what he has just said about the sequence of events surrounding the Parousia (Mt. 13:37-43, 24:29-31). He begins with this: “The Lord himself will descend from heaven.” The view of the dispensationalists notwithstanding, I would argue, on the strength of all the rest of Paul’s eschatological writings, that this is Christ’s *definitive* descent to the earth; the descent that results in the final glorification of the cosmos; the descent that therefore effectively joins heaven and earth, bringing Christ and the Church to their eternal home once and for all (Rev. 21:1f).

When the Lord thus descends, it will be with three great sounds: a shout (or “cry of command”), the voice of the archangel, and the trumpet of God. I take it that the shout emanates from the lips of Christ himself. If it is indeed a shout, it is a shout of (final) victory (Num. 23:21, Josh. 6:5, Psalm 47:5, Isaiah 42:13, Jer. 25:30; 1 Cor. 15:54). If, as seems more likely, it is a cry of command, it is the voice of Christ summoning the dead from their graves (John 5:25, 11:43), and/or sending the holy angels to their work (Mark 13:27). Perhaps it is both.

Concerning the archangel, this is almost certainly Michael (Dan. 12:1, Jude 9) or Gabriel (Dan. 8:16, 9:21, Luke 1:19, 26). In any case, by definition he is a ruler over the other angels. Therefore, his presence on the scene implies what the NT explicitly teaches elsewhere: the presence of *all* the holy angels (Mt. 25:31). When he raises his voice, it is most likely for

the purpose of sending those angels to their great work of judicial and redemptive ingathering (Mt. 13:41, 24:31, Rev. 14:18).

Finally, there is the trumpet of God. Its blast signals the final destruction of the evil world-system (Josh. 6:15-21), but also the summoning of God's people to their full, New Covenant inheritance; to their enjoyment of eternal life in the glorious "holy mountain" that is the new heavens and the new earth (Exodus 19:1ff, Mt. 24:31). This line of interpretation accords well with the word of the apostle found in 1 Cor. 15:52: The trumpet that will raise the dead is the *last* trumpet, the trumpet that will consummate the purposes of God and bring in the World to Come.

Considering the character of these two verses, it is marvelous indeed that anyone could find here a "secret" eschatological event, devolving exclusively upon the saints, who alone can see and hear it! Quite to the contrary, the actual data cry out, over and again, that this is a hugely *public* event, precisely because it devolves, not simply upon the Church, but upon the whole created cosmos. Just as every eye will see, so too every ear will hear: Christ's shout, the archangel's voice, and the final blast of the trumpet of God (Mt. 26:64, John 5:28, Phil. 2:9-11, Rev. 1:7).

In verse 16b, Paul reiterates the basic message of verse 15: When the Lord returns, the dead in Christ will rise first. Then, in verse 17, he explains what will happen after that, so that the reunion of separated loved ones may be accomplished once and for all. To understand his thought here, we must read it with 1 Cor. 15:50ff in mind. When we do, a very clear picture emerges: Immediately following the resurrection of the dead, the living saints ("we who are alive and remain") will be changed, glorified (1 Cor. 15:51-52). Then the entire company "... will be caught up in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air." The Greek word for "caught up" (*arpazo*) is perhaps best translated *to seize*. It connotes taking (or being taken) suddenly and with great force, whether urgently to obtain (Mt. 11:12, NIV), maliciously to abduct (Mt. 13:19, John 6:15, 10:12), or benevolently to help or rescue (Acts 8:39, 2 Cor. 12:2, Jude 23). Here, it is used in the latter sense, since the Lord—with great zeal, and power to match—swiftly gathers his Bride to himself, even as he rescues her from fiery judgment descending upon the earth below (2 Peter 3:8-13).

How exactly will Christ catch up his Church? As we have seen, it will be at the hands of the holy angels (Mt. 24:31, Mark 13:27, Rev. 14:14-16).

Carrying the saints into (and through?) the spiritual “clouds” by which God and Christ will visibly manifest their presence, power, and glory, they will bring them to meet the Lord *in the air* (Luke 9:34, Acts 1:9). This final detail is important, signaling as it does that when Christ comes again he will draw *very near* to the earth, which, according to Scripture, is the center of the cosmos, the apple of God’s eye, and the home of Christ himself in the eternal World to Come (Mt. 17:5, 24:30, Luke 9:34-5, Luke 21:27, Rev. 21:1f).

Observe carefully that Paul says *nothing at all* about the Lord removing his Church to heaven. The apostle leaves her—and us—in the air. What, then, will happen *after* this happy reunion? Here, Paul does not say. However, what he *does* say suggests an interpretation far superior to the dispensational. It is this: “And thus we shall *always* be with the Lord.” Note the finality—the ultimacy—of that phrase. When the Lord returns, we shall *always* be together: together with him, and together with one other! Thus, Paul’s exact wording strongly suggests that he has in mind the ultimate goal of Salvation History: life together with Christ in the new heavens and the new earth. Admittedly, he makes no explicit mention of this; of *where* the saints will ever be with the Lord. But that is simply because his present focus is elsewhere, upon the reunion of separated loved ones at the Parousia. We have already seen, however, that in his other eschatological writings Paul unfailingly associates the Resurrection with the final renewal of all creation (Rom. 8:18-25, 1 Cor. 15, Phil. 3:20-21). So then, his thought here is that a glorious reunion awaits all the saints, and immediately after that, *a glorious life together in the World to Come!*

In every generation, let the saints comfort one another with these astonishing words (8).

1 Thessalonians 5:1-10

This brings us to part two of our text, 1 Thess. 5:1-10. Here we do well to remember that the Greek NT does not contain chapters or verses. There is no new chapter, and—in the broadest sense—*there is no new theme*. Paul is still dealing with the Parousia and the Consummation.

Here, however, he turns to another facet of the Consummation, and in so doing from comfort *to exhortation*. For now, having given the

Thessalonians a tiny glimpse of the joys of eternal life together in the World to Come (17), he would prepare them for yet another element of the Consummation, through which they must safely pass if they hope to enter that World: the Judgment. It too will occur at the Parousia, for in that Day Christ will not only raise the dead, transform the living, and catch up his glorified Bride into the sky above the earth, but he will also judge the whole world in righteousness. As ever, Paul has a single, unified Consummation in view.

He opens by saying, “Now as to the times and the seasons, brethren . . .” (5:1). Here, a question immediately arises: The times and seasons *of what?* The answer is obvious: the times and seasons *of the Parousia he has just been speaking of.* Now, however, he refers to it as the Day of the Lord (5:2, 4). Why so? Because now his focus is upon judgment and retribution, themes that appear prominently in all the Day of the LORD passages found in the OT (e.g., Isaiah 2, Joel 2, Amos 5, Zeph. 1, Mal. 1). But again, in the NT the Day of the LORD becomes the Day of the Lord Jesus Christ. Here, then, Paul’s focus is upon what Christ will do at his Parousia and after the Resurrection: He will judge the world in righteousness (Acts 17:31).

To read the rest of the text is to understand the compelling reasons for his lengthy exhortation. When the Lord returns, he will come as a thief in the night (v. 2). At that time, he will wreak sudden destruction upon a world-system completely unprepared for his arrival; a world deluded, it would appear, by the false assurances of the Antichrist (v. 3, 2 Thess. 2). What will this destruction look like? Here Paul does not say, though other NT texts tell us that it will be with fire, and that it will involve the holy angels catching up the (resurrected or transformed) wicked: first (it would appear) to the Judgment Seat of Christ (in the air), and ultimately to Gehenna (the Lake of Fire), where they will endure eternal punishment away from the presence of the Lord and the glory of his power (Mt. 13:37-43, 2 Cor. 5:10, 2 Thess. 1:9, 2 Peter 3, Rev. 20:11:15f).

But with the saints it will not be so. They are not in darkness: neither in intellectual darkness about the times, seasons, and events of the Consummation, nor in the moral darkness for which the world-system will then be destroyed (4-5). However, in order to escape the Judgment, *they must maintain all due diligence* (Mt. 24:32-25:30). They must remain spiritually alert and sober. They must walk as good soldiers of Christ. They

must clothe themselves with the breastplate of faith and love; and for a helmet, they must put on the hope (i.e., confident assurance) of salvation (vv. 6-8). Happily, they are well able to do so, since the sovereign God has not destined them for the outpouring of his wrath that will occur on the Day of the Lord Jesus (v. 2; 1 Cor. 5:5, 2 Cor. 1:14; 2 Thess. 1:3-12, 2 Thess. 2:1-12). Rather, he has destined them for full and final salvation, which Christ will bestow upon his own when he comes again (1 Thess. 4:13-18, 2 Thess. 1:3-12; Rom. 8:18-25, 2 Cor. 5:1-10, Phil. 3:20-21, etc.).

Observe in verse 10 how Paul concludes this section by reverting to the theme with which he opened his meditation in 4:13-18. The Lord has died for us, so that whether we are awake (i.e., physically alive) or asleep (i.e., physically dead) we can live: together with *him* now on earth, together with *him* in heaven during the Intermediate State, and together with *him* and *one another* in the new world that he will create for us when he comes again! Our text is indeed a unit, exploring different facets of the one Consummation set to occur at the Parousia of the Lord Jesus Christ.

The Dispensational Interpretation

I have argued that 1 Thess. 4:13-5:10 not only accommodates but positively teaches a single Consummation. Our dispensational brethren disagree. John MacArthur writes, “This passage, along with John 14:1-3 and 1 Cor. 15:51-52, forms the biblical basis for the ‘Rapture’ of the Church, which takes place when Jesus comes to collect his redeemed and take them back to heaven.” In commenting further, MacArthur argues that the Rapture will occur seven years prior to the Day of the Lord; that the Day of the Lord is exclusively a Day of Judgment upon the unbelieving world; and that the Day of the Lord “falls into two parts,” the first occurring throughout—but especially at the end of—the Great Tribulation, and the second occurring at the close of the Millennium.

Needless to say, this interpretation is controversial. As MacArthur himself would freely admit, the text itself explicitly teaches *none* of these things. In particular, it says nothing about Christ taking his Church to heaven, nothing about a future millennium, nothing about the Day of the Lord being devoted exclusively to judgment, nothing about it “falling into two parts,” and nothing about the multiple resurrections required in order to

make this complicated scenario work. Clearly, MacArthur is reading his eschatology into the text. The great questions are: “Has he done so successfully? What arguments does he offer? Are his arguments sound?” Let us turn to the notes of *The MacArthur Study Bible* in order to find out.

MacArthur opens his case by appealing to two other NT texts, John 14:1-3 and 1 Cor. 15:51-52. The former, he says, “specifically explained” the mystery of the Rapture, the latter further illumined it. Now, in 1 Thess. 4:13-18, Paul goes on to complete the revelation of this mystery, filling in all the “details.” We have seen, however, that in John 14:1-3, Christ did *not* “specifically explain” the Rapture; that his words *could* refer to his removing the Church to heaven; but that his words elsewhere (both in the Gospels and the epistles) rule out this interpretation, inviting us to embrace the traditional Reformation view, with which John 14:1-3 harmonizes quite well. As for 1 Cor. 15:51-52, we have seen that it closely parallels 1 Thess. 4:13-18, teaching nothing more (or less) than the sudden, supernatural transformation of the living saints. It makes no mention whatsoever of a secret Rapture into heaven. If, then, as MacArthur states, 1 Thess. 4:13-18 is indeed the premiere NT text on the Rapture, in which Paul gives us the full “details” about this great eschatological mystery, certainly we would expect him (Paul) at least to mention—and hopefully explain—the removal of the Church to heaven for seven years. We have just seen, however, that he does neither.

Secondly, MacArthur points to various *dissimilarities* between the Rapture of 1 Thess. 4 and the Parousia of Mt. 24 (and the parallel Gospel texts), deducing from them that two distinct events are in view. Happily, he acknowledges the many similarities: a trumpet, a resurrection, glory clouds, and the ingathering of elect believers. However, he refuses to draw from these similarities the most natural conclusion: that Paul, with the benefit of fresh apostolic insight, is simply providing us with *further* details about the same event; about the one Parousia that Christ will effect at the Consummation of all things.

MacArthur’s case for distinguishing the Parousia of Mt. 24 from the Rapture of 1 Thess. 4 is not persuasive. For example, he points out that in Matthew we see the Son of Man coming on the clouds, but that in 1 Thessalonians we see believers ascending in them. But does this “dissimilarity” really require us to posit two separate events? Is it not far

simpler—and far more reasonable—to say that Christ, at his Parousia, first arrives on the clouds of heaven, and then, by means of angelic agency, gathers his saints into the clouds and safely to his side (Luke 9:34)?

Again, MacArthur says that in Matthew 24 we find the *angels* gathering up Christ’s “elect” (i.e., the tribulation saints), while in 1 Thessalonians 4 we see Christ himself personally gathering in a different elect (i.e., his Church). However, Paul does *not* say that Christ himself will gather his Church. Rather, he simply says that “we ... will be caught up together to meet the Lord in the air” (v. 17). So again, there is no real conflict between the two passages, since in both cases it is clearly Christ who does the “catching up” *by means of angelic agency* (Mt. 24:31). This, in turn, means that there is no need to distinguish between two different “elects.” Both texts deal with one and the same elect: the Church, the called out ones of all time, whether Jew or Gentile.

Finally, MacArthur states that in Matthew 24 there is no mention of the Resurrection, while with Paul it is his main theme. Given, however, the many similarities between the two passages, surely the most natural explanation for this minor difference is to say that in the Olivet Discourse (as elsewhere) Christ simply presupposed a knowledge of the Resurrection on the part of his hearers (Mt. 13:37-43, 22:23-33). Certainly he had already taught his disciples that the Parousia, the Resurrection, and the Judgment were essentially simultaneous events (John 5:19-29). In the Olivet Discourse, he therefore assumes that they remember what he said. Also, it is well worth pointing out that dispensationalists themselves teach that at the Parousia (seven years after the Rapture) there *will* be a resurrection—of the OT saints, and of those who died during the Tribulation.² But if Jesus’ silence about a resurrection in Mt. 24 does not actually rule out a resurrection, who is to say that Mt. 24 and 1 Thess. 4 are not parallel after all?

Seeing, then, that all of MacArthur’s “dissimilarities” are easily explained, and seeing that the many similarities are actually quite compelling, we conclude that these two texts are indeed parallel; that both passages teach and presuppose a single Parousia of Christ, at which time there will be a general resurrection and a general judgment. And if there were any doubts about this, numerous other NT texts teaching precisely the

same thing should rule them out completely (John 5:19-29, 1 Cor. 15:20-28, 50-58, 2 Cor. 5:1-10, Phil. 3:20-21).

In his final argument for a pre-tribulation Rapture, MacArthur invites us to draw a sharp distinction between the two parts of our text. He states that the first part (4:13-18) deals with the redemption of the Church, whereas the second (5:1-10) deals with the judgment of the unbelieving world. In particular, he asserts that the “Coming” of Christ mentioned in 4:15 (i.e., the Rapture) exclusively affects the Church, while the Day of the Lord mentioned in 5:2 exclusively affects unbelievers living at three different times: 1) during the seven year Tribulation, 2) at the Judgment at Christ’s Coming at the end of the Tribulation, and 3) at the Judgment at the end of the Millennium.³ In short, the “Coming” of 4:13-18 is redemptive only, while the Day of the Lord of 5:1-10 is judicial only.

For many reasons, this distinction is profoundly misguided.

Concerning the text itself, we have already seen that it is indeed a unit; that here Paul has in mind a single Momentous Event. It is *the* Day of the Lord Jesus (5:2), which will occur at *the* Parousia (4:15), and which has both redemptive (4:13-18) and judicial (or retributive) aspects (5:1-10).

Concerning the one Parousia, we have seen that it most certainly *does* devolve judicially upon the unbelieving world, as well as redemptively upon the Church (Mt. 13:37-43, Mt. 24-25, 1 Cor. 15:20-28, 2 Thess. 1-2). Concerning the one Day of the Lord, we have seen that it most certainly *does* devolve redemptively upon the Church, and not only judicially upon the unbelieving world. Indisputably, this is the united testimony of God’s OT prophets, Christ himself, and all his holy NT apostles (Isaiah 2:1-22, Ezek. 38-39, Joel 2:28-32, 3:12-17, Obadiah 15-21, Nahum 1:12-15, Zeph. 2:4-11, 3:8-13, Zech. 12:1-9; Mt. 7:21-23, 26:29, 2 Cor. 1:14, 2 Tim. 1:12, 4:8, 2 Peter 3:10-13).

Finally, we are about see that as in 1 Thessalonians, so in 2 Thessalonians: Paul quite powerfully represents the Day of Christ as having both redemptive and judicial components (2 Thess. 1:2-10, 2:11-12).

For all of these reasons, then, MacArthur seriously errs when he states, “Believers have no part in the Day of the Lord.” He also errs when he therefore concludes that the Rapture (4:15) and the Day of the Lord (5:2) are two separate events.

Some Final Questions

Having addressed MacArthur's arguments for a pre-tribulation Rapture, I want to conclude our study of this crucial text by asking my dispensational brethren a few important questions.

If Paul really desired to distinguish between a coming *for* the saints (4:15) and a coming *with* the saints (13), why would he not have introduced a new technical term for the former—a good, sturdy noun like *appearing* or *revelation*—so as to avoid any confusion?

Why have dispensationalists had to invent such a term (i.e., Rapture)? And why do they persist in using it, as though it depicted a discrete event in Salvation History, when it neither appears here, in the “definitive” biblical text on the Rapture, nor anywhere else in the NT?

Why, in all of Paul's writings, would he repeatedly speak of *the* Coming of Christ (1 Thess. 3:13, 4:15, 5:23, 2 Thess. 2:1) or “his Coming,” as though there were only one of them (1 Cor. 15:23, 1 Thess. 2:19, 2 Thess. 2:8)?

Why would he speak of *the* Resurrection, as though there were only one of them (Acts 17:18, 32, 1 Cor. 15:21, 42, 2 Tim. 2:18)?

Why would he speak of *the* Judgment (Acts 24:25, Rom. 2:2), or *the* Day of Judgment (Rom. 2:16), or *the* Day of the Lord (1 Cor. 5:5, 2 Cor. 1:14, 1 Thess 5:3) as though there were only one of them?

And why, if the Parousia, and the Resurrection, and the Day of the Lord all fall into several parts, would he not carefully explain such crucial distinctions, whether here in the Thessalonian letters, or elsewhere in the NT?

Finally, is it not clear from all these questions that Paul views the Consummation as a single unified event, set to occur at the Parousia?

And is it not clear that if this is true, then Dispensationalism, with its endless multiplication of eschatological acts and events, must be false?

Conclusion

We have seen that 1 Thess. 4:13-5:10 is an eschatological unit. Here, as elsewhere in the corpus of his writings, Paul has in view a single Momentous Event. He is not looking for a secret, pre-tribulational coming of Christ that removes the Church to heaven, followed by a public, post-

tribulational coming seven years later. Nor is he looking for a premillennial coming of Christ, followed by yet another coming a thousand years thereafter. We search in vain for the slightest hint of any such distinctions or any such fracturing and fragmenting of the Church's Blessed Hope.

Rather, the apostle is looking for a single, dramatic, powerful, and supremely public Consummation of all things; a Consummation to be effected by Christ at his Parousia; a Consummation that involves a general Resurrection of the dead, the glorification of the living saints, the "catching up" of the Church into the air, the Last Judgment of all men and all angels before the throne of Christ, the final restoration of the universe, and the descent of Christ's glorified Bride to her new home in the World to Come.

This is the Pauline eschatology; this is the sense of our text; this is the teaching of the classical Reformation; and this is the Blessed Hope of Christ's Church.

13. The Righteous Judgment of God

(2 Thessalonians 1:3-10)

In Paul's second letter to the Thessalonians eschatological teaching appears even more prominently than in the first. The Thessalonians continue to endure severe persecution (1 Thess. 3:3, 2 Thess. 1:4). Because of this, and because of the apostle's earlier letter, they eagerly await the Coming of their Lord (1 Thess. 1:10). Now, however, a rumor is circulating, to the effect that "the Day of the Lord has come"—that Christ's return is "at the very door" (Mt. 24:33). As a result, the Thessalonians are troubled, shaken from their spiritual composure (2 Thess. 2:2). Doubtless a vigorous debate has arisen in their congregations, seeing that the rumor does not square with Paul's previous instruction (2 Thess. 2:5). Also, certain men, previously reprov'd for their indolence, are probably using the rumor as an excuse to dodge the responsibility of regular work (1 Thess. 4:11-12, 5:14). In the good providence of God, Paul gets wind of these things and again takes pen in hand.

Our text, 2 Thessalonians 1:3-10, is the first of two passages in this letter devoted almost entirely to eschatological themes. In essence, it celebrates the Thessalonians's faithfulness and endurance amidst their severe persecutions, even as it encourages them to stay the course, seeing

that Christ will soon return to administer perfect justice in the form of eternal rewards and retribution. Let us briefly survey it, paying special attention to any signs that Paul has in view the single, Christ-centered Consummation of classic amillennial eschatology.

In verses 3-4, the apostle opens with an expression of thanksgiving. He is deeply grateful for the Thessalonians' growth in faith and brotherly love, and especially for their perseverance amidst so many dire persecutions and afflictions (Acts 17:5-9, 1 Thess. 1:6, 2:14, 3:3). He feels he ought always to thank God for such exemplary qualities in such exemplary Christians, and proudly declares that he openly boasts about them to the other churches of God.

In verse 5-10 he goes on to encourage them to keep up the good fight. This tightly knit section may be divided into three parts.

In verse 5, Paul states his theme for the passage: the righteous judgment of God. The Thessalonians are to remember that their admirable endurance through these unjust persecutions stands as a "plain indication" (or "manifest evidence," NKJV) that God, the Righteous Judge, has already declared them to be righteous because of their faith in Christ, and in so doing has made them worthy to enter his eternal Kingdom. However, they must continue to endure, so that their righteousness may be fully vindicated on the Day of the Lord Jesus (Mt. 24:13, Rom. 8:17, 11:22, Col. 1:23, 1 Tim. 2:15). As Paul will later say it to the Philippians, the calm perseverance of believers in the midst of persecution is a *sure sign*: a sign of future destruction for their persecutors, but of (present and therefore) future salvation for the believers themselves (Phil. 1:28).⁴

In verses 6-8, Paul continues his meditation on God's righteous judgments. Now, however, his thoughts pass on to the Last Judgment itself. He means his words to be a great encouragement to the Thessalonians. In that Day, God will send the Lord Jesus down from heaven, surrounded by flaming fire (i.e., divine glory in manifestation) and accompanied by his mighty angels. When he arrives, he himself will consummately administer "the righteous judgment of God," turning a morally upside down world right side up. How will he do this? He will do it by afflicting the afflictors, and by relieving the afflicted (verses 6-7). He will do it by dealing out fiery retribution to all who have spurned the knowledge of God and refused to obey the Gospel of Christ (v. 8; Rom. 1:5, 28).

Is this indeed the Last Judgment? Verses 9-10 assure us that it is. In verse 9, Paul says that the unbelieving rebels will pay the penalty of *eternal* destruction. Again, by this word he means the eternal ruin of all spiritual and physical wellbeing for those consigned to Gehenna, which is the Lake of Fire (1 Thess. 5:3; Mt. 13:41f, 25:46, Phil. 3:19). Note also that this judgment removes unbelievers from “the presence of the Lord and the glory of his power.” Here Paul has the Regeneration in view. Unbelievers will neither taste the powers, nor behold the glories, of the eternal World to Come, when God and Christ feast together with the saints in the new heavens and the new earth (v. 9, Luke 14:24).

Verse 10 also points conclusively to the Last Judgment. When he comes, Christ will “... be glorified in his saints on that day, and marveled at among all who have believed.” Paul has in view the entire Church: *all* the saints, *all* who have believed. And how exactly will *all* arrive upon the scene? The apostle need not say, for in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 he has explained everything: On the Day when Christ is revealed from heaven, he will bring with him the spirits of the departed saints, clothe them with their new resurrection bodies, and then transform the living saints. At that point, *all* the saints of all time will be standing before him in glory! I agree, therefore, with F. F. Bruce, when he writes, “Christian men and women are meant here. They are to share in Christ’s glory. The revealing of the Lord Jesus from heaven (v. 7) is also the day of the revealing of the sons of God” (Rom. 8:19, Col. 1:3).⁵

Finally, note in verse 10 Paul’s reference to “that day.” What day does he mean? As the phrase itself indicates, there is, and can be, only one of them: *the* Day of the Lord Jesus. Moreover, in this text—as in so many others like it—it is plainly a day of eternal reward and retribution (1 Cor. 5:5, 2 Cor. 1:14, 1 Thess 5:2, 2 Thess. 2:2, 2 Peter 3:10f). In sum, it is the Last Day, the Day of the general Resurrection, the general Judgment, and the inauguration of the Final State for all men and angels (John 6:39, 40, 44, 54).

This text is highly problematic for our dispensational brethren. If, in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18, Paul was extending to his flock the hope of a secret Coming and a secret removal to heaven, how is it that here he is extending *to that very same flock* a completely different hope: the hope of an

exceedingly *public* Coming, resulting in *final* redemption for the saints and *final* retribution for sinners?

No, in both of these passages Paul clearly has in mind the same Day. It is the Last Day, the Day of the Lord Jesus Christ, the Day of the Consummation, in which the glorified Lord Jesus will come to the earth one final time to raise the dead, judge the world in righteousness, and introduce the Kingdom of God in its glorious fullness.

So our Protestant forefathers believed, taught, and joyfully proclaimed. We do well to follow in their footsteps.

14. It Will Not Come Unless

(2 Thessalonians 2:1-13)

For all its doctrinal complexity, this lengthy eschatological text was written primarily out of deep pastoral concern. As verses 1-2 make plain, a rumor was circulating among the Thessalonian house churches, to the effect that the Day of the Lord had come; that it was imminent. Since this rumor was troubling the brethren, distracting them from their spiritual mission and daily responsibilities, Paul addressed it pointedly. His message is clear: The Day of the Lord will *not* come until certain things happen first; until certain unmistakable signs appear on the historical horizon. So until you see those signs, *stand firm* (2:15) and *stay busy* (2:17, 3:6f)!

Because this passage tells the Church so much about events leading up to the Consummation, it invites a closer look. Once again my approach will be to give the gist of each section, and then to spotlight the many indications that Paul here presupposes a single Consummation at the Parousia of Christ.

An Urgent Request (1-2)

Verses 1-2 present the apostle's urgent request. The subject matter of the request is threefold: the Coming of Christ (1 Thess. 2:19, 3:13, 4:15, 5:23), the gathering together of the saints to Christ (i.e., the "rapture" of 1 Thess. 4:17), and the Day of the Lord (1 Thess. 5:2). The protests of our dispensational brethren notwithstanding, the juxtaposition of these closely related themes makes it quite clear that Paul has in mind a single

Consummation. The Parousia, the Resurrection, the Gathering Together, and the Judgment of the Day of the Lord all occur basically simultaneously. Yes, each of these is a discrete event; but the discrete events are also parts or elements of a single Momentous Event. If the concerned apostle and pastor thought otherwise, would he not have said so?

As for the request itself, it is this: Don't let any evil spirit, false word of teaching or prophecy, or phony letter as if from one of us apostles, persuade you that the Day of the Lord (or the Parousia, or the Gathering Together of the saints) has come, and so shake you from your proper spiritual composure (Mark 13:7). Concerning the crucial phrase "has come," the NIV Study Bible well comments: "Obviously, Christ's climactic return had not occurred, but Paul was combating the idea that the final days had begun *and their completion would be imminent.*"⁶ So then, for Paul, the one Parousia of Christ is *not* imminent in the technical sense defended by dispensationalists. Certain things must happen first, certain signs must appear on the stage of history. This simple truth is of great importance for all the saints, but especially for those living and serving in the last generation. Because God has structured the Consummation in this manner, and because he has moved Christ and his apostles carefully to teach us about it, *Christians should be well able to keep their cool, even at the end of the world!*

It Will Not Come Unless (3-5)

What exactly are the telltale signs that will enable them to do so? In our journey thus far, we have discussed several of them. Here, however, in verses 3-5, Paul focuses on just two, presumably because they will occur closest to the end. They are *the rebellion* (or apostasy), and *the revelation of the Man of Lawlessness* (or the Antichrist).

Concerning the first of these, it is true that the NT anticipates a large-scale apostasy, or falling away from the faith, at the time of the end (Mt. 24:10-12, 1 Tim. 4:1, 2 Tim. 3:1-9). Here, however, the close association of the *apostasia* with the revelation of the Man of Lawlessness strongly suggests a causal relation. If so, it is probably best to translate *apostasia* as *rebellion* (NIV, ESV). On this reading, Paul's thought would be that the Day of the Lord will not come until the corrupt world-system fully and finally

rebels against the Law and Gospel of God, paving the way for Satan to go public with his counterfeit Christ; paving the way for the Antichrist to be revealed, and for the whole fallen world to follow after him (vv. 10-11, Mt. 24:12, Rev. 13:3).

As for the Man of Lawlessness, Paul draws freely upon OT prophecy to give us the gist of his character and very short career (vv. 3-4; Dan. 7:8, 20-21, 25, 9:26-27, 11:36). Though he does not use the word, it is clear that Paul thinks of this man, above all, as an *antichrist*; indeed, as the final embodiment of “the spirit of antichrist,” and so as *the* Antichrist himself (1 John 2:18, 22, 4:3). Very importantly, the Greek word *anti* can mean *against* or *instead of*. We see both elements here and later on in our text. The Man of Lawlessness will act *against* Christ, even as he seeks to act *instead of* Christ as the appointed prophet, priest, and king of the whole world.

Verses 3-5 give us several illustrations of this all-pervading motif.

Like Christ at his first and second comings, the Man of Lawlessness will be *revealed* in his proper time; yet only for a short time, seeing that he, unlike Christ, is a son of destruction (i.e., one doomed to destruction), (3; 2 Thess. 1:7, 2 Tim. 1:10, 1 Peter 1:7, 13, 1 John 3:2).

Unlike Christ, who loved the Father and delighted to do his will, the Man of Lawlessness will *oppose* every so-called god or object of worship, including the one true living God and his divine Son (3, 8; John 8:28, Heb. 10:7). He will stand *against* the true God and his people.

Finally, acting *instead of* Christ, the Man of Lawlessness will “take his seat in the temple of God, displaying himself as being God” (4). This verse calls to mind the sin of Lucifer, who, from the very beginning, has ever desired to exalt himself above God and to usurp the worship properly belonging to him (Isaiah 14:13-14, Mt. 4:9). In the Man of Lawlessness—who will project himself as God incarnate—he (Satan) will briefly achieve his goal: The whole (unregenerate) world will worship him (Rev. 13:8). This, I believe, is the sense of Paul’s words about “the temple.” He does not look for the Man of Lawlessness to seat himself in the temple at Jerusalem, from which he could hardly be expected to gain a worldwide following. Still less does he look for this man to seat himself in the Church, since at that point in history the Church had neither institutional status nor spiritual credibility in the eyes of the Gentile world (1 Cor. 3:16, 2 Cor. 6:16, Eph.

2:21). Rather, he appears simply to look for the Man of Lawlessness to represent himself as God incarnate, and thereby to (try to) rob God and Christ of the universal worship that rightfully belongs only to them.⁷

Note from verse 5 how Paul had previously taught these things to the Thessalonians, and how surprised he is that they have already forgotten them! Now if, as our dispensational brethren so frequently admonish us, the Church is supposed to look only for Christ (at a secret Rapture), and never for the Antichrist (as a sign of Christ's Coming), why does Paul here instruct the Thessalonians to do the exact opposite? The answer is clear: *He never told them to look for a secret Rapture in the first place.* Rather, he told them to look for the one Coming of Christ, but also for the foremost sign of that Coming: the appearance of the Antichrist. Armed with such an understanding of the lead-up to the end, they could not possibly fall prey to false prophecies about an "imminent" return of Christ—as too many of our dispensational brethren have.

The Restrainer (6-7)

Seeking to keep the Thessalonians on their spiritual toes, Paul now reminds them in verses 6-7 that the mystery of lawlessness is already at work. He means that the spirit of antichrist (i.e., Satan and his demonic hosts) is now abroad in the world, eager to raise up and bring forth *the* Antichrist himself, the Man of Lawlessness (1 John 2:18). For the moment, God is restraining Satan from doing so—through what instrumentality, Paul does not say, having spoken of this earlier when he was with them. Possibly he has in mind certain Roman rulers (whom he would be loathe to mention in a letter), or angels, or simply the power and person of the Holy Spirit himself (Rom. 13:1f, Rev. 12:7). In any case, the restrainer will continue to restrain until God, at his good pleasure, takes him out of the way. Since this must happen, and since it could happen without warning, the saints must remain ever watchful.

In passing, let us note how closely these verses parallel the teaching of Revelation 20: In both cases we learn that Satan is bound—and the Church free to fulfill her mission of global evangelism—*until* God removes the restrainer (who is ultimately God himself), thereby releasing the devil for a

little season, thereby bringing on the Last Battle, thereby bringing the High King of Heaven back to the earth!

The Deceptive Career of a Counterfeit Christ (8-12)

In verses 8-12 Paul once again takes up his theme of the revelation of the Man of Lawlessness, this time going into greater detail about his brief, dramatic, and dangerously deceptive career.

By way of introduction, observe that this text gives us an astonishing revelation, not simply of a sovereign God, but of a sovereign God with a great flair for the dramatic. We see this in his decrees relative to the Consummation. As Paul teaches us here, God has ordained that at the end of Salvation History, Satan will raise up a counterfeit prophet, priest, king, kingdom, and “god-man” who, in many ways, will darkly mirror the Person and Work of the true Christ. Here we have the outworking of the principle laid down by the Lord Jesus himself in his Parable of the Wheat and the Tares, to the effect that both Christ and Satan will have their own people and their own kingdoms, sown together in the same earth, growing up side-by-side, and running closely parallel to one another until the Day of the final harvest and separation at the end of the age (Mt. 12:22-30, 13:36-43, Luke 4:6, Rev. 14:14f). Understanding all this, Paul is yet again at pains to show the saints that the Man of Lawlessness is indeed a true *antichrist*: He not only *opposes* Christ, but also *apes* Christ—powerfully, deceptively, and dangerously. Yet for all that, he and his career are in the mighty, sovereign hands of the true God and the true Christ, who will not let their chosen ones spiritually succumb.

With these thoughts in mind, Paul begins by telling us what will happen when the restrainer is removed: The lawless one will be revealed, much as Christ was revealed in the days of his flesh (and will again be revealed in the Day of the Lord). Unexpectedly, yet quite significantly, Paul does not immediately go on to describe the career of the Lawless One. Rather, drawing on a Messianic prophecy found in Isaiah, he first speaks of his destruction: The Lord himself will slay him with the breath of his mouth at the appearing (*epiphaneia*) of his coming (*parousia*), (Isaiah 11:4)! Paul’s message in this close sequence is both clear and comforting: The career of the Lawless One will be *exceedingly* short, brought swiftly to an end by the

return of Christ in judgment. For this reason, the revelation of the Man of Lawlessness becomes what is likely the single most important sign of the imminence of the end—and, in its own way, a great encouragement to the (suffering) saints of God (Luke 21:28).

In verse 9, Paul resumes his teaching about the career of the Antichrist. Now, however, he speaks of his *coming*. We remember that this word denotes the arrival of a powerful dignitary, as of an emperor or a king. Just as Christ, in the days of his flesh, arrived upon the scene in great power and authority, so too will the Lawless One. Just as God the Father enabled Christ to perform signs and true wonders, so too will Satan, the spiritual father of the Lawless One, enable his son to perform signs and “false” (i.e., real, but misleading) wonders (John 8:44, Rev. 13:2, 4). Speaking of the final clash of the kingdoms in the last of the last days, the Lord Jesus himself warned of this very thing (Mt. 24:24). Later on, John the Revelator will do the same (Rev. 13:13-14, 16:14, 19:20). Let not the saints forget.

According to verse 10, when the Lawless One arises he will not only come with counterfeit miracles, but also with “every deception of wickedness.” This deception will include “the lie”—a false but very winsome gospel; a new, alternative religion. It will work. Multitudes who did not receive the love of the true Gospel will believe the false gospel of the Antichrist, and so perish (v. 11; Rev. 13:3).

Because the Antichrist will gain such a large following, and because it will be helpful for the saints to understand why, Paul is moved to explain. He does so in verses 11-13. He has just said that the Man of Lawlessness will be able to deceive multitudes because, prior to his (the Antichrist’s) coming, “they did not receive the love of the truth.” The Greek word used here is *dechomai*, which can mean *to receive* or *to welcome*. Both meanings are applicable. On the one hand, multitudes will believe the false gospel of the Antichrist because the sovereign God will not bestow upon them his gracious gift of the love of the truth (Mt. 13:10-17, John 3:20-21, 8:43-45, Rom. 9:14-26). And yet they will still be culpable, for when God does offer them the truth, *they themselves*, preferring to live in their sin, will not welcome it (John 3:17f, Acts 13:46). For this reason, according to verses 11-12, God will justly judge them, sending upon them a deluding influence, so that they who took pleasure in wickedness may now believe “the lie”—and perish.

This note of sovereign grace—quietly running through verses 10-12—is loudly struck in verse 13, where Paul concludes by giving thanks to the God who has so graciously chosen a beloved people for salvation, through sanctification by the Spirit and faith in (and love of) the truth.

Conclusion

Reading this challenging text, Christ's Church is to understand, fear, and rejoice. One day, Satan will unveil his man. When he does, few on earth will be able to discern or resist him, seeing that this person and his work will hew so closely to the Person and Work of Christ. Like Christ, the Antichrist will have a coming and a revelation. Like Christ, he will have a spiritual father who leads and empowers him. Like Christ, he will perform supernatural signs and wonders. Like Christ, he will proclaim a gospel of salvation. Like Christ, he will have a flock and a kingdom—and in that day, both will seem larger and more powerful than those of the Good Shepherd.

