

Interpreting Biblical Eschatology in Light of Its Overall Structure

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A brief summary of Chapter 2 in the book entitled,
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The book of Revelation, and much other prophecy (especially apocalyptic), is largely visionary and highly symbolic. Therefore, it should be interpreted in light of clear didactic prose, illustrations, and parables elsewhere in Scripture that deal with eschatology.¹

The OT had various prophetic and eschatological themes and expectations, but never synthesized them into a coherent whole. The OT did not have an overall interpretive structure which could clearly account for the fact that Messiah would come twice. The NT has changed that. We now have “*the whole counsel of God*” (Acts 20:27). NT now gives us a clear, consistent, and comprehensive eschatological interpretive structure. That structure is the “two ages” (Greek = *aiōn* [“age”]): “*this age*,” and the “*age to come*.”²

The “two-age” model

The terminology of the two ages is the key concept for understanding biblical eschatology. A proper understanding of how this age and the age to come fit

¹ Riddlebarger, *Amillennialism*, 36-38, 197-200; Beale, *Revelation*, 973-74.

² The New American Standard Bible (NASB) has been used in this book unless otherwise stated. However, because the Greek term *aiōn* (“age”) sometimes is translated as “world,” I have compared the NASB with the Greek NT. Whenever the Greek NT uses *aiōn* I have rendered it “age,” even though the NASB may have translated it as “world.” It should be noted that the “two-age” structure was implicit, if not fully developed, in the OT. For example, VanGemeren states, “The phrase ‘the age to come’ relates to the prophetic designation ‘in that day,’ ‘in the last days,’ or ‘in those days’ (Isa. 2:2; Jer. 33:16; Joel 2:29).” VanGemeren, *Interpreting*, 92. However, in the OT this idea appears to have been primarily related to a new beginning for the nation of Israel after the exile. VanGemeren therefore notes that the prophets “comforted the godly remnant with the eschatological hope that after the Exile, the Lord will open up a new era of forgiveness, covenant renewal, and restoration.” Ibid. As was discussed in chapter 3, and as will be discussed in this and the next chapter, the coming of Christ and the completion of the NT demonstrate that the OT prophecies in fact find their ultimate fulfillment not in the restoration of Israel after the exile, but in the restoration of the cosmos and people of all nations through Christ.

together renders biblical eschatology both understandable and coherent. Samuel Waldron mentions that the importance of the two ages derives from the fact that that terminology “pervades the New Testament, is homogeneous and provides us with a truly structural concept for biblical eschatology. It means the same thing—assumes the same, basic structure—wherever it is used.”³ M. C. de Boer adds that “the scope of the two ages is cosmic: they both involve all people and all times.”⁴

“This age,” “the age to come,” and variants of those terms are used to describe the two ages

Multiple places in the NT describe the two ages by using the terms “*this age*”⁵ and “*the age to come*.”⁶ Sometimes a variant or distinctive part of those terms is used. “*This age*” sometimes is called “*the age*”⁷ or “*this present age*.”⁸ The “*age to come*” sometimes is called “*that age*” (Luke 20:35), “*the one to come*,”⁹ or “*ages to come*” (Eph 2:7). In several passages only “*this age*” appears but “the other member of the contrast is nevertheless present by implication.”¹⁰

The Bible also uses related terminology to describe the two ages

* In Mark 10:30 and Luke 18:30 Jesus contrasts “*this time*” with “*the age to come*.”

* In Rom 8:18 “*this present time*” is a synonym for “*this age*”; it is contrasted with “*the glory that is to be revealed*.”

* Rom 13:12 states, “*The night is almost gone, and the day is near*,” i.e., “The ‘night’ is the present evil age (Gal. 1:4); ‘the day’ is the day of the Lord. Paul’s assertion that ‘the day is almost here’ (Rom.13:12 NIV) means that the day when God will bring to an end human history as we know it is fast approaching.”¹¹

* In 1 Cor 3:19 “*this world*” (*ho kosmos houtos*) is a synonym for “*this age*” (see also 1 Cor 5:10; 7:31; Eph 2:2). This is seen in the parallelism in 1 Cor 3:18-19:

³ Waldron, “Structural Considerations,” n.p.n.3. The material quoted herein from Waldron has been incorporated in his book *The End Times Made Simple: How Could Everybody Be So Wrong about Biblical Prophecy* (Amityville, NY: Calvary, 2007). See also Ladd, *Gospel of the Kingdom*, 26-34; Vos, *Pauline Eschatology*, 12-38; Hoekema, *Bible and Future*, 13-22.

