

What Happened to our Eschatology?

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Eschatology is a buzz word that can confuse many people if not defined and used properly. The *Pocket Dictionary of Theological Terms* provides a thorough, yet brief definition of “eschatology”:

“Eschatology...is the theological study that seeks to understand the ultimate direction or purpose of history as it moves toward the future, both from an individual perspective (What happens when a person dies?) and from a corporate perspective (Where is history going, and how will it end?)”¹

Eschatology, derived from the Greek word *eschatos* (ἔσχατος), meaning “last,” is often considered to be the study of end things. Almost every Jewish or Christian religious movement has had to deal with eschatology somewhere along the lines of the development of its theology, and the emerging Messianic movement today is no exception. We all have to deal with the questions of what will happen in the future, how or when the Kingdom of God will be consummated on Planet Earth, and what the final fate for us as individuals will be. Admittedly, these are not easy questions, and they are often surrounded in controversy.

History has borne out that many new religious movements arise as a result of some kind of eschatological teaching. Recalling my family’s initial involvement in the Messianic movement over ten years ago, there was an incredible amount of end-time speculation going on in 1996-1997. The Middle East Peace Process was gaining momentum, President Clinton was meeting frequently with Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu and P.A. Chairman Arafat. Some believed that the peace agreement of September 13, 1993 had actually started the Seventieth Week of Israel and were looking for animal sacrifices to begin on the Temple Mount any day. Some were looking at potential “antichrists” among European royalty to rise up and take control of the situation. And, a few we encountered claimed to know the date of Yeshua’s return.

We sit almost ten years after those events, and it is absolutely safe to say now that the peace agreements made between Yitzhak Rabin and Yassir Arafat **did not begin the Tribulation period**. Both of these men have now experienced their own personal *eschatos*. The Abomination of Desolation did not take place on the Temple Mount, nor has any European prince arisen as “the antichrist.” Anyone claiming that Yeshua would have returned on any of the proposed timelines in connection to the events of the mid-1990s has been proven false. Furthermore, we now sit six years on the opposite side of Y2k, which many “prophecy buffs” automatically assumed would cause it all to “come down,” even if their own predictions failed. As a consequence years later, many, many people in the Messianic community have become disenfranchised with even examining the end-time message of the Bible.

There have always been those throughout history who have believed that they were the last generation, and that God’s Kingdom was coming in their lifetime. An early example of this is the Essene community of First Century Israel (B.C.E.-C.E.). While often accredited for being responsible for the composition of the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Essene community is the first major example that we see in history of an “end-time sect.” The Essene community believed themselves to be the final generation, seeing the corruption of the Sadducees in league with Rome, and Pharisaical sects that they believed were too legalistic, or too liberal. Their literature reflects on their beliefs that a messianic figure would come and redeem Israel from Roman oppression and reestablish the Davidic dynasty. Their example reflects on the fact that they were waiting in the desert for things to “come down.” The problem with the Essenes is that when things finally did “come down” and the Jewish revolt of 66 C.E. failed, they found themselves slaughtered and eliminated. The only religious sect that survived the times were the Pharisees, who became responsible for continuing the Jewish faith, and those Jewish Believers in Yeshua who had seen the destruction coming.

This is a First Century example that helps us gain a perspective on the times in which our faith was birthed. We often do not consider the passage of time the way God does, because our

¹ Stanley J. Grenz, David Guretzki, and Cherith Fee Nordling, *Pocket Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1999), 46.

human minds are too simplistic to grasp what He sees. Consider the fact that some may say that the Apostle Peter was incorrect in asserting that his generation was living in the “Last Days,” in what he spoke to those assembled at *Shavuot*/Pentecost:

“But Peter, taking his stand with the eleven, raised his voice and declared to them: ‘Men of Judea and all you who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you and give heed to my words. For these men are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is *only* the third hour of the day; but this is what was spoken of through the prophet Joel: ‘AND IT SHALL BE IN THE LAST DAYS,’ God says, ‘THAT I WILL POUR FORTH OF MY SPIRIT ON ALL MANKIND; AND YOUR SONS AND YOUR DAUGHTERS SHALL PROPHECY, AND YOUR YOUNG MEN SHALL SEE VISIONS, AND YOUR OLD MEN SHALL DREAM DREAMS; EVEN ON MY BONDSLAVES, BOTH MEN AND WOMEN, I WILL IN THOSE DAYS POUR FORTH OF MY SPIRIT and they shall prophesy. ‘AND I WILL GRANT WONDERS IN THE SKY ABOVE AND SIGNS ON THE EARTH BELOW, BLOOD, AND FIRE, AND VAPOR OF SMOKE. THE SUN WILL BE TURNED INTO DARKNESS AND THE MOON INTO BLOOD, BEFORE THE GREAT AND GLORIOUS DAY OF THE LORD SHALL COME. AND IT SHALL BE THAT EVERYONE WHO CALLS ON THE NAME OF THE LORD WILL BE SAVED’” (Acts 2:14-21).

It is obvious that Peter is quoting a large portion of text from Joel 2:28-32, describing end-time events that are to occur. Those who believe that the Bible has major contradictions would say that Peter was wrong in saying this, not because of Joel’s prophecy about people receiving the Holy Spirit and prophesying, but because he says, “I will display wonders in the sky and on the earth, blood, fire and columns of smoke. The sun will be turned into darkness and the moon into blood before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes. And it will come about that whoever calls on the name of the LORD will be delivered; for on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there will be those who escape, as the LORD has said, even among the survivors whom the LORD calls” (Joel 2:30-32). It is obvious to anyone who reads the Bible that this has yet to happen.

Was Peter wrong to say “And in the last days it shall be” (RSV)? From a human perspective, looking at it in linear time, Peter may have been wrong. But from God’s perspective, looking down at things *outside of time*, and following the course of history not day-by-day, but millennia-by-millennia, the last 2,000 years have technically been “the Last Days.” Notice how both Joel and Peter place a higher priority on the Holy Spirit being poured out on God’s people, and consider God’s judgment on the world to be secondary. What was Peter focusing on at Pentecost? He was focusing on the Holy Spirit being poured out, and logically quoted from the remainder of Joel’s prophecy. From the Lord’s perspective, we have been in “the Last Days” since that time, even though we await the prophetic fulfillment of many more events.

There are theologians who believe otherwise, and actually base their claims on the words of Yeshua. The Messiah said to His Disciples, “Truly I say to you, there are some of those who are standing here who will not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom” (Matthew 16:28; cf. Mark 9:1; Luke 9:27). Some claim that Yeshua was wrong to have said this, because His Kingdom was not manifested in the lives of His Disciples. Others, asserting that Yeshua could not be wrong, have had to spiritualize or allegorize His statement, claiming that we are indeed presently in God’s Kingdom. Yet, the narrative of the Gospels themselves explains the fact that there were indeed Disciples of Yeshua who saw Him “coming in His kingdom”:

“Six days later Yeshua took with Him Peter and James and John his brother, and led them up on a high mountain by themselves. And He was transfigured before them; and His face shone like the sun, and His garments became as white as light. And behold, Moses and Elijah appeared to them, talking with Him. Peter said to Yeshua, ‘Lord, it is good for us to be here; if You wish, I will make three tabernacles here, one for You, and one for Moses, and one for Elijah.’ While he was still speaking, a bright cloud overshadowed them, and behold, a voice out of the cloud said, ‘This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well-pleased; listen to Him!’ When the disciples heard *this*, they fell face down to the ground and were terrified” (Matthew 7:1-6).

In this dramatic scene, Yeshua is transfigured in all of His radiant glory before Peter, James, and John. They see Moses and Elijah appear before the Lord, and indeed get a glimpse of the Kingdom. The Kingdom appears in visible form before these Disciples, and they are so

convinced that it has indeed “come to Earth” that Peter suggests that they build three tabernacles or booths for the three of them to live in. But when He does this the voice of God the Father Himself overshadows them, and they have no choice but to bow down to the Supreme One. Consider what would happen if Yeshua walked into our homes today. What would we do? Would we claim to have seen “the Kingdom of God”? Would we walk up to Yeshua and greet Him as though He were just another human? Or, would we be hiding ourselves under furniture and carpet from His presence?