Therefore, at that time it will be just as the Master said: “False Christs and false prophets will arise and will show great signs and wonders, so as to mislead, if it were possible, even the elect” (Mt. 24:24). Therefore, let the elect always give thanks to the loving and sovereign God who has purposed to keep them from such powerful deception. But let them also see to it that now, as then, they remain ever vigilant to receive and welcome the love of the truth (2 Thess. 2:9, 13).

15. The End of All Things is at Hand

(1 Peter 4:7-19)

Our final two texts are found in the epistles of Peter. It is widely believed he wrote them from Rome sometime between AD 60-68, during the reign of that infamous persecutor of the fledgling Church, the emperor Nero. In his first letter, Peter repeatedly encourages the suffering Church with the hope of eternal glory at the revelation of Christ. From this, it is evident that he (circumspectly) looked for the Lord's return in his own lifetime. However, by the time of his second letter, the apostle has realized that soon he will be martyred (2 Peter 1:12-14, John 21:18), and that the Lord may yet tarry a great while (2 Peter 3:8-9). Accordingly, he is now at

pains to leave behind a body of written instruction and exhortation; instruction that will include, not least of all, important information about the Consummation, so that Christ's pilgrim Church may always be able to keep her Blessed Hope before her eyes, and so walk in strength and purity, pleasing to the Lord (2 Peter 1:15, 3:1-18).

In the paragraphs ahead we will discuss 1 Peter 4:7-19, a passage that well reflects the apostles' view of the Consummation. However, in order to understand it most fully, let us take few moments to survey the eschatology of the letter as a whole.

The Eschatology of 1 Peter

The eschatology of this epistle is comprised of four main elements.

First, there is *suffering*. This theme is quite prominent, seeing that the recipients of the letter themselves were suffering greatly. When they followed the pagan traditions of their forefathers, they experienced little or no persecution. Now, however, by God's grace, they serve the King of kings and the Lord of lords. Now they can no longer render unto Caesar what properly belongs to God and Christ (Mark 12:17). Now they must try, with gentleness and respect, to press upon their idolatrous neighbors the rightful claims of the one true living God (1:17-19, 3:15). Now, therefore, they *do* experience persecution (1:6-9, 3:13-22, 4:1-2, 12-19). Moreover, they are not to see it as some "strange thing," but as an integral part of the plan of God, who uses persecution to manifest his faithfulness (4:19), purify his people (1:1:7, 4:1-2), visit the (convicted) souls of unbelievers who witness their steadfastness (2:12), and secure eternal rewards for the saints (1:7, 4:13).

In reading this epistle we therefore see that Peter's eschatology closely resembles Paul's in the Thessalonian letters, and also his Master's in the Olivet Discourse. Like them, he understands that prior to the end *the suffering Church must pass through a brief season of great tribulation, but after that into the glories of the eternal Kingdom*. Peter, as a matter of private opinion, may well have thought that under Nero the Church was about to do that very thing (4:12f).

The second element—and the central one—is the *revelation* of Christ. By far, this is Peter's favorite term for the Second Coming (1:7, 13, 4:13,

5:1). In every text where it appears, he treats it as the one and only Blessed Hope of the Church. Most emphatically, he is not looking for a secret “coming” of Christ, nor is he counseling his suffering brethren to do so. Rather, he is simply waiting for the glorified Christ to *appear* (5:4, Col. 3:4, 1 John 2:28); to be *revealed* to all (4:13, 5:1), saints and sinners alike (4:15, 17; 2 Thess. 1:7).

This brings us to the third element: *the Judgment*. When Christ is revealed, he will judge the world in righteousness. Later, in his second epistle, Peter will develop this theme at greater length (2 Peter 3). However, it definitely shows up here (4:15, 17). Everywhere, he assumes that there is to be one final Judgment which will occur by the hand of Christ at his Revelation. As a rule, he likes to think of it as the appointed time of final rewards for the saints, for it will bring them praise, glory, and honor from Christ (1:7), special grace that consummates their redemption (1:13), unfading crowns of glory (5:4), and the perfection of their very being (5:10). Nevertheless, Peter recognizes that the one Judgment will also bring (final) retribution for the godless and the sinner (4:17-18).

The fourth and final element of Peter’s eschatology is *the World to Come*. This, and this alone, awaits him on the far side of the Revelation of Christ and the Judgment. In his second epistle, Peter will call it the new heavens and the new earth (2 Peter 3:13). Here, he simply refers to it as “heaven” (1:4-5), and also as “the glory that is to be revealed” (5:1). We look in vain for the slightest hint of a future millennial era in which glory and sin, life and death, peace and war, joy and sorrow will again commingle. No, Peter is eagerly waiting for “... an inheritance that is imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away ...” (1:4). He would have the suffering saints do the same.

Here, then, in a nutshell, is the eschatology of 1 Peter, and his view of the Consummation. Following a brief season of intense tribulation for the Church, the Lord Jesus Christ will come again and be revealed in all his glory, at which time he will punish the ungodly, richly reward the saints, and bestow upon them the glories and joys of the World to Come.

The End of All Things is at Hand (1 Peter 4:7-19)

With these preliminaries to guide us, let us now take a closer look at our first Petrine text.

In verses 7-10, Peter issues a series of familiar commands: The saints are to devote themselves to prayer (v. 7), keep fervent in their love for one another (v. 8), be hospitable without complaint (v. 9), and faithfully use their spiritual gifts for the glory of God and the good of the Church (vv. 10-11). What is remarkable here is the little phrase that stands at the head of these exhortations: “The end of all things is at hand” (v. 7, 1 John 2:18). Because of this, the saints—with a diligence proper to the urgency of their historical situation—must busy themselves with the responsibilities and privileges of Christian discipleship (James 5:8).

This phrase assures us that Peter had in mind a single Consummation. If anyone *wanted* to speak of the ultimate goal of Salvation History, how could he possibly choose a more apt expression? Importantly, the verses that follow confirm this conclusion, showing not only that he did indeed have the one Consummation in mind, but also that he very much wanted his brothers and sisters in Christ to be prepared for it.

In verses 12-13, he launches his pastoral thrust with an exhortation: The saints are not to be surprised or offended by the “fiery ordeal” that has, or will, come upon them. Far from thinking this a “strange” thing, they should understand that it is part of God’s wise plan for his people: Through such suffering, he “tests” (i.e., refines) them (1:6-7), affords them the privilege of sharing in Christ’s sufferings and redemptive activity (2:12), and prepares them for the exultation they will experience at his Revelation, when he consummates their redemption and rewards them for their faithfulness (1:3-9, 13, 5:10-11). Again, in light of verse 7, it appears that Peter himself, at this stage of his ministry, viewed the present (or imminent) persecutions under Nero as part of the final tribulation that would soon culminate in the return of Christ.

In verses 14-16, the apostle offers further words of encouragement and exhortation to the pilgrim Church (1:1). If, as they sojourn through this hostile world, they yield to temptation and then suffer as murderers, thieves, evildoers, or meddlers, they are simply getting what they deserve, and should certainly feel ashamed of it. But if they suffer for carrying the Name of Christ, then far from feeling ashamed, they should wear that Name as a badge of honor! And they should also recognize that amidst any and all

such suffering, their Creator is faithful to make it up to them with corresponding effusions of his soul-strengthening Spirit (3:19). Here, then, is how tribulation saints “gird up the loins of their minds” for the rigors of the last days (1:13).

In verses 17-18, Peter gives an important rationale for his exhortations: The saints must walk in holiness because “It is time for judgment to begin.” Verse 7 of this chapter illumines his meaning: He has in mind the Last Judgment, for the end of all things is at hand. Reading our passage in context, we therefore understand that this Judgment will occur at the Revelation of Christ (4:13), begin with the Church, and then immediately fall upon those who do not obey the Gospel of Christ (2 Thess. 1:8). In other words, at the one Consummation both the godly and the ungodly, the righteous and sinners, will stand together before Christ the Judge (3:18). And if our text left any room for doubt about the unity of this Judgment, a close reading of 2 Peter 3 would remove it completely.

In verse 19, Peter concludes with still another exhortation. In view of the impending Judgment, let every believer keep entrusting his soul to a faithful Creator in doing what is right; to a faithful Creator, because he knows our frame and can strengthen it; *in doing what is right*, because the Judge is at the door, and because believers walking in holiness will have no cause to shrink back when he walks through it (2:13-21, 1 John 2:28)!

Was the apostle wrong when he declared that “the end of all things is at hand,” or that “it is time for judgment to begin?” No, he was not. As he himself would write in his second epistle, with the Lord a thousand years is as one day (2 Peter 3:8; 1 John 2:18). Therefore, by God’s reckoning, Peter wrote to us 21st century Christians only two days ago. The end of all things is indeed at hand, and the time for the Judgment is upon us, and it is nearer now than ever before (Rom. 13:11)! Therefore, just like our brethren under the Emperor Nero, we too must faithfully gird up the loins of our minds for action, stay sober in spirit, and fix our hope completely on the grace to be brought to us in the one Consummation set to occur at the Revelation of the High King of Heaven (1:13).

16. The Day of the Lord Will Come

(2 Peter 3:3-13)

For sheer power and majesty, 2 Peter 3:3-13 stands among the top two or three eschatological texts of the NT. Here the apostle fully unveils his conception of “the end of all things” (1 Peter 4:7). As ever, the Parousia lies at its heart (3:4). Now, however, the accent falls upon the one Judgment that Christ will effect at his return, and also upon the cosmic implications of that Judgment. The result is one of Scripture’s most comprehensive pictures of the Consummation, a picture whose character and unity completely rule out every premillennial scheme. Truly, this text serves as a mighty bulwark of the classic Reformation eschatology.

Before plunging into the passage itself, a few introductory words are in order.

As we saw earlier, Peter now knows that the time of his departure from this world is at hand (1:14). Accordingly, he desires to leave his fellow pilgrims with some final words of instruction, encouragement, and exhortation. He explains to them how they can make their calling and election sure (1:3-11). He directs them to the unfailing sources of spiritual light and strength: the Lord’s own commandments, the apostles’ testimony, and the inspired words of the Old Testament prophets (1:12-21, 3:1-2). Mindful that apostates and false teachers are now infiltrating the churches, he sharply warns the brethren against following them into error and sin. He also assures us that God is faithful to preserve all who walk in holiness from the Judgment that is soon to fall on those who have spurned Christ (2:1-22). Notably, chapter 2 is loaded with various OT types and shadows of the Day of the LORD, a Day that he will expound here in chapter 3 (2:4-9).

Peter opens with an exhortation (3:1-2). The saints must always remember the words of the OT prophets and the commandment of their Lord and Savior, formerly conveyed to them by the apostles who first taught them. In chapters 1 and 2, he has marvelously exemplified this very pattern, teaching them not only out of his own personal experience with Christ (1:12-18), but also out of the rich treasury of OT history (2:1-22).

At this point, the apostle turns to eschatology. One crucial component of previous apostolic teaching consisted of warnings about the character of the end times. In verses 3-4 he turns again to this theme: In the last days, mockers will rise up, following after their own lusts, saying, “Where is the

promise of his Parousia? For ever since the (OT) fathers fell asleep, all things continue just as they have from the beginning of creation.”

Here, Peter is addressing the growing problem of a perceived delay in the return of Christ. Though uncertain as to how long, he himself knows that the Lord will indeed tarry (Mt. 25:5, 19). He also knows this “delay” will flush the hypocrites and apostates out into the open (Mt. 24:48f, Luke 19:11f). And he knows that when they do show themselves, they will try to stumble the true saints by mocking their faith in the Lord’s promise of a soon return. Being, therefore, an excellent apologist, he would prepare the brethren for the inevitable spiritual contest.

In passing, note carefully from verse 4 that throughout the discussion ahead the great bone of contention is “the promise of his Parousia.” This means that in everything he says subsequent to verse 4, Peter is not only assuring his readers *that* Christ will indeed come again, but also reminding them of *what* Christ will do when he does. Not surprisingly, the resulting picture is of a single Consummation centered on the Lord Jesus Christ at his Parousia (3:7, 10, 13).

In verses 5-7, Peter responds directly to the mockers. In saying that all things continue as they have from the beginning of the creation, these men (like modern philosophical naturalists) deliberately forget several important biblical truths.

First, if God *created* the heavens and the earth by his powerful word, who is to say that the same omnipotent Being cannot *destroy* or *renew* all things by subsequent words (3:5, 7, 13)?

Secondly, as a matter of historical fact, all things have *not* continued as they are from the beginning, since at the Flood, God supernaturally intervened to destroy the earth (3:6).

And thirdly, in OT prophecy, as well as in the teaching ministry of his Son, God has openly declared that indeed he *will* intervene again, this time by fire, in the Day of the judgment and destruction of ungodly men (3:7; Deut. 32:22, Isaiah 66:15, Mal. 4:1; Mt. 3:12, 13:40-43, Mark 24:35, Luke 17:29). Importantly, the mockers, seeing only what they want to see, fail to realize that they too are among the ungodly, and are actually condemning themselves to this very destruction.

In passing, note from verse 7 that Peter speaks of *the* Day of Judgment: There is only one of them, and it occurs at *the* Coming of the Lord, just as

the Lord himself promised (3:4; Mt. 13:37-43, 25:31f, Luke 17:22-36). Again, Peter assumes a single, unified Consummation.

In verse 8, the apostle turns his attention away from the mockers and towards his beloved flock. Now he wants to give them a fresh perspective on *time*, a perspective that will help them adjust to Christ's seeming delay. Therefore, he tells them that with the Lord a day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as a single day (Psalm 90:4). Commenting on this thought-provoking verse, Michael Green well observes:

God sees time with a *perspective* we lack: Even the delay of a thousand years may well seem like a day against the backdrop of eternity. Furthermore, God sees with an *intensity* we lack: One day with the Lord is like a thousand years.⁸

Again, Peter is seeking to reframe the believer's perspective on time. To the extent they can adopt God's *eternal perspective*, they can see that Christ has not really delayed his Coming at all; that 2000 years is as a mere two days in the Lord's sight; that he is indeed coming "quickly," just as he said (Rev. 22:7, 12, 20). But to the extent they can adopt God's *probing intensity*, they also can see that he carefully scrutinizes every deed of every person—both good and evil—through the twin prisms of final redemption and final judgment. Both outlooks will help the saints to remain faithful to their Lord, no matter how long he tarries.

In verse 9 Peter continues to modify our perspective on time. What appears to men as "slowness" (i.e., unpunctuality), is actually longsuffering and patience. Christ long endures the world's sin (and mockery) because he is patiently waiting until all his elect children are safely gathered in. Only then will he return for the Judgment. The saints are to regard the patience of the Lord as salvation (3:15).

In verse 10, Peter boldly affirms that the Day of the Lord *will* come. For four reasons, this verse is a mighty pillar of Reformed eschatology, and the bane of all premillennialism.

First, it speaks of "the" Day of the Lord. Again, there is only one of them. Contrary to John MacArthur, the apostle does not give us the least hint that the one Day is divided into three separate "phases," two of which are separated by a thousand years!

Secondly, this Day will come *like a thief*. It is, then, the very same Day that Christ and the apostles have been speaking of right along; the Day that will bring to a close *the present evil age*, and not some future millennium (Mt. 24:43, Luke 12:39, 1 Thess. 5:2-4). For how shall a Day scheduled to arrive at the end of a thousand literal years come as a thief in the night?

Thirdly, this will be a Day of complete cosmic destruction; a day in which “the heavens will pass away with a roar, the elements will be destroyed with intense heat, and the earth and its works will be burned up” (3:7; Mt. 24:35, Rev. 20:11). According to premillennarians, Christ will *modify* or *transform* the world when he comes. But according to Peter, he will cause it to *pass away*!

This brings us to our fourth and final point. According to verse 13, the Day of the LORD—which is none other than the Day of Christ’s Parousia—will bring in the new heavens and the new earth, the eternal home of the redeemed. Where, then, is there room for a future millennium?

In verses 11-14, Peter concludes his argument by drawing out the practical applications of his eschatology. This passage is also quite relevant for our study. Here the apostle speaks explicitly of what the saints *are* looking for, and implicitly of what they *ought* to be looking for. In other words, Peter is giving us his conception of the Blessed Hope of the universal Church.

And what exactly is that? The twofold answer is quite clear. On the one hand, the saints are looking for the coming of the Day of God, on account of which the heavens (i.e., the heavenly bodies, the luminaries) will be destroyed by burning; and on account of which the elements (i.e., the fundamental building-blocks of the material world) will melt with intense heat (3:12). On the other hand, they are also looking for new heavens and a new earth, in which righteousness dwells (3:13).

Both aspects of the Blessed Hope have practical implications. Since the saints look ahead in holy fear to the final Judgment at Christ’s Parousia, they must be diligent to be found by him in peace, spotless and blameless, manifesting all holy conduct and godliness (3:11, 14; 1:7, Phil. 3:9). But since they also look ahead in holy eagerness for new heavens and a new earth, they must also be diligent to *hasten* the Coming of the Lord—and his completed Kingdom—through faithful prayer, service, and evangelistic outreach (1:13, 3:9, 12).

Conclusion

We have completed our survey of 16 crucial NT texts dealing with the Parousia and the Consummation. We have heard from Christ, Paul, and Peter. Had we looked at eschatological texts in the letters of James, John, Jude, and the writer to the Hebrews, we would have heard more of the same. Not one speaks of a pre-tribulation Rapture. Not one speaks of a future Millennium. To a man, all the apostles agree in looking for a single Momentous Event at the end of the present evil age; a single Christ-centered Consummation, set to occur at the Parousia of the High King of Heaven, who will raise the dead, judge the world in righteousness, and create new heavens and a new earth, the eternal home of the redeemed.

This is the Blessed Hope of the Didactic NT. This is the Blessed Hope of the Revelation. This is the Blessed Hope of the historic Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant Communion.

My prayer is that one day soon it will again be the Blessed Hope of entire evangelical Church of the Lord.

The Consummation: A Biblical Scenario

We have come to the end of our journey. Having traversed many a biblical foothill, having scaled many an eschatological mountain, we have reached the summit. Now it is time to take in the view.

From the beginning our goal has been to behold—with clarity and conviction—the true shape of Salvation History, and the true nature of the Consummation, the Blessed Hope of Christ’s Church.

To this end we embarked on our journey by looking closely at the Kingdom of God. First, we discerned its *nature*: that it is, in essence, a direct spiritual *reign* of God, through Christ, by the Spirit, in and over all who believe; and that it also is the *realm* which that reign creates. Next, we discerned its *structure*: that the Kingdom enters history in two simple stages: the Kingdom of the Son (*already* here), followed by the Kingdom of the Father (*not yet* here), the two stages being separated by a single Parousia of Christ at the end of the present evil age. To our great surprise and joy, we found that this good, NT understanding of the Kingdom enabled us to behold the true biblical outline of all Salvation History.

Building upon this, we next went in search of the proper NT principles for interpreting OT Kingdom prophecy. This enabled us to discover and articulate what we called the *New Covenant Hermeneutic*, the NT method for understanding the OT in general, and OTKP in particular. We then applied that hermeneutic, with good success, to some of the most important and challenging OTKP’s, showing that in the end they all stubbornly resist the premillennial approach, but sweetly yield up their treasures to all who view them beneath the light of the simple, two-staged Kingdom taught in the Didactic NT.

Thus encouraged, we ventured into that most “Old Testament” of NT books, the Revelation. We began by carefully examining its purpose, structure, and literary genre. This opened us to the possibility that Revelation 20 might be the last of six “mystical” depictions of the course, character, and consummation of the spiritual reign of the High King Heaven, the exalted Lord Jesus Christ. And when we actually studied Revelation 20, we saw that this interpretation is indeed by far the best.

Drawing near to our final goal, we turned once again to the NT, this time to see if its teaching on the Consummation confirmed our suspicions about the true (amillennial) shape of Salvation History. We looked carefully at the Christ-exalting design of the Consummation. We discerned its Christ-centered structure. And we closely examined the top 16 eschatological texts of the Didactic NT. Through all of this, we finally reached our destination. We beheld—with clarity and certainty—the Christ-centered unity of the Consummation. We saw that Christ will indeed come again *once* at the end of the present evil age, to raise the dead, judge the world in righteousness, destroy the present earth and its works by fire, and then create new heavens and the new earth, the eternal home of the redeemed.

In sum, over many highways and byways, over many paths and peaks, we sought and found the one true Blessed Hope of the Church.

And now, from high on Mt. Pisgah, let us survey the Promised Land one final time.

A Consummation Structured for Hope

Above all, God has structured the Consummation with a view to enhancing the glory of his Son (John 5:23). However, in so doing, he has also structured it with a view to illuminating, encouraging, motivating, equipping, and empowering the Church Militant. In short, he has designed it so that his pilgrim people may have *hope*.

On this crucial eschatological theme we recall the words of the apostle Paul:

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

Frankly acknowledging the challenges of Christian discipleship in an age dominated by the powers of evil, Paul strongly exhorts God’s people to live in a manner worthy of their calling. However, in order to encourage them to rise to those challenges, he also gives them a great hope. Very aptly, he calls it *the* Blessed Hope. There is just one of them: *the* appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ. However, there are many reasons why it is blessed. It is blessed because God has made it so simple, so easy to envision, and so easy to proclaim. It is blessed because at his appearing the Savior will do so many wonderful things, things that God has revealed in Scripture so that his saints can “look for” them with eager anticipation. And it is blessed because in the contemplation of these things the saints are filled with courage, confidence, and joy as they journey on to the borders of Canaan, where, at long last, they will enter the Promised Land (Acts 3:19, 1 Peter 1:3-9, Rev. 12:13:17).

Therefore, as we bring our own journey to a close, let us take a few moments to remember what we have learned about our Blessed Hope. And as we do, let us also consider how God has designed each of its elements so as to awaken in our hearts a special *kind* of hope; and how the sum of those hopes makes our one Blessed Hope blessed indeed!

The Signs of His Coming

In our study we learned that the Lord Jesus and his apostles unveiled a body of signs by which disciples may know that the Parousia is drawing near. Strictly speaking, we cannot call these signs *elements* of the Consummation, for they only herald the end rather than bring it to pass. Nevertheless, because they are so closely associated with the Consummation—and so helpful for God’s pilgrim people—we do well to remember them afresh.

On this score, Christ himself showed the way, speaking of most of the signs in his Olivet Discourse (Mt. 24, Mark 13, Luke 21). Then, after his ascension and the subsequent outpouring of the Holy Spirit, he completed God’s revelation on this theme by unveiling a few more signs through his apostles, thereby giving us a still more nuanced picture of the lead-up to the

end (Rom. 11, 1 Cor. 15, 1 Thess. 4, 2 Thess. 2). Let us briefly survey them once again.

The Beginning of Birth Pains

The NT distinguishes between two kinds of eschatological signs. First, there are signs that fall into the category of “the beginning of birth pains” (Mt. 24:8). As with all the signs, these reflect the intensified clash of the Kingdom of God with the kingdom of Satan, now that Christ has entered the world and launched his redemptive assault on the Domain of Darkness (Rev. 12). Accordingly, these signs appear all throughout the remainder of the Great Tribulation; which is to say *throughout the entire course of the Era of Gospel Proclamation* (Rev. 7:1-8).

The birth pains are twofold .

On the one hand, they include what are manifestly (providential) judgments of God: wars, famines, earthquakes, pestilences, etc. (Mt. 24:7, Rev. 6). Happily, alongside these judgments God graciously grants the preaching of the Gospel, by which sinners may come to understand what the judgments mean, and so flee from the Greater Judgment that they portend, by turning in faith to Christ (Mt. 3:7, 1 Thess. 1:10).

On the other hand, the birth pains also include what are manifestly acts of Satan: the emergence of false Christs and false prophets, the apostasy of false believers, and the persecution of the true spiritual Church (Mt. 24:4-14, Rev. 6, 7, 11, 12, 13, 16, 20).

Importantly, Jesus warns us that “Such things must happen, *but the end is still to come*” (Mt. 24:6). In other words, these are indeed signs that the end is fast approaching (Rev. 12:12), but also signs that *the end is not yet here*. Accordingly, the wise disciple will not allow himself to be distracted by the beginning of birth pains. Instead, he will simply remember what they mean, and therefore stay focused on the work before him, which is, above all, to preach the Gospel, and in so doing to make wise use of “the signs of the time” (Mt. 16:3).

Signs of the Imminence of the Parousia

There is, however, a second kind of eschatological sign. Since they are destined to occur very close to the end of the age, signs falling into this

category are properly called *signs of the imminence of the Parousia*. Very importantly, they will not enable believers to determine “the day or the hour” of their Master’s return, only that it is quite near, even at the door (Mt. 24:32-36). Disciples are, then, to be on the lookout for (the confluence of) these special signs, and to take special hope and courage when they see them on the horizon.

One such sign is *the completion of world evangelization*. As Jesus himself put it, “This Gospel of the Kingdom shall be preached in the whole world for a witness to all the nations, *and then the end shall come*” (Mt. 24:14). Therefore, disciples are to keep close tabs on the state of the global harvest, and are to rejoice in hope when they finally see thriving churches planted among “every tribe and tongue and people and nation” (Rev. 5:9).¹

Another such sign—closely related to the first—is *the conversion of the great mass of latter-day Jews*. According to the apostle Paul, this will occur near the end of the age, when the full number of elect Gentiles has finally come to Christ. At that time, God will graciously turn again to his ancient covenant people, spiritually grafting them into his New Covenant vine through (God-given) faith in their Messiah. When he does, it will be nothing less than “life from the dead,” this expression being an apparent reference to the general Resurrection that Christ himself will accomplish at his Parousia (Rom. 11:20-26).

A third sign of the nearness of the end is *deep and widespread spiritual darkness*. Along these lines, the Lord himself taught that in the last of the last days lawlessness will dramatically increase, with the result that the love of many (professing believers) will grow cold (Mt. 24:12). He said that those days will be like the days of Noah, Lot, and Sodom and Gomorrah, days when materialism, pride, violence, and gross sexual immorality prevailed; days when only a few were saved from the outpouring of God’s wrath (Luke 17:26-30). As for the apostle Paul, he warns that just prior to the conversion of ethnic Israel at large, (many of) the Gentile branches will be broken off the vine of God (Rom. 11:19-21). Similarly, he predicts that before the manifestation of the Man of Lawlessness a “rebellion” will occur, a global rejection of the Law, Gospel, and (true) people of God (2 Thess. 2:3). Yes, the Church will groan amidst this darkness; but because of it, her light will shine all the brighter, guiding frightened souls to her Lord and the true City of Refuge (Num. 35:9f, Isaiah 60:1-3, Mt. 5:14).

This brings us to our fourth sign, *The Last Battle* (Rev. 16:12-16, 19:17-21, 20:7-10). It will commence with the rise to power of the Man of Lawlessness (2 Thess. 2:1f), also called the Antichrist (1 John 2:18). A true person, the Bible characterizes him as a satanically energized world leader with pretensions to deity, who, by means of persuasive words and miraculous powers, will succeed in consolidating the entire fallen world-system around himself and against the people of God (Rev. 13:3). The resulting persecution, global in scale and ferocious in intensity, will culminate in the apparent demise of the true spiritual Church. She will lie "... dead in the street of the great city which mystically is called Sodom and Egypt, where also (her) Lord was crucified" (Rev. 11:7-10; Mt. 24:15, Rev. 16:12-16, 20:7-10). It was this final, end time persecution—and not simply the destruction of Jerusalem—that Jesus had in view when he warned his disciples, saying, "For then there will be great tribulation, such as has not been since the beginning of the world until this time, no, nor ever shall be" (Mt. 24:21).

It should not be supposed, however, that the Church alone will endure the tribulation of those dark days. For God—responding to the final assault of evil against his Christ, his truth, and his people—will bring wave upon wave of judgment against the rebellious nations. As the end draws near, they will increase in number and intensity, with less and less time in between for (a dangerously deceptive) "business as usual" (Mt. 24:36-44, 1 Thess. 5:1-3).

Here then is the fifth and final sign of the imminence of the end: *stupendous disruptions in nature and society*. They are both "death throes" and "birth pangs." On the one hand, they signal the imminent destruction of Satan's evil kingdom. As such, they are meant as trumpets, mercifully warning sinners of the Judgment soon to come, and giving them one final opportunity to repent. On the other hand, these disruptions signal the imminent birth of God's Kingdom in its glorious fullness. As such, they are meant to give insight and courage to the saints (Dan. 12:10, Mt. 24:8).

Speaking of these extraordinary events, Jesus remarked as follows:

And there will be signs in the sun, in the moon, and in the stars; and on the earth distress of nations, with perplexity; the sea and the waves roaring, men's hearts failing them from fear at the expectation of those things which are coming on the earth, for the powers of the heavens

will be shaken ... And unless those days were shortened, no flesh would be saved; but for the elect's sake, those days will be shortened.

—Luke 21:10-11, 25-26; Mt. 24:21-22

It is easy to see why Christ and his apostles make these signs known to the disciples: How shall they endure such terrible tribulation unless they understand that it is part of God's plan, that it will be ever so brief, and that it will both herald and trigger the return of their King—the One who will swiftly rescue them from their enemies and richly reward them with the unspeakable joys of the Kingdom of God (2 Thess. 1:3-10, Rev. 11:11-19, 20:9-10, 21-22)?

In sum, Christ gave us these five signs in order to kindle hope: hope of serving him honorably and effectively in the last of the last days, hope of his Parousia, and hope of the consummate rescue and restoration it would bring. As he himself said, “When you see these things begin to take place, straighten up, and lift up your heads, for your redemption is drawing near” (Luke 21:28)!

The Parousia

Here is the hub, the central element of the Consummation, the core eschatological event that brings all the others to pass in quick succession. Many NT texts describe it, but the most famous comes from Matthew's gospel. Let us hear it again:

But immediately after the tribulation of those days, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from the sky and the powers of the heavens will be shaken. And then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. And He will send forth His angels with a great sound of a trumpet, and they will gather together His elect from the four winds, from one end of the heavens to the other.

—Mt. 24:29-31; 1 Thess. 4:13-18,
2 Thess. 1:3-10, Rev. 19:11-21

Here Jesus' focus is clearly upon the Parousia, his arrival in glory in the skies above the earth. Nevertheless, even in these few verses we see that his Coming cannot be divorced from the other (judicial and redemptive) elements of the Consummation. Moreover, when we read this passage in its larger context (Mt. 24-25)—and supplement it with material from others

parallel to it—an altogether mind-boggling picture emerges: *The Parousia involves nothing less than the centering of the entire physical and spiritual universe around the glorified Son of God, with a view to its complete and final restructuring at his own hand.*

Drawing liberally from other portions of the NT, let us take a small moment to flesh out this very big idea.

Observe first from our text that in order to set the stage for Christ's arrival God literally extinguishes the sun, moon, and stars. This is high drama: Blackest night falls upon the entire cosmos, so that all eyes may be turned upon the radiant body of him who comes their way in clouds of glory (Mt. 26:64, Acts 1:9-11, Rev. 1:7, 6:12ff, 14:14f, 21:23). Note that the spiritual heaven itself has been emptied—or rather that it descends with Christ into the skies above the earth—since he comes not only with all the holy angels, but also with “the spirits of just men made perfect,” both OT saints and New (Zech. 14:5, Mt. 25:31, 1 Thess. 3:13, 4:14, Heb. 12:23). As he draws near, there is a cry of command, the voice of the archangel, and the sound of a trumpet (1 Thess. 4:16). With these, Christ's final dealings with mankind begin: He raises the dead, transforms the living, and—through angelic agency—transports all into the skies above, where they come before the High King and Judge, seated upon the throne of his glory (Mt. 19:29, 25:31, Rev. 20:11). Meanwhile, the world below “flees from his face,” which is to say that the earth and its works are consumed by fire (Rev. 20:11, 2 Peter 3:10). At Christ's command, the Lake of Fire suddenly appears, the Last Judgment is concluded, new heavens and a new earth are created, and the glorious Bride of Christ descends with her heavenly Husband to their eternal home. In all its fullness, the Kingdom of God has come at last (Mt. 25:31f, Rev. 21:1f).

In a moment, we will examine the several elements of this great Consummation more closely. Here, however, I have summarized it briefly in order to capture the true thrust of the Parousia, which is, in essence, to reduce the entire universe as we now know it to a vast sea of men and angels, suspended in vacant space before the Judgment Seat of Christ, where they await, in awe and dread, the final disposition of all things. And herein will lie a consummate object lesson for every sentient being: the One now enthroned at the center of the universe is the One who has *always* been enthroned at the center of the Father's heart, and therefore at the center of

his every purpose, plan, and work. In sum, through the Parousia, both men and angels will behold the Son of God for who he is and for what God has appointed him to be: the Creator, Sustainer, Redeemer, Judge, and Re-creator of all.

For the saints who eagerly await that day, the hope of seeing the Son in such consummate glory is a blessed hope indeed.

The Resurrection

The resurrection of the dead, promised by the OT prophets, affirmed by Christ, taught and proclaimed by the apostles, and longed for by all the saints, will take place at the Parousia (Acts 26:7). Christ himself will accomplish it. As Jesus put it, “Do not marvel at this, for the hour is coming in which all who are in the graves will hear the voice of the Son of Man and come forth: those who have done what is good, to a resurrection of life, and those who have done what is evil to a resurrection of condemnation” (John 5:28-29, Phil. 3:20-21). As these words show, there is but *one general bodily resurrection*, for which reason Christ and his apostles repeatedly speak of it as *the* resurrection (Mt. 22:30, Luke 14:14, Acts 17:18, 24:15, Phil. 3:11). The saints look forward to it as the consummation of their redemption (John 11:24, Rom. 8:23, Phil. 3:11). When it occurs, their perfect spirits will be joined to perfect bodies, in which they will live forever in perfect holiness. These bodies are like Christ’s body: glorious, powerful, incorruptible, and immortal (Luke 20:35-36, Phil. 3:20-21). They are perfectly suited to the unimaginable glories of the World to Come (1 Cor. 15:50). One of Israel’s leading sects, the Sadducees, flatly denied the resurrection of the body (Mark 12:18). The Athenians, at the sound of Paul’s preaching, scoffed at the very idea (Acts 17:32). Modern skeptics follow in their footsteps. But Jesus rebukes them all, saying, “You are mistaken, knowing neither the Scriptures nor the power of God” (Mt. 22:29). The resurrection will abundantly vindicate both.

Saints living at the time of Christ’s return will not be raised, but suddenly transformed and glorified. According to the apostle John, this amazing change occurs at the very moment they behold the Lord coming in the sky. “Beloved, now we are the children of God, and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be; *but we know that when He is revealed, we shall*

be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is” (1 John 3:2; 2 Cor. 3:18). Similarly, the apostle Paul declares: “Behold, I tell you a mystery: we shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed—in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed” (1 Cor. 15:50-52, 1 Thess. 4:13-18). At the resurrection of the dead and the transformation of the living saints, Christ gathers together and glorifies the new family of man, so that they may live with him and the Father forever.

The Resurrection also includes a catching up and gathering together of risen (or transformed) mankind to meet the Lord in the sky. As we learn from the Olivet discourse, at the Parousia Christ will send forth his angels to gather his elect from the four corners of the earth (Mt. 24:31, 1 Thess. 4:13-18). But as we learn from the Parable of the Wheat and the Tares, he will also send forth his angels to gather up the wicked. To judge from parallel NT texts, it appears that they too will first be brought before the Judgment Seat of Christ (where *all* must appear), and then cast into the furnace of fire (Mt. 13:41-42, 25:31ff, 2 Cor. 5:10, Rev. 20:11-15). Dispensational interpreters argue that this catching up (which they call the Rapture) affects only Christ’s Church, occurs in secret, and is separated by seven years from his visible return in glory. But again, this view seriously departs both from the Bible and from traditional Christian theology, as a careful study of the relevant texts and Church history will reveal (Mt. 24:29-31, 25:31ff, 1 Thess. 4:13-18, 2 Thess. 1, Rev. 14:14-20).

The resurrection and its concomitants contribute abundantly to the saints’ blessed hope. These amazing events promise a healthy new body, a joyful reunion with departed Christian loved ones, and the privilege of being *like* the Lord, *with* the Lord, forever.

The Last Judgment

The resurrection leads quickly to the Last Judgment. Again, Christ himself will administer it. Jesus repeatedly bade his disciples to envision him in the Judgment Seat of God on the last day (Mt. 19:28, 25:31).² He also said, “As the Father has life in Himself, so He has granted the Son to have life in Himself, and has also given Him authority to execute judgment, because He is the Son of Man” (John 5:26-27, 30; 2 Cor. 5:10). The

Judgment marks the end of all probation for the sons of Adam: There is no further opportunity to receive salvation, no further opportunity to earn rewards. As on the day of his death, so on the Day of Judgment: A man's eternal destiny is sealed once and for all (John 8:24, Heb. 8:27, Rev. 20:11-15).

The Last Judgment has two main elements.

First, Christ will effect a final separation of the saved from the lost. This element is vividly set forth in Jesus' Olivet Discourse, where he likens himself to a shepherd who, at the end of the age, will separate the sheep from the goats (Mt. 25:31ff). All-pervasively, the NT teaches that the one criterion for inclusion in God's Kingdom is personal faith in Christ (Mt. 11:28, 22:11-12, John 3:16f, 5:24, 6:29, Acts 16:31, 26:18, Rom. 3:28, 4:16, 5:1, Gal. 2:16, Eph. 2:8, Titus 3:4-5, etc.).³ When the books are opened, those who have truly trusted in him—and therefore lived for him—will find their names written in the Lamb's Book of Life (Rev. 20:12, 15). Those who have not, but who have trusted instead in their own righteousness to win heaven's favor, will be everlastingly dismayed to see how far short they fell of the one and only standard for salvation: the glory of God, freely offered to mankind in the Christ of God (Mt. 5:48, 22:11-12, Luke 18:9-14, Rom. 3:23, Phil. 3:8-9, Heb. 12:15).⁴

The second element of the Judgment is reward and retribution. Christ himself will bestow both. In the case of the saints, there is no retribution, since the Savior has already undergone their punishment in his own Person (1 Pet. 3:18). Indeed, this was his chief purpose in laying down his life as a ransom for many, namely, that he should deliver them from the wrath to come (Mark 10:45, 1 Thess. 1:10). Believers will, however, receive rewards—some thirty, some sixty, and some a hundred fold—for all they allowed Christ to accomplish through them during their lifetime (Mt. 6:19-21, 25:14-30, Mark 10:29-31, John 15:18, Rom. 15:14-21). Soberingly, Paul warns that at the Judgment spiritually negligent saints will find many of their works burning up like wood, hay, and stubble. Though they themselves are saved, they have little reward (1 Cor. 3:15).