⁴ de Boer, “Paul and Apocalyptic Eschatology,” 349.

⁵ Matt 12:32; Luke 16:8; 20:34; Rom 12:2; 1 Cor 1:20; 2:6, 8; 3:18; 2 Cor 4:4; Eph 1:21; 1 Tim 6:17.

⁶ Mark 10:30; Luke 18:30; Eph 1:21; Heb 6:5.

⁷ Matt 13:22, 39-40, 49; 24:3; 28:20; Mark 4:19.

⁸ Gal 1:4; 1 Tim 6:17; 2 Tim 4:10; Titus 2:12.

⁹ Matt 12:32; Eph 1:21; 1 Tim 6:19 [the same Greek word as in Matt 12:32 and Eph 1:21, the present active participle of *mellō* (“coming”), is translated “future” in 1 Tim 6:19],

¹⁰ Vos, *Pauline Eschatology*, 12. See Rom 12:2; 1 Cor 1:20; 2:6, 8; 3:18; 2 Cor 4:4; Gal 1:4; Eph 2:2; 1 Tim 6:17; Titus 2:12.

¹¹ Schnabel, *40 Questions*, 22.

“If any man among you thinks that he is wise in this age, he must become foolish, so that he may become wise. For the wisdom of this world is foolishness before God.”

* First Cor 13:12 contrasts “*now*” with “*then*,” i.e., “Now, in This Age, we see in a mirror, imperfectly; ‘but then face to face.’ In The Age to Come, we shall no longer see a reflected likeness, we shall see face to face.”¹² Similarly, 1 John 3:2 contrasts “*now*” with “*what we will be*.”

* In Eph 2:1-2 Paul says that the Ephesians had been dead in their trespasses and sins in which they had formerly walked according to “*the age of this world*” (synonymous with “*this age*”). Similarly, in Luke 16:8 Jesus contrasts “*the sons of this age*” with “*the sons of light*.”

* First Tim 4:8 contrasts “*the present life*” with “*the life to come*.”

* Heb 1:6 and 2:5 contrast “*the world*” (*tēn oikoumenēn*) with “*the world to come*” (*tēn oikoumenēn tēn mellousan*).

* Heb 13:14 contrasts “*here we do not have a lasting city*” with “*the city which is to come*.”

* In several places, instead of using “*the age to come*” Paul used “the less formal, more expressive phrase ‘kingdom of God’ . . . just as we more easily speak of ‘heaven’ or ‘eternity’ than of ‘the future age.’”¹³

* In Matt 19:28 Jesus called the age to come “*the regeneration*” (Greek = *paliggenesia*).

There is a *qualitative difference* between “this age” and the “age to come”

Ladd states an important hermeneutical fact:

The New Testament sets The Age to Come in direct opposition to This Age. . . . When we ask what Scripture teaches about the character of these two ages, we find a sharp contrast. This Age is dominated by evil, wickedness, and rebellion against the will of God, while the Age to Come is the age of the Kingdom of God. . . . In This Age there is death; in the Kingdom of God, eternal life. In This Age, the righteous and the wicked are mixed together; in the Kingdom of God, all wickedness and sin will be destroyed. For the present, Satan is viewed as the ‘god of this age;’ but in The Age to Come, God’s Kingdom, God’s rule will have destroyed Satan,

¹² Ladd, *Gospel of the Kingdom*, 74.