But it does not stop there, the Apostle John is indeed shown a vision of the Heavenly realm in the distant future, when the Kingdom of God has been made fully manifest. John is told, “Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after these things” (Revelation 4:1). He sees the awesome scene of Yeshua the Messiah sitting on His throne, with the elders bowing down before Him. In his revelation, He is shown the judgment that is dispersed upon Planet Earth in the Last Days, the Millennial reign of Yeshua, and He also sees the New Heavens and the New Earth and the complete restoration of God’s Creation. He sees Yeshua worshipped for who He is, as the elders proclaim, “Worthy are You, our Lord and our God, to receive glory and honor and power; for You created all things, and because of Your will they existed, and were created” (Revelation 4:11). Yeshua was right: **some of His Disciples did get to see His Kingdom coming in power.**

The restoration of God’s Kingdom on Earth is the whole focus of the Last Days. The seventy-weeks prophecy given to Daniel says that “Seventy weeks have been decreed for your people and your holy city, to finish the transgression, to make an end of sin, to make atonement for iniquity, to bring in everlasting righteousness, to seal up vision and prophecy and to anoint the most holy *place*” (Daniel 9:24). I believe that the most important of the things to happen is “eternal righteousness ushered in” (NJPS). Has this happened? Have we seen eternal righteousness fully manifested in the world today? Are we living in the restored Kingdom of God on Earth?

Perhaps there are elements of these things that we currently partake of as Believers, and as members of the Body of Messiah we do make up “the Kingdom of God.” Yeshua was absolutely right when He said, “The time is fulfilled, and kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel” (Mark 1:15). The Kingdom of God is alive in each and every one of us, but there are dimensions of the Kingdom that have yet to manifest themselves. The Kingdom of God must be built through the redemption of individual human souls, which Yeshua emphasizes time and time again in the Gospels, but it is ultimately a force that will overtake the sin-cursed world we live in. That is something we are still awaiting to see. But can we make the jump and say that it is “all over,” that the “end-times” are now behind us, and that we are now living “in the Kingdom” as though it were fully manifest on Earth?

This past *Chanukah* season, we cannot help but be drawn to the prophecies of Daniel, some of which describe the rise of the evil Antiochus Epiphanes, as well as the prophecies of Yeshua in Matthew 24, which outline the Last Days. Antiochus Epiphanes was an evil man and was responsible for committing a desolate act on the Temple Mount. What he did prefigured events that would happen in the future. But did he prefigure events that would happen in the “immediate future,” or for our future today?

There are some who believe that the events of Yeshua’s Olivet Discourse have already taken place. To a certain extent, some of Yeshua’s prophecies are generic enough that perhaps there is some logic in seeing an ongoing historical fulfillment of them. But some of them are quite specific. Yeshua says that “This gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all the nations, and then the end will come” (Matthew 24:14). Looking at this prophecy in its most generic sense, it has not been fulfilled. The good news of salvation has not reached out to all the world, to say nothing about the good news of Israel’s restoration. This did not happen in the First Century, in spite of the strident missionary work of the Apostles and their immediate successors. Furthermore, Yeshua qualifies that the Abomination of Desolation must take place, and references the Prophet Daniel:

“Therefore when you see the ABOMINATION OF DESOLATION which was spoken of through Daniel the prophet, standing in the holy place (let the reader understand), then those who are in Judea must flee to the mountains. Whoever is on the housetop must not go down to get the things out that are in his house. Whoever is in the field must not turn back to get his cloak. But woe to those who are pregnant and to those who are nursing babies in those days! But pray that your flight will not be in the winter, or on a Sabbath” (Matthew 24:15-20).

Yeshua says that when this happens, those who live in Jerusalem must flee the city with nothing but the clothes on their back. Yeshua references the prophecies of Daniel, which tell us of a man who is to come and commit the worst possible abomination on the Temple Mount. In the text it is described as *kenaf shiqqutzim* (כְּנֶפֶף שִׁקְצֻצִים), literally “the extreme of abominations”:

“And he will make a firm covenant with the many for one week, but in the middle of the week he will put a stop to sacrifice and grain 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 one who makes desolate” (Daniel 9:27).