As for the lost, they will suffer eternal retribution for their every evil deed. For their want of obedience to the gospel of Christ "... they will be punished with everlasting destruction away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power" (2 Thess. 1:8-9). For specific sins they

will suffer varying degrees of torment in hell (Mt. 12:36, Luke 12:47, 2 Cor. 5:10). The Scripture represents hell, or the Lake of fire, as a true place (Rev. 19:20, 20:10, 14). Christ himself will create it on the Day of Judgment, especially for the devil and his evil angels, but also for rebellious humans who have spurned God's kingdom in favor of Satan's (Mt. 22:1-14, 25:41, Rev. 20:10). Hell may be situated in another dimension, or else in space itself; close, perhaps, to the new earth (Rev. 14:10-11). Whether the fires of the "outer darkness" are physical or spiritual is unclear. As in *Hades*, so there: Its inhabitants will experience loss, regret, torment, and the consciousness of God's wrath abiding upon them (John 3:36, Rom. 2:28, Rev. 19:9-20). There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth (Mt. 8:12, 22:13, Rev. 14:11). Tellingly, Jesus usually referred to hell as *Gehenna*, a Hebrew word whose etymology identifies it as a kind of cosmic garbage dump, in which the refuse of the universe—both human and demonic—will burn forever just outside the City of God (Mt. 5:22, 29, 10:28, 18:9, 23:15, 33; Rev. 19:1-4, 22:15). Hell, therefore, will serve as an eternal reminder to God's elect of his infinite holiness, perfect justice, and sovereign mercy and grace. Seeing it, their thought will ever be, "There, but for the grace of God, go I" (Eph. 1:6).

Solemn as it is, the Last Judgment is also an integral part of the saints' blessed hope. Christ's disciples look forward to the day when their King will send forth judgment unto victory, when the scales will be balanced at last, when the righteous will receive their just reward, and the wicked their just desserts (Mt. 10:20, Rev. 15:3-4). They also look forward to receiving their own rewards, and to hearing these precious words from the Master's lips: "Well done, good and faithful servant" (Mt. 25:21).

Recognizing, however, the true source of their righteousness, they mostly look forward to casting down their crowns at the feet of him who loved them and gave himself for them; the One who called them, kept them, and sanctified them during their life on earth, so that he might present them faultless before the presence of his glory with exceeding joy (Gal. 2:20, Jude 1:24, Rev. 4:10).

Cosmic Transformation

In order supremely to honor his Son, the Father has also conferred upon him the privilege of transforming the cosmos. This is the climax of Christ's specifically redemptive acts. God has made him the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End (Rev. 1:8, 11). This means that the Father has granted the Son not only to create the universe in the beginning, but also that he should re-create it in the end. Just as the returning Christ will have authority to raise, transform, and glorify the broken bodies of his saints, so too he will have authority and power to subdue *all things* to himself, thereby liberating them from their subjection to futility, and lifting them into the freedom of the glory of the children of God (Rom. 8:20, 1 Cor. 15:24-27, Phil. 3:20-21).

This transformation is twofold . It begins with a cosmic conflagration, a universal meltdown in which, as Jesus predicted, heaven and earth shall pass away (Mt. 24:35). The most complete description of this awesome event is found in 2 Peter 3, where the apostle writes:

But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, in which the heavens will pass away with a roar and the elements will be destroyed with intense heat, and the earth and its works will be burned up. Since all these things are to be destroyed in this way, what sort of people ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness, looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God, on account of which the heavens will be destroyed by burning, and the elements will melt with intense heat? But according to His promise, we look for new heavens and a new earth.

—2 Peter 3:7, 10-13

Importantly, Peter is not looking for the annihilation of the natural world, only its purging and restoration. It is only the *form* of this present world that will pass away, not the world itself (1 Cor. 7:31). Just as the ancient Flood cleansed the earth of sinners and paved the way for a new world, so it will be in the Day of the Lord, only more so. In the conflagration, Christ will erase from the natural order every scar of sin, so that out of the very fires that consume “the former things” new heavens and a new earth may emerge (Mt. 13:41-43, Luke 17:26f, 2 Pet. 3:3-6). Notably, Peter asserts that these fires are also ordained for the destruction of ungodly men (2 Pet. 3:7). Again, it appears from this that in some small portion of the new heavens (or in a dimension nearby) the flames of judgment will burn forever (Jude 7). As we just saw, this is *Gehenna*, or the Lake of Fire.

It is the final destination of Satan, his demons, and all the people on earth who followed their ways (Mt. 25:41, Rev. 20:10).

The second stage of the transformation is what Jesus called the Regeneration, what Peter called the restoration of all things, and what Paul called the subjection of all things (Mt. 19:28, Acts 3:21, Phil. 3:20-21). Negatively, these expressions point to cosmic deliverance: Once and for all, Christ will lift the curse that lies so heavily upon the natural order, releasing it from its bondage to futility and its slavery to corruption (Rom. 8:18-25, Rev. 22:3). Positively, they point to the creation of new heavens and a new earth; a new universe upon which he impresses both the forms and functions that will perfectly reflect God's will of precept—his good pleasure—for his (redeemed) creatures (Isaiah 65:17, 66:22, 2 Pet. 3:13).

What will this world—also referred to as the Eschaton and the Final State—be like? Sparingly, yet provocatively, the Bible gives us some tantalizing answers.

As for the saints' resurrection bodies—which are essential equipment for life in the presence of God's glory (1 Cor. 15:50)—we have seen that they will be like the body of the risen Christ. As the Scriptures repeatedly teach, he is “the first-fruits of those who sleep,” the divine prototype to which the new humanity will be conformed in body, soul, and spirit (1 Cor. 15:20, Rom. 8:29, Phil. 3:21, 1 John 3:2). Jesus gave us precious glimpses of the resurrection body on the Mount of Transfiguration (Mt. 17:1f), in his several resurrection appearances (Luke 24, John 21), and, to some extent, in his self-disclosure to John on the island of Patmos (Rev. 1:9ff). Paul goes on to affirm that the resurrection bodies of the saints will be incorruptible, immortal, powerful, Spirit-controlled, and radiant with the glory of God (1 Cor. 15:42f, Mt. 17:2, Rev. 1:9f). Being altogether perfected, both within and without, the saints will shine like the sun in its strength in the Kingdom of their Father (Dan. 12:3, Mt. 13:43, Rev. 1:16).

But what of the World to Come, the future home of the saints: What will it be like? Since much of the language used to describe it is symbolic, we must be cautious. Still, it is clear enough that there will be no sun, moon, or stars, for God and Christ themselves, throughout a single eternal day, will be the light *in* all, and the light *of* all (Rev. 21:25, 22:5). There will be no more sea—though a world inwardly refreshed by the life-giving waters of the Spirit will doubtless be graced with physical analogues thereof: springs,

streams, and rivers (Rev. 21:1; Isaiah 35:5-7, 41:17-20, Rev. 22:1). Apparently animals will be present, peacefully sharing with the family of man a new home of unimaginable Edenic beauty (Isaiah 11:6-9, 35:1ff, Rom. 8:19). It is doubtful that we are to look for a physical city, since the NT consistently identifies the Church herself as the bridal City of God and Christ (John 4:21-24, Gal. 4:26, Eph. 2:19-22, Heb. 12:22, Rev. 3:12, 21:2, 9-10, 12, 14). Our home will simply be the new earth, which will have become the eschatological Garden of God (Isaiah 51:3, Ezekiel 36:35, Rev. 21:1-2).

While some interpreters have tried to tease further details about the World to Come out of Scripture, the Bible itself seems content largely to nourish our hopes with certain blessed generalities. It tells us, on the one hand, what will *not* be there: the curse, sin, Satan, violence, war, sickness, pain, sorrow, and death (Isaiah 2:4, Rev. 20:10, 21:4). On the other, it tells us what *will* be there: God, Christ, the Holy Spirit, the angelic hosts, multitudes of fellow-saints, light, life, purpose, service, righteousness, beauty, and joy (Rev. 21-22). Through the lens of such expansive promises we behold the World to Come through a glass darkly, and therefore with ever-growing curiosity about the glories yet to be revealed (1 Cor. 13:12, Rom. 8:18-25). Nonetheless, it is clear enough that this is indeed the world of our dreams, precisely because it is the world of God's dreams; a world in which, by God's consummating grace at the hand of Christ, dream and reality have become one at last.

The Delivering Up of the Kingdom

When the transformation is complete, there remains one final eschatological act for Christ to perform: He must deliver up the Kingdom to his Father. Of this mysterious and ultimate transaction the apostle Paul wrote as follows:

For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ all shall be made alive. But each one in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, afterward those who are Christ's at his Coming. Then comes the end, when he delivers up the kingdom to God the Father, when he puts an end to all rule and all authority and power. For he must reign till he has put all enemies under his feet. The last enemy that will be destroyed is death. For, "He has put all things under his feet" (Psalm 8:6). But when He says "all things are put under him," it is evident that He who put all things under

him is excepted. Now when all things are made subject to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to Him who put all things under him, that God may be all in all.

—1 Cor. 15:22-28

In this text, Paul's theme is the resurrection. However, in discussing it he is moved to survey the entire course of the Messiah's heavenly reign. At the beginning of that reign, God the Father gave the Son all authority in heaven and earth, as well as a commission to subdue every enemy; to put all things under his feet (Psalm 2, 8, 110, Mt. 28:18, Eph. 1:15-22). Since then, he (Christ) has been doing so victoriously, gathering to himself a people for his own possession, changing their hearts and thereby making former enemies into eternal friends (Titus 2:11-14). One day up ahead, at the Parousia, he will complete the work, defeating and banishing every remaining foe—spiritual, physical, or Satanic—from his people and from the new and glorious world that he will create for them. The last of these enemies, says Paul, is death itself, which Christ will forever banish at the resurrection of the dead (1 Cor. 15:26, 50-58).

At this point, the Messiah's work will be finished. The Kingdom that the Father commissioned him to redeem and create will now stand complete before him: a new, glorified humanity, and a new, glorified world in which that humanity will live. Yet one thing remains, one final act of worship, one final acknowledgment of the One through whom he (Christ) was able to accomplish it all: He must deliver up his Kingdom to God the Father. He must give it back to the One who gave it to him (John 17:6). In other words, he must relinquish *this form* of his cosmic sovereignty and freshly submit himself, his people, and his world to the Father's direct authority. He must do this so that God the Father may be glorified as the supreme Sovereign of the universe; that he may be all in all.⁵

And because the Son loves the Father, he will do so gladly (John 17:1).

The delivering up of the Kingdom is "the consummation of the Consummation." Not only so, it is the crowning touch upon the Blessed Hope of the saints. Mysterious as the great transaction is, they anticipate it with relish, knowing that herein the redemptive achievements of the Son are forever sealed, the Father fully glorified, and his completed Kingdom introduced at last. Accordingly, even before it happens, they think they hear the Father saying to the Son precisely what the Son will say to them when

their own labors are complete: “Well done, good and faithful Servant; enter into the joy of your Lord” (Mt. 25:31).

Conclusion

Our theme has been the Blessed Hope. In love and wisdom, God our Father has given it to us, through Christ, in the Scriptures, so that we might have *eternal* comfort and *good* hope by grace (2 Thess. 2:16). My prayer, after so long and challenging a journey, is that we all may understand, use, and savor it well.

What is this hope? As we have seen, it is the one Consummation at the end of this present evil age, a Consummation wrought by Christ himself at his Parousia.

It is, however, a many-faceted hope. We look with hope, not only upon the one Consummation, but also upon every aspect of that Consummation.

Thus, we hope to glorify Christ and advance his redemptive plan through God-given steadfastness in the midst of the Greatest Tribulation and the Last Battle (2 Thess. 1).

We hope to behold his face at his appearing, and so to be changed into his likeness (Rom. 6:5, 1 John 3:2).

We hope to see our beloved Master universally vindicated: honored by all men and all angels as the High King of heaven and earth (Phil. 2:5-11).

We hope for perfect spiritual and physical wholeness, bestowed upon us at the Resurrection of the Dead (1 Cor. 15, Col. 3:4).

We hope for a joyful reunion with departed believing loved ones, as we meet the Lord together in the air (1 Thess. 4:13-18).

We hope to see the Holy and Righteous Judge turn a morally upside down world right side up (Mt. 25:41, Rom. 2:1-10).

We hope to hear the merciful and gracious Judge commend us for lives well lived and works well done (Mt. 25:21).

We hope to see the realm of nature purified of every vestige of sin, and a beautiful new world springing up out of the ashes of the old (2 Peter 3:10-13).

And in that world, we hope to know, serve, worship, and enjoy our triune God forever (Rev. 21:9f).

Such is the Blessed Hope.

Such is the eschatological Pearl of Great Price.

Such is the Hidden Treasure, formerly locked away in the storeroom of Scripture, but now opened to our wondering eyes by the High King of Heaven, who so graciously places within our trembling hands the Master Keys to the Great End Time Debate.

Epilogue

Amillennialism: An Eschatology for These Last Days

ARE WE LIVING in “the last days”?

If you’ve read this book, you know my answer: Yes, I *know* we are, for the Bible says we have been ever since the Son of God came into the world to purchase our redemption (Heb. 1:1-2).

But are we living in “the last of the last days?” Are we closing in on the final scenes of cosmic history, the Parousia, the Consummation, and eternal life in the World to Come?

If you’ve read this book, you suspect my answer: Yes, I *think* we are; and I have written this epilogue to explain why.

For two millennia, the Church has experienced what Jesus referred to as *the beginning of birth pangs*: wars, rumors of war, famines, earthquakes, pestilence, the deceptive teaching of false christs and false prophets, and the ebb and flow of persecution. All of this has been part and parcel of the Great Tribulation, out of which God has been faithfully rescuing his elect for generations, placing them savingly in his Beloved Son.

Today, however, the universal Church is witnessing a notable intensification of those birth pangs. While revival fires burn here and there, much of Christendom is in collapse. European churches stand empty. Whole denominations, rich with Christian history and culture, slide into compromise and apostasy. Outspoken atheism is on the rise, even in America, an historic citadel of the faith. The Western intelligentsia speaks openly of a “post-christian” society. As in the days of Noah and Lot, world culture now descends into lawlessness: gratuitous violence, kidnapping, slavery, murder, sexual immorality, lying, greed, religious fanaticism, and anarchy. Meanwhile, the persecution of Christians rises to epidemic proportions. Some observers estimate that over 100,000 believers die

annually for their faith. Morning, noon, and night, the souls of the martyrs stream into heaven to take their place beneath the altar of God (Rev. 6:10).

But amidst all this gloom, there is good news as well: The glory of the Lord has risen upon his Church, and through the global preaching of the Gospel—especially in the “two-thirds world”—the elect of all nations are coming to her light, streaming into the City of God (Isaiah 60 1-3, Mt. 24:14).

Have we therefore reached transition itself? Is the delivery near? Is the rebirth of all things at the very door?

Yes and no. No, because we have not yet witnessed three of the special signs our Lord taught us to look for, signs that herald the imminence of the end. But yes, if we take a moment to reconsider those signs and note the solid historical evidence suggesting that they too will soon be upon us.

Consider first the Great Commission. It is indeed true that we have not yet fulfilled it. According to the Joshua Project, there are 16,475 people groups in the world, of which 6,664 remain technically “unreached”. This is 42% of all people groups, some three billion souls. It is a staggering number, largely representing Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists, Communists, and animists who live in the so-called “10/40 window.” However, we must also remember that the gap between “reached” and “unreached” is swiftly growing smaller; that the pool of potential missionaries has never been larger; that revivals are continually springing up in many of these populations; and that modern advances in communications technology are facilitating rapid church growth even in “closed” nations. Yes, much work remains to be done, and many pioneer missionaries are needed to do it. Nevertheless, it is not wishful thinking to say that today’s Church is powerfully “hastening” the Coming of the Lord, and that the completion of the Great Commission is near.

Secondly, it is also true that we have not yet seen the large-scale conversion of God’s ancient covenant people, Israel. However, the stage is certainly set for one. Most notably, many of the sons of Jacob have returned to their former homeland, a staggering feat of Providence that can hardly be without redemptive significance (see Appendix 5). Their enemies—as numerous as the sands of the seashore—are armed to the teeth and surrounding them on all sides. Their spiritual wealth is inversely proportional to their material: From Christ’s perspective, they are wretched,

miserable, poor, blind, and naked. Even now there is a great famine in that land, such that one day soon—perhaps amidst the birth pangs of war itself—they will finally cry out to God’s greater Joseph: first for forgiveness, and then for food, drink, and real safety in a far better homeland where righteousness eternally dwells (Gen. 45:1f).

Finally, it also true that the Man of Lawlessness has not yet been revealed, and that the Last Battle and the Greatest Tribulation have not yet begun.

But again, there is much evidence to suggest that these biblical tokens of the final clash of the kingdoms are drawing near. I have already mentioned growing lawlessness, apostasy, and persecution, all of which may well herald, or even fulfill, the “rebellion” of which Paul spoke (2 Thess. 2:3). Beyond these, there are fresh waves of “Messianic” fanaticism rolling through different cultures. A fragile global economy, increasingly vulnerable to sudden collapse, portends a global cry for a global deliverer. Powerful new weapons systems and massive armies make the unthinkable thinkable: a final world empire, ruled by a final world tyrant, holding the family of nations in a twofold iron grip—the hope of heaven on earth, and the fear of utter annihilation for those unwilling to comply. Happily, the Gospel continues to go forth with good success to every tribe, tongue, people, and nation, so that new churches are springing up in their midst. Yet even as it does, a world-system given over to idolatry—and drunk with pride, wealth, sensuality, and power—grows increasingly hardened. Like Egypt of old, at any moment it could turn *en masse* against God’s eschatological Israel, thinking to pursue her to the death through a Red Sea of religious cleansing.

So then, it appears that the Church may well be entering the last of the last days. But why does she need to recover the biblically orthodox eschatology? Why does the Lord himself seem to be restoring it to her? Why is the revival of interest in amillennialism so timely? In short, why is amillennialism an eschatology for these last days?

Here are my top five reasons.

First and foremost, amillennialism is true. God’s truth is, of course, always good for God’s people; but it will be especially good for that portion of his people who enjoy the privileges—and endure the rigors—of the end of the age.

Secondly, amillennialism powerfully clarifies and crystallizes the truth of the entire biblical worldview. For example, amillennialism secures for us a clear picture of the one true outline of Salvation History. Similarly, it rounds out biblical cosmology, which, to be complete, requires a good understanding not only of the origin, purpose, and structure of the universe, but also of its destiny. Also, it opens up and integrates Scripture as a whole. It does this by exalting the New and Eternal Covenant as the heart of Salvation History, and then placing the New Covenant Hermeneutic firmly in our hands, so that henceforth we are able not only to understand the Gospels and the Epistles, but also OT typology, OT Kingdom prophecy, and the Revelation. Lest his Church be cast adrift upon the ideological crosscurrents of the last days, God must anchor her to his total truth. Amillennial eschatology gives her total truth, and will hold her to it, safe and sound.

Thirdly, amillennialism strengthens the preaching and teaching ministry of the Church. This is a corollary of point two. By opening and integrating total biblical truth, amillennialism enables us to *proclaim* total biblical truth. In particular, it empowers evangelists, teachers, and prophets to proclaim the Gospel not only from the Gospels and the Epistles, but also from OT history, OTKP, and the Revelation. It empowers them to preach Christ, not only in his life, death, and resurrection, but also in his present heavenly reign and future Coming again. It empowers them boldly to sing and shout and trumpet the signs of the times, the one Parousia, the one Resurrection, the one Judgment, and the one new World to Come. In short, amillennialism enables them to bring the full force of God's total truth to bear upon saints and sinners alike. In the days ahead, we will need it as never before.

Fourthly, amillennialism restores to the Church a true vision of Christ at his Coming, a true vision of her Blessed Hope. As I argued earlier, for a longish season smoke arising from the abyss has darkened that particular sun (Rev. 9:1-2). Now, however, the Lord is clearing the air. As he does, the Bride suddenly beholds her coming King afresh, not only up above, but also up ahead. The vision is breathtaking, filling her eyes with his glory, majesty, and power. Contemplating the Momentous Event that soon will come to pass, she cries, "My Beloved is dazzling, outstanding among ten thousand!" This vision is not simply a means to an end. It is an intrinsic good. The Father has sent the Son to redeem a holy people, so that they might behold

the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ—and live. Amillennialism, in giving us back our Blessed Hope, gives us a fresh sighting of the High King of Heaven, and so a fresh infusion of the divine life.

But fifthly, amillennialism is indeed useful, even vital—especially in these last days. Over and again, we have seen why. Opening a window onto the true Consummation, it lets light from God’s true future pour into the perplexing present, filling the hearts of the saints with the clarity, joy, and zeal of Christ himself. Thus filled, the Bride becomes strong for outreach, steady amidst the birth pangs, proof against lies and error, holy before the rising tide of lawlessness, and courageous in the face of severe persecution.

Indeed, as her heavenly Husband washes her eyes with the water of his Word, the veil between the present and the future grows so thin that she seems to see her King standing before her very eyes.

With love and longing, she cries, “Come!”

With love and longing, he replies, “Yes, my Beloved, I am coming quickly. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.”

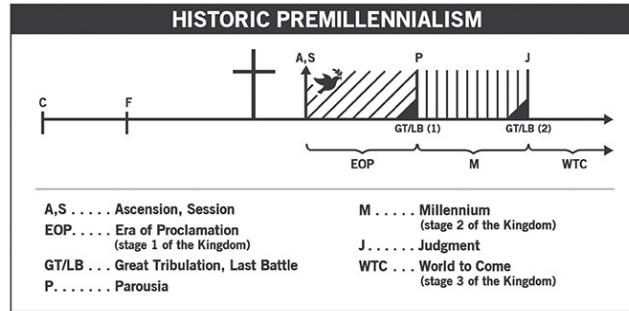
A Critique of Historic Premillennialism

THIS IS THE first of four appendices in which I offer brief critiques of the main eschatological options before evangelical Christians. My purpose here is not to repeat the arguments and evidences discussed in the body of this book. Rather, I simply want to model what I regard as the most fruitful method for examining different eschatological perspectives, whether old or new.

This approach, which reflects the underlying issues of the GETD, involves asking four questions of each eschatological option. They are:

- 1) What is its view of the nature and structure of the Kingdom of God?
- 2) What is its view of the nature and structure of the Consummation?
- 3) How does it interpret OTKP: basically literally, in terms of ethnic Israel and a future Mosaic theocracy; or basically spiritually, in terms of the Church and the spiritual reign of God introduced by the New Covenant?
- 4) What is its view of the Revelation in general, and of Revelation 20 in particular?

With the help of the Timeline shown below, let us use these questions to critique historic premillennialism. Before continuing, You may wish to revisit the overview of HP in chapter 3, where I distinguish between New Covenant and Old Covenant HP.



View of the Kingdom

From our Timeline we learn that HP envisions the Kingdom as entering history in three stages: the Church Era of Gospel Proclamation, the Millennium, and the World to Come. However, in our journey we saw that the NT blocks the way. Apart from the much-disputed Revelation 20, it says nothing whatsoever about a future millennial stage of the Kingdom. Moreover, its didactic eschatology completely rules out premillennialism, since it has the Kingdom entering history, not in three stages, but two: the Era of Proclamation and the World to Come.

Additionally, NT teaching about the *nature* of the Kingdom shows that OCHP cannot possibly be true. That's because the two-staged Kingdom is a creation of the New Covenant, with the result that its citizens worship God, not in this or that earthly mountain, but in spirit and (New Covenant) truth. There will be no return to the temporary and typological institutions of the ancient Mosaic theocracy.

View of the Consummation

Historic premillennarians look for two distinct Comings of Christ—one at the end of the present evil age, and the other at the end of the Millennium. This complex scenario raises thorny questions. At the first Parousia, who will be judged and who will be allowed to enter the Millennium? How biblical (or credible) is it to assert that the children of unbelievers will become the nations over which Christ rules? What happens to the millennial saints when they die? Will they immediately receive their resurrection bodies, or will they wait in heaven till the second resurrection at the end of the Millennium? How is it that Christ's peaceful millennial reign ends in near universal rebellion against him and his people? And

finally, does Scripture really permit us to look for what HP requires: two resurrections, two judgments, and two cosmic transformations, with the members of each pair separated by a thousand years?

Such questions tell us that something is fundamentally wrong with HP. In the course of our study we learned what it is: The NT consistently looks for a *single* consummation centered on a *single* parousia, resurrection, judgment, and cosmic transformation. It is, then, the doctrine of a future Millennium that shatters the simplicity of the biblical picture, and opens the door to confusion. Perhaps premillennarians would be wise to revisit their futuristic interpretation of Revelation 20, for by moving things into the present as amillennialism does, all confusion disappears!

View of OTKP

I rejoice that advocates of NCHP are inclined to interpret OTKP much as amillennarians do: as *veiled* revelations in which God used OT language and imagery to speak “mysteriously” about spiritual and physical blessings *unveiled* by Christ and the New Covenant. To paraphrase their Master, they are not far from the truth of the Kingdom!

I wonder, however, how they can preach and teach from OTKP. In particular, how can they discern which predictions are actually fulfilled in the Millennium? Is Isaiah 11:6-9 fulfilled in the Millennium? Since it says nothing of a thousand years, how can they be sure it does not speak “mysteriously” of the World to Come? And what of these premillennial favorites: Isaiah 65:17-25 and 66:22-24? Here the situation is even worse, since the prophet positively affirms that latter-day “Jerusalem,” and the world it will inhabit, will endure forever (65:18, 66:22)!

It appears, then, that NCHP is shut up to Revelation 20 alone for its knowledge of the Millennium. This should make its proponents very uneasy. Do they really want to hang so great an eschatological bundle on so small a scriptural peg? Is this not another invitation to re-examine Revelation 20 beneath the clearer light of the didactic NT?

As for the followers of OCHP, we remember that they interpret OTKP basically literally; that they view these prophecies as photographs of Israel and the nations living together in the Millennium.

We have seen, however, that this approach plunges the biblical interpreter into a great thicket of difficulties: apparent contradictions, historical anachronisms, a future return to the Mosaic Law, and a losing battle with the NT doctrine of the Kingdom. Happily, we also saw that the apostles do *not* interpret OTKP in this manner. Yes, they understood that God meant “simple” Messianic prophecies—prophecies fulfilled *prior* to Pentecost—to be interpreted basically literally, and then to be used as witnesses in the global proclamation of the Gospel. But they also understood that true OTKP’s—prophecies fulfilled *after* Pentecost—must be interpreted by a skillful use of the NCH, and therefore as being fulfilled in Christ, under the New Covenant, and among the New Covenant people of God: the Church, comprised of believing Jews and Gentiles of all time. Let us be glad of it, for here alone do we find the way of escape from the maddening historical and theological contradictions into which OCHP would plunge us all.

View of the Revelation

Whatever their approach to the Revelation as a whole, all historic premillennarians agree that chapter 20 speaks of events to occur *after* the Parousia. We have seen, however, that this futuristic reading of Revelation 20 immediately brings it into conflict with the rest of the NT, which pervasively sees the Kingdom as coming in two simple stages, separated by a single Consummation at the return of Christ.

Happily, there is a clear solution. We came upon it in Part 4 of our study, where we learned that Revelation 20 is actually one of six visionary cycles, *all of which* describe the period of time between Christ’s first and second advents. This was particularly evident from the striking similarities between chapters 12 and 20. Moreover, once we recognize that “the first resurrection” of 20:4-6 is spiritual, it is easy to see how the second is both physical and general, and that Revelation 20 symbolizes the course of the Era of Proclamation. Henceforth, the whole book harmonizes perfectly with the rest of the NT.

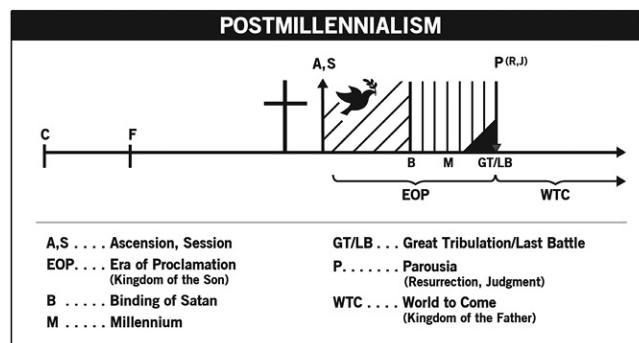
Summing up, we find that HP entangles the biblical interpreter in inescapable conflict and confusion. When, however, we receive from Christ the Master Keys to the GETD, all difficulties are resolved, and the one true

eschatology of Scripture rises like the sun in its strength. I pray my premillennial brethren will receive those keys, and so enter into the joy of the amillennial dawn.

A Critique of Postmillennialism

AS WE LEARNED in chapter 3, postmillennialism is a species of amillennialism. Its distinctive characteristic is the expectation of a Golden Era of universal Christian faith, peace, and prosperity prior to the Last Battle, the Parousia, and the Consummation of all things.

With the help of the diagram below, let's review its understanding of Salvation History.



Like amillennialism, postmillennialism envisions the Kingdom of God as appearing in two stages: the Kingdom of the Son, followed by the Kingdom of the Father. However, unlike amillennialism, it posits that the Kingdom of the Son is itself divided into two stages. Beginning in NT times, the Gospel goes forth into the world. Amidst much tribulation it begins to prosper. Then, at some point late in the Era of Proclamation—a point yet future to us—Satan is bound in such a way that the Gospel begins to make unprecedented advances. This is the second, “millennial” stage of the Kingdom of the Son. Importantly, most postmillennarians assert that the Millennium will begin with the conversion of the great bulk of ethnic Israel. Then, as Ken Gentry puts it, “The Kingdom will grow and develop until eventually it exercises a dominant and universal gracious influence in a

long era of righteousness, peace, and prosperity on the earth and in history.”¹ This era could actually last more than a literal thousand years, since (unlike Augustine) most postmillennarians regard that number as symbolizing magnitude. Quite surprisingly, as the end approaches the glories of the Golden Era are suddenly overshadowed by a brief, Satanically inspired rebellion, in which the true saints of God will suffer much persecution. However, just as suddenly, the Lord will return to reverse the reversal, rescue his own, raise the dead, judge the world, and bring in the eternal Kingdom.

Using our four questions, let us now critique this relatively unpopular eschatological option.

View of the Kingdom

On a positive note, postmillennialism does indeed embrace the basic NT understanding of the structure of the Kingdom, viewing it as entering history in two separate stages, separated by a single Consummation at the Parousia of Christ.

The problem, however, lies with its view of the first stage of the Kingdom, the Kingdom of the Son (or the Era of Proclamation). Nowhere in the Didactic NT do we find any suggestion that it is divided into two sub-stages, or that it includes a long, future Golden Era. Quite to the contrary, our study has shown that whether we look at the teachings of Christ, Paul, Peter, or John, we always find these men girding the loins of the saints for constant opposition and persecution, yet also for measured success as God brings in his little flock through the faithful preaching of the Gospel (Mt. 24:9-14, John 10:16, Rom. 8:30, 1 Thess. 2:2, Titus 2:14, 1 Peter 4:12, 1 John 3:13, 5:19).

In this regard, the Parable of the Wheat and the Tares is paradigmatic (Mt. 13:24-30, 36-43). There the Lord clearly assumes that all throughout the Era of Proclamation the tares will grow up alongside the wheat. Indeed, so abundant are the tares that the angels regard them as a threat to the safety of God’s crop (Mt. 13:27-28). This is the template of all NT eschatology. Believers live and serve in the present evil age (Gal. 1:4). Always and everywhere, they struggle against the world forces of this present darkness (Eph. 6:12). To the very end, the world-system lies under the sway of the

evil one (2 Cor. 4:4, 1 John 5:19). The Church is light shining in the ever-deepening darkness of the world-system (Mt. 5:14, John 1:5). Her ongoing experience is one of Great Tribulation (Rev. 7:14). She is making a hard pilgrimage through the wilderness of a hostile world (Rev. 12:6, 13-17). The Last Battle will simply be the final and most extreme engagement of a perennial war. Where, in all of this, is there room for a Golden Era of peace, righteousness, and prosperity?²

View of the Consummation

Fundamentally, the postmillennial view of the Consummation is sound, since, like its birth mother (amillennialism), it looks for a single Consummation at the Parousia. Nevertheless, there are a number of serious problems, most of which involve its picture of the lead-up to the Consummation.

First, postmillennialism errs in looking for the latter-day conversion of ethnic Israel *prior* to the Millennium; that is, prior to the so-called Golden Era. This is not the teaching of the NT, which looks for Israel's conversion at *the end* of the Millennium, that is, at the end of the entire Era of Proclamation. And this is a serious mistake, since here postmillennialism effectively robs the Church of one of the great signs of the imminence of the Parousia: the grafting of Israel back into the vine of Christ, after which we may soon expect "life from the dead."

Secondly, just like premillennialism, postmillennialism has great difficulty explaining the Last Battle. How is it that multitudes the world over can suddenly defect from Christ? Are they regenerate? How then can they so terribly fall away? Are they unregenerate? What then was the spiritual basis of the global peace that immediately preceded this incongruous war? There is something wrong with this picture, and the problem, it would appear, lies in the way postmillennarians have drawn it.

Thirdly, postmillennialism undermines true biblical teaching on the Last Battle. Yes, postmillennarians confess that a Last Battle will occur prior to the Parousia. However, by placing it on the far side of their Golden Era, they leave the Church looking first for a Golden Era (that will not come), and only then for the Last Battle (which, for postmillennarians, will come all too soon). In other words, their doctrine effectively cuts the nerve of

several powerful NT texts warning us that the Last Battle could quickly fall upon us, and that we must therefore always be ready for it. It leaves a naively optimistic Church vulnerable to the shock of the sudden rise of the Antichrist, and to a crisis of spiritual disillusionment that would almost certainly flow from it. Again, all these unwelcome prospects are rooted in the postmillennarian's failure to see that the *entire* Era of Proclamation is a season of Gospel combat and conflict, a season of "great tribulation" (Rev. 7:14).

Finally, postmillennialism tends to trivialize the Last Battle and the Last Judgment. Both are profoundly solemn events, events that will engulf huge swaths of humanity. Postmillennarians, however, regard the Last Battle as an unfortunate ripple upon the sea of millennial bliss. Similarly, their distinctive eschatology eclipses the gravity of the Last Judgment by implying (or explicitly asserting) that as a consequence of the Golden Era relatively few souls will be lost.

On both counts, the NT sharply disagrees. Jesus said that throughout the Church era, and especially at its end, his disciples will be hated by all nations (Mt. 10:16ff, 24:9). John relates that the number of those who wage war against the eschatological camp of the saints will be "like the sand of the seashore" (Rev. 20:8). As for the ratio of the saved to the lost, we are wise, I think, to eschew undue speculation (Luke 13:22f). Nevertheless, it is sobering to recall that wide is the gate and broad the way that leads to destruction, and many go in by it; that Christ refers to his Church as "a little flock;" and that those who will follow him upon the slopes of the eternal Zion are "the firstfruits" (i.e., a small, early part of the total harvest) of God and the Lamb (Mt. 7:13, 13:24-30, 36-43, Luke 12:32, James 1:18, Rev. 14:1-4, 14-20).

We find, then, that despite its welcome nod to orthodoxy, postmillennialism gives us a flawed and potentially injurious view of the Consummation.

View of OTKP

Postmillennarians argue that a large number of OTKP's promise a global triumph of the Gospel in the Church Era (Psalms 72, 110, Isaiah 2:1-4, 65:17-25, Micah 4:1-3, Zech. 9:10, etc.). Like their amillennarian

brethren, they see these prophecies as being fulfilled under the New Covenant. However, unlike them, they tend to view the prophecies as being fulfilled in the New Covenant Era of Proclamation, rather than in the Era of Reward and Retribution (i.e., the World to Come). Reading OTKP this way, they conclude that the OT promises us a Golden Era of Gospel success *on this side* of the Consummation.

In the course of our study, I have addressed a number of these texts in some detail, using the NCH hermeneutic to show that they—and all genuine OTKP’s—are fulfilled in the (conflicted) Era of Proclamation, the (perfected) World to Come, or both. We saw, for example, that Psalm 72 is *not* fulfilled exclusively in the Era of Proclamation, but that it often uses OT imagery to represent the Messiah’s achievements in the World to Come. We saw that the NT consistently regards Psalm 110 as one of the Old Testament’s most powerful portraits of *the ongoing spiritual warfare of the Church Militant*. We saw that Isaiah 2 and Micah 4—just like Psalm 72—refer to *both* stages of the Kingdom. As for Isaiah 65:17-25, it is not, as postmillennarian Marcellus Kik avers, a picture of “the moral and spiritual revolution in human affairs fostered by the Gospel.” Rather, it is simply a picture of the new heavens and the new earth, cast in the familiar tropes of the OT (2 Peter 3:13, Rev. 21:2).

In all of this, we see yet again the vast importance of a skillful use of the NCH. Unless we are thoroughly grounded in NT eschatology—unless we are perfectly clear about the nature and structure of the two-staged Kingdom of God—we shall surely miss the true message of OTKP. Like their premillennial brethren, postmillennarians seek to impose a false reading of OTKP and Revelation 20 upon the Didactic NT. This turns things upside down. Instead, they should allow a true reading of the Didactic NT guide them into a true understanding of OTKP. Only thus shall the OT and the NT be found to sing the same beautiful song!