¹³ Vos, *Pauline Eschatology*, 12. See 1 Cor 6:9-10; 15:50; Gal 5:21; Eph 5:5; 1 Thess 2:12; 2 Thess 1:5; 2 Tim 4:18.

and righteousness will displace all evil.¹⁴

There is a quantitative difference between “this age” and the “age to come”

The term *aiōn* (the noun for “age”) may refer to a long, but finite, period of time or to an everlasting or eternal period of time depending on the context. For example, “this age” is temporal, finite, and will come to an end (Matt 13:39, 40, 49; 24:3; 28:20; Heb 9:26). However, the “age to come” will last infinitely, without end (Luke 1:33; 2 Pet 1:11; Rev 11:15). The everlasting nature of the age to come is implied from the above qualitative differences with this age: e.g., “*the perfect*” (1 Cor 13:9-10) cannot be subject to termination or be succeeded by anything better; clearness of sight and fullness of knowledge (1 Cor 13:12) can never be surpassed; imperishability (1 Cor 15:50) by definition cannot end.¹⁵ The unending nature of the age to come is particularly seen when the adjective *aiōnios* (which is based on *aiōn* and pertains to the “age”) is used in conjunction with the attributes of God and the promises, blessings, and curses that find their fulfillment in the age to come.¹⁶ As such, *aiōnios* is typically translated “eternal” or “everlasting.”

On a number of occasions, biblical writers use the plural “ages.” They do this in connection with the past and current age, e.g., 1 Cor 10:11 (“*upon whom the ends of the ages have come*”); Heb 9:26 (“*now once at the consummation of the ages he has been manifested to put away sin*”); in connection with the future age to come, e.g., Dan 7:18 LXX (lit. the saints will possess the kingdom “*to the age of the ages*”); Dan 12:3 LXX (lit. those who lead many to righteousness will be like the stars “*to the ages and still [further]*”); Rom 16:27 (lit. to the wise God . . . “*be glory to the ages*”); Eph 2:7 (“*in the ages to come*” he will show the surpassing riches of his grace); Heb 13:8 (lit. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, “*and to the ages*”); Jude 25 (lit. to God be . . . authority “*before all of the age and now to all the ages*”). On multiple occasions the phrase *eis tous aiōnas tōn aiōnon* (lit. “*into the ages of the ages*”) is used.¹⁷ The phrase is an intensive form and is correctly translated “forever and ever” or “forevermore” since every

¹⁴ Ladd, *Gospel of the Kingdom*, 31, 28, 34. Very early in church history, the distinction between the two ages was recognized and was used as the basis for leading a godly life now. The *Epistle of Barnabas* 4:1 states, “Let us, therefore, avoid absolutely all the works of lawlessness lest the works of lawlessness overpower us, and let us hate the deception of the present age, so that we may be loved in the age to come.” See also *Shepherd of Hermas*, *Vision* 4.3.2-5.

¹⁵ Robert Peterson puts it like this, “The state of affairs after the resurrection of the dead is characterized by the life of God himself; the age to come lasts as long as he does—forever.” Peterson, *Hell on Trial*, 35.

¹⁶ In fact, it appears that every time the adjective *aiōnios* is used in the NT “endlessness” is meant. See BDAG, “*anōnios*,” 33; Zodhiates, *Complete Word Study*, “*anōnios*,” 107-08. Even the few instances where something in the past is referred to (Rom 16:25; 2 Tim 1:9; Titus 1:2), the use of *anōnios* renders the sense as “time eternal,” “before time was,” or “from eternity.” Zodhiates, *Complete Word Study*, “*anōnios*,” 107; see also Walvoord, “The Literal View,” 24-25.

¹⁷ Gal 1:5; Phil 4:20; 1 Tim 1:17; 2 Tim 4:18; Heb 13:21; 1 Pet 4:11; Rev 1:6, 18; 4:9, 10; 5:13; 7:12; 10:6; 11:15; 15:7; 19:3; 20:10; 22:5.

use shows something exhibiting an eternal or everlasting duration.

The use of the plural appears to be largely stylistic. For example, Geerhardus Vos comments that the phrase “ages to come” in Eph 2:7 “is a plural of immensity; it expresses itself in terms of time, whereas eternity marks the pleroma [fullness] of time.”¹⁸ The same could be said for the other uses of “ages” instead of “age.” Stephen Smalley notes that the literal phrase “to the ages of the ages” in Rev 22:5 “is liturgical in character; see 1:6; et al.”¹⁹ TDNT states, “In order to bring out more fully the stricter concept of eternity, religious usage generally prefers the plural. . . . This plural us is simply designed to emphasise [sic] the idea of eternity which is contained in but often blurred in the singular *aiōn*.”²⁰

Although there may be different aspects of “this age” (for example, the period before Christ came and the period after his coming), the whole of this age is of the same essential nature. Likewise, although we do not have detailed information about everything that will characterize the “age to come” after Christ returns, the information we do have indicates that the whole of the age to come (i.e., the “ages of the ages”) will be of the same essential nature for all of eternity.