View of the Revelation

Like premillennarians, postmillennarians generally teach that the events described in Revelation 20 *follow* those described in Revelation 19:11-21. This means, of course, that Revelation 19:11-21 cannot be speaking of the Parousia/Consummation. Accordingly, Loraine Boettner argues that this

text gives us "... a vision setting forth in figurative language the age-long struggle between the forces of good and the forces of evil in the world, with its promise of complete victory."³ In other words, it gives us Christ triumphing in the Era of Proclamation through the preaching of the Word of God. This results in a special binding of Satan, which in turn inaugurates the golden millennial era (20:1-3). In that era, the world will experience "the first resurrection," by which postmillennarians mean a "... restoration and vindication of the cause for which the martyrs died" (J. J. Davis), or "a rebirth of the martyr spirit" (A. Strong). Vast numbers of millennial saints, now fully subject to the Spirit of the High King of Heaven, will reign victoriously on a peaceful and prosperous earth (20:4-6).⁴ At the close of the Millennium, this global victory will seem, for the briefest of moments, to end in defeat, as Satan is released from his prison and leads multitudes against the faithful people of God. However, at his Parousia, Christ will swiftly intervene to destroy his enemies (20:7-10). This brings on the Last Judgment (20:12-15), which in turn brings in the new heavens and the new earth (21:1-22:21).

By my lights, this is a serious misreading of the Revelation. As I argued earlier, Revelation 20 runs *parallel* to Revelation 17-19, and does *not* follow it chronologically. Revelation 19:11-21 most certainly *does* give us the Parousia, as do 6:12-17, 11:11-19, 14:14-20 and 20:10-15. The binding of Satan took place at the *beginning* of the Era of Proclamation, through Christ's work on the Cross; it is *not* still future, even to us who live 2000 years into that era (Mt. 12:29, John 12:31, Col. 2:15, 1 Peter 3:22, Rev. 12:7f)! The first resurrection is *not* a revival of the martyr's cause or spirit, but the attainment of the joys of the Intermediate State by the spirits of the saints who die in the Lord (Rev. 14:13). And finally, the millennial reign of the saints does *not* take place upon the earth, but rather in heaven, where the spirits of the saints reign in life with Christ, even as they await the final triumph of life at "the second resurrection": the resurrection of the body on the Day of the Lord Jesus Christ (Rom. 5:17, 1 Cor. 15:1f, Rev. 20:11-15).

Conclusion

Certainly we can be grateful to our postmillennarian brethren when they remind us that God has destined the Gospel to triumph in the earth; that it

will indeed redeem a great multitude of believers *out of* every tribe, tongue, people and nation (2 Cor. 2:14, Rev. 5:9, 7:9). And certainly we can affirm with them that the advance of Christ's spiritual Kingdom both leavens and enlightens the evil world-system in such a way as to have positive impacts upon its various institutions, whether cultural, political, or economic (Matt. 5:13-16). By all means, then, let individual Christians serve their Lord in every legitimate sphere of life, and let them be grateful whenever their presence produces a measure of change for the good (John 17:15).

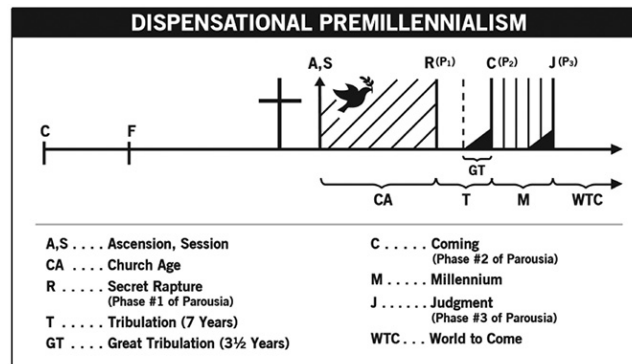
Yet for all this, postmillennialism remains a seriously flawed eschatology, perhaps even dangerously so. Its root problem is that it fails to understand God's true purpose in the Era of Proclamation, and therefore the true character of that era. God's true purpose is not to Christianize the Domain of Darkness, but rather to rescue a chosen people out of it and to transfer them into the Kingdom of his beloved Son (Gal. 1:4, Col. 1:13). This means that, from beginning to end, Christ's Kingdom and Satan's kingdom are in constant contact and conflict; that the Era of Proclamation is, above all else, a spiritual battlefield upon which we shall ever see a cosmic clash of the kingdoms.

If received, the unbiblical doctrine of a future Golden Era will seriously undermine the spiritual health of the saints. It sets them up for disappointment and frustration, since the Era they dream of will never come, no matter how hard they toil for it. It distracts them from their true mission, which is not to transform the world-system, but simply to preach the Gospel, so that God may gather his chosen people out of it. It distorts the believer's hope, focusing it upon an illusory stage of Church history rather than upon the Consummation at Christ's return (1 Peter 1:13). It fails to prepare the Church for inevitable persecution, and also to warn her against the perils of the rising tide of lawlessness that will characterize the last of the last days (Mt. 24:12). And again, it effectively robs her of the three great signs by which she may know that the Coming of her Lord is at hand: the completion of the Great Commission, the conversion of ethnic Israel, and the Last Battle.

For all these reasons, I would invite my postmillennial brethren to come home to your true birth mother, to the amillennial eschatology that begot you. Truly, she has prepared her table well, and is eager to forgive, forget, and savor all good things with her beloved sons.

A Critique of Dispensational Premillennialism

IN CHAPTER 3, I offered a brief history and theological overview of dispensational premillennialism. Throughout the course of this book, I have addressed and critiqued nearly every element of that system. In the present appendix, I will use the diagram below and our four questions to provide a brief summary and evaluation of this popular eschatological option.



View of the Kingdom

Classical Dispensationalism teaches that the Kingdom of God enters history at the onset of the Millennium. It was promised to ethnic Israel in the Abrahamic and Davidic Covenants, predicted and pictured in OTKP, offered to Israel in the days of Christ’s flesh, rejected, and then postponed until the end of the Dispensation of the (largely Gentile) Church. After the Rapture, when Christ removes the Church from the earth, God’s prophetic clock will begin to tick again. Just as Jesus did, 144,000 Jewish evangelists will preach “the Gospel of the Kingdom,” this time to all nations during a seven-year Tribulation. This Tribulation will end with the Parousia (i.e.,

Christ's Coming *with* his Church), at which time those Tribulation saints who have believed in Christ will enter his millennial Kingdom. Then Christ will sit on David's throne in Jerusalem, ruling and reigning over the nations. Many elements of the Mosaic Ceremonial Law will be revived as a memorial to Christ's work. Ethnic Israel will be the head, the Gentile nations will be the tail. According to some, the glorified Church will remain in heaven throughout the Millennium (though she will still have a mysterious share in Christ's millennial reign). According to others, she will rule with Christ on earth. Dispensationalists view this lengthy "Kingdom Age" as the true sphere of fulfillment of almost all OTKP.

In passing, we should note that among dispensationalists there is some difference of opinion as to the structure of the Kingdom. Classical dispensationalists foresee a two-staged Kingdom: the Millennium and the World to Come, wherein the glorified Church will join with glorified Israel in the eternal worship of God. Progressive dispensationalists, alive to NT teaching on the presence of the Kingdom in the Church, refer to the Church Era as "the mystery phase of the Kingdom." In effect, they offer us a three-staged Kingdom of God.

In the course of our study, we have seen that Dispensationalism more or less completely misunderstands the NT doctrine of the Kingdom of God. By way of review, four crucial points may be made.

First, Dispensationalism misunderstands the *nature* of the Kingdom. As we have seen, Christ and the apostles taught that the Kingdom is simply the direct reign of God, through Christ, by the Spirit, over all who have entered the New (i.e., the Eternal) Covenant by faith. The Kingdom has nothing whatsoever to do with the theocratic institutions of the Mosaic Law, all of which have been fulfilled and rendered obsolete by Christ and the New Covenant.

Secondly, Dispensationalism misunderstands the *OT representations* of the Kingdom. In *OT history*, the Kingdom was represented by national Israel—by the Mosaic theocracy—, especially as this existed under kings David and Solomon. In *OT Kingdom Prophecy*, the Kingdom was represented as an ideal Mosaic theocracy to be governed by God's latter-day David, the Messiah. But as the NT makes clear, in both cases God was using physical persons, places, objects, and institutions to picture the spiritual elements and blessings of the New Covenant. For

dispensationalists, OTKP's are photographs of a coming physical kingdom; for the NT authors, they are symbols of the spiritual Kingdom that *has* come in Christ, and that *will* come—in glorious fullness—at his return.

Thirdly, Dispensationalism misunderstands the *structure* of the Kingdom. As we have seen, the NT does *not* look for a future millennial stage of the Kingdom, but sees the Kingdom appearing in two simple stages. In the first, Christ reigns from heaven over the spirits of his pilgrim people. He does this through the Holy Spirit, and through the institutions of his new evangelical law. In the second, the Father and the Son reign over the glorified spirits, bodies, and world of their resurrected/transformed people in the new heavens and the new earth. Happily, some progressive dispensationalists acknowledge that God's eschatological David does indeed now rule over his spiritual nation from his heavenly throne. But even these, by looking for a literal fulfillment of OTKP in a future millennium, tragically eclipse the centrality and glory of the greatest of all NT mysteries of the Kingdom: the heavenly mediatorial reign of the High King of Heaven.

Finally, Dispensationalism misunderstands the *people* of the Kingdom. According to the NT, they are a great multitude taken out of every tribe, tongue, people, and nation; they are all who come by faith to Christ as Prophet, Priest, and King (Mt. 11:28f, John 6:37, 44, 65). God does *not* have two peoples, and he does *not* have two plans for two peoples: a Gospel of the Kingdom for the Jews, and a Gospel of Grace for the Gentiles. No, he has *one* plan: the New Covenant in Christ. And he has *one* people: those who enter the New Covenant through faith in him, whether Jew or Gentile. Henceforth, he has broken down the middle wall separating Jew and Gentile (Eph. 2:14). Henceforth, there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, but all are one in Christ Jesus (Gal. 3:28). Henceforth, there is one flock (John 10), one Woman (Rev. 12), one Bride (Eph. 5), one Wife (Rev. 21), one Body (Eph. 5), one New Man (Eph. 2), one Olive Tree (Rom. 11), one City (Rev. 21), one Royal Priesthood (1 Pet. 2), and one Holy Nation: the one true Israel of God who will live with him forever (Gal. 6:16, 1 Pet. 2). Therefore, let no one rebuild what God has forever torn down (Gal. 2:18); let no one separate what God has forever joined together (Mt. 19:6).

View of the Consummation

For those steeped in the simplicity, power, and Christ-centered glory of the NT view of the Consummation, dispensational teaching on this theme is deeply troubling. The great problem here is that Dispensationalism destroys the Blessed Hope of the Church by dismantling its unity; by breaking up the eschatological Diamond into pieces and sewing them like tiny sequins on a false Timeline of future Salvation History. The result is eschatological controversy, confusion, and discouragement, none of which well serves a people upon whom the ends of the ages have now come (1 Cor. 10:11).

But in order to be more specific, let us work our way through the relevant portions of the dispensational timeline.

The dispensational vision of the Consummation begins with the Rapture, or Christ's Coming *for* his saints, when he secretly returns to the earth, raises the dead (Christians), transforms the living, and removes his glorified Church into heaven, thus marking the onset of a seven-year season of tribulation. We have seen, however, that this idea is not found in the OT, and that it is based on a faulty exegesis of a small handful of NT texts. In truth, the Rapture—or the gathering together of *all* the glorified saints to meet the Lord in the air—occurs at the one Parousia, when Christ returns in visible power and glory, raises *all* the dead, and judges *all* men before his glorious throne (Mt. 13, 25, 1 Thess. 4).

Next comes the seven-year Tribulation, or the 70th week of Daniel. Here, error abounds. We have seen, for example, that “the Great Tribulation” of Revelation 7:14 is the entire present evil age, wherein the saints have always been persecuted; that the permutations of three and a half found in the Revelation symbolize the entire Era of Proclamation as a season of persecution; and that “the greatest tribulation” of which Christ spoke in Matthew 24:21 is a brief season of unspecified length at the end of the age, a season of tribulation for both the Church and the world. Using symbolic language, Daniel spoke of this very season, describing it as the final “seven” (or week) of Salvation History; the “week” in which the Antichrist would rise to power, deceive the world, and persecute the saints (Dan. 9). So then, the Scriptures do *not* teach that the final season of tribulation will last seven years; and most certainly they do *not* teach that the Church will escape it. Quite to the contrary, whether in the Old or New

Testaments, the Holy Spirit clearly reveals these solemn truths in order to prepare the saints to endure this brief final season of hardship—this Last Battle—as good soldiers of Jesus Christ (2 Tim. 2:3, 4:5).

Next we have Christ's Coming *with* his saints, at which time he will (allegedly) judge the living nations that have passed through the Tribulation. Here the dispensational error is at its worst, seeing that this view of the Parousia so egregiously empties the Consummation of its Christ-centered power and glory. As we saw in our journey, there is but *one* Parousia of Christ, not two (i.e., a Coming *for* his saints, followed by a Coming *with* his saints). Moreover, this Parousia is cosmic in scope, and absolutely ultimate in impact. Here Christ raises or transforms *all* who have ever lived; here he judges *all* sentient beings, whether men or angels; here he destroys the old cosmos and creates a new one out of its ashes; here he lays down the completed Kingdom as a radiant trophy before his Father's feet, and *concludes* his Messianic reign, rather than begins it! Contrary to all this NT teaching, Dispensationalism has Christ's Coming affecting a small portion of humanity by a partial resurrection, a partial judgment, and a partial transformation of nature. Certainly our dispensational brethren do not mean it so, but in point of fact their teaching on the Parousia runs sharply athwart the true purpose of God for the Consummation, grievously detracting from the unspeakable glory of the High King of Heaven at his return.

Next comes the Millennium. As we have seen, by placing it in the future, dispensationalists misrepresent the true structure of the Kingdom, and further disrupt the unity of the Consummation by requiring yet a third (stage of the) Consummation to occur at the close of the Millennium. Neither the Didactic NT nor the Revelation require or permit this, teaching as they do that the thousand years of Revelation 20 symbolize the lengthy era between Christ's first and second advents, in which the High King of Heaven applies and perfects the redemption that he purchased for his own during his days upon the earth. How wonderfully amillennialism unifies, simplifies, and illuminates all things, including the Consummation!

We conclude, then, that the dispensational view of the Consummation seriously departs from Scripture, needlessly robbing Christ of his proper glory, and needlessly confusing the saints by breaking up the one Consummation into multiple comings, resurrections, judgments, and

transformations of nature. Surely, after so many years of confusion and controversy on this score, it is time for our dispensational brothers seriously to rethink their position, so that in the difficult days ahead we all may stand firm in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the Gospel (Phil. 1:27).

View of OTKP

Classic dispensationalists interpret OTKP's in a severely literal manner. Charles Ryrie asserts that this literal hermeneutic necessarily generates a premillennial system, and he is right: We cannot interpret OTKP's literally unless we find or create a stage of the Kingdom in which they can be literally fulfilled. We have seen, however, that going down this road immediately entangles the interpreter in a host of insuperable difficulties: historical anachronisms, apparent contradictions, a resurrection of the OT Law, a rebuilding of the wall between Jew and Gentile, and the problem of millennial conditions said to endure forever (Isaiah 60:21, 65:18, Jer. 17:25, 31:36, Ezek. 37:25, 43:7, Hosea 2:19, Joel 3:20, etc.).

More importantly still, we have seen that the NT gives us a simple, two-staged Kingdom—an Era of Proclamation, followed by the eternal World to Come—with the result that there is simply no room for a future Millennium. In effect, NT teaching *demand*s that we approach OTKP (and Revelation 20) using an entirely different hermeneutic; a hermeneutic that interprets OTKP typologically, christologically, covenantally, eschatologically, and ecclesiologically. In short, it demands that we use the New Covenant Hermeneutic, precisely as Christ and the apostles taught us to do.

Progressive dispensationalists clearly feel the force of these arguments. As a result, they now bid their classic dispensational brethren to join them in exploring a new hermeneutic. Recognizing, with the NT, that the Kingdom is indeed “already” and “not yet”; that Christ, even now, is reigning upon David's throne in heaven; and that the Church, under the New Covenant, is indeed participating in the Abrahamic and Davidic covenants, these interpreters—who still adhere to the basic dispensational picture of Salvation History—argue that OTKP has a *double* fulfillment; that it speaks *both* of the Church Era, and also of a future Jewish

Millennium. This is a step in the right direction. However, for reasons already explained, I am quite confident that my progressive dispensationalist brethren will find that it is but a *first* step; a first step in a long journey that can arrive at its happy destination only when they come home to the classic eschatology of their Protestant forefathers.

View of the Revelation

Earlier in our study, I argued that the true foundation of the entire dispensational system is found in its distinctive (and unprecedented) interpretation of Daniel 9:24-27, the prophecy of the 70 weeks. According to this view, the great theme of Daniel's prophecy is Israel's future glory in the millennial kingdom (9:24). To attain this glory, she must traverse "seventy sevens," that is, 490 calendar years. The 69 weeks began with Artaxerxes' decree to rebuild Jerusalem and ended at the birth (or triumphal entry) of Christ. Having described them, Daniel quietly leaps over the entire Church Era, for it must remain a mystery completely unforeseen in OTKP, reserved for Christ to reveal. Finally, he describes the last week, the 70th. It begins at the Rapture, when Christ removes his Church to heaven, with the result that God's prophetic time clock for his OT people begins to tick again. This final week is nothing other than the Tribulation, repeatedly spoken of both in the Old and New Testaments. In the middle of this week, the Antichrist arises, bringing on a Great Tribulation of three and a half years. At the end of the Great Tribulation, Christ comes again *with* his Church and *for* his OT people, to destroy the Antichrist, judge the nations, and inaugurate the blessings of the Kingdom Age promised to Daniel and his people.

Dispensationalists passionately believe that the Revelation confirms their interpretation of Daniel 9, and that these two prophecies, taken together, supply us with the (long-overlooked) Key to the true nature and shape of Salvation History. To understand all this better, let us briefly discuss the dispensational view of the structure and contents of the Revelation.

Dispensational interpreters assert that in chapters 2-3 the Lord's true focus is upon the "mysterious" gap between the 69th and 70th week of Daniel; that is, upon the entire Church Era, now some 2000 years long. Yes,

in these chapters Christ is addressing seven historical churches. But in so doing, he is also giving us something more: a glimpse of the seven stages of Church history. Scofield declares that these chapters speak of “. . . the progress of (the Church’s) spiritual state until the end of the Church Age.”¹ This truth is (supposedly) confirmed by the fact that after Rev. 3:22 the word “church” does not appear again. As we shall see in a moment, dispensationalists take this to mean that the true burden of the Revelation (and of Daniel 9 as well) is not the Church’s difficult sojourn through the present evil age into the World to Come, but rather God’s (Tribulation) dealings with ethnic Israel, by which he will prepare her for glory and honor during the thousand-year Kingdom Age.

Next come chapters 4-5, in which the theme is once again the Church, but this time the Church in heaven, after the Rapture. How do we know this? Dispensationalists reply by pointing out that John now hears a voice, crying, “Come up here” (Rev. 4:1). This, they argue, is a “type”: Christ’s upward call—and the apostle’s upward journey—are meant mystically to picture the translation of the Church into heaven at the end of the Church Age. Accordingly, Scofield asserts that the 24 elders represent the glorified, rewarded, and worshiping Church, now safely at home in heaven because of the Rapture.

This brings us to chapters 6-19, and to the great bulk of the prophecy. According to Dispensationalism their theme is the Tribulation, or the seventieth week of Daniel. During this season of seven years, 144,000 Jewish evangelists will preach the Gospel of the Kingdom. During the first half of the week, many Jews and Gentiles will believe. Then the Beast (i.e., the Antichrist) will arise, and the Great Tribulation will begin. It will be marked by fierce persecution, but also by serial divine judgments of ever-increasing severity. Says Scofield, “The major continuity (in the book) is provided by the events symbolized in the seals (6:1-8:1), the trumpets (8:2-11:19), and bowls (15:1-16:21).”² As we saw in chapter 3, dispensationalists assert that the Coming of Christ depicted in Revelation 19 will *not* consummate God’s plan of salvation, but will bring more conversions, a partial resurrection, a partial judgment, and the inauguration of the Millennium. This brings the 70th week of Daniel to a close.

Chapter 20 now gives us the great goal of the 70 weeks: the Kingdom Age, in which Israel is finally exalted and all OTKP is finally fulfilled,

literally. With Satan bound (i.e. confined to the abyss), David's Greater Son—the glorified Lord Jesus Christ—now reigns from Jerusalem over all the earth for a thousand years. Fundamentally (though not exclusively), the Millennium is a time of peace, prosperity, longevity, righteousness, and joy. Nevertheless, it will end in conflict, with a series of dramatic eschatological acts and events: the release of Satan, a final global assault against Jerusalem, another resurrection (this time of the wicked dead), and a final Judgment before the Great White Throne (also of the wicked dead).

Leaving the 70 weeks behind, chapters 21-22 bring us at last to the World to Come. Concerning these chapters, dispensationalists hold different views. All agree that 21:1-8 reveals the Final State. But what of 21:9-22:7, in which John further describes the Holy City, New Jerusalem? Some argue that this text is a retrospective, using figurative language to depict *earthly* Jerusalem as it will exist during the Millennium. While agreeing that the focus here is indeed the Millennium, others say it gives us the *heavenly* Jerusalem, floating above the earth in such a way as to enable the Gentile nations to walk by its light (21:4). Still others say it tells us more about the Final State. Such are the conflicting fruits of dispensational literalism.

Again, in the eyes of many modern evangelicals, the structure and contents of the Revelation powerfully confirm the dispensational interpretation of Daniel 9, and therefore the entire dispensational scheme of Salvation History. Indeed, so closely do these two prophecies seem to harmonize, and so powerfully do they seem to support one another, that dispensational interpreters feel justified in forcibly imposing this new paradigm on the entire NT. No matter that the Didactic NT gives us a completely different conception of the nature and structure of the Kingdom; no matter that it never once mentions a pre-tribulation Rapture, or a seven year Tribulation, or a two (or three) phased Parousia, or multiple resurrections, judgments, and transformations of nature; no matter that it pervasively teaches a single Consummation at a single return of Christ at the end of the present evil age. No, none of this matters. For even if the Didactic NT *seems* to teach the traditional eschatology of the historic Christian Church, we now know better; we now have the Rosetta Stone; we now have discovered—in Daniel 9 and the Revelation—the (formerly) hidden theme, nature, and structure of all Salvation History. Therefore, we

now see that the Didactic NT *must* teach this view, even if on the face of things it obviously does not.

In the course of our study, I have sought diligently to probe these twin pillars of Dispensationalism. Indirectly, I have done so by going first to the proper locus of true eschatological truth: the Gospels and the Epistles. Having done that, and having confirmed from them the truth of the traditional amillennial eschatology, I proceeded directly to Daniel 9, then to the Revelation as a whole, and finally to Revelation 20. In all cases, we found that the dispensational interpretations simply do not hold up under careful scrutiny. On the other hand, we also found that with a proper application of the NCH, all these texts are seen to teach and support the traditional amillennial view. It appears, then, that the dispensational captivity of the evangelical church is traceable to an optical illusion, an illusion that might quickly have been dispelled had we all followed sound hermeneutical practice, turning first to the didactic clarity of the Gospels and the Epistles, and only then to the mystery and poetry of Daniel and the Revelation. Truly, it has been a costly mistake.

By way of conclusion—and by way of a final critique of the dispensational view of the Revelation—let us remember for just a moment what we learned in our study about the theme and structure of that most challenging NT book.

Chapters 2-3 of the Revelation do indeed give us the High King's messages to the seven churches of Asia, and also to the Church Militant of all time. Possibly, they hint at the stages of Church History (though I think it is far better to see them addressing situations that can arise at any time in Church History). And yes, the word "church" does not appear again after 3:22. But does any of this mean that after chapters 2-3 Christ is no longer speaking *to* the Church *about* the Church? Hardly! John addresses the entire book to the Church (1:4). If "the things which are" pertain to the Church, is it not reasonable to conclude that "the things which shall take place after these things" also pertain to the Church? The *entire book* is a prophecy, a prophecy directed to the Church (1:3, 22:7, 10, 18-19). In chapters 2-3, Christ prophesies to the Church by way of *exhortation*. In subsequent chapters, he prophesies to the Church by way of *prediction*. When he does, he often uses OT symbols to speak to his NT people about their walk through wilderness of this world, thus highlighting the unity of the people

of God of all time, and also giving us the grand finale of all Scripture. No, there is nothing here to suggest that chapters 2-3 exhaust Christ's message to or about the Church. Indeed, there is much to argue against it.

In chapters 4-5, the Spirit does indeed call John up into heaven. His purpose, however, is certainly not to give him (or us) a picture of the Rapture of the Church, or to reveal the life of the Church in heaven after the Rapture. To the contrary, the Spirit's purpose is to show John things to come, so that he in turn can show them *to the Church Militant*, so that they in turn may be edified, exhorted, and encouraged (4:1). In all of this, John is indeed a type of the Church: not a type of the Church raptured, but a type of the Church Militant, which even now is spiritually seated in heavenly places, yet also physically walking, amidst great tribulation, through the wilderness of this evil world. Also, note well that the elders cannot symbolize the saints of the Church Age only, since there are 24 of them: 12 representing the OT saints, and 12 representing the NT saints. So then, in a great mystery, the 24 elders picture the Universal Church—Jews and Gentiles, OT and NT saints—seated in the heavenlies with Christ, watching him receive all authority from the Father so as to become the High King of heaven and earth; so as triumphantly to apply and consummate the redemption that he purchased upon the earth as the Lamb of God. The worship they offer has already begun, and it will resound to all eternity (Rev. 5:8-14).

The dispensational view of chapters 6-19—that it chronicles the ministry and vicissitudes of a Jewish remnant during a seven-year period of intense tribulation—is simply incredible. As I have argued, it flies in the face of the stated purpose of the book, that Christ should prophesy to his Church. It flies in the face of the self-evident literary genre of the book (biblical apocalyptic), which in this case uses OT ideas and imagery to symbolize NT eschatological realities; realities that will befall God's NT people, the Church, during the period between the two advents. It flies in the face of a proper understanding of the 70th week of Daniel. And it flies in the face of sound NT teaching on the Great Tribulation (i.e., the present evil age), and “the greatest tribulation” (i.e., a season of unspecified length that will bring it to a close).

But most importantly, it flies in the face of the true structure of this section, which gives us six cycles of visions, each of which traces the inter-

adventual era from beginning to end, closing with a symbolic depiction of the Parousia and/or its effects. Wonderful to say, this is actually a far more reasonable understanding of Revelation 6-19, since it truly fulfills the prophetic function of the book, which is to *edify, exhort, and encourage* the Church. It does so by assuring her that despite the manifold challenges of life in the Era of Proclamation, she is well able to bear them, seeing that her Lord will nourish her in the wilderness of this world, bless her labors, protect her from her foes, vindicate her cause at the Judgment, and richly reward her faithfulness in the World to Come. How starkly all this contrasts with the troubling fruits of the dispensational view, a view that deludes and weakens the Church with false promises of a rapturous escape from the Greatest Tribulation, in which she is called to walk faithfully and courageously in the steps of the Suffering Servant of God.

As for Revelation 20, dispensationalists rob Christ's Church of much-needed edification by banishing this crucial chapter to complete irrelevancy; by asserting that it speaks of a literal thousand years to *follow* the Parousia, and that it pertains, not to the Church, but to Israel and the millennial nations. We have seen, however, that in truth Revelation 20 traces—for the sixth and final time—the course, character, and consummation of the entire Era of Proclamation; that it faithfully teaches, warns, and comforts Christians concerning things to come *prior* to the Parousia, the Resurrection, and the Judgment of the Last Day. Far from being irrelevant, Revelation 20 is vital to our spiritual health. We dare not lose it.

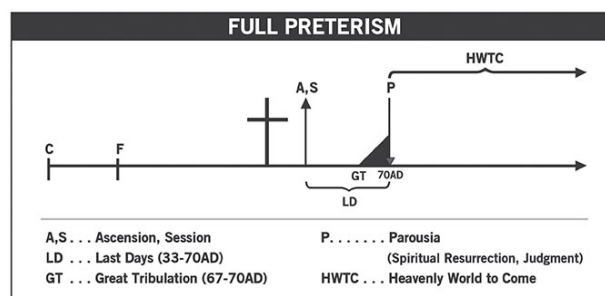
Finally, it is heart-rending indeed to see how their literalist hermeneutic plunges dispensationalists into confusion and controversy over chapters 21-22; how it keeps them from decoding the rich OT symbolism employed here; how it keeps them from seeing the glorious Bride-City of Christ enjoying the fullness of eternal life with her Triune God in the World to Come; how it keeps them from hearing and savoring the Grand Finale of the Grand Finale of all Scripture.

My prayer, then, is that the High King of Heaven—the glorious Christ of the Revelation—may grant us all eyes to see and ears to hear, that we may better know both him and his truth, and may better serve him and his people in these last days (Rev. 1:8-20, 2:7, 3:18).

A Critique of Preterism

AS WE LEARNED in chapter 3, preterism is a school of prophetic interpretation that emphasizes the *past* fulfillment biblical prophecies dealing with the Consummation. Grounding their distinctive views in the Olivet Discourse (and especially Matthew 24), preterists lay great stress on the Jewish War (66-70 AD) and the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD. Full preterists assert that *all* elements of the Consummation were fulfilled at that time; partial preterists say that *many* elements were fulfilled at that time, though the main ones still await the end of the age. In the course of our study, I have addressed most of the preterist claims, whether directly or indirectly. In this appendix I will again use our four basic eschatological categories to summarize my criticisms of this view, which has gained some traction in Reformed circles.

Full Preterism (FP)



Full Preterism (FP) is the view that the Consummation, whole and entire, occurred in 70 AD. For full preterists, the last days are the last days of the Mosaic Covenant, the (brief) period between Christ's ascension and his (spiritual) Parousia in 70 AD. During this time the whole (Jewish and Roman) world was evangelized, the fullness of ethnic Israel came in, the

Antichrist (i.e., Nero) arose, and the Great Tribulation (i.e., the lead-up to Titus' invasion) occurred. Then, in 70 AD, the Parousia, the Resurrection, and the Last Judgment all took place: spiritually rather than physically. The Kingdom in its fullness appeared, the new heavens and the new earth arrived: spiritually, rather than physically. Since then, believers, at their death, are resurrected into the World to Come; unbelievers, at their death, are resurrected into the Lake of Fire: spiritually, rather than physically. You may ask, "What then lies ahead for the physical remains of the saints, or for our sin-cursed earth?" So far as I can tell, no full preterist seems to know.

View of the Kingdom

In agreement with amillennarians, Full Preterists affirm that the Kingdom is the direct reign of God, through Christ, by the Spirit; that it is entered through faith in the Person and Work of Christ; and that it is, in essence, the promise of the Eternal Covenant. Also, they would agree that the Kingdom enters the world in two stages, though they conceive of these quite differently: the first began at Pentecost, the second at the destruction of Jerusalem.

This is a serious misunderstanding of NT Kingdom teaching. As we saw on our journey, the second stage of the Kingdom does *not* begin in 70 AD, but at the Parousia of Christ in glory at the end of the present evil age, when he himself will cast out *all* things that offend, and destroy every enemy, the last of which is death itself (Mt. 13:36-43, 1 Cor. 15:20-28). In the second, eternal stage of the Kingdom (the Kingdom of the Father), God's will is done on earth exactly as it is done in heaven; in other words, his reign is cosmic and all embracing (Mt. 7:10). This means that it will descend upon the entire physical side of his creation, lifting the curse from all things, and making all things new (Rom. 8:18-25, Rev. 21:1-5, 22:3). No amount of preterist spiritualizing can rid the Scriptures of these glorious promises, which belong essentially to the Blessed Hope of the Church.

View of the Consummation

The FP view of the Consummation completely undermines Christ's teaching about the Consummation, thereby leaving the Church unprepared for the trials of the end of the age, and also robbing her of her Blessed

Hope. It does so by misreading the Olivet Discourse, and then making a flawed interpretation thereof into a Procrustean Bed for the rest of NT eschatology. In particular, FP fails to see that in his teaching Christ spoke *both* of the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD *and* the Consummation at the end of the age. He was employing what we referred to earlier as “prophetic perspective,” blending the near and the far, the already and the not yet, the local and the universal, the temporal and the eschatological. FP’s refusal to acknowledge this crucial characteristic of the Lord’s prophetic discourse guts all NT prophecy of its futuristic component, thereby plunging us into exegetical chaos and destroying the Blessed Hope of the Church.

Having already explained and defended the amillennial view of each element of the Consummation, I need not repeat myself here. I will, however, take just a moment to contrast FP teaching with my understanding of the biblical truth.

To begin with, the last days are *not* the last days of the Mosaic Covenant (which, by the way, Jesus fulfilled and abolished, not in 70 AD, but when he breathed his last on the Cross, crying, “It is finished!”, Mt.27:50-51, John 19:30). Rather, they are the days in which the New Covenant has been manifested in the earth. They began with Christ’s incarnation and will conclude on the last of the last days at his Parousia (Heb. 1:1-2).

Yes, Paul and the other apostles effectively evangelized the “world” of the Roman Empire of their day (Rom. 1:18, Col. 1:6, 23). But as Paul himself would admit, this was only a prelude to, and a picture of, the complete evangelization of the whole earth, of which the Lord Jesus spoke in the Olivet Discourse (Mt. 24:14, Rom. 15:18-29). Fittingly, after 2000 years, the Church still hears his words as an exhortation and encouragement to finish the job.

Most assuredly, the regrafting of ethnic Israel into the God’s New Covenant Vine did *not* occur prior to 70 AD, when in fact most of Israel was dispersed or destroyed. Rather, it still lies ahead, and is a great sign of the imminence of the Parousia.

Though moved by an antichristian spirit, the emperor Nero certainly was *not* the eschatological Antichrist, as any impartial reading of 2 Thessalonians 2 will show. The coming of *the* Antichrist—with his miraculous powers, unprecedented claims to deity, and universal following—still lies ahead, and is yet another great sign of the nearness of the end.

Dire as they were, the vicissitudes of Titus' invasion were *not* the greatest tribulation of which Jesus spoke, a tribulation that will be unparalleled in world history, cut short for mercy's sake, and culminate in the visible appearing of the Son of God in glory in the skies above the earth (Mt. 24:21-31, Rev. 1:7).

While it is indeed true that Christ came to Israel providentially in 70 AD (Mt. 10:23), that particular coming was certainly *not* "the" Coming—the eschatological Coming—concerning which the disciples primarily inquired, of which their Master spoke, and for which the Church ever yearns (Mt. 24:29-31, 25:31ff). Indeed, one of the Lord's great burdens in this Discourse was to protect his Church from false christs by urging them to remember that he, the true Christ, will appear visibly, audibly, bodily, and in great power and glory in the skies above the earth (24:23-27). The rest of the NT repeatedly affirms this very thing (Acts 1:11, 1 Thess. 4:16f, 2 Thess. 1:3-12, 1 John 3:2, Rev. 1:7, 19:11-16). Again, no amount of preterist spiritualizing can overthrow the plain sense of these texts, or drain us of the thrilling hope they engender.

As for the Resurrection, it is certainly *not* the case that it occurred in 70 AD, or that it is spiritual only, rather than bodily. Here, whole tracts of the NT challenge the FP's. Christ went toe to toe with the Sadducees on the resurrection of the body, emphatically affirming it (Mt. 22:23-33). So too did the apostle Paul in 1 Cor. 15, where he warned against the very teaching now promoted by FP, urging Christians to remember that the doctrine of the resurrection of the body belongs *essentially* to their faith, and that without it ". . . (they) are of all men most pitiable." Paul's parting words to Timothy, in which he identifies the denial of the bodily resurrection as heresy, should strike fear in the heart of every full preterist (2 Tim 2:16-18).

And what of the Last Judgment: Has it really already occurred? Obviously not, seeing that the Scriptures repeatedly associate it with the bodily return of Christ, the bodily resurrection of the dead, and the physical destruction of the present earth and its works by fire (Mt. 13:37-43, 24-25, John 5:21-29, 1 Cor. 15:20-28, 2 Thess. 1:3-12, 2 Peter 3:1-13). As for *the* Parousia, so for *the* Judgment: There is but *one* of them, set to occur at the end of all things.

Finally, the World to Come has certainly *not* come, nor have the new heavens and the new earth appeared. On this point I find FP teaching

particularly discouraging, since, by spiritualizing the cosmic transformation promised throughout Scripture, it robs the saints of their eternal home, and leaves behind a groaning, sin-cursed earth to endure forever—or is it that God will one day put it out of its misery by destroying it altogether? Happily, biblical teaching on this theme powerfully refutes the FP error, promising us a beautiful new physical universe, set free from its bondage to corruption, and lifted up into the life-giving glory of God (Isaiah 35, 65:17-25, Ezek. 47, Mt. 13:37-43, Acts 13:19-24, Rom. 8:18-25, Phil. 3:20-21, 2 Peter 3:3-13, Rev. 21-22).

View of OTKP

Like amillennarians, FP's use the New Covenant Hermeneutic to interpret OTKP. Rightly, they interpret OTKP typologically, covenantally, christologically, and ecclesiologically. Rightly, they see Christ, the New Covenant, and the Church as the true sphere of fulfillment of all OTKP.

Their great and costly misstep, however, is to apply the same hermeneutic to *NT prophecies of the Kingdom*. That is, they interpret NT Kingdom prophecy figuratively and typologically. They would have to, if there is to be any hope whatsoever of seeing them fulfilled in 70 AD!