The two ages comprehend all of time and the age to come immediately succeeds this age

Eph 1:21 says that Christ is “*far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come.*” Additionally, in Matt 12:32 (see also Mark 3:29) Jesus states that whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit shall not be forgiven, “*either in this age, or in the age to come.*” Those passages indicate that there is no intervening or temporary time period between “*this age*” and the “*age to come.*” The reason why this necessarily is true is pointed out by Vos: “The very name ‘coming aion’ is not merely expressive of futurity, but also carries within itself the element of direct successiveness. Were this otherwise, then the entire closely-knit scheme intended to comprehend all happenings in the universe from beginning to end would fall to pieces, because of the lacking link in the middle. To say that a sin will not be forgiven either in this age or in the age to come could never have served as a formula for absolute unforgivableness ad infinitum, Matt. xii 32, if there were conceivable a gap between the two aions.”²¹

Transformation by resurrection is required in order to enter the age to come/kingdom of God

¹⁸ Vos, *Pauline Eschatology*, 316n.20.

¹⁹ Smalley, *Revelation*, 566.

²⁰ Sasse, “*aiōn*,” 1:199.

²¹ Vos, *Pauline Eschatology*, 25-26.

The necessity of resurrection as a condition to enter the age to come or consummate kingdom of God is stressed by Ladd: "The Kingdom of God, like The Age to Come, will follow the resurrection. In I Corinthians 15:50, Paul says that 'flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God.' Paul here is speaking about the resurrection. *Flesh* and *blood* cannot inherit the Kingdom of God. Our bodies must undergo a transformation so that they no longer consist of flesh and blood but are incorruptible, glorious, powerful, 'spiritual' bodies (vv. 42-44). Only in these transformed bodies will we enter the Kingdom of God."²²

Christ's first coming brought with it an overlapping of the "two ages"

The breaking in of the "age to come" into "this age" is parallel to the "already, but not yet" nature of the kingdom. Thus, the age to come is the reign of Christ; the reign of Christ has already begun (Acts 2:29-36; Eph. 1:21). The age to come is the age of resurrection (Luke 20:34-36); the resurrection has already begun (1 Cor 15:23). The age to come is the age of eternal life (Mark 10:30); eternal life has already begun (John 3:36; 17:3; 1 John 1:2-3; 5:13). The age to come is the age of the new creation (Rom 8:18-22; Rev 21:1-4); in a sense the new creation already has begun (2 Cor 5:17; Gal 6:15).

The overlapping of the two ages, and the "breaking in" of the age to come into this age, explains why the Bible constantly assumes a "two-stage" character of salvation. Justification (Rom 5:1; Matt 12:37), adoption (Rom 8:14-16, 23; Gal 4:4-6; Eph 4:30), redemption (Eph 1:7; 4:30), and other biblical realities associated with salvation are spoken of both as past realities and future blessings. The overlapping of the two ages does not change the character either of "this age" (which still remains temporal and evil) or of the "age to come" (which is the age of life, righteousness, and God's kingdom).

Christ's first coming and the "last days"

The NT makes clear that Christ's first coming (or, more specifically, the complex of his death, resurrection, ascension, and pouring out of the Spirit at Pentecost) is of great eschatological significance.²³ Some people think that the "last days" is a period of time in the future which will occur just before Jesus comes again. That is not true. Christ's first coming: (A) marked the beginning of the "last days" which will continue until his return; and (B) fulfilled the OT prophecies concerning the "latter days" or "last days."

²² Ladd, *Gospel of the Kingdom*, 34.

²³ Allison summarizes the understanding of the NT writers and the early Christians as follows: "When [Jesus] suffered and died and subsequently appeared alive to his followers, they concluded that the eschatological drama had opened, that the final tribulation had begun with the suffering and death of the Messiah, that the general resurrection had begun with his resurrection. In brief, the eschatological expectations of the pre-Easter period were drawn upon in the attempt to understand the crucifixion and Jesus' conquest of death." Allison, *End of the Ages*, 170.