But the NT clearly bars the way. Kingdom prophecy such as we find in the Didactic NT (i.e., the Gospels, the Book of Acts, and the Epistles) does *not* use mystical, typological language. Quite to the contrary, it uses “simple prophecy”—straightforward eschatological predictions—in order to supply the hermeneutical *key* to OTKP and the Revelation. This makes perfect sense: Somewhere, sometime, someone in the Bible is going to have to speak plainly about the Consummation, so that we can decode the more symbolic materials. In the Didactic NT, Christ and the apostles do this very thing (Mt. 13:10-12, 51-53, John 16:12-14, 25, 1 Cor. 2:6-16, Eph. 1:8-10, 1 Tim. 4:1-3). Alas, our FP brethren fail to see it.

Here we do well to consider Mt. 24:29-31, Jesus' great prophecy of the Parousia. Contrary to FP, it does not at all read like Isaiah 13:9-10, 19:1f, or Ezekiel 32:7-8—OTKP's that clearly employ much figurative language. Rather, as I argued earlier, it is a straightforward prediction of the Parousia, giving us the true contours of that awesome event. This is evident from the straightforward predictions that lead into it (24:21-27), and also from the

straightforward predictions that flow from it (24:32-51, 25:30-46). It is evident from the language itself, which, by alluding to various OTKP's, finally supplies us with the true character of their eschatological fulfillment. It is especially evident from the fact that other NT descriptions of the Parousia closely resemble this one, which clearly serves as the NT prototype, and is therefore the mother of all NT prophecies of the Parousia and Consummation (Mt. 13:37-43, 1 Thess. 4:13-18, 2 Thess. 1:3-12, 2 Peter 3:1-13). In short, if the Olivet Discourse is not speaking straightforwardly about the Parousia and the Consummation, then we are completely at sea in trying to frame a true picture of the Blessed Hope of Christ's Church.

In passing, I would note that it is no objection to this line of thinking to say that the Olivet Discourse displays prophetic blending. Yes, Christ had in view two comings, two (future) abominations that make desolate, two great tribulations, and two generations in which all the signs heralding his (twofold) coming are fulfilled. However, this does not mean he was speaking figuratively or typologically. Rather, it means that he was straightforwardly predicting certain real historical events, but all the while subtly blending near and far, small and great, local and cosmic, temporal and eschatological. Once FP's acknowledge this, they will no longer feel the need to spiritualize the Parousia and the Consummation; once they acknowledge this, the NT again will yield up its vast eschatological treasures; and once they acknowledge this, they again will find themselves standing on the solid ground of biblical orthodoxy.

I close this section with an excellent quote from pastor Fred Zaspel. Writing on full preterism, he says:

Due recognition of this principle (i.e., the principle of the prophetic blending of the already and the not yet) is vital to accurate interpretation of the prophetic word. Often it is the case that two sides of a prophetic debate, each with a part of the whole, make as though the whole were their "part." It's often the case that neither side is wrong in what they are saying, except that they have only half the picture. But not until all parts are together do we have the whole. And again, we must not announce fulfillment until we are sure the prophecy has been (fully) filled. Here is one basic flaw of preterism, as I see it. Ironically, it is the same mistake made by the older dispensationalists, who said there was no present realization of the Kingdom, only a future. They wanted it all "not yet." Preterism wants it all "now." Both hold a part to be the whole.¹

View of the Revelation

Astonishingly, FP's declare that the Revelation *in its entirety* was fulfilled just prior to, in, or immediately following 70 AD. Its focus is not upon the supernatural Coming of Christ at the end of the present evil age, but upon the providential coming of Christ against Jerusalem during the Jewish War (AD 66-70). On this view, chapters 1-3 give us Christ's message to the Asian churches, messages designed to prepare them for "the end." Chapters 4-5 give us God and the High King of Heaven, also preparing the saints for "the end." The vision of the six seals (Rev. 6) and the seven trumpets (Rev. 8-11) depict miscellaneous aspects of the judgment against Jerusalem. So too do the seven bowl judgments of chapters 15-16. Rev. 7:1-8 depicts God spiritually sealing the Christian Church, so that she might pass safely through the Jewish War. Rev. 7:9-13 depicts her having done so, and now enjoying the blessings of heaven. Chapters 12-14 gird up the Church for Jewish and Roman persecution at the hands of the Beast (Nero/Rome) and the False Prophet (according to some preterists, the Roman governor of Jerusalem, Gessius Florus). Chapters 17-19 give us the fall of the Harlot (Jerusalem), who wickedly consorts with the Beast (Rome). Chapter 20 symbolizes the spiritual "reign" of the saints on earth, through their faith in Christ, during the years between Pentecost and 70 AD. Chapters 21-22 use earthly language to symbolize the glories of heaven.

We have seen, however, that for a great many reasons, this line of interpretation is untenable.

First, the vast majority of scholars agree that the Revelation was written around 95 AD. If so, it is obvious that the entire preterist thesis is overthrown.

Secondly, this view runs counter to the prophetic purpose of the book, which is to edify, exhort, and encourage Christ's Church *of all generations*, especially by keeping *before* her eyes (and not *behind* her back) the rigors of the Great Tribulation, the sobering inevitability of the Last Battle, the comforting assurance of spiritual life in heaven during the Intermediate State, and the Blessed Hope of Christ's return in glory in order to consummate all things. In short, FP turns the Revelation into a practical irrelevancy for the vast majority of Christians, thereby demonstrating its own falsehood.

Thirdly, while the preterist approach does indeed leave room for the idea of six visionary recapitulations of the inter-adventual era (Rev. 6-20), it

mistakenly substitutes 70 AD for the end of that era. As a result, it grievously misconstrues much of the rich symbolism of the book, eclipses the glory of Christ at his Coming, and robs the Church not only of much-needed encouragement, but also of her Blessed Hope itself.

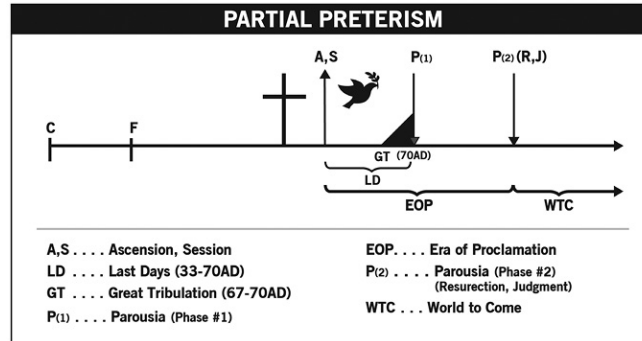
Fourthly, the full preterist interpretation beclouds—and even trivializes—the powerful symbolism of the Revelation. We have seen, for example, that the seal, trumpet, and bowl judgments do *not* fall (exclusively) on Jerusalem or Rome, but upon the entire world system; that the Beast from the sea is *not* Nero, but the governmental face of the anti-christian world-system; that the Beast from the Land (also called the False Prophet) is *not* some Roman functionary, but the religious face of the anti-christian world system; that the harlot is *not* Jerusalem (though she did indeed play the harlot with Rome), but the cultural and economic face of the anti-christian world-system; that Babylon the Great is *not* Rome or Jerusalem, but the City of Man of all time, the fallen world-system as a whole; etc. Certainly the preterist approach gives us valid historical *applications* of some of these symbols, but it by no means exhausts them, seeing that they are cosmic in scope, and therefore speak with fresh power to all generations of believers in Christ.

This brings us to our final criticism, namely that FP altogether misses the cosmic scope and weightiness of the Revelation. By making the Jewish War the locus of fulfillment for its expansive symbolism, it shrinks and shackles a majestic prophecy that is clearly meant to give us something far greater: a heaven's eye view of *the full sweep of Salvation History*; serial depictions of *the whole course of the whole universe*, from the time of Christ's first Coming to his Second, and beyond that into eternity future. On this score, Robert Mounce therefore states the case well:

The major problem with the preterist position is that the decisive victory portrayed in the latter chapters of the Apocalypse (*and in the earlier chapters as well*) was never achieved. It is difficult to believe that John envisioned anything less than the complete overthrow of Satan, the final destruction of (*all*) evil, and the eternal reign of God. If this is not to be, then either the Seer was essentially wrong in the major thrust of his message, or his work was so helplessly ambiguous that its first recipients were all led astray.²

In a moment, I will offer some concluding remarks about FP. But first, let us consider again its kissing cousin, Partial Preterism.

Partial Preterism (PP)



Partial preterism (PP) is an inconsistent form of FP—blessedly so, since its very inconsistency keeps it within the pale of orthodoxy. In what follows I will briefly explain where the two camps agree and disagree, where I think PP errs, and why this eschatology is indeed an inconsistent form of FP.

Above all, full and partial preterists agree in taking their eschatological stand on the Olivet Discourse (especially Matthew 24), and also in using a preterist hermeneutic to interpret it. As a result, they generally agree that here Christ refers exclusively to the Jewish War and the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD; that “the last days” are the few remaining years of “this (Mosaic) age,” during which Jews may find pardon and new life through faith in Christ; that the (Jewish and Roman) world was fully evangelized during this time; that Nero (who initiated the Jewish War) was the Antichrist; that Titus’ banners, planted on the temple grounds, were the Abomination that Makes Desolate; and that the Great Tribulation was the three and a half year siege of Jerusalem, culminating in its destruction. Also, the two camps agree that the great theme of Revelation 6-19 is the (providential) Judgment of Jerusalem, and not the Judgment of the whole world-system. In the body of this book and in the paragraphs above, I have addressed all these claims.

PP does not agree, however, that the Parousia, the Resurrection, the Last Judgment, and the transformation of the cosmos have already occurred. To the contrary, in accordance with historic orthodoxy, PP affirms that all these events are yet future. In this, their view accords fairly well with the amillennial view of the Consummation.

There are, however, some problems.

To begin with, partial preterists assert that Mt. 24:29-31 does not depict the final, supernatural Coming of Christ, but rather a providential “judgment-coming” against Jerusalem. This is indeed a departure from orthodoxy, and a serious one. The historic view of the Church, defended in the body of this book, is that Mt. 24:29-31 and Mt. 25:31-46 *both* describe the one Consummation, with the former text accenting the Lord’s Parousia, and the latter the Judgment he will effect when he comes. PP demurs, asserting that Mt. 25:31-36 *alone* gives us the supernatural Parousia of Christ and the Last Judgment. But this stretches all credulity. Does Mt. 24:29-31 look at all like a providential judgment against Jerusalem? Is it not, on the face of it, a supernatural Coming, bringing a supernatural Judgment? Is it not altogether global—even cosmic—in its scope (24:35)? Is it not the *ultimate* Coming of which the apostles inquired? Is it not clear that these two portions of the very same Discourse—with their shared references to the Coming of the Son of Man, his glory, his angels, and his judgment—fit together hand in glove? And is it not therefore the case that PP bifurcates the NT mother prophecy of the Consummation, shattering its majestic unity?

Secondly, this mishandling of our Lord’s prophecy of the Consummation works havoc upon the exegesis of other related texts. Yes, partial preterists affirm a future Parousia and Judgment. But having interpreted Mt. 24 as they do, they seem now to have serious difficulties deciding which coming and which judgment these other texts have in view. Some say, for example, that in 1 Thess. 4:13-18 Paul speaks of the supernatural Coming of Christ to raise the dead, but that in 1 Thess. 5:1-11 he suddenly turns to the providential coming of 70 AD to judge Israel. Some contend that in 2 Thess. 1:3-12 Paul also has the judgment-coming of 70 AD in view, despite the fact that he speaks of the Lord being *revealed* from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire! Similarly, most partial preterists insist that in 2 Thess. 2:1-12 the apostle is not describing the demise of a future Antichrist, but of the emperor Nero (or possibly Vespasian), whom the Lord Jesus “providentially” slew with the breath of his mouth and brought to an end by the Appearance of his Coming!

The source of all this confusion is plain. Partial preterists fail to discern prophetic blending in the Olivet Discourse; they see mostly the near, and only rarely the far. As a result, they must resort to an alien, hyper-

spiritualizing hermeneutic in order find in Mt. 24:29-31 a reference to the events of 70 AD. But as a result of this, they feel compelled to use the same hermeneutic on other NT texts that refer to the Parousia. Henceforth, the door is open for exegetical chaos to enter in.

Regarding these other NT eschatological texts—including the Revelation—the simple truth is this: The apostles show *no interest whatsoever* in the destruction of Jerusalem, whether it lay ahead of them (as in the case of the writings of Paul and Peter) or behind them (as in the case of the writings of John). Their concern is “the” Parousia, the one supernatural Coming of Christ, set to occur at the end of the present evil age (1 Thess. 3:13, 4:15, 5:23, 2 Thess. 2:1, James 5:7, 2 Peter 3:12). Yes, in the Olivet Discourse we do indeed find Christ referring to the Destruction of Jerusalem, for the disciples specifically inquired about it, and he had to reply and prepare them for it. But in the rest of the NT, which is directed almost entirely to Gentile believers, or to Jewish Christians dispersed throughout the empire, interest in the events of 70 AD completely falls away, seeing that the one and only Blessed Hope of the universal Church was (and is) the visible Coming of Christ in power and glory to the skies above the earth. Here then is the living heart of all apostolic eschatology, as indeed every major NT eschatological text reveals.

Partial Preterism on the Revelation

Let me conclude with a few words about the partial preterist take on the Revelation.

Regarding chapters 1-19, partial preterists are in accord with full preterists: All is focused on the Jewish-Roman persecution of the Church, the rise of the Beast (Nero), and the Destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD. I have addressed these assertions above, and more extensively in the body of this book.

Regarding Revelation 21-22, partial preterists typically stand with historic orthodoxy, viewing these chapters as a picture, cast largely in OT language, of the glorified Church situated in the glorified World to Come. Good for them.

However, regarding Revelation 20 there are serious differences of opinion.

On the one hand, we have those who identify the Millennium with the entire Church Era. On this view, the binding of Satan is a work of the Spirit made possible by the Cross of Christ. Because of these two great redemptive events, Satan can no longer deceive the nations so as to prevent the ingathering of the elect, nor can he launch the Last Battle until God so decrees (20:1-3). The first resurrection and the reign of the saints are spiritual rather than physical, and (perhaps) heavenly rather than earthly (20:4-6). Revelation 20:7-10 gives us the book's one and only prediction of the Last Battle against the Church, in which the Antichrist, who has already come (in the person of Nero), plays no part. Other texts in the Revelation that *seem* to predict the Last Battle were actually fulfilled during the Great Tribulation of 66-70 AD, when the Church was persecuted by Israel and Rome (11:7-10, 16:12-16, 19:19-21). As for 20:11-14, it gives us the Revelation's one and only description of the Last Judgment at the end of the world. Fundamentally, this is the amillennial view of Revelation 20, though it totters upon a grievous misreading of the rest of the book.

On the other hand, we have interpreters like Ken Gentry and Doug Wilson, who give us a postmillennial view of Revelation 20. As we have seen, for postmillennarians the Millennium is a Golden Era still future to us. The binding of Satan has yet to occur, but certainly will, perhaps when ethnic Israel at large turns to the Lord (Rom. 11:15). This will bring about "the first resurrection" and "the reign of the saints," these being understood as a fresh burst of gospel vitality that will fill the earth, not only with multitudes of devoted Christians, but also with widespread Kingdom righteousness, peace, and joy. Alas, the Golden Era will indeed be marred by the release of Satan, and by a final rebellion against Christ and his faithful remnant (20:7-9). But the mysterious reversal will be offset by the fact that the Lord himself will immediately come again, visibly, in power, and with great glory (20:9), to raise the dead, judge the world in righteousness, and bring in the new heavens and the new earth (20:10-15). Note carefully, then, that for *all* partial preterists, Revelation 20 *alone* gives us the supernatural Parousia of Christ, the bodily Resurrection, and the Last Judgment. All the other texts that *seem* to predict these things were actually fulfilled in 70 AD (6:12-17, 11:11-19, 14:14-20, 16:17-21, 19:11ff)!

Having discussed the Revelation at length in the body of this book, there is no need for me to comment further on partial preterist views.

Suffice it to say that an over-emphasis on the events of 70 AD, and a faulty hermeneutic that arises from it, have kept our partial preterist brethren from fully seeing and enjoying the structure, purpose, and scope of this mighty prophecy. This is a tragic loss, not only for them, but also for those who go down this eschatological road with them. Our Lord meant the Revelation to be a mirror in which Christians of *every* generation could see their own face and their own world; in which they could be strengthened for persecution, readied for the Last Battle, and profoundly encouraged by *manifold* representations of all the elements of their Blessed Hope. Like most of the NT, the Revelation says not a word about a providential coming of Christ to destroy Jerusalem. It does, however, say many words about the one supernatural Coming of Christ to raise the dead, judge the world, radically transform the cosmos, and welcome his beloved Bride to eternal life with him in the glorious new World to Come. If we see and remember all this, we shall come to enjoy, rather than dread or dismiss, this wonderful book, the Grand Finale of all Scripture.

Conclusion

In this appendix, I have lingered long over preterist eschatology, not because it is an especially popular view, but because in recent years it has gained a foothold in Reformed circles, circles that hitherto have been bastions of amillennial orthodoxy. Needless to say, that troubles me. At a time when my Reformed brethren should be calling Christ's Church back to eschatological orthodoxy, I now find some of them mired in error—or worse.

Of all the contemporary options in eschatology, FP is the least scriptural and, should it gain currency, the most dangerous. The reasons are many. In countless ways it robs the Church of her true Blessed Hope, even as it renders her vulnerable to the extraordinary trials and temptations of the end of the age. It radically undermines her confidence in the perspicuity of Scripture, thereby discouraging the saints from turning to the life-giving streams of the Word of God for light and strength. Worst of all, however, is its denial of the resurrection of the body, an eschatological heresy that strikes dangerously close to the heart of the Gospel. Therefore, we should resist this grievously distorted teaching with all our might.

As for Partial Preterism, I am only slightly less concerned. Why? *Because PP is simply an inconsistent form of FP.* As we have just seen, both of them stand upon the same corrupt foundation: a faulty exegesis of Matthew 24 that fails to discern prophetic blending; that collapses the far into the near and the cosmic into the local; that therefore hyper-spiritualizes and misinterprets our Lord's paradigmatic description of his Parousia (Mt. 24:27-31); that thereby creates a false hermeneutic and a false emphasis that spread like a cancer to other crucial eschatological texts, especially the Revelation. In short, if hermeneutical consistency counts for anything, the partial preterist must sooner or later become a full preterist—or else turn back altogether.

I would welcome the latter. Indeed, I would urge *all* my preterist brothers in Christ to retrace your steps; to re-examine your exegetical foundations; to let the sweet simplicity and crystal clarity of the apostolic eschatology strike you afresh with their mighty power; and then to let them bring you home to the good old paths of our Reformed forefathers.

I believe we are entering the last of the last days. If so, Christ's pilgrim Church will need all the eschatological truth, clarity, and encouragement she can possibly get. And she will need *you* to help her receive them all.

Is the Modern State of Israel a Fulfillment of Biblical Prophecy?

MANY PREMILLENNARIANS CONFIDENTLY assert that the creation of the modern state of Israel in 1948 was in fulfillment of biblical prophecy. Dispensationalist Thomas Ice says it this way:

There are dozens of biblical passages that predict an end time regathering of Israel back to her land ... I believe that modern Israel is a divine work and is in the process of fulfilling Bible prophecy. I believe that Israel, as she is constituted today, is a work of God in progress, preparing the nation for the Tribulation, which will lead to her national conversion, the second coming of Christ, and His millennial reign.¹

These words invite careful—very careful—reflection. Certainly all Bible believing Christians would agree that the creation of the modern state of Israel is a “divine work,” since Scripture clearly teaches that God, by his all-controlling providence, creates every nation of the sons of Adam, having predetermined their appointed times and the boundaries of their habitation (Acts 17:26). Moreover, in the course of our study I myself have argued that a number of Scriptures encourage us to look for a large-scale conversion of world Jewry just prior to the second coming of Christ. If so, it would be strange indeed if the sudden arrival of a new Jewish state upon the stage of history had nothing to do with it!

But is it true, as Ice believes, that dozens of OT Kingdom prophecies predicted the recent return of millions of Russian and European Jews to Palestine? In God’s sight, are they still his people—his “Israel”—despite the fact that most of them have not (yet) trusted in Jesus Christ as their Messiah? In God’s sight, is Palestine still their land? Is God really preparing modern-day Israel for a seven-year Tribulation? And should we really look for a second coming of Christ that will partially transform physical

Palestine, inaugurate a temporary earthly kingdom, raise up a middle wall of partition between Israel and the nations, and reinstitute various Mosaic ordinances—all for a thousand years?

In the body of this book, I have addressed these questions at length. Since, however, many Christians believe that the creation of the modern Jewish state lends credence to one or another of the various premillennial scenarios, it is important that we review them once again.

My approach in this appendix will be to consider three closely related questions:

1. What is God's present relation to unbelieving Jews, wherever they happen to live?
2. Is the creation of the modern Jewish state a fulfillment of OTKP?
3. And if it is not, how *are* we to understand it?

Again, what follows will be a review of material covered earlier. Accordingly, I will not often support my statements with proof texts. For the Scriptural basis of my arguments, please consult the relevant chapters and exegetical discussions.

What is God's present relation to unbelieving Jews?

This is a subtle question, one that cannot be answered without the help of NT teaching on the true identity of the people of God, and on the exact relation of the Old Covenant to the New. Let us briefly recall our findings.

In the course of our journey we learned that from eternity past God has always had a single plan for the salvation of his people: the Eternal Covenant. It is comprised of five elements.

The *parties* to the Covenant are God and his chosen, believing people, whether Jew or Gentile. They go by various names. They are *the Church*: God's called out ones, whether Jew or Gentile. They are *the saints*: God's separated ones, whether Jew or Gentile. And they are the one *Body*, the one *Bride*, the one *Flock*, and the one *Holy Nation* of God and Christ, whether Jew or Gentile.

The *provision* of the Covenant—that which makes the Covenant possible—is Christ, both his divine-human Person and redemptive Work.

The *promise* of the Covenant is eternal life: *spiritual* life throughout the remainder of this present evil age (i.e., the Era of Proclamation), and *spiritual and physical* life throughout the eternal Age (or World) to Come.

The *proviso* of the Covenant—the condition of entrance into the Covenant, and of the enjoyment of its promised blessings—is repentance from sin and faith in Christ alone.

Finally, the *penalty* for spurning the Covenant is eternal punishment.

Here, then, in the Eternal Covenant, we have the great redemptive “mystery” of God. It is none other than the New Covenant, which, in the present Era of Proclamation, has been unveiled, expounded, proclaimed, and celebrated by Christ himself, his holy apostles and prophets, and his entire Church.

What, then, is the exact relationship between the Eternal Covenant, the Old Covenant (i.e., the Mosaic Law), and the New Covenant? In our study, we addressed this question at some length. We learned, for example, that in OT times, God administered the Eternal Covenant typologically; that in those days he *promised, pictured, and prepared* for the (unveiling of the) Covenant, while in NT times he *fulfilled* all he had promised, pictured, and prepared for by manifesting the several elements of the Covenant as they truly are.

This “mysterious” relationship is especially evident in God’s dealings with the family of Abraham, a family that in due season he constituted as a nation when he gave Israel the Mosaic Law at Mt. Sinai. Under that Law, ethnic Israel *pictured* the universal Church, the human parties to the Eternal Covenant; so too did the Temple, Jerusalem, and other OT institutions (Eph. 2:19-22, Rev. 21:1f). Under that Law, the prophets, priests, kings, and sacrifices *pictured* Christ, the provision of the Covenant, in all his offices. And under that Law, the land *pictured* the World to Come, the promise of the Eternal Covenant in all its fullness (Rom. 4:13). In short, the rich tapestry of Mosaic institutions pictured and promised the several elements of the Eternal Covenant.

Very importantly, we also learned that when Christ entered the world and inaugurated the Eternal Covenant through the shedding of his blood, he not only fulfilled the Old Covenant and its various emblems and institutions, *but also abolished it (and them) forever* (Mt. 5:17). The veil of the temple was rent (Mt. 27:51). The fig tree was cursed (Mark 11:12-14).

The old wineskins were to be cast away (Mt. 9:17). In all of these things, the Spirit depicts for us the permanent laying aside of the OT institutions; their perpetual obsolescence (Heb. 8:13). As a result, since the Day of Pentecost when the apostles first proclaimed the finished work of Christ, it has never been safe for any man—Jew or Gentile—to shelter his soul under Moses (John 1:17). Indeed, the NT casts those who stubbornly try to do so as rebels against God (2 Thess. 1:8, 1 Peter 4:17). In the words of Christ, Jewish unbelievers who cling to the Mosaic Law are a synagogue of Satan (Rev. 2:9, 3:9). In the words of Paul, they are citizens of the Jerusalem below, but not of the Jerusalem above; they are children of Hagar, but not of Sarah; they are slaves to sin, condemnation, and wrath, but not free men in Christ (Gal. 4:21-31). So then, now that Christ has entered the world, everything has changed for the physical seed of Abraham. Israel according to the flesh *must* become Israel according to the Spirit, or cease being Israel at all.

Once we understand all this—once we understand how the New Covenant fulfills the Old, rendering its emblems and institutions forever obsolete—then we can understand God’s relation to modern unbelieving Jews. It is not a mystery. Just like unbelieving Gentiles, they are “not his people” (Hosea 1:9). They are outside the Covenant. Indeed, they are outside two covenants. They are outside the New Covenant because they remain in sin and unbelief; and they are outside the Old Covenant because the Old Covenant no longer exists. Thus, at the risk of some confusion, one might call these people Israelites in a strictly anthropological sense, since they are indeed the physical descendents of Jacob. But spiritually speaking, they are no longer Israel at all. Though God certainly loves them, and though he may yet have great plans for them, at present he does not regard them as his people, his family, or his nation. In the NT, such honorifics are reserved *exclusively* for the elect parties of the New Covenant. In NT times, there is only *one* Israel of God: Christ’s Church (Gal. 6:16, 1 Peter 2:9-10).

This important truth bears heavily on the question before us. Premillennarians assert that in OTKP God spoke of a latter-day restoration of ethnic Israel to their land. But we have learned from Scripture that the latter-day s are the days of the New Covenant (Heb. 1:1f, 8:1ff). How then, in those prophecies, could God have been speaking of anyone other than the *parties* of the New Covenant; of anyone other than Christ’s called out ones,

whether Jew or Gentile? No, when God promised to draw eschatological “Israel” into an everlasting covenant with himself, and to give them a beautiful new homeland, he was not speaking of unbelieving Jews, but of his whole Church (Hosea 2:14-23). Even so, in *every* genuine OTKP God did not have in view the restoration of unbelieving Jews to a life in Palestine under (the institutions of) the Old Covenant, but the restoration of his believing Church to a life in the Spirit, in the stages and under the institutions of the New Covenant.

All of this enables us to think clearly about the vexed question of the “right” of modern unbelieving Jews to the land of Palestine. Suppose that in the years immediately following Pentecost, Israel at large had repented of their sin and trusted in Christ as their Messiah. Then indeed she would have had a divine right to the land. However, that right would *not* have been grounded in God’s Old Covenant promise of a physical homeland, because the Old Covenant, at that point, was obsolete. Therefore, their right to the land would have been grounded solely in the workings of divine Providence: Formerly, God had placed them there, much as he had placed other people groups in their own respective homelands. In order for them to remain there, they had only to walk in obedience to Christ, just as all nations must do if they hope to remain in their appointed places, secure and prosperous. In other words, *by divine covenant*, believing Israel would have had a *right* only to one land: the land above (Heb. 12:22), and the land up ahead (2 Peter 3:13). Difficult as it may be to receive, the upshot of this is quite clear: If, at that time, the land of Palestine *would not* have been theirs by divine covenant, certainly it *is not* theirs by divine covenant today.

We know, however, that as a matter of historical fact things turned out very differently. Not only did ethnic Israel at large reject their Messiah, they also persisted in their unbelief until God destroyed their capital through Titus in 70 AD, and shortly thereafter scattered the whole nation to the four winds. Very importantly, *this situation was altogether different from Israel’s earlier expulsion from the land*. Formerly, when God sent Israel into Babylon for seventy years, the nation was still in covenant with him, as the prophet Daniel well knew, and to which fact he fervently appealed (1 Kings 8:33-35, Jer. 29:1f, Dan. 9). In God’s sight, the land still belonged to his OT people, so that they still had a right to return to it, all in his good time. However, after Calvary, when Christ sealed the New Covenant in his blood

—thus fulfilling, dissolving, and rendering the Old Covenant permanently obsolete—unbelieving Israel no longer had a divine right to the land, for she was no longer in covenant with God. Nor does she have such a right today. She does, however, have a divine right to a far better homeland, which she may enter upon condition of simple faith in her Messiah, the Lord Jesus Christ.

In reflecting upon the condition of modern Israel, one is therefore inclined to think back to the days shortly after the Exodus. Having thought better about rejecting the good word of Joshua and Caleb, the panicky Israelites tried to press into Canaan in order to make it their own, even though God was not with them in the attempt, and even though he had warned them against it (Num. 13-14). It is much the same today. Having spurned the good word of the Gospel, ethnic Israel at large seeks to press into Palestine, hoping that somehow they can reclaim the glory days of David and Solomon. But after more than six decades of continual conflict, it is abundantly clear that this can never be, for apart from Christ they can do nothing (John 15:5). Moreover, even *with* Christ there is no guarantee that a believing Jewish nation would *physically* survive the vicissitudes of end time persecution any better than an unbelieving Israel, seeing that *all* of God's New Covenant children are destined for *physical* (but only physical) trampling beneath the feet of the unbelieving nations (Mt. 10:16-31, John 16:2, Rev. 11:1-2).

So then, as for the modern Gentile so for the modern Jew: Their greatest need is to make sure that their true citizenship is in heaven, from which also they ought eagerly to wait for a Savior who will welcome them into the glories of the only Land that counts: the World to Come (Phil. 3:20-21).

Hopefully, the Church Militant understands this. Hopefully we all understand that we do our Jewish neighbors no favor whatsoever by encouraging them to think that even now, in their unbelief, God has somehow accepted them; or that he has planted them in Palestine out of pure good will; or that the mysterious events of 1948 are a harbinger of unique millennial privileges soon to come. No, let all who understand and honor Scripture instead lovingly remind our Jewish neighbors that he who believes in the Son has eternal life, but that he who does not obey the Son shall not see life, for the wrath of God abides upon him (John 3:36). Let us invite them to turn their eyes away from the Jerusalem below, and to lift

them up towards the Jerusalem above, where the Savior of the world is seated at God's right hand. And let us urge them to join us in confessing that no matter where we live, we are strangers and exiles in this world; exiles who are confidently seeking a better homeland, a heavenly homeland, a homeland that the Messiah will make ours, once and for all, at his soon return (Heb. 11:13-16).

Is the creation of the modern Israeli state in fulfillment of OTKP

Our premillennial brothers tell us that in OTKP God promised to restore latter-day ethnic Israel to Palestine, where, after a brief season of severe tribulation, they will live and worship for a thousand years with Christ as their king. Some say that *all* of the OT prophecies of Israel's eschatological restoration were fulfilled in 1948. Others, like Thomas Ice and Arnold Fruchtenbaum, fine tune this doctrine: In 1948 some OTKP's were fulfilled by the restoration of *unbelieving* Israelites to the land (Isaiah 11:11-12, Ezek. 36:22-26, 37:1-14); however, in the near future more of the prophecies will be fulfilled by a restoration of *believing* Israelites to the land (Deut. 30:1-10, Isaiah 43:5-9, Jer. 31:7-10, Amos 9:14-15, Zech. 10:8-12). In any case, all premillennarians are agreed that the true sphere of fulfillment of these prophecies is ethnic Israel and the land of Palestine.

We have just seen, however, that this is impossible, since, according to the NT, the true sphere of fulfillment of all OTKP is the New Covenant, the New Covenant people of God (the Church), and the New Covenant homeland of God, which is heaven above during the temporary Era of Proclamation, and which is the new heavens and the new earth during the eternal Era of Consummation. If, then, we are rightly to understand OTKP's of "Israel's" eschatological restoration to the land, we must interpret them within this paradigm. And this entails that OTKP says *not a word* about a latter-day restoration of ethnic Israel to Palestine.

How, then, *are* we to interpret these prophecies? In the body of this book I have sawn a great deal of theological lumber in an effort to show the way. In our discussions, we uncovered three simple principles to guide us in our interpretive labors. For safety sake, let us briefly review them once again.

First, there is “simple” OT prophecy. These prophecies were fulfilled in OT times, under the Old Covenant. These we interpret literally. For example, Jeremiah 29:1-14 is a simple OT prophecy of ethnic Israel’s restoration to the land of Palestine. It was literally fulfilled in the days of Ezra and Nehemiah, when a chastened, penitent, and prayerful people returned to their homeland to rebuild their lives, their homes, their villages, and their temple (Dan. 9:1f). It should be carefully noted, however, that this lesser restoration served as a picture of the far greater restoration of eschatological “Israel” under the New Covenant. And it is of this greater restoration that Jeremiah and the other prophets almost always speak (Jer. 23:1-8, 30:1ff, 31:1-30, 31:31-40, 32:36ff, 33:14-26).

Secondly, there is OTKP. These prophecies are fulfilled in NT times, under the New Covenant. These we interpret by means of the New Covenant Hermeneutic. These we interpret typologically, christologically, eschatologically, and ecclesiologically. These we interpret as having their sphere of fulfillment in the New Covenant, in Christ, in the Church, and in the two-staged Kingdom of God.

Again, if all this is so, the implications are inescapable: *Every* OTKP in which premillennarians find God predicting a latter-day restoration of ethnic Israel to the land is actually an OTKP, which means that *every* such prophecy must be interpreted figuratively and typologically, by means of a skillful use of the NCH.

In our journey together, I have sought to model this approach many times.

For example, premillennarians claim that in Isaiah 11:11-16 God is speaking of two restorations of ethnic Israel to the land. The first was accomplished under Ezra and Nehemiah, the second under the United Nations, in 1948. We have seen, however, that this literal interpretation cannot possibly be correct, since it requires us to look for modern ethnic Israel fighting against nations that long ago passed from the stage of history (e.g., Philistia, Edom, Moab, etc.). No, the context indicates that here Isaiah is speaking “mysteriously” of the Messianic era (11:1-5, 10); an era in which God will gather unto Christ a new nation of Gospel warriors (11:10); an era in which those warriors will engage in such victorious Gospel combat that multitudes of previously unbelieving enemies will walk the highway of holiness into God’s Kingdom and into his people’s

eschatological homeland (11:14-16). Just as God, in the first Exodus, rescued physical Israel from Egypt through Moses, so in the eschatological Exodus he will rescue spiritual Israel from the Domain of Darkness through Christ (11:16). And when the great contest is over, the Messiah will execute final Judgment against all his remaining foes (11:4), and then bring in the eternal World to Come (11:6-9).

Again, premillennarians say that in 1948 God fulfilled his ancient promise to give birth to a nation in a day (Isaiah 66:7-8). However, in our careful exegesis of this text, we saw that the new Land, Nation, and City of which Isaiah spoke is actually Christ's Church, born on the Day of Pentecost as a result of the Person and redeeming Work of the Boy-Child to which OT Zion, embodied in mother Mary, gave birth (11:7-8, 10).

In our study we also considered Ezekiel's famous vision of the Valley of Dry Bones. Without a doubt, this is the premillennarian's favorite proof text for a latter-day restoration of the Jews to Palestine (Ezek. 37:1-14). Thomas Ice, for example, reads it as giving us "a multi-stage process." First ethnic Israel is restored to the land in unbelief, and so is pictured as a vast sea of lifeless bodies, physically whole but spiritually dead. This stage supposedly began in 1948 and continues to the present. Then, possibly during the seven year Tribulation, the second stage begins: God brings the nation to faith, so that now it stands on its feet, a great army of Jewish evangelists, effectively calling both Jews and Gentiles to salvation in Christ just prior to his premillennial return.

However, earlier in our journey I argued for a very different interpretation of this text, an interpretation guided by the NCH. I suggested that Ezekiel's famous prophecy pictures God, who physically created man from the dust, spiritually re-creating the One New Man—Christ's Church—from the dead (Eph. 2:15). In other words, it gives us Christ, from the Day of Pentecost on, breathing into the nostrils of his elect (whether Jew or Gentile), raising them to newness of life, and sending them as a vast army into triumphant spiritual warfare for the cause of the gospel (John 20:22, Rom. 6:4, 2 Cor. 2:14f, Eph. 2:5-7, 6:10f, 2 Tim. 2:4, Rev. 19:19). Which interpretation has the sanction of NT eschatology? That is for you to decide.

Premillennarians also like to point to Amos 9:13-14, which they claim anticipates the agricultural fruitfulness that we now see, or soon will see, in the modern nation of Israel. However, the NCH supplies a far more edifying

interpretation, finding here a beautiful prophecy, cast in rich OT symbolism, of the eternal fruitfulness of the Church in the Paradise of God, the new heavens and the new earth (Rev 2:7, 22:2, 22:14). And we know that this is the correct interpretation because of the verses immediately preceding our text (Amos 9:11-12). According to the explicit teaching of the NT, these speak of the eschatological restoration of the fallen Davidic dynasty *through the birth and growth of the Christian Church*, a growth that includes the gathering of all the Gentiles who are called by God's name, after which comes the end and Paradise (Acts 15:16-18).

Finally, we have Zechariah 8:1-8, yet another picturesque prophecy of the restoration of God's people to their eternal homeland and holy city, Jerusalem. Premillennarians confidently assert that this too was fulfilled in 1948, or that it will be fulfilled in yet another migration of Jews to Palestine, since it was written *after* the restoration under Ezra and Nehemiah. However, even a cursory reading of this heart-warming text will persuade the reader that the happy scenes depicted therein cannot possibly speak of life in modern war-torn Israel. No, as we saw earlier, this prophecy uses familiar OT imagery to speak of the blessedness of Christ's Church, both in the present Era of Proclamation, and also in the World to Come .

And so too do all the other OTKP's that premillennarians cite to defend their notion that the Bible predicts a latter-day return of ethnic Israel to their ancient homeland in Palestine.

How are we to understand the creation of a modern Israeli state?

Certainly every Bible-believing Christian senses in his spirit that the creation of the modern Jewish state is a remarkable act of God's providence, *an act that cannot be without eschatological significance*. Indeed, I imagine that even unbelievers, in their unguarded moments, find this unexpected phenomenon arresting, even troubling; that they cannot help but marvel at the preservation of Abraham's physical seed over centuries of struggle, marginalization, persecution, and near destruction; and that they cannot help but see the invisible hand of the living God hovering over the events of 1948, moving purposefully and lovingly over his lost and scattered OT people. Some things we all know in our knower. God's abiding concern for ethnic Israel is one of them.

The great question, however, is this: What *exactly* does God mean by this thought-provoking historical development? Here, and in the body of my book, I have stated forthrightly what I think it does *not* mean: It does not mean that God is literally fulfilling OTKP; it does not mean that he is placing ethnic Israel on center stage for the wrap-up of Salvation History; it does not mean that he is raising up 144,000 Jewish evangelists; it does not mean he is preparing for a great battle on the slopes of Mt. Meggido, or for a global assault on physical Jerusalem, or for a national conversion at the premillennial return of Christ, or for a thousand years of temple worship in Palestine, etc. In short, the creation of the modern nation of Israel does not vindicate historic or dispensational premillennialism.

This does not mean, however, that the event is without eschatological significance. To reject the premillennial interpretation of ethnic Israel's return to Palestine is *not* to make it into mere accident of history. But if in fact it is not an historical accident, we are brought again to the question with which we opened this discussion: What *does* the birth of modern national Israel mean? How *does* it figure into God's plan of salvation? What *is* its eschatological significance?

Earlier, I suggested a plausible answer to these fascinating questions. In particular, I argued from our exegetical study of Romans 11 that the spiritual rebirth of Israel at large is one of the three or four great NT signs of the imminence of Christ's Parousia. As Paul wrote, "If their rejection be the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance be, if not life from the dead" (Rom. 11:15)?

The creation of the modern Israel fits well into this scenario. Indeed, the words of our Lord himself may well teach this very thing; for when, some two thousand years ago, he spoke God's word of judgment over ethnic Jerusalem and Israel, he also left them—and us—with a notable glimmer of hope:

Woe to those who are pregnant and to those who are nursing babies in those days; for there will be great distress upon the land and wrath to this people; and they will fall by the edge of the sword, and will be led captive into all the nations; *and Jerusalem will be trampled under foot by the Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled.*

—Luke 21:23-24

Now, it is certainly the case that since 1948 the Gentiles are no longer trampling earthly Jerusalem underfoot. Could it be, then, that Israel's unexpected rise to nationhood signals that the times of the Gentiles are now fulfilled; that the Gentile's (often cruel) domination over the Jewish Dispersion has come to an end; that God's redemptive thrust into the Gentile world is now nearing its completion; and that, as Paul prophesied, the Gentiles are about to be broken off, while ethnic Israel at large is about to be grafted back in (Rom. 11:17-24)?

I am strongly inclined to think so. And if this *is* so, it becomes all the more urgent for the Christ's Church to bring the Gospel to the Jews, not only in Palestine, but wherever they may live. Thus shall we serve our Jewish neighbors as we ought. Thus shall we honor God in remembering that we Gentiles do not support the Jewish root, but the Jewish root supports us (Rom. 11:18). And thus shall we actually hasten the coming of our Lord (2 Peter 3:12). For as he himself told us, when ethnic Israel again learns to say "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord," then they—and we—shall finally see him again (Mt. 23:39)!

Old Testament Kingdom Prophecies Listed

HERE IS A very full, though not quite exhaustive, list of Old Testament Kingdom Prophecies (OTKP's). Please remember from our study that I define an OTKP as any OT prophecy of the Kingdom of God fulfilled on or after the Day of Pentecost, when the first stage of the Kingdom began with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. As opposed to "simple" OT prophecies, which were fulfilled prior to Pentecost, these cannot be interpreted literally, but must be interpreted through a skillful use of the New Covenant Hermeneutic. That is, they must be interpreted:

- **Covenantally:** As being fulfilled under the New/Eternal Covenant, and as referring to the several elements of that Covenant.
- **Christologically:** As being fulfilled in the Person and Work of Christ.
- **Typologically:** As using OT ideas and images to convey NT truth.
- **Ecclesiologically:** As being fulfilled among God's New Covenant people, the Church, which is comprised both of Jew and Gentile.
- **Eschatologically:** As being fulfilled in the last days, which are the days in which the New Covenant has been made manifest; as being fulfilled either in the first stage of the Kingdom (the Kingdom of the Son), the second stage of the Kingdom (the Kingdom of the Father), or both.

My hope and prayer is that as you apply the New Covenant Hermeneutic to these beautiful OT prophecies, the Holy Spirit will enable you to understand and delight in them, and also to use them mightily for the advance of Christ's Kingdom.

Deuteronomy

1. 30:1-10 The Lord Will Gather You (DF)
2. 32:34-43 The LORD Will Make Atonement for His Land

2 Samuel

1. 7:8-17 Your Kingdom Shall Endure Forever (DF)

Psalms

1. 2 The Reign of the LORD's Anointed
2. 22:27-31 The Ends of the Earth Will Turn
3. 69:34-36 God Will Save Zion
4. 72 A Prayer for the Coming King
5. 89 God's Eternal Covenant with David
6. 96 Sing to the LORD, All the Earth
7. 132 Zion, My Resting Place Forever

Isaiah

1. 2:1-5 The Mountain of the Lord
2. 2:6-22 The Day of the Lord
3. 4:2-6 The Branch of the Lord
4. 9:1-7 A Child is Born
5. 10:20-23 A Remnant Will Return
6. 11:1-9 A Branch from Jesse
7. 11:10-16 A Remnant from All Nations
8. 12:1ff The Church's Song of Praise
9. 14:1-2 Taking Their Captors Captive
10. 19:16-24 Israel, Egypt, Assyria: God's Inheritance
11. 24:21-23 Bound for Many Days
12. 25:6-9 A Feast of Fat Things
13. 26:1ff The Song of Judah

14. 27:1ff A Remnant Will Worship in Zion
15. 30:18f Your Eyes Will See Your Teacher
16. 32:1-5 A King Will Reign in Righteousness
17. 33:16-24 The Land of the Majestic King
18. 35:1ff The Joy of the Remnant
19. 40:1f Comfort My People!
20. 41:8-20 Fear Not, I am with You!
21. 42:1-4 Behold, My Servant!
22. 43:1ff Israel's Only Savior
23. 44:1-5 Israel My Chosen
24. 44:21-28 She Shall Be Built
25. 49:1-7 A Light for the Nations
26. 49:8-13 The LORD has Comforted His People
27. 49:14ff God's Promise to Zion
28. 52:1-12 How Beautiful Upon the Mountains
29. 52:13-53:12 A Suffering Servant, an Exalted King
30. 54:1ff Your Maker is Your Husband
31. 55:1f Come, Buy, Eat!
32. 56:1-18 I Will Gather Others
33. 60:1-22 Zion's Future Glory
34. 61:1ff They Shall Build Up the Ancient Ruins
35. 62:1ff A City Not Forsaken
36. 63:1-6 The Day of Vengeance
37. 65:8-10 The Faithful Remnant
38. 65:17ff I Create Jerusalem a Joy
39. 66:7-14 A Nation Born in a Day
40. 66:18ff The Nations Gathered to Zion

Jeremiah

1. 3:11-18 God's Promise to Faithless Israel
2. 12:14-17 God's Word to Israel's Wicked Neighbors
3. 23:1-7 The Righteous Branch of David
4. 29:10-14 I Will Bring You Back (DF)
5. 30:1f I Will Break His Yoke (DF)
6. 31:31f A New Covenant, a New Heart

7. 32:36ff They Shall Be My People
8. 33:1-13 Jerusalem, a Name of Joy Before the Nations
9. 33:14ff God's Eternal Covenant with David
10. 46:26 Eschatological Mercy to Egypt
11. 48:47 Eschatological Mercy to Moab
12. 49:6 Eschatological Mercy to Ammon
13. 49:39 Eschatological Mercy to Elam
14. 50:4-5 They Will Ask the Way to Zion
15. 50:17-20 I Will Pardon the Remnant
16. 50:34 Eschatological Mercy to the Earth

Ezekiel

1. 20:33-44 I Will Be King Over You
2. 28:24-26 Israel Will Dwell Securely
3. 34:11-31 I Will Lead My Flock to Rest
4. 36:8-15 God's Word to the Mountains of Israel
5. 36:22-37 I Will Prove Myself Holy
6. 37:1-14 Resurrection Life in the Valley of Dry Bones
7. 37:15-28 One Stick in My Hand
8. 38-39 Gog and Israel in the Day of the LORD
9. 40-48 Israel's Worship in the World to Come

Daniel

1. 2:31-45 The Statue of Man, the Kingdom of God
2. 7:1f The Vision of the Four Beasts
3. 9:20-27 The Prophecy of the Seventy Sevens
4. 11:36-12:13¹ The Last Battle and the Resurrection of the Dead

Hosea

1. 1:10-11 Children as the Sand of the Sea
2. 2:14-23 Wedded in the Wilderness
3. 3:5 Israel Will Come Trembling
4. 11:10-11 The LORD Will Roar
5. 14:4-7 I Will Heal Their Apostasy

Joel

1. 2:18-27 You Shall Eat in Plenty
2. 2:28-32 I Will Pour Out My Spirit
3. 3:1ff Judah's Glorious Future

Amos

1. 9:11-18 David's Tabernacle Restored

Obadiah

1. 1:15-21 Salvation on Mt. Zion

Micah

1. 2:12-13 I Will Gather the Remnant of Israel
2. 4:1-5 The Peoples Stream to Zion
3. 4:6-8 I Will Gather the Outcasts
4. 4:9-13 Arise and Thresh, Daughter of Zion
5. 5:1-6 He Will Be Great to the Ends of the Earth
6. 5:7-8 A Remnant Among the Nations
7. 7:7-13 A Day for Building Your Walls
8. 7:14-20 Unchanging Love to Abraham's Seed

Nahum

1. 1:15 Good News for Judah

Habakkuk

1. 3:1-19 God Will Go Forth for His People's Salvation

Zephaniah

1. 2:1ff Israel Will Be Restored
2. 3:9-13 A Humble People in the Land
3. 3:14-20 Sing Aloud, O Daughter of Zion!

Haggai

1. 2:5-9 The Latter Glory of God's House

2. 2:20ff Zerubbabel, My Signet Ring

Zechariah

1. 1:4-17 The Four Horsemen
2. 1:18ff The Four Craftsmen
3. 2:1-13 Jerusalem Measured for Blessing
4. 3:1-7 A Brand Plucked From the Fire
5. 3:8-10 The Coming Branch
6. 4:1-14 Grace, Grace to It!
7. 5:5-11 Iniquity Removed from the Earth
8. 6:9-15 A Man Whose Name is Branch
9. 8:1-23 Zion's Future Peace
10. 9:9-17 The Coming Warrior King
11. 10:1-12 I Will Bring Them Back
12. 1-17 Jerusalem, a Cup that Causes Reeling
13. 12:1-9 Strong in the Lord
14. 12:10-14 Before Strength, Tears
15. 13:1-6 After Tears, Cleansing
16. 13:7-9 The Stricken Shepherd, the Gathered Flock
17. 14:1-2 The Last Battle
18. 14:3-5 The Day of the LORD
19. 14:6-11 The World to Come
20. 14:12-15 The Judgment to Come
21. 14:16-21 The Worship to Come

Malachi

1. 1:1-14 From the Rising of the Sun
2. 2:17-3:5 The Messenger of the Covenant Will Come
3. 4:1-6 The Sun of Righteousness Will Rise

NOTE: DF = Double Fulfillment. In OTKP's where this occurs, the prophecy has both an historical fulfillment under the Old Covenant, and an eschatological fulfillment under the New Covenant in the (two-staged) Kingdom of God.

Old Testament Kingdom Prophecies Cited in the New Testament

HERE IS A fulsome list of OT Kingdom prophecies cited in the Didactic New Testament (i.e., the Gospels, the Book of Acts, and the Epistles). As we learned in our study, when interpreting and applying these prophecies, the apostles consistently use the New Covenant Hermeneutic. In other words, here they find the Spirit using OT language and imagery to speak typologically of the two-staged spiritual Kingdom introduced by Christ under the New Covenant.

Please note that this list does *not* include the dozens of OT Messianic prophecies fulfilled *prior* to the Day of Pentecost. Those prophecies do indeed speak of the coming King, but not of the spiritual Kingdom that he inaugurated on the Day of Pentecost when the Church was born. They are “simple” OT prophecies, and so were literally fulfilled in the days of Christ’s flesh, prior to Pentecost and the coming of the Kingdom.

NT Text	OT Text	Gist of Text
1. Mt. 10:35-36	Micah 7:6	I set a man against his father
2. Mt. 12:18-21	Isaiah 42:1-3	Behold, My Servant
3. Mt. 13:14-14	Isaiah 6:9-10	You will keep on hearing
4. Mt. 13:32	Ezek. 17:23	Birds of the air
5. Mt. 21:42	Psalm 118:22	The rejected Stone
6. Mt. 22:43-46	Psalm 110:1	The LORD said to my Lord
7. Mt. 24:29	Isaiah 31:10, 24:23,	The luminaries removed

NT Text	OT Text	Gist of Text
	Ezek. 32:7, Joel 2:10, 31, 3:15, Amos 5:20, 8:9, Zeph. 1:15	
8. Mt. 24:30	Dan. 7:13	He will come in clouds
9. Mt. 24:31	Isaiah 27:13, Zech. 9:14	The sound of a trumpet
10. Mt. 24:31	Dan. 7:2, Zech. 2:6	The four winds
11. Mt. 26:64	Psalm 110:1, Dan. 7:13	At the right hand of power
12. John 6:45	Isaiah 54:13	All shall be taught by God
13. Acts 2:14-21	Joel 2:28-32	The Spirit outpoured
14. Acts 2:25-28	Psalm 16:8-11	I ever saw the LORD
15. Acts 2:32-36	Psalm 110:1	The LORD said to my Lord
16. Acts 3:22-23	Deut. 18:19	I will raise up a Prophet
17. Acts 3:25	Gen. 22:18	The Seed of Abraham
18. Acts 4:11	Psalm 118:22	He is the Stone
19. Acts 4:23-31	Psalm 2:1f	Why did the nations rage
20. Acts 7:47-50	Isaiah 66:1	Heaven is my throne
21. Acts 13:16-41	Psalm 2:7, Hab. 1:5	Behold, you scoffers
22. Acts 13:44-48	Isaiah 49:6	I have placed you as a light
23. Acts 15:12-21	Amos 9:11-12	The tabernacle of David
24. Acts 28:25-28	Isaiah 6:1f	Go to this people and say
25. Rom. 1:17	Hab. 2:4	Righteous by faith
26. Rom. 4:7-8	Psalm 32:1-2	Blessed are the forgiven

NT Text	OT Text	Gist of Text
27. Rom. 9:23-26	Hosea 2:23, 1:10	I will call My people
28. Rom. 9:27-8	Isaiah 10:22	The remnant will be saved
29. Rom. 9:29	Isaiah 1:9	We would be like Sodom
30. Rom. 9:32-3	Isaiah 28:16	I lay in Zion
31. Rom. 10:11	Isaiah 28:16	Never put shame
32. Rom. 10:13	Joel 2:32	Whoever calls on Him
33. Rom. 10:19	Deut. 32:1	I will make you jealous
34. Rom. 10:20-21	Isaiah 65:1-2	I was found by those
35. Rom. 11:8	Isaiah 29:10f	A spirit of stupor
36. Rom. 11:25-26	Isaiah 59:20-21	The deliverer will come
37. Rom. 14:10-12	Isaiah 45:23	Every knee shall bow
38. Rom. 15:8-13	Deut. 32:43 Psalms 18:49, 117:1, Isaiah 11:10	God's mercy to Gentiles
39. Rom. 15:21	Isaiah 52:15	They who had no news
40. 1 Cor. 1:18-19	Isaiah 29:14	The wisdom of the wise
41. 1 Cor. 15:20-28	Psalms 8:6, 110:1	All enemies under foot
42. 1 Cor. 15:54-7	Isaiah 25:8, Hos. 13:14	Death swallowed up
43. 2 Cor. 6:1-2	Isaiah 49:8f Ezek. 37:27, Jer. 31:1,	The Lord's favorable time
44. 2 Cor. 6:14ff	Isaiah 52:11, Hos. 1:10, Isaiah 43:6	God's temple, family, covenant
45. Gal. 4:26-27	Isaiah 54:1	The Jerusalem above

NT Text	OT Text	Gist of Text
46. Eph. 2:17	Isaiah 57:9	He preached peace
47. Eph. 5:14	Isaiah 52:1-2, 60:1	Awake, sleeper!
48. Heb. 1:5	Psalm 2:7, 2 Sam. 7:14	Thou art My Son!
49. Heb. 1:13	Psalm 110:1	Sit at my right hand
50. Heb. 2:12	Psalm 22:22	I will proclaim Thy name
51. Heb. 2:13	Isaiah 8:17-18	Behold, I and the children
52. Heb. 5:5-6	Psalm 2:7, 110:1	Thou art my son
53. Heb. 7:17, 21	Psalm 110:4	A Priest forever
54. Heb. 8:8-13	Jer. 31:31f	A new covenant
55. Heb. 10:37-38	Haggai 2:3-4	The coming One will come
56. Heb. 12:26	Haggai 2:6	Once more I will shake
57. 1 Peter 2:4-8	Isaiah 28:16, Psalm 118:22	The rejected cornerstone
58. 1 Peter 2:9-10	Isaiah 43:20, 61:6, 66:21, Hosea 1:10, 2:23	A chosen race, nation, priesthood
59. 2 Peter 3:4, 10	Isaiah 2, 13 Joel 2, Zeph. 1 Mal. 4, etc.	The Day of the Lord
60. 2 Peter 3:13	Isaiah 65:17, 66:22	New heavens, new earth

New Testament Texts Touching on the Parousia/Consummation

HERE IS A fulsome list of texts from the Didactic New Testament (i.e., the Gospels, the Book of Acts, and the Epistles) touching on the Parousia and the Consummation. In our journey, we have closely examined a number of the most important. As you use this chart to study the rest, I trust you will find that each one confirms the central thesis of this book: God has a planned a single, Christ-centered Consummation for the end of the present evil age, when, at the Lord's one Parousia, he raises the dead, judges the world in righteousness, destroys the present earth and its works by fire, and creates new heavens and a new earth, the eternal home of the redeemed.

Text	Gist of Text
<i>Matthew</i>	
1. 12:18-20	Till he sends forth judgment to victory
2. 13:37-43	The parable of the wheat and the tares
3. 13:47-50	The parable of the dragnet
4. 16:27-17:8	A glimpse of the consummated Kingdom
5. 19:27-28	Judging the twelve tribes of Israel
6. 21:43-44	The Stone that will fall
7. 22:23-33	The resurrection affirmed
8. 24-25	The Olivet Discourse
9. 26:29	Until the day I drink it new
10. 26:64	Coming on the clouds of heaven

Text

Gist of Text

Mark

1. 4:26-29 The harvest at the end of the age
2. 8:38 When the Son of Man comes
3. 9:1-8 The transfiguration
4. 12:18-27 The resurrection affirmed
5. 13:1ff The Olivet Discourse

Luke

1. 9:27-36 The transfiguration
2. 12:35-40 Let your loins be girded
3. 17:22-36 Remember Lot's wife
4. 18:1-8 Will the Son of Man find faith?
5. 19:11-17 The parable of the talents
6. 20:27-40 The resurrection affirmed
7. 21:5-36 The Olivet Discourse

John

1. 5:21-29 Resurrection and judgment at the hand of Christ
2. 6:39-40, 44, 54 The resurrection on the Last Day
3. 14:3 I will come again

Acts

1. 3:19-25 The restoration of all things
2. 10:42 The judge of the living and the dead
3. 24:15 A resurrection of the just and the unjust

Romans

Text	Gist of Text
1. 2:1-16	Judgment on the Day of Christ
2. 8:16-25	Cosmic restoration at the resurrection
3. 11:11-15	Life from the dead at Israel's conversion
4. 16:20	Satan crushed at the Parousia

1 Corinthians

1. 1:4-8	Waiting for the end at the revelation of Christ
2. 3:13	The one Day of Judgment
3. 4:5	Universal judgment at the Parousia
4. 5:5	The Day of the Lord Jesus
5. 15:20-28	The resurrection and the twofold Kingdom
6. 15:50-58	The death of death at the last trumpet

2 Corinthians

1. 4:14	God presents his people at the resurrection
2. 5:1-10	Resurrection, judgment, and a house eternal in the heavens

Ephesians

1. 4:30	Sealed for the day of redemption
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Philippians

1. 1:6-11, 2:16	Sincere and blameless till the Day of Christ
2. 3:9-11	That I may attain the resurrection
3. 3:20-21	Cosmic restoration at the resurrection

Colossians

1. 3:4	Revealed with him in glory
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Text

Gist of Text

1 Thessalonians

1. 1:10 Waiting for his Son from heaven
2. 2:19-20 Paul's hope, joy, and crown at the Parousia
3. 3:11-13 Established in holiness at the Parousia
4. 4:13-18 The comfort of his coming
5. 5:1-11 Appointed for salvation in the Day of the Lord

2 Thessalonians

1. 1:3-12 Rescue and retribution at the revelation of Christ
2. 2:1-13 Christ vs. Antichrist at the Parousia

1 Timothy

1. 6:13-16 Be faithful until his appearing

2 Timothy

1. 1:12, 18 Guarded until that day
2. 4:1 Universal judgment at his appearing

Titus

1. 2:13 The Church's blessed hope

Hebrews

1. 6:1-3 The resurrection, followed by eternal judgment
2. 9:25-28 Christ to appear a second time, for final salvation
3. 10:11-13 Waiting in heaven till his enemies are made his footstool
4. 10:25 The day is drawing near
5. 12:26-27 One more shaking to come

Text

Gist of Text

James

1. 5:7-9 Be patient till the judgment at his return

1 Peter

1. 1:6-9 Be patient till the revelation of Christ
2. 4:7-19 The end of all things is at hand

2 Peter

1. 3:1-13 The Day of the Lord will come
2. 3:18 Glory to Christ, now and till the day of eternity

1 John

1. 2:28 Confident at his appearing/coming
2. 3:2-3 At his appearing we shall be like him

Jude

1. Verse 6 The Judgment of the Great Day
2. Verses 14-15 Mockers to be judged at the Parousia
3. Verses 24-25 Believers to stand with great joy

Biblical Prophecies of the Last Battle

HERE IS A fulsome list of biblical prophecies of the Last Battle, the final conflict between Christ and Satan, the Church and the World. As these prophecies show, the Last Battle is predestined to occur shortly before the Consummation at the Parousia of the Lord Jesus Christ, and is therefore a major sign of the imminence of his return. In recent years the evangelical Church has largely neglected this doctrine, primarily due to the influence of Dispensationalism, which transforms the Last Battle into a final conflict between ethnic Israel and the nations following the Rapture of the Church. Now, however, Dispensationalism is in retreat, and the historic Christian teaching on this theme is once again coming into view. This is timely, since the rising tide of global persecution of Christians suggests that the Last Battle may be nearer than we think.

Text	Gist of Text
1. Ezekiel 37-38	“I am against you, O Gog!”
2. Daniel 7:1-28	A vain war against the saints
3. Daniel 9:26-27	Even to the end there will be war
4. Daniel 11:36-12:13 ¹	A people rescued in time of distress
5. Joel 3:1-17	Multitudes in the Valley of Decision
6. Micah 4:11-5:1	God gathers the nations to his threshing floor
7. Zechariah 12:1-17	Jerusalem, a cup of reeling to all peoples
8. Zechariah 14:1-3	The LORD will go forth and fight
9. Matthew 24:9-28	Then there will be great tribulation (BP)
10. ² Thessalonians 2:3-12	The Man of Lawlessness, opponent of God
11. Revelation 11:7-10	The Beast at war with the Two Witnesses

Text**Gist of Text**

- | | |
|------------------------|--|
| 12.Revelation 13:6-10 | The Beast from the sea overcomes the saints (BP) |
| 13.Revelation 16:12-16 | The kings of the earth gathered for the war |
| 14.Revelation 19:17-21 | The nations assembled for the Supper of God |
| 15.Revelation 20:7-10 | A fire from heaven ends the war |

NOTE: BP = Blended Prophecy: A prophecy that blends near and far historical events; that blends the preliminary and the ultimate, the historical and the eschatological.

The Creeds of Christendom on the Consummation

THIS APPENDIX CITES the eschatological portions of some of the great creeds of Christendom, especially those in the Reformed tradition. Together, they show that amillennialism has indeed been the traditional eschatology of the universal Christian Church. I have written this book in hopes that all God's people will consider it afresh and, if necessary, come home.

1. The apostles' Creed (Fourth Century)

Christ . . . sitteth at the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead.

2. The Nicene Creed (AD 381)

And Christ shall come again, with glory, to judge both the quick and the dead; whose Kingdom shall have no end.

3. The Athanasian Creed (Sixth Century)

He ascended into heaven, (and) sitteth on the right hand of the Father, God Almighty; at whose coming all men shall rise again with their bodies, and shall give account for their works. And they that have done good shall go into life everlasting; and they that have done evil, into everlasting fire.

4. The Augsburg Confession (Lutheran, AD 1530)

(We) teach that at the Consummation of the World Christ will appear for judgment, and will raise up all the dead; He will give to the godly and elect eternal life and everlasting joys, but ungodly men and the devils He will condemn to be tormented without end.

(We) condemn (those) who are now spreading certain Jewish opinions, that before the resurrection of the dead the godly shall take possession of the kingdom of the world, the ungodly being everywhere suppressed.

5. Belgic Confession (Reformed, AD 1561)

Finally, we believe, according to God's Word, that when the time appointed by the Lord is come (which is unknown to all creatures) and the number of the elect is complete, our Lord Jesus Christ will come from heaven, bodily and visibly, as he ascended, with great glory and majesty, to declare himself the judge of the living and the dead. He will burn this old world in fire and flame in order to cleanse it.

Then all human creatures will appear in person before the great Judge—men, women, and children, who have lived from the beginning until the end of the world.

They will be summoned there by the voice of the archangel and by the sound of the divine trumpet.

For all those who died before that time will be raised from the earth, their spirits being joined and united with their own bodies in which they lived. And as for those who are still alive, they will not die like the others, but will be changed in the twinkling of an eye from corruptible to incorruptible.

Then the books (that is, the consciences) will be opened, and the dead will be judged according to the things they did in the world, whether good or evil. Indeed, all people will give account of all the idle words they have spoken, which the world regards as only playing games. And then the secrets and hypocrisies of men will be publicly uncovered in the sight of all.

Therefore, with good reason the thought of this judgment is horrible and dreadful to wicked and evil people. But it is very pleasant and a great comfort to the righteous and elect, since their total redemption will then be accomplished. They will then receive the fruits of their labor and of the

trouble they have suffered; their innocence will be openly recognized by all; and they will see the terrible vengeance that God will bring on the evil ones who tyrannized, oppressed, and tormented them in this world.

The evil ones will be convicted by the witness of their own consciences, and shall be made immortal—but only to be tormented in the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels.

In contrast, the faithful and elect will be crowned with glory and honor. The Son of God will confess their names before God his Father and the holy and elect angels; all tears will be wiped from their eyes; and their cause—at present condemned as heretical and evil by many judges and civil officers—will be acknowledged as the cause of the Son of God.

And as a gracious reward the Lord will make them possess a glory such as the heart of man could never imagine.

So we look forward to that great day with longing in order to enjoy fully the promises of God in Christ Jesus, our Lord.

6. The Heidelberg Catechism (Reformed, AD 1563)

Question: What comfort is it to thee that (it is written in the apostles' Creed), "Christ shall come again to judge the quick and the dead"?

Answer: That in all my sorrows and persecutions, with uplifted head I look for the very same Person, who before offered himself for my sake, to the tribunal of God, and has removed all curse from me, to come as Judge from heaven: who shall cast all his and my enemies into everlasting condemnation, but shall translate me with all his chosen ones to himself, into heavenly joys and glory.

7. The Thirty-Nine Articles (Church of England, AD 1563)

Christ ascended into Heaven, and there sitteth until he return to judge all Men at the last day.

8. Westminster Confession of Faith (Puritan-Reformed, 1647)

London Baptist Confession (1689)

Chapter XXXIII Of the Last Judgment

- I. God has appointed a day, wherein He will judge the world in righteousness by Jesus Christ, to whom all power and judgment is given of the Father. In which day, not only the apostate angels shall be judged, but likewise all persons that have lived upon earth shall appear before the tribunal of Christ, to give an account of their thoughts, words, and deeds; and to receive according to what they have done in the body, whether good or evil.
- II. The end of God's appointing this day is for the manifestation of the glory of His mercy, in the eternal salvation of the elect; and of His justice, in the damnation of the reprobate, who are wicked and disobedient. For then shall the righteous go into everlasting life, and receive that fullness of joy and refreshing, which shall come from the presence of the Lord; but the wicked who know not God, and obey not the Gospel of Jesus Christ, shall be cast into eternal torments, and be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of His power.
- III. As Christ would have us to be certainly persuaded that there shall be a day of judgment, both to deter all men from sin; and for the greater consolation of the godly in their adversity: so will He have that day unknown to men, that they may shake off all carnal security, and be always watchful, because they know not at what hour the Lord will come; and may be ever prepared to say, "Come Lord Jesus, come quickly, Amen."

9. Methodist Articles of Religion (1784)

Article 3: Of the Resurrection of Christ

Christ did truly rise again from the dead, and took again his body, with all things appertaining to the perfection of man's nature, wherewith he ascended into heaven, and there sitteth until he return to judge all men at the Last Day.

10. New Hampshire Baptist Confession (AD 1833)

We believe that the end of the world is approaching; that at the Last Day Christ will descend from heaven and raise the dead from the grave to final (reward and) retribution; that a solemn separation will then take place; that the wicked will be adjudged to endless punishment, and the righteous to endless joy; and that this judgment will fix forever the final state of men in heaven or hell, on principles of righteousness.

11. Baptist Faith and Message (Southern Baptist, AD 1963)

God, in His own time and His own way, will bring the world to its appropriate end. According to His promise, Jesus Christ will return personally and visibly in glory to the earth; the dead will be raised, and Christ will judge all men in righteousness. The unrighteous will be consigned to hell, the place of everlasting punishment. The righteous in their resurrected and glorified bodies will receive their reward and will dwell forever in heaven with the Lord.

12. National Association of Evangelicals

We believe in the resurrection of both the saved and the lost; they that are saved unto the resurrection of life and they that are lost unto the resurrection of damnation.

Endnotes

Chapter 1: What is Biblical Eschatology?

1. For a discussion of naturalistic and pantheistic eschatologies, see Dean Davis, *In Search of the Beginning* (Pleasant Word, 2010), chapters 2-4.
2. For a more detailed discussion of personal eschatology, see Anthony Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future* (Eerdmans, 1979), chapters 7-9. Also, see Dean Davis, *The Test: A Seeker's Journey to the Meaning of Life* (Pleasant Word, 2010), chapter 15.

Chapter 2: Issues in Biblical Eschatology

1. For a sampling of the eschatology of the traditional creeds, see Appendix 10.

Chapter 3: Options in Biblical Eschatology

1. Throughout this book, when I use the words “premillennialism” and “premillennarians,” I have in mind either OCHP or dispensational premillennialism, and their adherents. That is, I have in mind the two forms of premillennialism that interpret OTKP more or less literally. Therefore, I must apologize in advance to my NCHP friends, who will not recognize their faith in most of my descriptions of premillennialism. They will, however, have this compensation, that my own view of OTKP is *far* closer to theirs, so much so that I cherish fond hopes of winning them at last to the sweet simplicity of amillennialism, and to the truly “historic” eschatology of the Christian Church. For more on the history of HP, see Stanley Grenz, *The Millennial Maze*, (IVP, 1992), chapters 2, 5.
2. Theologians use the expression *realized eschatology* to describe the way in which Christ and the apostles regarded the promised (blessings of the) Kingdom to be present, or “realized,” in their own time. For them, the Kingdom was *already* present (i.e., real in personal experience), though

not yet present in its fullness. We shall have much more to say about this important idea in the pages ahead.

3. In the body of this book I address all the issues raised by each of the different schools of prophetic interpretation. Also, in the appendices I offer a concluding summary and critique of each school.

Chapter 6: The Beginning and the Kingdom

1. I first came across this striking idea in Watchman Nee's classic, *The Normal Christian Life* (Tyndale House, 1977).
2. In the OT the motif of Expulsion and Return is prominent and deeply significant. Two instances are of special importance. The first—which is prototypical—is mankind's expulsion from Eden into the Domain of Darkness. This is followed by various OT types and prophecies *promising* mankind's eschatological return to Paradise; and this is followed by *fulfillment*, by actual spiritual and physical return in “the last days” of the New Covenant. The second instance, which is emblematic of the first, is Israel's expulsion from her homeland, resulting in bondage under Assyria and Babylon. This expulsion is also followed by various OT promises of return; and these are also followed by actual return. Here, however, the actual return is twofold. The first is physical, and occurred in OT times when many ethnic Jews returned to Palestine under Ezra and Nehemiah. The second is first spiritual and later physical; it occurs throughout NT times, as multitudes of spiritual “Jews” (i.e., Jewish and Gentile believers in Jesus) return to Christ in different ways (i.e., through the new birth, through the ascent of their spirit into heaven at the moment of death, and through their bodily resurrection for eternal life in the World to Come). This motif—and its twofold embodiment—is *extremely* important for the proper interpretation of OTKP. As we shall see later on, in OTKP the Holy Spirit frequently uses predictions of eschatological Israel's return to the Promised Land to speak mystically of mankind's ultimate return to Paradise and the Tree and Water of Life.
3. For more on the spiritual significance of the Good and Bad Beginnings, see Dean Davis, *In Search of the Beginning* (2010, Winepress Publishing), Chapter 5.

Chapter 7: The Covenant and the Kingdom

1. In chapter 9 we will examine a number of NT texts, showing that this is indeed Jesus' and the apostles' view of the structure of the Era of Proclamation and Probation.
2. For a Timeline visualizing Salvation History in terms of the successive administrations of the Eternal Covenant, please see chapter 10.

Chapter 8: The OT Promise of the Kingdom

1. The rainbow that God ordained after the Flood is also a type, a picture of the full spectrum and beauty of the Person and Work of Christ in behalf of his people. For all eternity God will look upon it, and therefore refrain from judging them ever again (Gen. 9:9-17).
2. We also catch a glimpse of the Kingdom in the fact that Abraham gave Isaac his son "all that he had" (Gen. 24:36, 25:5). This typifies the exaltation of Christ, into whose hands the Father placed "all things" (i.e., all authority, all power, and all custody of the cosmos), thereby making him the High King of heaven and earth (Mt. 11:27, 28:18f, Acts 2:36, Phil. 2:1f).
3. Though OT Israel typified God's elect, not all Israelites were part of God's elect. As Paul the apostle put it, "They are not all Israel who are descended from Israel" (Rom. 9:6). It was only the godly Jews, in whom the Spirit had wrought true repentance and faith (especially faith in the promised Messiah), who belonged to "the Israel of God" (Gal. 6:6).
4. See Louis Berkhoff, *Systematic Theology*, (Eerdmans, 1977), p. 298.
5. Again, we will see in chapter 9 that Christ and the apostles did indeed envision the Kingdom as coming in two basic stages, a temporary Era of Proclamation followed by an eternal Era of Reward and Retribution, the two eras being separated by a single Consummation at the Parousia of Christ.

Chapter 9: The Coming of the Kingdom

1. In 1 Cor. 15:50-57 Paul completes his discussion of the resurrection by introducing another "mystery," the previously hidden truth that the saints living at the time of the Parousia will not die, but will be glorified "in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet." This text also powerfully supports the simple two-staged view of the coming of the

Kingdom. When will the living saints be glorified? At the resurrection of the dead (52). When will the resurrection occur? At the Parousia (23). What will sound at the Parousia? The *last* trumpet (52). Why is it called the last trumpet? Because it heralds the one resurrection that will forever swallow up death in victory (54-55). So then, for Paul the Parousia brings the end (24), the subjection of all enemies (25), the subjection of all things (26), the last trumpet (52), the one resurrection of the dead (52), the one glorification of the living saints, and (for the saints and the world they will inherit) the eternal abolition of death. In short, *the Parousia brings the Consummation of all things*. With love and respect, I would therefore put this important question to my premillennarian brothers: How, after the Parousia, shall Christ rule for a thousand years over a world in which Satan, various human and natural enemies, and death itself are still present; in which more resurrections and more judgments must occur; and over which still another “last” trumpet must sound?

2. It is deeply revealing to see how premillennarians try to reconcile their eschatology with the plain sense of Paul’s teaching in this decisive text. John MacArthur, for example, commenting on verse 23, asserts that “those who are Christ’s will be raised and enter the eternal heavenly state *in three stages* at Christ’s coming” (MSB, p. 2401). What he means is that Christ’s Coming actually involves three distinct (and widely separated) events: a pre-tribulation Coming (i.e., the Rapture, when he raises dead believers), a post-tribulation Coming (when he raises OT and Tribulation saints), and an intra-millennial Coming (when, in all likelihood, he continually raises and glorifies the millennial saints at the moments of their death)! This is an outstanding example of what theologians call *eisegesis*; of reading into a text something that is not there, instead of extracting from the text what really is there. No matter that in this text there is not a single word about a future millennium. No matter that in *the entire Didactic NT* there is not a single word about a future millennium! Because of his previous commitment to a literal interpretation of OTKP and Revelation 20, the premillennarian *must* make room for one, just as MacArthur has done here with his doctrine of three Comings. But I ask: Would it not be far more reasonable for a premillennarian to take his eschatological cues from the Didactic NT, and

so to reconsider his eschatological commitment to prophetic literalism? “Yes,” say Christ and the apostles, “it would!”