The first announcement of the “last days” in the NT

The first announcement of the “last days” in the NT was Peter’s speech on the Day of Pentecost in Acts 2. Anthony Hoekema notes the significance of the wording Peter uses when he quotes the prophet Joel in his speech: “The words ‘in the last days’ [Acts 2:17] (*en tais eschatais hēmerais*) are a translation of the Hebrew words’ *acharey khēn*, literally *afterwards*. When Peter quotes these words and applies them to the event which has just occurred, he is saying in effect: ‘We are in the last days now.’”²⁴

Every other use of the phrase “last days” in the NT presupposes that we are in the “last days” now

The following are the other uses of “last days” in the NT. In each case the passage explicitly or implicitly applies to the present time (i.e., the period between Christ’s first and second comings): 2 Tim 3:1-5; Heb 1:1-2; Jas 5:1-3; 2 Pet 3:1-4.

The NT writers use other phrases to show that we are now in the “last days”

In the following passages the NT writers use equivalent phrases to the “last days,” but they have the same meaning as the “last days”: 1 Cor 10:11; Gal 4:4; Eph 1:9-10; 1 Tim 4:1-6; Heb 9:26; 1 Pet 1:3-5; 1 Pet 1:20; 1 John 2:18; Jude 17-19. Again, the context indicates that the present time (between Christ’s first and second comings) is indicated.

Even though we are in the “last days” now, there will be a “last day” when this age ends, and the eschatological fullness of the age to come begins

The distinction between the “last days” and “the last day”

The last days have lasted approximately two thousand years so far. However, there will be a “last day” when the “last days” of this present age end. That “last day” will be the day of Christ’s return, the *parousia*.²⁵ Hoekema explains how the grammar of the NT makes this clear: “When the expression is found in the singular, however (‘the last day’), it never refers to the present age but always to the age to come, usually the Day of Judgment or the day of resurrection. . . . New Testament eschatology, therefore, looks back to the coming of Christ which had been predicted by the Old Testament prophets, and affirms: we are in the last days now. But New Testament eschatology also looks forward to a final consummation yet to come, and hence it also says: the last day is still coming;

²⁴ Hoekema, *Bible and Future*, 16.

²⁵ See Schnabel, *40 Questions*, 22-24.

the final age has not yet arrived.”²⁶ Thus, in John 6:39, 40, 44, 54 Jesus does not speak about the “*last days*” (plural), but in each of those verses says that he will raise up the faithful on “*the last day*” (singular). In John 11:24 Martha says that she knows her brother Lazarus “*will rise again in the resurrection on the last day*” (singular). In John 12:48 Jesus says, “*The word I spoke is what will judge him at the last day*” (singular).

The “end of the ages” versus the “end of the age”

The distinction between the “last days” and “the last day” is also found when the Greek noun *synteleia* (“end” or “consummation”) is used with either the plural or singular of the word “age” (i.e., “the end of the ages” versus “the end of the age”). Hoekema explains that this NT grammar reveals that there will be a specific end of this age:

In the one instance where this word [*synteleia*] is used with the plural of *aiōn* (age), it means the present era (Heb. 9:26, ASV). But when this word is used with the singular of *aiōn*, it always refers to the final consummation which is still future (Matt. 28:20). When Jesus is explaining the meaning of the Parable of the Tares, he says, “the harvest is the close [end] of the age (*synteleia aiōnos*)” (Matt. 13:39; cf. vv. 40, 49); and when the disciples ask Jesus about the future, they say, “Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign of your coming and the close [end] of the age?” (Matt. 24:3).²⁷

Consequently, the biblical pattern reveals a clear and consistent eschatological structure: there are two ages: “this age” and the “age to come.” Christ’s first coming—particularly in the complex of his death, resurrection, and ascension—entailed the in-breaking of the “age to come” into “this age.” His first coming means that this age is in its “last days.” Christ’s first coming, however, did not mean the total *replacement* of this age with the age to come. Rather, since his first coming, the two ages are overlapping. Nevertheless, there will be a “last day” in which “this age” will end and will be replaced by the “age to come” in all its fullness.

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²⁶ Hoekema, *Bible and Future*, 19-20.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 19.

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