3. Historic Premillennarian, George Ladd, pointing to the presence of certain Greek words denoting sequence, interprets verses 23-24 as follows: “An undefined interval falls between Christ’s resurrection and his parousia; and a second undefined interval falls between the Parousia and the end” (*New Testament Theology*, p. 559). For Ladd, the “second undefined interval” is an earthly millennium. But does this text—or Paul’s eschatology as a whole—support his view? For the reasons just cited in note 1, I would strenuously argue that it does not, and that the interval between Christ’s one Parousia and the delivering up of the glorified Kingdom to the Father is precious short indeed!
4. It is true that in the Gospels we find Jesus declaring that the Kingdom of God is in your midst (Luke 17:21, NAS), and that the Kingdom has come upon you (Mt. 12:28). This does not mean, however, that during the days of his flesh the Kingdom had come into the world *as an abiding presence*, or that it had actually taken root in the earth, or that it had begun its redemptive assault upon the Domain of Darkness. For the reasons indicated earlier, *that* coming must await the Day of Pentecost. So then, in these two texts Jesus is saying that the Kingdom that will come on the Day of Pentecost is even now in your midst (though not yet within you), and is even now upon you (though not yet permanently) (John 14:17). By way of a sneak preview, it is here; but by way of its definitive entrance into human history, it has not yet come.

Chapter 10: Salvation History: A Journey to the Kingdom

1. Because in God’s plan the last days were meant to last a long time, the Revelation pictures them under large numerical images: 1260 days and 1000 years (Rev. 11:3, 12:6, 20:1-7). In chapter 20 we will analyze these numbers. Also, note that in a few OTKP’s, the last days include the Kingdom of the Father (Isaiah 2:2f, Micah 4:1f). In the NT, however, they are uniformly co-extensive with the Kingdom of the Son.

Chapter 12: The Nature and Stages of the Kingdom in OTKP

1. For a fulsome list of OTKP’s, see Appendix 6.

2. Importantly, in Hosea's prophecies of Israel's eschatological restoration, the apostle Paul actually finds a prediction of the Gentile's conversion to Christ (Hos. 1:10, Rom. 9:25-26)! This shows that Paul applied the NCH to Hosea, seeing in his words a prediction of the eschatological restoration of Christ's Church, a Church that includes Gentiles as well as Jews.
3. Observe how God's covenant with David serves as a picture of the Covenant of Redemption between the Father and the Son. It is upon condition of the Son's obedience unto all stages of his humiliation that the Father will reward and bless him by making him Head over an eternal dynasty of saints, the called out ones of every age, the Church (Psalm 89).
4. See Isaiah 14 and Ezekiel 28 for two intriguing instances of prophetic blending. In the former, Isaiah blends predictions of the fall of the king of Babylon with predictions of the fall (i.e., destruction) of Satan and his kingdom. In the latter, Ezekiel does much the same, this time tying predictions of Satan's demise to predictions of the doom of the king of Tyre.
5. Familiar examples of OTKP's of the World to Come include Isaiah 11:6-9, 35:1ff, 65:17-25, Jer. 31:12-14, 23-26, 31-34, Ezek. 37, 40-48, Daniel 7:1ff, Hosea 2:14-23, Joel 3:18-21, Amos 9:11-15, Micah 4:1-5, Nahum 1:15, Hab. 3:1-19, Zeph. 3:14-20, Haggai 2:5-9, Zech. 8:1-23, Mal. 3:4, 4:1-3. Some we have discussed already; others we will discuss later.
6. The opaqueness of OTKP is reflected in the fact that during the inter-testamental period Judaism could not reach a consensus on the nature and coming of the Kingdom. NT Theologian George Ladd goes into some detail on this subject, comparing and contrasting different Jewish perspectives reflected in the Apocrypha, the Pseudepigrapha, the Qumran Community, the writings of the Rabbis, and the NT itself. To interact with these disparate views is to see at least one thing with crystal clarity: All of these ancient interpreters of OTKP stood in desperate need of an authoritative revelation of the mysteries of the Kingdom of God! So do we. See George Ladd, *New Testament Theology*, (Eerdmans, Rev. Ed., 1993), pp. 58-60, 135-138.

7. To get a feel for the tremendous difficulty of harmonizing all the Old and New Testament prophetic Scriptures within a single premillennial framework, see Wm. Biederwolf, *The Millennium Bible* (Glad Tidings Publishing, 1924). I am much indebted to Biederwolf, not because he resolved the Great End Time Debate, but because, with heart-rending integrity, thoughtfulness, and diligence, he showed us how impossible it is to do so on premillennial grounds.

Chapter 13: NT Principles for Interpreting OT Kingdom Prophecy

1. As we have seen, progressive dispensationalists are attempting to go down this road, arguing that OTKP's are amenable *both* to literal (premillennial) and figurative interpretations. The great problem with this idea is that NT eschatology does not support it at all; indeed, it positively refutes it at every turn. For more, see Appendix 3.
2. OT types of Christ are distinct from, yet closely related to, christophanies, which may be defined as appearances of the Son of God in OT times. We find christophanies in Genesis 16, 22, 32, Exodus 4, Joshua 5, and Daniel 3.
3. For reasons given elsewhere, I believe that at the moment of death the OT saints did not descend, as some hold, into (a blessed) compartment of Sheol, but simply entered heaven (Psalm 16:11, 17:15, 73:24f, 139:8, Proverbs 14:32, 15:24). But if this is so, how exactly was it that they did not become "perfect" until Christ completed his redemptive work (Heb. 11:40)? One response is to say that until Christ actually completed his redemptive work on earth, returned to heaven, and there illuminated their minds, the spirits of the OT saints did not become perfect *in their understanding and enjoyment of God's plan of salvation* (Luke 24:45). Certainly the angels themselves did not fully comprehend the mystery of the Eternal Covenant until the apostles began to proclaim it (Eph. 3:10). In this regard, the OT saints may well have been on the same page as the angels! For more, see Dean Davis, *The Test* (Pleasant Word, 2010), pp. 351, 550.
4. In my thinking about the various "modes of seeing" proper to the NCH I have been much helped by the work of H. K. La Rondelle, found in *The Israel of God in Prophecy* (Andrews University Press, 1983).

5. George Ladd, *New Testament Theology* (Eerdmans, 1993), p. 58.

Chapter 14: NT Examples of Interpreting OT Kingdom Prophecy

1. For more on the interpretation of Romans 11 and the latter-day conversion of the bulk of ethnic Israel, see chapter 23.
2. A number of passages found in Jeremiah 30-33 have an extraordinarily NT feel, for which reason Christian readers often hear them speaking straight to their hearts. They include Jeremiah 30:8-9, 22; 31:3, 8-9, 10-12, 13-14, 18-20, 32:36-41.
3. Critics observe that Jeremiah 31:32 (Heb. 8:9) seems clearly to identify the houses of Israel and Judah (v. 31) as ethnic Jews; as the latter-day descendents of the fathers whom God rescued from the land of Egypt. True enough. *But this does not nullify the fact that in v. 31 the (united) houses of Israel and Judah represent the Church.* Through Jeremiah God said that in the last days he would bring eschatological Israel and Judah into a New Covenant. But according to the NT, eschatological Israel and Judah include both Jews and Gentiles (Rom. 11:17-18). Therefore, the writer to the Hebrews can use this text to speak to Jewish believers who were in danger of lapsing from the faith; but he can also use it to speak to Gentile believers, as he has for centuries, whenever and wherever they read this wonderful promise.
4. Commenting on Jer. 31:31-34, premillennarian C. I. Scofield writes, “Although certain features of this covenant have been fulfilled for believers in the present Church Age, the covenant remains to be realized by (ethnic) Israel according to the explicit statement of v. 31.” Feeling the strong link between this text and the surrounding OTKP’s (Jer. 30-33), Scofield wants to distinguish Jeremiah’s New Covenant from the New Covenant into which Christ invites his Church. The former, he asserts, will bring in the Jewish Kingdom Age (the Millennium), while the latter will bring in the (mainly Gentile) Church Age. The two share “certain features,” yet they are distinct. However, the writer to the Hebrews could not disagree more. Nowhere does he even hint that Jeremiah’s prophecy has the kind of dual fulfillment that Scofield imagines. To the contrary, he is explicit that the New Covenant of which Jeremiah spoke is the very same covenant under which the whole Church—both Jew and Gentile—

now lives (7:22, 8:6). Moreover, it is a covenant based on a new and *eternal* priesthood (Heb. 7:21); and it is a covenant that creates a new and *eternal* “nation” that will forever dwell with God in his Kingdom (Jer. 31:36-37, 40, 1 Peter 2:9). The writer’s premise is crystal clear: The New Covenant in Christ is God’s last word. Therefore, it is certain that he has no “newer” (e.g., millennial) covenants in store. For other dispensational views on this text, see J. Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom* (Dunham, 1959) pp. 209-210.

5. *The New Bible Commentary* (Eerdmans, 1979), s.v. Isaiah, p. 624.

Chapter 15: OT Kingdom Prophecies Considered: Psalms, Isaiah, Jeremiah

1. *Scofield Reference Bible* (SRB), (Oxford University Press, 1967) p. 602.

2. Walvoord, J., *The Millennial Kingdom* (Dunham, 1959), p. 266.

3. Grudem, W., *Systematic Theology* (Zondervan, 1994), p. 1129.

4. *SRB*, p. 716.

5. *SRB*, p. 723.

6. Walvoord, p. 208.

7. Grudem, p. 1128.

8. See *MacArthur Study Bible*, s.v. Isaiah 24; also, *The Millennium Bible*, pp. 75-76.

9. *New Bible Commentary*, p. 621.

10. *New Bible Commentary*, p. 625.

11. For similar prophecies, see Jeremiah 3:11-18, 12:14-17, 29:10-14, 50:4-5, 17-20. For Jeremiah’s promise of eschatological mercy to the Gentiles, see 46:26, 48:47, 49:6, 49:39, 50:34.

12. *The Millennium Bible*, p. 165.

Chapter 16: OT Kingdom Prophecies Considered: Ezekiel

1. Duguid, I., *NIV Application Commentary: Ezekiel* (Zondervan, 1999), pp. 17-41. In preparing my remarks on Ezekiel, I have profited greatly from this fine commentary. Though I part company with Duguid on a few minor points, I have found his labors to be a continual source of light and inspiration. I could not have reached the finish line without them, and heartily thank him for them.

2. *The Millennium Bible*, p. 188.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 188.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 190.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 193.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 197
7. *Ibid.*, p. 200.
8. Cited in Pentecost, J. D., *Things to Come* (Dunham, 1958), p. 514.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 514.
10. Walvoord, J., *The Millennial Kingdom* (Dunham, 1959), p. 310.
11. See *The NIV Study Bible* for extremely helpful diagrams of the Temple Area and the layout of the eschatological Promised Land.
12. *Reformation Study Bible*, s.v. 2 Samuel 2:35.

Chapter 17: OT Kingdom Prophecies Considered: Daniel

1. G. Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Eerdmans, 1972), p. 136.
2. 1 Cor. 15:20-28 makes it clear that Christ's heavenly mediatorial reign is temporary, and that after the Consummation he will subject himself afresh to the Father. However, whatever the exact nature of this further and final subordination, it is also clear from a great many biblical texts, including Daniel 7:14, that Christ will indeed rule forever, with and under the Father, over the eternal Kingdom of God (Psalm 72:7, Isaiah 9:7, Ezek. 37:25, Luke 1:32-33, Rev. 5:13, 11:5).
3. It is true that Jesus, in speaking to the Sanhedrin about his Parousia, *referred* to Daniel 7:13 (Mt. 26:64). However, I strongly doubt he would agree with commentators who conclude from this that Daniel saw the Son of Man coming to the Ancient of Days *at the Parousia* in order to receive *more* sovereignty for *more* rulership in the *consummated* kingdom. By my lights, such a view completely misunderstands the structure of NT eschatology; indeed; it stands it on its head! No, in speaking as he did, the Lord was simply saying that just as he will soon come *to* the Ancient of Days upon clouds of glory to receive authority for his heavenly Messianic reign, even so, at his Parousia, will he come *from* the (right hand of the) Ancient of Days on clouds of glory to consummate it. An impressive

number of NT texts confirm this very thing (Mt. 24:30, 13:26, Acts 1:9-11, 1 Thess. 4:17, Rev. 1:7).

4. *The New Bible Commentary* (Eerdmans, 1979), s.v. Daniel, pp. 698-700.

5. *The Millennium Bible*, p. 219.

6. SRB, p. 913.

7. H. C. Leupold, *Exposition of Daniel* (Baker, 1969).

8. *Ibid.*, p. 405.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 409

10. *Ibid.*, p. 416.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 417.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 427.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 428.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 432.

15. *The Millennium Bible*, p. 224.

16. For a close, thought-provoking examination of the many parallels between the character and career of Antiochus Epiphanes (the OT antichrist), and the NT Antichrist of Daniel 9:26-27, see Leupold, pp. 437-440.

Chapter 18: OT Kingdom Prophecies Considered: Zechariah

1. *Systematic Theology*, p. 1127-1129.

2. *Reformation Study Bible*, p. 1326.

3. *MacArthur Study Bible*, p. 1180.

4. *The Millennium Bible*, p. 303.

5. Commenting on this verse, John MacArthur writes:

“Only a portion of the people of Israel will remain faithful to Christ and be alive in the end. The spiritual survivors will be the remnant who look upon Christ in repentance at His return (12:10-13:1), who will include those who make up the 144,000 (Rev. 7:4; MSB, p.1881).”

This is puzzling, indeed. How shall the one third of Tribulation Jews be loyal to Christ—and, in the case of the 144,000, preach Christ—when, according to MacArthur himself, they will not be converted until Christ’s Second Coming at the end of the Tribulation (see also MSB on Romans

11:26, p. 2349)? Such is the confusion to which prophetic literalism drives us; such is the confusion that the NCH avoids and dispels.

6. *Reformation Study Bible*, p. 1340.

7. It is true that at Christ's ascension the angels in attendance told the amazed and saddened disciples that their Lord would return in just the same way as they watched him go up into heaven (Acts 1:11). This does not mean, however, that he will return to the Mt. of Olives from which he ascended. Rather, it simply means that he will return bodily, visibly, and in clouds of glory, just as he left. Moreover, as we shall see in Part 5, the NT is quite clear that when Christ does return, he will return, not to the earth, but to the skies above the earth, where he himself will bring to pass the Judgment, the Destruction of the cosmos by fire, and the final Restoration of all things.

Chapter 19: The Revelation: Purpose and Literary Genre

1. Despite (weak) preterist arguments to the contrary, the consensus in favor of the late date of composition (ca. 96 AD) is well founded, longstanding, and broad. For details, see *More Than Conquerors*, p. 14; also, *The Man of Sin*, Appendix, pp. 179f.

2. In the Revelation, the seven lamps before God's throne—also called the seven spirits of God—symbolize the one Holy Spirit. Seven is the number of perfection; lamps give light. The symbols appear to mean that the one Spirit of Truth has received from the Father and the Son a perfect, many-faceted ministry to the saints, by which he will guide them into all truth, bringing them to Christ, keeping them in Christ, and conforming them to Christ (Rev. 1:4, 3:1, 4:5, 5:6; John 16:13, Acts 2:33, Rom. 8:29, 1 Thessalonians 5:23).

3. *Reformation Study Bible*, p. 1862.

Chapter 20: The Revelation: Structure and Key Symbols

1. *More Than Conquerors*, p. 43.

2. *Ibid.*, pp. 36-37.

3. The exalted Christ tells John to write the things he has seen, the things that are, and the things that are to take place after this (1:19). Effectively, this divides the book into three parts. The things that John has seen (up to

that point) are the contents of the vision of 1:9-20. The things that “are” are the things pertaining to the seven churches of Asia (2:1-3:22). The things yet to take place are all that lies in store for the Universal Church (4:1-22:21).

4. “Historically, a white stone was given to victors at games; such a stone was also used by jurors at trials to vote for acquittal.” *The ESV Study Bible*, (Crossway, 2008), p. 2466.
5. In Revelation 3:10 Christ promises that he will keep the faithful Philadelphians from “the hour of testing that is about to come upon the whole earth.” For dispensationalists, the hour of testing is the seven year Tribulation at the end of the Church age, from which Christ will keep his people by removing them from the earth at the Rapture (*MSB*, p. 2707). But for many reasons, this view is impossible. First, the NT does not teach a pre-tribulation Rapture (see chapter 23). Secondly, if it is taught in the Revelation, it is only taught here. Thirdly, it is *not* taught here, since there is no mention whatsoever of Christ removing his Church or the Philadelphians from the earth. Finally, the dispensational view is not even *compatible* with this verse, since it is nearly meaningless to have Christ saying that he will keep the Philadelphians from a future seven-year Tribulation by having them die (in the faith) some 1900 years before it occurs!

What then is the true meaning of the promise found in 3:10? I see two possibilities. First, it may mean that Christ will safely preserve his faithful people whenever and wherever the Beast, the False Prophet, and the Harlot arise to test the spiritual loyalty and integrity of the “inhabitants of the earth,” a test that the latter group will fail (John 17:15, Rev. 13:8, 17:8). On this view, there is a brief but eternally decisive “hour of testing” for all men of all time; a test that Christ will enable his faithful people to pass (2 Cor. 6:2). But secondly, it may mean that Christ will safely preserve his faithful saints at the Last Judgment, when he himself tests the spiritual allegiance of “the inhabitants of the earth,” and sends all whose names are not found in the Lamb’s Book of Life to eternal punishment (Rev. 20:12-15). I lean towards this view since the time of testing mentioned here is brief (lasting only an hour) and quite universal (engulfing the whole world and all who dwell upon the earth). Such

images seem aptly to describe the one Judgment of the Great Day (Jude 1:6).

6. George Ladd writes: “The little book (or scroll) is in the form of an ancient will, which was usually sealed with the seals of seven witnesses. The book contains God’s inheritance for his people, which is founded upon the death of his Son. The saints’ inheritance is the Kingdom of God; but the blessings of God’s Kingdom cannot be bestowed apart from the destruction of evil. In fact, the very destruction of all evil powers is one of the blessings of God’s kingly rule. Here is the twofold theme of the Revelation: the judgment of evil and the coming of the Kingdom.” *A Theology of the New Testament*, p. 674.
7. My thinking about the structure of chapters 6-20—and about the structure of the book as a whole—is much indebted to William Hendriksen’s outstanding commentary, *More Than Conquerors* (Baker, 1995). Highly recommended.
8. A close study of Revelation 7:4-8 reveals many hints by which the Spirit would direct us away from a literal interpretation of the 144,000, and towards a more figurative interpretation. They are as follows: (1) The text begins by mentioning Judah (the Messiah’s tribe), rather than Reuben, as was customary in the OT; (2) It omits Dan and Ephraim, replacing them with Joseph and Levi, giving us a list of the tribes of ethnic Israel that is unprecedented in the OT; (3) It is illumined by Rev. 14:1f, which identifies the 144,000 as those redeemed by the Lamb, as those who follow him wherever he goes; (4) It runs closely parallel to Rev. 21:9ff, which, under much the same symbolism, describes the Church in glory; and again, (5) it certainly seems to receive a decisive interpretation in verse 9, which strongly implies that the “144,000” are, in fact, a great multitude.
9. This means, of course, that there is no room for a future millennial stage of the Kingdom.
10. For further study of the Revelation see: Greg Beale, *The Book of Revelation* (Eerdmans, 1998); Louis Brighton, *Revelation* (Concordia, 1999); Dennis Johnson, *The Triumph of the Lamb* (Presbyterian and Reformed, 2001); George Ladd, *A Commentary on the Revelation of John* (Eerdmans, 1972).

11. *The Triumph of the Lamb*, p. 223.

12. *Ibid.*, pp. 225-226.

13. *Ibid.*, pp. 228-229.

14. *Ibid.*, pp. 231-236.

Chapter 21: Revelation 20: The Meaning of the Millennium

1. *The Millennium Bible*, pp. 693-4.

2. *SRB*, p. 1373.

3. According to one popular view, the expression “a time, times, and half a time” symbolizes steadily increasing tribulation suddenly cut short. Twice one “time” equals two, and twice two times equals four, for a total of seven times. But the sovereign God will not permit the tribulation of his people to reach fullness (symbolized by seven), but will mercifully intervene to cut it short. See *New Bible Commentary* (Eerdmans, 1970), s.v. Daniel 7:25, p. 697.

4. For an extended treatment of Revelation 20:4-6 in amillennial perspective, see A. Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future*, pp. 229-238.

5. To read the article by Sam Storms, visit Justin Taylor’s blog, *Between Two Worlds*, at the website of the Gospel Coalition. <http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justintaylor/2009/10/07/thrones-in-revelation/>

6. George Ladd, *A Commentary on the Revelation of John*, p. 267.

7. Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom*, p. 329.

8. Johnson, *The Triumph of the Lamb*, p. 290.

9. *MSB*, s.v. Ezekiel 38, p. 1683.

10. *Ibid.*, s.v. Revelation 20, p. 2740.

11. Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom*, p. 294.

12. *MSB*, s.v. Revelation 20, p. 2741.

13. Ladd, *op. cit.*, p. 272.

14. *The Millennium Bible*, pp. 694-703.

15. Speaking of Grand Finales, be sure to listen to the last movement of Anton Dvorak’s *New World Symphony*. If he didn’t have in mind the World to Come, he certainly should have!

Chapter 22: The Design, Structure, and Unity of the Consummation

1. For a substantive introduction to biblical cosmology and a close look at the idea of cosmic geocentricity, see Dean Davis, *In Search of the Beginning: A Seeker's Journey to the Origin of the Universe, Life, and Man* (Pleasant Word, 2005); my essay, *The Case for Cosmic Geocentricity*, (www.clr4u.org/writings/essays/345.html); and Philip Stott, *Vital Questions* (Reformation Media Press), chapter 6.
2. See W. J. Grier, *The Momentous Event* (Banner of Truth, 1945). This is a short, popular introduction to the major themes of biblical eschatology. Grier defends the classic Reformation view of a single Consummation set to occur at the Parousia of Christ.
3. Premillennarians argue that Dan. 12:2, which states that *many* who sleep in the dust will awake, teaches a partial resurrection. However, this interpretation is impossible since there is nothing else in Daniel, the Didactic NT, or the Revelation to confirm it, and a great deal to contradict it. Accordingly, Leupold translates Dan. 12:2 as follows: "There will be many who will arise from sleeping in the land of the dust." His view is that in Daniel the Spirit is stressing the *magnitude* of the resurrection (*many* bodies will arise), while in John 5:28-29 (which refers to Daniel, and interprets it) Christ is stressing the *universality* of the resurrection (*all* bodies *everywhere* will arise). If so, it is clear that both texts agree in teaching a single general resurrection. See *Exposition of Daniel*, pp. 529-532.
4. In the next chapter, we will examine these and other texts in order to clarify their meaning and draw out their implications for the Great End Time Debate.
5. This is problematic for premillennarians, who assert that the resurrection of the righteous occurs *before* the Millennium, while the glorification of nature occurs *after* it.

Chapter 23: Crucial NT Texts Pertaining to the Consummation

1. *The Bible and the Future*, pp. 117-119.
2. Partial preterists claim this text as support for their view that *the* Parousia occurred in 70 AD, at which time God brought about the end of the age of the Mosaic Law. Assuming, however, that it does indeed refer to 70 AD, it

actually refutes their view. For again, here Jesus did not speak of *the* Coming of the Son of Man, but only of *a* coming. Moreover, the NT never represents Israel's years under the Law as an "age," nor does it teach that *the* Coming of Christ occurs at the end of the Mosaic era, but rather at the end of *the present evil age* (i.e., the era spanning from the Fall to the Consummation), which is also the beginning of the Age (and World) to Come (Mt. 12:32, 13:39, 49. 24:3, 29-31, 28:20, Luke 20:35). See pp. 164-166, 530f, and Appendix 4.

3. Cited in *A Case for Amillennialism*, p. 160.

4. *Reformation Study Bible*, p. 1401.

5. In order to argue that the providential events of 70 AD constitute *the* Coming of Christ, preterists must radically spiritualize the language that Christ and the apostles typically use to describe it (e.g., Mt. 24:27-31). But no one who reads such texts objectively could possibly think that these men had in mind anything other than a stupendously *supernatural event with cosmic impact*. So again, we must acknowledge that the NT does indeed speak of a providential coming of Christ in 70 AD, but also of a supernatural coming—*the* Coming—at the end of the present evil Age. For more, see Appendix 4.

6. In Daniel 11:31, the prophet first speaks of the Abomination that Makes Desolate. Here the reference is to Antiochus IV, who desecrated the Jewish temple in 168 BC. However, Antiochus was only a type and precursor of the Antichrist, the eschatological Abomination who will desolate the Church and its worship. Daniel speaks of him, as well (9:27, 12:11). In much the same way, Jesus sees Titus as a type and precursor of the Antichrist, and Matthew very much desires that his readers understand this well (Mt. 24:15).

7. But see also Mt. 13:30, 41, where the order is reversed.

8. Commenting on this passage, the *Reformation Study Bible* says:

“The ‘all things’ of verse 34 refers to the ‘all these things’ of verse 33, which are distinguished from the Consummation itself. They are the ‘beginning of the birth pains’ (v.8) and signs that point to the final Coming of Christ, including the siege and fall of Jerusalem. *All of the elements of this prophecy, except for the Second Coming itself, had occurred in some form before the apostles died.* – p. 1402”

9. Commenting on Mt. 25:31ff, NT theologian G. Ladd writes as follows:

“The clue to the meaning of the parable is Jesus’ “brethren.” And we have clear evidence as to its meaning. Jesus himself said that his brothers and sisters are those who do the will of the Father—Jesus’ disciples (Mt. 12:50). Jesus used a parabolic incident of the nightly separation of sheep and goats to tell his disciples that they have a mission to the nations of the world. The destiny of individuals will be determined by the way they respond to Jesus’ representatives. They are to go as itinerant preachers, finding lodging and food from those who receive them (Mt. 10:8-11). However, they will meet persecution and imprisonment (Mt. 10:17-18). Those who receive these preachers and treat them well in reality receive Christ. “He who receives you receives me” (Mt. 10:14-15). The destiny of nations will be determined by the way they respond to Jesus’ representatives. This is not a program of eschatology (as the dispensationalists teach), but a practical parable of human destiny.” – *New Testament Theology*, pp. 206-207.

10. Dispensationalists make much of the idea of the “imminence” of the Lord’s return. The return they have in mind, however, is not the Parousia (spoken of in Mt. 24-25), but the Rapture, supposedly set to occur seven years earlier, and allegedly discussed in 1 Thess. 4. The Rapture, they insist, is altogether imminent: It could occur at any moment, *since God has not given us any signs by which to know it is near*. In this way dispensationalists completely overthrow the Lord’s purpose in the Olivet Discourse, and Paul’s in 2 Thessalonians 2, which was to secure the Church against prophetic frenzies by supplying easily identifiable signs of the imminence of the Parousia. As older Christians well know, far from protecting the Church from such frenzies, Dispensationalism has actually unleashed them one after another.

11. Wm. Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary: John* (Baker, 1953), Vol. II, p. 265.

12. *MacArthur Study Bible*, p. 2211.

13. One of the most powerful and moving biblical affirmations of a latter-day restoration of ethnic Israel is found in the OT story of Joseph and his brethren (Genesis 37-47). Jealous of the “dreamer” in their midst who has declared that he will one day rule over them, Joseph’s brothers violently

send him down to Egypt, where, after a season of profound humiliation, he is exalted to the right hand of Pharaoh and made prince over all the land. At just the right time, and by the good providence of God, Joseph's chastened and guilt-ridden brothers go down to Egypt themselves, hungry and seeking food. Concealing his true identity from them, he tests them sorely, in order to elicit an honest confession of their sin. But then, with a startling display of deep emotion, he gladly makes himself known, assuring them of his love, forgiveness, and all the good things that the sovereign God has ever had in store for them. Without doubt, this is one of Scripture's most elaborate and beautiful Messianic types, picturing as it does Israel's rejection of Jesus Christ, their subsequent dispersion and descent into spiritual poverty, his subsequent ascent to the right hand of the Father where he exercises great authority over the Gentile nation(s), and his ultimate reconciliation and reunion with the estranged sons of Israel, when, with a great show of love (at which all the Gentile world will marvel) he finally makes himself known to his brethren (Gen. 45:1ff).

14. Astonishingly, John MacArthur declares that in 1 Cor. 15:50-58 Paul's theme is really the secret Rapture of the Church; that "the last trumpet" does not herald the Consummation of all things, but rather "the end of the Church era" (*MSB*, p. 2403). Now it is certainly true that this text runs closely parallel to 1 Thess. 4, wherein Paul does indeed discuss the catching up the Church to meet the Lord in the air. But as I have shown above (and as I will also show when we look at 1 Thess. 4) he is *clearly* dealing with the Consummation: with the advent of an *eternal, incorruptible* Kingdom (50), the *last* trumpet (52), and the defeat of the *last* enemy, which is death (26, 54-55). In short, he is dealing with "the end" (24).

Chapter 24: Crucial NT Texts Pertaining to the Consummation (2)

1. See Rom. 8:18-25, 1 Cor. 15:20-28, 50-58, Phil. 3:20-21, 1 Thess. 5:1-11, 2 Thess. 1:3-12, 2 Thess. 2:1-12, cf. 2 Peter 3:1-13.
2. *MSB*, s.v. Rev. 20:5, p. 2740.
3. *MSB*, s.v. 1 Thess. 5:2, p. 2521.

4. For help in writing this section I am much indebted to Leon Morris, *Tyndale NT Commentary: 1 and 2 Thessalonians* (Eerdmans, 1983).
5. *New Bible Commentary*, s.v. 2 Thess. 1, p. 1162.
6. *NIV Study Bible*, s.v. 2 Thess. 2:2, p. 1869.
7. During and after the Reformation most Protestant leaders taught that 2 Thess. 2:4 was/is fulfilled in the papacy. For them, the institution itself was the Antichrist, a spiritual usurper that for centuries had lawlessly seated itself in the temple of God (Christ's Church), distorted the Gospel, and opposed and persecuted the true spiritual Church through the evil offices of compliant kings and princes. Given the nature of their vicissitudes, it is easy to see how the Reformers arrived at this conclusion. However, the conclusion itself does not fit well with the actual data of Scripture or history. The reasons are many. Paul represents the Antichrist as an individual man, not an institution. Strictly speaking, the popes did not exalt themselves above God, but at least postured themselves as his servants. Similarly, they directed men's worship to God and Christ, even if they also misdirected it to Mary, the saints, the angels, and themselves (Rev. 19:10, 22:10). They did not claim to be God or Christ, but only to act as their vicars (i.e., representatives) on earth. They were not (pre-eminently) political or military leaders, as both the Old and New Testaments depict the Antichrist (Dan. 7, 11, 12, Rev. 13). Finally, they did not perform amazing miracles, as Paul says the Man of Lawlessness will. It appears, then, that the papacy is not Paul's Man of Lawlessness. On the other hand, whatever Paul's private opinion may have been, there is nothing in his inspired words to rule out the possibility that one day up ahead an individual pope, promulgating an egregiously mutant and highly politicized form of Catholicism, could become (or abet) the kind of Antichrist Paul here envisions. Unlikely as it may now seem, Christians should not rule out this possibility. The Roman Catholic Church is the largest religious institution in the world; it has a long history of skillfully lending the venerable name of Christ to its unscriptural teachings; it has an ugly history of persecuting the true spiritual Church; and even today it appears to be looking hard for ways to welcome (unconverted) Jews and Muslims into its fold. If, at the end of the age, there is to be an anti-Christian one-world religion, surely the

Roman Catholic Church is one of the best candidates presently on the scene to lead it. Alert Bible Christians, living in the last perilous days of deepest deception, would be wise to keep a sharp eye on what comes out of Rome. For more, see Kim Riddlebarger, *The Man of Sin*, chapter 7.

8. Michael Green, *Tyndale NT Commentary: 2 Peter and Jude* (Eerdmans, 1983), p. 134.

Chapter 25: The Consummation: A Biblical Scenario

1. For help in keeping tabs on the state of the global mission of the Church, you may visit the websites of Frontier Ventures (www.frontierventures.org), Operation World (www.operationworld.org), and the Joshua Project (www.joshuaproject.net).
2. There are a number of NT passages teaching that all humanity must stand before the *throne* (Mt. 25:31, Rev. 20:4) or *judgment seat* of Christ (Rom. 14:10, 2 Cor. 5:10). While it is not impossible that these texts speak of a physical throne, it seems more likely that the throne is visionary in nature, or that it is a symbol for the sovereignty of the High King of Heaven, especially as this will be manifested at the Judgment. See Mt. 13:36-43, in which the mention of Christ's throne is conspicuously absent.
3. At first glance, Jesus' parable of the sheep and the goats (Mt. 25:31ff) seems to teach final salvation by good works done for his "brethren" (25:40). Who are Jesus' brethren, and how can we square this parable with the abundance of other sayings—many from the lips of Jesus himself—to the effect that salvation is *not* by works, but by simple faith in Christ and what *he* has done in behalf of his people? See endnote # 9, chapter 23, for George Ladd's wise response to this important question.
4. Theologians wrestle with the question of the eternal destiny of those who lived beyond the borders of Israel in OT times, and beyond the reach of the Gospel in NT times. Elsewhere, I have defended the idea that life is a test of our love of spiritual truth, and that God therefore gives each person a *bona fide* opportunity to choose it, even if they have not received the Gospel at the mouth of man. However one resolves this question, all who revere the Bible as God's word affirm, with Christ, that no one comes to the Father except through him (John 14:6), and that "He

who has the Son has life, he who does not have the Son does not have life” (1 John 5:12). See: Dean Davis, *The Test: A Seeker’s Journey to the Meaning of Life*, (Pleasant Word, 2010), p. 558.

5. Numerous biblical texts affirm that Christ will reign forever over his people (Is. 9:7, Dan. 2:44, 7:14, 27, Luke 1:13, 2 Peter 1:11, Rev. 11:15). These passages make it clear that the delivering up of the Kingdom does not *terminate* the Son’s sovereignty, but rather—in a manner that defies complete description—*transforms, subordinates, and seals* it once and for all.

Appendix 2: A Critique of Postmillennialism

1. Cited in an article written by Lee Irons, *Will There Be a Golden Age Before Christ Returns*, available at www.upper-register.com.
2. See in this same article Iron’s discussion of Daniel 2, wherein it is affirmed that the Kingdom of God will *not* triumph in the earth until *after* the destruction of the four-fold Image of Man; a destruction that will occur at the Parousia of Christ. Then, and only then, says Irons, will “the kingdom of this world become the Kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ” (Rev. 11:15).
3. Cited in S. Grenz, *The Millennial Maze*, p. 72.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 74.

Appendix 3: A Critique of Dispensational Premillennialism

1. *SRB*, p. 1353.
2. *SRB*, p. 1351.

Appendix 4: A Critique of Preterism (Full and Partial)

1. Zaspel’s thoughtful essay is available at www.biblicalstudies.com.
2. Robert Mounce, *The New International Commentary of the New Testament: The Book of Revelation* (William Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1977), p. 42.

Appendix 6: Old Testament Kingdom Prophecies Listed

1. Commentators divide on whether Daniel 11:36-45 is yet another prophecy of the eschatological Antichrist and the Last Battle. For a

helpful defense of the view that it is, see: Leupold, H.C., *Exposition of Daniel* (Baker, 1949), pp. 510-549.

Appendix 9: Biblical Prophecies of the Last Battle

1. See end note 1 under Appendix 6.

Subject Index

Key

COG=Covenant of Grace
COR=Covenant of Redemption
COW=Covenant of Works
DNT=Didactic New Testament
EC=Eternal Covenant
GETD=Great end time Debate
NC=New Covenant
NCH=New Covenant Hermeneutic
NT = New Testament
OC=Old Covenant
OT = Old Testament
OTKP=OT Kingdom Prophecy
URD=Upper Room Discourse
WTC=World to Come

Numbers

2: witnesses of Rev. 11, 422, 430, 447
3: horns of Daniel 7, 363;
helpers of the Dragon, 414, 462;
final woes, 445
4: 443, 451, 453, 461, 487
6: seals, 5, 171, 442
7: messages to the Church, 432, 439;
trumpet judgments, 444;
bowl judgments, 454

10: 473
12: 313, 349, 499, 519, 529
24: elders, 437
42: months, 412, 451
666: 414
1000: 473, 499
1260: 412, 451
1600: 453
144,000: 422, 443

Subjects

A

Abomination of Desolation, 377, 533
Abraham, 113
Abyss (Bottomless Pit), 430, 466f
Adam, in Eden, 71; as type of Christ, 73; in COW, 74; in COG, 107
Adam's World, 82
Administrations (of EC), 106-120, 167
Ages (of cosmic history), 165
Amillennialism, 23, 609
Ancient of Days, 358
Antichrist, 319, 363, 375, 415, 428, 457, 487, 511, 597; and the papacy, 700
Apocalyptic, 417
Apostasy, 488, 532, 577
Armageddon, 30, 422, 457, 487

B

Babel, 85
Babylon, 87, 122f; the Great, 415, 457
Beast(s), of Dan. 7, 357; of the Revelation, 413, 414, 451, 459
Bereans, xxiii
Binding of Satan, 450, 466

Blessed Hope, defined, xvi; in crisis, xvii; elements of, 590f; and Amillennialism, 607f

Bodily resurrection, (see, Resurrection)

Bowl judgments, 454f

Bride, Bridegroom, xv, 73, 107, 211, 246, 272, 411, 449, 499

C

Christ (see, Jesus Christ)

Christophany, 688

Church, in COR, 94; in COG 98; in OT typology, 117; OTKP fulfilled in, 68, 242f

Clash (of the Kingdoms), 174f

Comfort, xix, 416, 540, 562

Coming of Christ, (see, Parousia)

Coming of the Kingdom, 101, 174f

Comparative reading, 236

Consummation, defined, 17; design of, 506; elements of, 511; structure of, 513; NT texts on, 527f, 671

Contrasting reading, 236

Cosmic conflagration, 585, 601

Cosmic transformation, 512, 529, 546, 561, 601; (see, the Regeneration)

Covenant of Grace, defined, 98; administrations of, 101, 235

Covenant of Redemption, defined, 94; and the Kingdom, 103; 111, 159

Covenant of Works, 74, 96, 160, 168, 180

Creeds on the Consummation, 677

Cycles, in the Revelation, 426f

D

David, covenant with, 32; as type of Christ, 119; in OTKP, 190, 196, 217, 282, 284, 287, 344, 388; tabernacle of, 262; Root of, 439

Day of (the Lord Jesus) Christ, 136, 223, 250, 278, 397, 568, 574, 576, 585

Day of the LORD, in OTKP, 220f; in Dispensationalism, 569, 588; in 2 Peter, 585

Days of the Messiah, 132, 135, 147, 217, 249, 289

Dead (the), in Rev. 20:12, 494f

Delivery of the Kingdom, 512, 603
Didactic NT, 46f; and the Revelation, 417f
Dispensationalism, defined, 28f; Progressive, **31f**, 625, 629, 687; rock of, 370; critiqued, 623f
Disruptions, in nature and society, 595
Domain of Darkness, elements of, 78; and the Kingdom, 83; and EC, 93; (see, World System)
Dragon, 413, 449
Dynasty, of David, 68, 142, 233, 245, 262

E

Eden, 71, 74, 109, 125, 168, 208, 289, 301, 311, 337, 347, 400, 497, 683
Egypt, as type of Domain of Darkness, 101, 121, 233, 290, 412, 447; in OTKP, 117, 191, 202, 209, 402
Eisegesis, 684
Elijah, 39, 42, 67, 529; in Rev. 11, 430, 447; in Rev. 12, 412, 449f
End (the; Greek, *to telos*), 147, 532, 581
Era of Fulfillment, 5, 101, 170; diagrammed, 167, 174
Era of Promise and Preparation, 5, 100, 169; diagrammed, 167, 175
Era of Reward and Retribution, 102, 136, 147, 171, 308, 575, 599; diagrammed, 167, 172, 175
Era of Proclamation and Probation, 24f, 102, 117, 136, 158, 179, 249, 269, 308f, 385f, 412; in the Revelation, 425f; diagrammed, 167, 172, 175; (see, World Evangelization)
Eschatology, defined, 1, 6; in crisis, xvii; Personal, 2; Cosmic, 4; elements of, 8; issues in, 9; options in, 20f, 613f; strategies for understanding, 4, 51f; options diagrammed, 165f; of Peter 581; amillennial, timeliness of, 607; realized, 682
Eschaton, 9; (see, World to Come)
Eternal Covenant, as mystery, 90; defined, 93; and Salvation History, 99, 168; and Kingdom, 102; diagrammed, 167, 175
Eternal life, and the Kingdom, 60; offered in COW, 75; forfeited at the Fall, 78f; restored in COG 94f
Evangelicals, divided, xvii; eschatologies of, 21f, 613f
Exodus, 117f, 121
Expulsion and Return, 10, 125, 337, 654, 683

F

Fall, consequences of, 78; and Domain of Darkness, 82; and Kingdom, 83f; of Dragon's helpers, 458
False prophet(s), 532, 581, 593, 607; in the Revelation, 414, 451
Fig tree, type of Israel under the Law, 66; lesson of, 535
Figurative language, and OTKP, 14, 231, 242, 251, 255
First resurrection, 476, 478f, 493
Flood, and the Kingdom, 84f
Future millennialism, 37
Futurism, 428

G

Gentiles, in OTKP, 191, 256, 261, 262, 264, 295; to be broken off, 551; fullness of, 552, 594
Geocentricity, 535, 596
Glory of Christ, xxi, 291, 338, 404, 509, 610, 643
Glory of God, xxi, 98, 103, 131, 134, 176, 197, 296, 337, 354, 437, 498, 507, 508, 610
Gog, 316, 486, 489
Gospel, and Eschatology, xxi; and COG, 99; and Era of Proclamation, 102, 170
Grand Finale of Scripture, 419, 423
Great City (the), 415, 457
Great Commission, xx, 319, 376, 412, 430, 608
Great Harlot, 415, 458
Great Tribulation (the), (see, Tribulation)
Great White Throne, (see, Throne(s))
Greatest Tribulation (the), (see, Tribulation, Last Battle)

H

Hades, 2, 77, 144, 149, 292, 432, 480, 492,
Harlot, 413, 415, 452, 456, 459, 642
Heaven, Christ reigns from, 97, 102, 133, 140f, 161, 171, 259, 436f; and Earth become one, 498f
Hell (Gehenna), 82, 102, 139, 600, 677f
Historic Premillennialism, defined, 21; critiqued, 613
Holy Spirit, and Blessed Hope, xii; and the Kingdom, 63f, 178; in COR 97, 159; in COG, 98; in
URD, 142; in Era of Proclamation, 161, 170, 175; in OTKP, 197, 217, 312, 338, 388

Horns, 114; of the Lamb, 157, 422, 439; in Daniel, 219, 357, 362; of the Dragon, 449; of the Beast, 451

I

Idealism, 429, 481

Image of the Beast, 414, 475, 480

Imminence (of Parousia), signs of, 511, 547, 554, 580, **593**, 608, 659; in Dispensationalism, 698

Inhabitants of the Earth (in the Revelation), 416, 421, 445, 450, 460, 470

Intermediate State, 453, 483, 493, 543, 557; and First Resurrection, 476, 477, 481

Interpretation (of OTKP), figurative, 14; literal, 15; NT principles for, 249f

Interpretation (of Scripture), modes of, **229f**

Investiture (or Session) of Christ, 161, 249, 360, 364; in the Revelation, 426, **436f**, 453, 483

Israel (eschatological), 110, 242, 246, 255; in OTKP, 281f

Israel (ethnic), a type of the Church, 69, 114, 117; history of, 121f; latter-day conversion of, 547, 594, 608, 698; modern state of, 650

J

Jacob, 50, 114; a type of the Church, 246, 286; in OTKP, 191, 192, 267, 295, 324, 350

James (on Amos 9), 262

Jerusalem, above, 64, 193, 212, 250, 266, **272**, 293; in OTKP, 286, 291, 293, 296, 303, 351, 354, **365**, **381**

Jesus Christ, holds keys to Biblical Eschatology, 39; view of the Kingdom, **57f**; in the COR, 95f; in the COG, 98f; Humiliation of, 96, 141, 158; Exaltation of, 97, 103, 141, 152, 259; on the Mysteries of the Kingdom, **128f**; earthly ministry of, 158; heavenly reign of, 133, 143, 151, 155, 157, 161, 282, 419, 436, 604; in OTKP, **196**, **241**; Agent and Center of the Consummation, 505f, 590f

Judgment (Day of), in OTKP, **220f**, 291; 486, 512, 537, 545, 573, 599

K

Keys, to understanding Biblical Eschatology, 177f; to interpreting OTKP, 249f

Kingdom (of the Father), 25, 132, 147, 179, 239, 278, 432; diagrammed, 172

Kingdom (of God), Jesus' view of, **58f**; essence of, 65, 178; and NC, 65, 180; and Creation, 71; and Marriage, 73; and Probation in Eden, 74; and Fall, **76f**; and Flood, 84; and Dispersion at Babel, 85; and EC, **90f**; and Adam, 106; and Noah, 111f, and Abraham, 113; and Moses, 117; and history of

Israel, 120; and Deut. 30; coming of, **128f**; mysteries of, 128-140; stages of, 158; structure of, 178; in OTKP, 9, **187f**; in the Revelation, **426f**; and the Consummation, **505f, 590f**
Kingdom (of the Son), 24, 132, 140, 179, 163,179, 432; diagrammed, 172

L

Lake of Fire, 463, 476, 480, 488, 490, 493, 498, 512, 535, 537, 597, 600, 602
Land (the), promised to Abraham and his seed, 115, 118; the Church's pilgrimage in, 116, 122, 412; in OTKP, **190f**; as type of heavenly life in Christ, 164, 302, 308, 320, 324, 348, 388; as type of the whole Earth, 122, 320, 394; as type of the World to Come, **206f, 325f, 398, 652**; and modern state of Israel, 654
Last Battle, in OTKP, 218f; in Ezekiel, 316, 352; in Daniel, 362, 377; in Zechariah, 395; in the NT, 318, 511, 594, 609; in the Revelation, 447, 453, 457, 463, 486; prophecies of, listed, 675
Last Days, as theme of Biblical Eschatology, 6; and the Spirit, 63; and Pentecost, 93; and NC, 263, 660, 687; and Kingdom of the Son, **172f**; as theme of the Revelation, 423; final days of, 379, 428, 441, 448, 454, 533, 580, **593f, 607f**
Law (Mosaic), in OTKP, 11, 188, 194, **201f**; and EC, 100, **117f, 167**; illuminated by NCH, 48f, **228f**; temporary, fulfilled, obsolete, **44f, 65, 238f, 274**
Lawlessness, 64, 376, 457, 532, 578, **594f, 607**; Man of, 364, 378, 487, **577f**
Levi, as type of Church, 11, 195, 245, **341f, 390**; in the Revelation 7, 694
Little Book, 446
Little Horn, 219, **357f**

M

Mark of the Beast, 413, 422, 451, 475, 477
Marriage, mystery of, **73**; and Age to Come, 160; in OTKP, 207, **211, 265, 342**; in John 14, xv, **541**; Feast of the Lamb, 452, 462, 545
Martyr(s), 376, 380, 532, 582, 608; in the Revelation, 443, 475, 477, 479, 481
Messiah, Days of, 132, **217, 249**, diagrammed, 172; in OTKP, 10, 120, **196, 282, 284, 287, 310, 356, 365, 392**; heavenly reign of, see, Jesus Christ; offices of, 157, 241, 283; and Millennium, 16f; and ethnic Israel, 547, 594, 650
Michael (the archangel), 161, 412, 565

Millennium, a key issue in Biblical Eschatology, 16; Evangelical views of, 20f, 613-645; meaning of, **465f**

Mountain(s), 65, 114, 192, 196, 219, 237, 317, 397, 459, 529; of God, 72, 113, 204, 214, 251, 282, 289, **331f**, 354, 400, 498

Multitude(s), of believers, 138, 174, 298, 310; of unbelievers, 323, 486, 507, 580; Great, of Revelation 7, 443, 473, 541

N

Nation, of (ethnic) Israel, 10, 57, 101, 106, 117, 121, 189, 650f; God's eternal, 68, 87, 147, 174, 193, 200, 247, 264, 277, 313, 325f, 385f, 548; born in a day, 296f

Nero, 410, 429, 581f; in Preterism, 636f

New Covenant, and GETD, 12f; and the Kingdom, 65f, 104; and EC, 90f, 101; and Hebrews 8, 274; renders OC obsolete, 67, 104, **328f**

New Covenant Hermeneutic, and Amillennialism, 15, 23; introduced by Christ, 46; importance of, 50f; key to GETD, 182f; used by apostles, **258f**, 661

New Heavens and Earth, and Flood, 85, 113; and history of Israel, 120f; and EC, 93f; and Age to Come, 166; and Kingdom of the Father, 132, 172; in the Revelation, 497; and Cosmic Transformation, 518, 601; life in, 602; (see, WTC)

New Jerusalem, in the Revelation, 434, 499; and Dispensationalism, 631; (see, Jerusalem above)

O

Old Testament Kingdom Prophecy, defined, 247; approaches to, 12f; Representative Idea of the Kingdom in, **187f**; marriage and children in, 211; death in, 213; stages of the Kingdom in, **215f**; NT principles for interpreting, **228f**; apostles' handling of, 258; interpreted with NCH, 281-408; listed, 661f; cited in NT, 667f

Olivet Discourse, 418, 443, 515, 523, 525, **530f**; and Preterism, 33f, 636f; and Dispensationalism, 370, 570

Obsolescence (of the Law), and progressive revelation, 41f; Jesus on, 65f; 238f

P

Palestine, 649f

Papacy, 700

Parables, of the Kingdom, **129f**; of the Consummation, 536f

Parousia, defined, 511; views of, 20f; and the coming of the Kingdom, 136, 162; diagrammed, 165, 167, 172, 174, 175; in OTKP, 220, 292, 302, 304, 322, 337f, 346, 362, 372, 397f; in the Revelation, 443, 448, 453, 457, 462, 488; centrality of, 521, 534; comfort of, xix, 562, 596f; NT texts on, 670f

Pentecost, 45, 102, 143, 542; and coming of the Kingdom, 161, 175, 686; in OTKP, 253, 293, 312, 338, 389; in the Revelation, 442, 471

Persecution, and Satan, 107, 135; saints appointed to, 135, 141, 272, 296, 386, 394, 527, 582, 593; and Last Battle, 353, **362f**, 443, 533, 538, 594; in the Revelation, 414, 430, 442-445; modern, 607

Peter, early sermons, 142; eschatology of, **581f**

Postmillennialism, defined, 26f; critiqued, 617f

Preaching, and Eschatology, xx, 610

Premillennialism, defined, 17; Historic, 21; Dispensational, 28; approach to OTKP, **252f**; critiques of, 202, 309, 317, 329, 370, 383, 513, 556, **613f**, **624f**; and the Revelation 20, **465f**

Present millennialism, 37f

Preterism, Partial, 33f; Full, 36f; and the Revelation, 428; Full, critiqued, 635f; Partial, critiqued, 643f

Pre-tribulation (Secret) Rapture, defined, 30; and Daniel 9, **369f**; and the Revelation, 428, 433, 476, 497, 692; and John 14, **540f**; and 1 Thess. 4, 524, **563f**; and 1 Cor. 15, 554, 698; critiques of, 139, 512, 578, 598, **624f**

Probation, of Adam, 5, 74f, 168f; of Christ, 96; of man under COG, 94, 163, 179, 599; Era of, 102, 136, 142, 147, 212, 249, 290, 298, 308f, 385f, diagrammed, 167; in the Revelation, 158, 162, 438, 473

Progressive Dispensationalism, **31f**, 625, 629, 687

Progressive parallelism, **430f**, 441, 470, 501

Progressive revelation, **41f**; and NCH, 46f; in the Revelation, 430

Prophecy, Simple vs. Kingdom, **252f**, 656

Prophetic literalism, defined, **15f**; 32, 37, 51; problems with, **187-228**, 615, 629; eschewed by apostles, **258f**; fails to open OTKP, **281-408**; and the Revelation, **421f**, 468, 474, 479

Prophetic perspective, 248f; and Olivet Discourse, 531f

Protoevangelium (Genesis 3:15), 107f; 209, **229f**

R

“Rapture” (Catching Up and Gathering Together of the glorified saints to meet the returning Lord in the air), 8, 139, 512, **563f**, 576; and Dispensationalism, (see, Pre-tribulation Rapture)

Rebellion (Greek, *apostasia*), **557**, 597, 609

Recapitulation, in COR, 95f; in the Revelation, **423f**, 428, 464f, 474, 501

Redemption, and Biblical Eschatology, 6; and the Kingdom, 58f; stages of, 128f; accomplished, 158f; applied, 161f; consummated, 162; diagrams of progress of, 165

Regeneration (the), defined, 512, 601f; in Ezekiel, 346; unity of, 519; NT texts on, 529, 546; in the Revelation, 436, 487, 497f; (see, WTC)

Release (of Satan at end of the Age), 475, 486f

Remnant (Jewish), foundation of NT Church, 195, 212, 256, 267, 299, 381f; type of Church in OTKP, 10, 123, 195, 248, 256, 264, 268, 285, 290, 296, 301, 310f, 314f; perennial members of Church, 265, 267, 301, 394, 314, 547

Replacement, of Old Covenant with New, 67f, 180f, 238f; of national Israel with Church, 68, 117, 193, 242f; of old cosmos with new, 278

Representative OT Idea of the Kingdom, defined, 11; 190f; difficulties in accepting, 12; and Jesus’ teaching, 65f; apostolic understanding of, 228f

Restoration, of eschatological “Israel”, 123f, 189, 192, 206, **216f**, 220f, 290f, 298, **306f**, 365f, 380f; of all things xx, 36, 146f, 179, 346, 398, 512, 546, 556 (see, Cosmic Transformation, Regeneration)

Restrainer, 578f

Resurrection (of the body), overview of, 597; unity of, 512, 516; Christ, Agent of, 136, 516; at Parousia, 521f; and Cosmic Transformation, 518; in OT, 210, 289, 312, 338; in NT, 147, 462, 495, 540, 554, 557, 562

Revelation (the), and Ezekiel, 352f; date of composition, 410; purpose and literary genre, 409f; structure and key symbols, 426; chapter 20, 465; Dispensational view of, 629

Rome, 57, 301, 357, 363, 393, 415, 459f, 642f

S

Sabbath, in OTKP, 12, 202, 210, 225, 327, 335, 342; as type of Christ and/or the eschaton, 68, 232, 497

Salvation History, defined, 4; Beginner’s Version of, 5f; evangelical versions of, 20f; and the Fall, 83; and the EC, 99f; timelines of, 165f; and Daniel, 356f; and the language of the Revelation, 417f; and the structure of the Revelation, 426f; Consummation of, 505f

Satan, and eschatological confusion, xvii; fall, kingdom of, **77f**; in Protoevangelium, 108f, 233; and coming of the Kingdom, 161f, 172; and clash of the Kingdoms, 174; in OTKP, 208, 259, 291; and Last Battle, 316f, 353, 396, 511, **577f**, 594; in the Revelation, 430, 445f, **449f**, **465f**; final judgment of, 174, 602

Sealing, of the saints, 112, 116, 151, 413, 470; of the Testament of God, 157, 361, **438f**, 498; as fulfillment of OTKP; of man's destiny, 599

Second Coming (see, Parousia)

Second Death, 434, 476, 480, 485, 493

Second Exodus, 192, **207**, **290**, 302, 380

Second Resurrection, **479**, 615, 622, (see, First Resurrection)

Sermon on the Mount, 65f

Seven mountains, 459

Seventy weeks (prophecy of, Daniel 9); three views of, 366-372; exegesis of 372-378; Rock of Dispensationalism, 370; and the Revelation, 629f

Sheep/Goat judgment, 139, **537f**, 599, 698, 701

Signs (divine miracles), 43, **60f**, 100, 143

Signs, (counterfeit miracles), 378, 414, 457, **579f**

Signs (beginning of birth pains), 447, 530f, 592f

Signs (of imminence of Parousia), 530, 554, 563, 573, **576f**, 593, **607f**

Son of Man, 133, 141, 150, 198, 223, **359f**, 432, 527, 528, **534f**

Song of Moses, 191, 221, 455

Symbol(s), in apocalyptic, 384; in the Revelation, 417f, 426f; (see, Types)

T

Tabernacle (of David), 262f

Tabernacles (Feast of), 209, 345, **402f**

Temple, in OTKP, 11, **201f**, 204, **260**, 270, **332**; as type of Christ, 68, 499; as type of the Church, 13, 44, 196, 234, 242, 246, 354f, 374, 435, 446, 499, **578f**; Herod's, 67, **530f**; in Premillennialism, 22, 30, 328, 383

Ten horns, 357, 363, 449

Three horns, 357f

Throne(s), of David, 32, 144, 217; of God, 157, 161, 192, 249, 339, 355, 358, 461; of Christ, 156, 198, 383, 492, 514, 535, **597**; Great White, 31, 491; of the saints, 359,437, **475f, 484f**, 519; of the Beast, 456

Time, God's perspective on, 587f

Time, times, and half a time, 219, 412, 451, 474f

Timelines, of Salvation History, 165f; of schools of Eschatology, 20f, 613f

Titus (Roman general), 34, **366f**, 410, 528, **530f**, 637f, 639, 644, 654

Transfiguration (of Christ), 39, 42, **528**, 602

Transformation (of living saints), 18, 148, 179, 462, 512, **521, 555f**, 569, **598f**

Tribe(s), of the Earth, 87, 174, 263, 294, 432, 541; of Judah, 197, 302, 337, 386, 439; of Israel, 114, 117, 354; of Levi, 202, 236, 245, 327, 389; in OTKP, **313, 344, 348, 398f, 341f**; in Rev. 7, 421, **694f**

Tribulation, saints appointed to, xix, 137, 357, 396, 416, 536, 582

Tribulation (the Great), Evangelical views of, 20f, 613f; defined, 173; in OTKP, 375, 386; in the Revelation, 412, 443, 451, 498; in DNT, 531, 593, 607

Tribulation (the Greatest); Christ on, **531f, 538f**; in OTKP, 316, 352, 362, 377, 395, 405; in NT, 447, 582, **593f**, 605

Tribulation (the), in Dispensationalism, 28f, 296, 309, **368f**, 428, 433, 467, 489, 524, 540, **568f, 627f**

Trumpet judgments, 429, **444f**, 454

Two witnesses (of Rev. 11), 422, 430, **446f**, 470, 487

Type(s), and NCH, 50, 169, 181, **231f**; examples of, 232; and the Law, 65f; and the EC, 100f; and the Protoevangelium, 107f, 229f

U

Unity, theological, xvii, 37; of mankind, **85f**, 290; of OT Covenants, 117f; of eschatological "Israel", 200, 208, **313**, 350; of Scripture, 405

Unity (of the Consummation), **514f**, 585, 591; texts on, 521; how Premillennialism shatters, 627; how Preterism shatters, 645

Universality, of the Kingdom in OTKP, 11, **191f**, 399; of Messianic Reign, 133, 156, **196f**, 284, 288, 360, 473; of Gospel proclamation, 100, 471, 532; of the Rebellion, 320, 322, 376, 488, 578; of the Judgment, 453, 491, 531, 537, 545

Upper Room Discourse, 63, **141f**, **540f**

V

Valley (of Dry Bones), 309f

Vultures, 533

W

War (the), 474, **486f**, 675; (see, Last Battle)

Water(s), of Eden, 71, 347, 682; of the Flood, 112, 232; of Red Sea, 120, 505; in OTKP, 72, 203, 289, **346f**, **399f**; in the Revelation, 355, 456, 499; in WTC, 602

Woe(s), three final, 445

Woman, mystery of, 73f, 107f, 228f, 626; in the Revelation 161f, **411f**, 415, 458, **449f**

World evangelization, 25, 375, **593f**, 637, 699; (see, Era of Proclamation)

World-system, **81f**, 87, 116, 121; in OTKP, 222, 290, 319, 357, 376, 396; in the Revelation, 353, **413f**, 447, **449f**, **458f**; destruction of, 532, 565, 568; (see, Domain of Darkness, Babylon the Great)

World to Come, defined, 9; diagrammed, 165f; in OTKP, **209f**, **224f**, 278, 289f, 295, 325f, 398, 687; in the Revelation, 416, 443, 497; in DNT, 133, 278, 512, 528, 543, 546, 561, 585, 601; (see also, New Heavens and Earth)

Worship, in OT times, 110, 116, 155f, 232; in OTKP, 11, 87, 191, 198, **201f**, 225, 260, 297, **331f**, **402f**; under NC, 13, 51, 68, 104, 155f, 277; temporarily usurped, 77f, 533, 578; in the Revelation, 416, 437, 443, 455; eternal theme of, 176, 508f, 605

Y

Year(s), of the Lord's favor, 102; of Noah's pilgrimage, 113; of Israel's wilderness sojourn, 121; of Jubilee, 224

Z

Zadok, 327, 341f

Zion, in OTKP, 11, 191, 192, 193, 195, 201, 214, **251f**, **266f**, 282, 285, 287, 291, 293, 296, 313, **331f**, **398f**; as type of Heaven, 68, 156, 193, 237, **267**, **272**, **283**, 313, 553; as type of WTC, 72, 214, 289, 292, **332**, **398f**; as type of Calvary, 121; as type of Church, 196, 246, 294, 297; in the Revelation, 434, 441, 452; language of, 231

Scripture Index

Genesis

1:1-2:25 71-73
2:16-17 74-76
2:18-24 73
3:1-24 78-83
3:15 107-109, 229-236
3:21 109-110
4:4 110
6:1-9:29 84-85, 111-113
9:9-17 684
11:1-9 85-88
12-25 113-117
17:7-8 115
24:36 684
25:5 684
37-47 698

Exodus

3-32, 117f
6:7-8 118
7-12 401
7:8-13 414
7:20 –21 447, 456
9:8-12 456
9:18-15 457
10:21-23 456

12:48 191
14:1-15:18 397
14:19-20 334
15:1f 455
16:1f 47, 451
17:8 488
19:1f 565
19:6 174, 195, 440
20:12 214
24:3-8 117-121
32:32-33 287

Leviticus

1-9 118, 120
19:28 392
19:33-34 191
23:10f 148
23:33-34 402
25:1f 224
26:1f 10, 118, 120, 189, 207, 211, 213, 216
26:6 213
26:21-22 80, 289
26:29 213
26:40-45 225

Numbers

9:15-23 287
11:29 245
12:8 257
13-14 119, 654
15:14-16 191
16-17 119

21:4-9 47
23:21 565
34:1-12 348
35:9f 397, 594

Deuteronomy

4:5-8 11, 194
5:33 213, 214
7:6-8 118, 194, 245
7:14 213
10:15 194
10:18-19 191
11:8-9 213
12:1-14 203
13:6-11 391
14:2 118
18:1-2 245
18:15 43, 118, 147, 198
18:20 383
26:19 194
28:1f 10, 81, 118, 119, 120, 123, 211
28:13 194
29:22-28 123
29:23 347
30:1-10 123-125, 189, 207, 216, 347, 656
30:6 390
30:7 221
32:1ff 10, 122, 189, 221, 216, 221
32:4-4 221
32:22 587
32:34-43 321
32:40-42 221

32:48-52 332

33:5 119

Joshua

6:1ff 398, 565

6:4 445

6:5 565

22:19 348

23:14 254

Judges

4-5 457

7:22 401

1 Samuel

2:1f 507

8:7 119, 345

25:29 344

30:1f 396

2 Samuel

2:35 342, 690

7:1-17 119, 197, 204, 245, 340, 345

6:1f 345

10-12 245

1 Kings

6:11-13 245

7:23f 346

8:1f 345

8:33-35 654

13:1-2 247

17:1f 412, 430, 447

18:28 392

2 Kings

18:4 66
23:1-14 300
23:10 304

1 Chronicles

12:1f 245
12:32 91

2 Chronicles

5:1ff 332
7:1f 245
20:1f 345
35:20-27 390
36:22-33 123

Ezra

1:1-4

Nehemiah

2:1f 368
3:1 303

Esther

6:9, 11 526

Psalms

2:1f 10, 95-98, 120, 172, 197, 253, **282**, 320, 435, 462
8:6 149
18:4 377
19:8-11 143
22:1f 87, 191, 208-9,
23:4 311
29:10 85, 113

40:6 94
45:1f 119, 442,
46:1f 347, 399
48:1f 88, 396
72:1f 87, 197, 208, **284**, 348
73:1f 507
78: 2, 52 231, 245
89:1f 197, 345
90:4 587
96:4-13 222
97:5 397
105:15 386
110:1f 10, 108, 149, 156, 197-198, 223, 245, **259**, 274, 330
132:13-14 202, 289
136:15 120
145:9 331

Proverbs

12:10 331
14:32 688
15:24 688
17:3 394
19:3 80
19:21 86
24:16 549

Song of Solomon

1:7 242
3:1-4 242

Isaiah

4:2-6 285
11:1-16 287, 657

11:6-9 213
13:1f 222
14:1f 687
19:19-25 203
24-27 417
24:21-23 291
25:6-9 214
43:5-7 217
49:5-7 261
49:8 269
53:4-12 198-199
54:1ff 272
59:15-21 267
60:1f 293
63:1-6 224
65:17-20 214, 277
66:1-2 204, 260
66:1ff 296
66:22 277

Jeremiah

3:17 203
23:1-8 301
29:1-14 656
30-33 275, 688, 689
31:31-34 12-14, 65, 204, 274, 688
33:10-11 211
33:19-22 200

Ezekiel

28:1f 687
37:1-14 309, 657

37:15-28 313
37:26-28 270
38-39 218, 316, 417
40-48 325f
47:1-12 203

Daniel

2:1f 701
2:44 700
7:1-28 218, 356, 417
7:13 691
9:24-27 218, 365, 630, 691
11:31 697
11:36f 218, 702
12:2 696

Hosea

1:9-11 200, 265, 653, 686
2:1 265
2:14-23 206, 263, 264, 653
2:19 629
3:5 6
6:4 241
13:14 208, 210, 556, 687

Joel

1:15 222
2:18-27 190, 208, 664
2:28-32 143, 207, 223, **265**, 489, 571
2:28 63, 175, 201
2:31 518
3:1-17 **218**, 332
3:9-21 193, 321

3:15 219
3:17 209, 304
3:18-21 202, 203, 399
3:20 190, 629

Amos

5:1f 567
5:18-20 222
9:11-18 197, 208, 687
9:11-12 **262**, 473, 658
9:11-15 190
9:13-14 658

Obadiah

1:15-21 663, 192, 222, 223, 571
1:21 190

Micah

1:3-4 397
2:12-30 200
2:12-13 172, 200, 216
4:1-5 11, 191, 251, 201, 251, 399, 473
4:11ff 218, 321
5:1-9 197, 209, 216
5:2 197, 253
7:8-20 207, 208

Nahum

1:2-8 222
1:5 398
1:12-15 202, 208, 223, 571, 687

Habakkuk

1:5 668

2:4 668
2:14 208
3:1-15 223, 687

Zephaniah

1:1f 136, 531, 567, 670
1:15 668
2:1f 665
2:4-11 223, 571
2:7 209
3:9-13 87, 192, 208, 665

Haggai

2:6-9 12, 201, 220, 520, 665, 670, 687
2:3-4 670
2:5 244
2:7 192
2:20-23 222, 520, 665

Zechariah

2:1-13 192
3:1-10 198
4:1f 447
6:12-13 198
8:1-8 658
8:5 213
8:23 192, 256
9:10 87
9-11 380f
12-14 385f
12:1-9 193, 218, 222, 571
13:7-9 199, 200
14:1-3 218

14:9 87
14:16-19 12, 202
14:20-21 204

Malachi

1:11 202
2:5 341
2:7 196
3:3 201, 202, 208
3:4 687
3:17 245
4:1-3 221, 222, 587, 687
4:5 518

Matthew

5:17-18 46-47
6:10 58-59
8:23-27 61
9:16-17 66
9:35 60
10:7-8 60
10:23 **527**
12:28 60-61, 686
13:1-52 **128-139**
13:41-42 64
16:27-17:8 **528**
19:27-28 529
24-25 **530**
24:1-3 66, 530
24:1-28 33-34, 530
24:15 697
24:21 538, 595

24:29-31 534, 596
24:32-35 535
24:36-44 536
24:45-25:30 536
25:14-30 140-141
25:31ff 537, 701
26:64 691

Mark

1:15 57, 160
4:1-34 **128-139**
4:26-29 138
8:38 435
9:1-13 **528**
9:48 3
10:29-31 166, 599
10:45 97, 253
11:12-14 66, 239, 297, 652
12:25 210
13:1ff **530**
13:27 312, 565
14:58 13
14:62 360

Luke

4:5-8 450
7:36-50 61
9:28-36 528
11:20 61
16:19-31 2
17:21 686
17:26-27 536

19:11-27 **140-141**
19:37-40 57
20:27-40 2, 166, 167, 214
21:5ff 530
21:23-24 660
21:25-26 595
22:28 529
24:27-47 **48-49**

John

1:17 44
3:3-16 62
5:19-30 62
5:23 43, 509
5:26-27 599
5:28-29 517
5:39 242
11:1-44 61
13-17 **141-142**
14:1-3 xvii, **540**
16:12-15 45, 242

Acts

1:9-11 596, 601
2:14-42 133, **143-144**, 236, 259
2:33-35 **259**, 439
3:11-26 **145-147**
4:23-31 320
4:25-27 282
7:44-50 **260**
8:26f 256
13:46-47 **261**

15:12-21 **262**
17:31 518, 545
24:15 517
26:12-18 231, 472

Romans

2:1-16 **545**
3:21 234
5:12ff 96-97
5:17 483
8:18-26 289, 507, 524, **546**
8:31-39 123
9:19-26 **264, 508**
9:25-26 686
10:12-13 **266**
10:14f 389
11:11-36 **547**
11:25-27 **265**
16:20 491
16:25-27 50, 92

1 Corinthians

2:6-13 91, 106, 169
3:21-23 122
15:1f 523-525
15:20-28 64, **147-150**, 175, 361, 472, 519, **603**, 690
15:23-24 685
15:45 73, 96
15:46 **232**, 256
15:50-58 70, **554**, 684, 699

2 Corinthians

3:12-18 47-9, 101, 130, 242

4:4 165, 472
5:1-10 **557**, 481, 537, 599
5:21 97, 110, 160
6:1-2 **269**
6:14-18 **270**
7:10 460
10:5 472
11:3 108

Galatians

1:4 166
1:6-10 247
3:15-4:7 108, 116, 240
3:16 235
3:19 108
3:28 87
4:3, 9 66, 240
4:4f 96, 253
4:26-27 **272**, 251
6:16 14, 51, 68, 118, 144, 147, 193, 246, 265, 313, 373, 385, 394, 443, 488,
548, 553, 684

Ephesians

1-5 **246**
1:5-6 **118, 231**
1:9-10 75, **95-96**, 474
1:15-23 **150-152**, 180, 472, 439, 604
2:5-6 152
2:7 171
2:8-9 99
2:11-22 193, 196, 240, 242, 316, 499, 551, 652
3:8-12 91

3:20-21 509
4:1-7 87
4:11-16 399
5:22f 73, 108, 273, 412, 499
6:10f 81, 166, 173, 619

Philippians

1:6-11 136, 403, 672
1:16 136
1:19-26 2, 477, 559
1:28 xxv, 574
2:5-11 87, 95, 98, 103, 322, 360, 399, 420, 566, 605
3:8-11 166, 298, 673
3:17-21 **561**
3:20-21 18, 64, 136, **152-153**, 279, 519, 542, 597, 601

Colossians

1:13-14 64, 77, 81, 132, 145, **153**, 174, 315, 403
1:15-18 73, 76
1:15-20 150
1:17 509
1:25-27 49, 92
2:1-3 42, 49
2:8-15 472
2:13 42
2:14 97
2:15 108
2:16-18 14, 49, 92, 161, 181, 232, 409
2:17 232
3:1-4 **153**, 320, 352, 448, 546, 673

1 Thessalonians

1:8 256

1:10 xx, 82, 116
2:1-12 298, 376
3:1-5 xix
3:13 515
4:13-18 113, 289, 462, 524, **563**, 575, 598, 605
4:15 555
4:16 338
5:1-3 595
5:1-10 **567**
5:3 322, 539, 574

2 Thessalonians

1:3-10 287, 462, 518, 571, **573**, 595, 645
1:7 515
1:8-9 584, 600
2:1-2 xxv, 539
2:1-12 357, 377, 396, 413, 487, **576**, 698
2:3-4 376, 594, 609, 699
2:8 223, 377, 515
2:8-12 378
2:16 605

1 Timothy

2:5 343
2:15 574
3:15 44, 386
4:1-3 391, 577, 640
6:13-16 510, 511, 674

2 Timothy

1:9 92
1:10 511, 516
1:12 674

1:18 674
2:3 627
2:12 481
2:24-26 81
3:1f 173, 321
3:12 442
4:1 674
4:1-8 510

Titus

1:2 90, 92
2:11-14 xviii, 391, 591, 604
3:4-5 347, 599

Hebrews

1:1-2 6, 42, 173
1:1-5 **155**
2:14-15 337
3:1-6 236
4:1-13 468
4:14-15 337
5:8-10 231
6:6 173
7:1-10 237
7:11-28 330
7:18-19 203, 237
7:20-28 239, 330, 340
8:1-13 204, **274**
8:4-5 232
8:13 14, 100, 205, 241, 330
9:1-28 203, 237
9:11-12 232, 330

9:26 330
9:27-28 516
10:1 232, 240
10:1-19 237
10:5-10 **94**
10:12 330
10:19-22 237
10:22-24 237
11:1ff 114f, 243
11:7 111, 112
11:8-16 116, 654
11:39-40 170, 243, 354
12:22 204, 251, 272, 654
12:25-29 **520**
13:20 93

James

1:1 246
1:18 620
2:20-23 115
4:4 458
5:7-9 515, 584, 674

1 Peter

1:3-9 147, 394
1:7 510, 511, 515
1:10-12 40
1:13 400
1:14-16 404
2:4-10 242, **245**, 286, 386
2:9-10 193, 298, 301, 336
3:18-22 232

4:7 435, 511, 585

4:7-19 116, 581

5:4 515

5:8 413, 469

2 Peter

1:12-14 582

1:19 435

3:1-13 **585**, 601

3:5-7 85, 112

3:10 597

3:11-14 230

3:13 112, **278**, 326, 374

1 John

2:18, 22 577, 584-5, 594

2:28 515, 585

3:1-2 246, 510, 512, 543, **598**

3:9-13 110, 230, 246

4:1-6 391

4:3 577

5:12 701

5:19 81, 356, 486

Jude

1:1 485, 493

1:3 41

1:4 392

1:6 77, 491, **518**, 535, 694

1:7 347, 601

1:9 565

1:14 134, 473

1:18 234

1:23 231, 566
1:24-25 343, 600

Revelation

1:1 421
1:1-20 431
1:19 693
2:1-3:22 432
3:10 693
4-5 437
5:1f 157-158
6:1f 442
7:1f 443
7:4-8 694
8-11 444
9:1-2 xx
11:3-6 429
11:7-13 430
12-14 449
12:1f 161-2, **411**
12:9 413
13:1f 429
13:1-4 413
13:11-18 414
15-16 454
17-19 458
17:1f 415
19:11-21 596
20:1-3 16, **466**, 686
20:4-6 16, 353, **475**, 686
20:7-10 **485**, 686
20:11-14 **491**

21-22 353

21:1-8 498

21:9-22:5 499

22:6-21 500

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