This is the man who makes, or “confirms” (KJV, NIV) a treaty with Israel for one week. His abomination will make the abomination of Antiochus and others look like nothing. But the challenge in comparing the events of Antiochus and what Yeshua talks about is that some have claimed that the abomination Yeshua refers to has already taken place. It is said that it occurred when the Romans destroyed Jerusalem in 70 C.E. I have even seen a few Messianic Bible teachers refer to the phrase “let the reader understand” as a clue that Yeshua wanted His audience to know Daniel’s prophecies to know that the Romans would commit an abomination. Yet, this is impossible because the remark “let the reader understand” is a textual addition by Matthew, and it is widely agreed by both conservative and liberal theologians that Matthew wrote his Gospel after 70 C.E., *after the destruction of the Temple*. Either Matthew is recording a post-dated prophecy, or he is recording something *to occur in the future*.

Suffice it to say, the bulk of Yeshua’s words in the Olivet Discourse remain unfulfilled. They end with the admonition that He will gather His elect from all over the Earth. And in Paul’s parallel words, “so shall we ever be with the Lord”:

“But immediately after the tribulation of those days THE SUN WILL BE DARKENED, AND THE MOON WILL NOT GIVE ITS LIGHT, AND 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 THE SKY with power and great glory. And He will send forth His angels with A GREAT TRUMPET and THEY WILL GATHER TOGETHER His elect from the four winds, from one end of the sky to the other” (Matthew 24:29-31).

“For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of *the* archangel and with the trumpet of God, and the dead in Messiah will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we shall always be with the Lord” (1 Thessalonians 4:16-17).

This is how these things are all supposed to end, and they have yet to occur. The resurrection has not taken place, and we are presently not living with the Lord forever. But in spite of all of this we have been living in “the Last Days” since the Holy Spirit being poured out at *Shavuot*/Pentecost. What have we missed? What have we failed to see?

In the past several years, I have not devoted as much of my time as I would like to have to the study of Scripture’s prophetic message. This has been largely due to the number of non-eschatology related theological issues that the Messianic movement has faced. As I survey the field, I see that many people do not have a mature attitude when it comes to this subject. Some, as my family experienced in our early days of being Messianic, have sensationalized the Bible’s prophetic message, and made claims that have proven to be false. But now I have encountered others in the Messianic community who are embracing views that say “it was all fulfilled in 70 A.D.”

Why is this the case? I think part of the problem comes from a human inability to deal with the Divine judgment of God on Earth. Whenever it comes to prophecy, we are struck with the stark reality that billions of people are going to die in the apocalypse. Some people revel with the idea of Divine judgment, and look forward to it to occur. **They are very misguided!** Have some, in reaction to this, accepted the belief that “it has already taken place”? Because the Book of Revelation is so full of Divine judgment, is it easier to adopt a position that it took place in the First Century?

If this is our approach to prophecy, then I believe we indeed have a very long way to go. I do not believe the extremes of looking for Yeshua’s return around every corner, or looking for events to take place in every newspaper article, are healthy for the lifestyle of a Believer. Likewise, I do not believe saying that “it’s already finished” is healthy, either. That is a remark of a person who does not want to deal with the reality of Divine punishment on mankind, or who personally cannot handle the idea of the end-time apocalypse.

The latter view has disturbed me greatly recently. In light of the abuse of prophecy and failed end-time predictions, there seems to be a backlash in the Messianic community of people adopting preterist forms of eschatology. Some Messianics have adopted the idea that being Torah observant is controversial enough, and so by adopting the view that most of the “end-time events” occurred in the past, they can pursue their Torah studies safely and unbothered. Some have taken a less-dramatic approach, claiming that when the end-times are truly upon us, then they will examine prophetic Scriptures. Until then, their attitude is that it really does not matter. I feel that neither attitude is good.

Whether we like it or not, the Messianic community is always going to have a connection to the modern-day State of Israel. There are prophecies concerning Israel that have yet to occur. All Israel is to be restored in the days before Yeshua returns. Regardless of how things will specifically play out, and specific interpretations of them, this is something acknowledged by all pre-millennialists who believe that Yeshua returns before His thousand-year reign. They all believe Israel will be restored. But if we adopt any other point of view, we have to be led to the conclusion that God’s Kingdom is already present on Earth, *in its fullness*. Can we believe this? Perhaps *elements of God’s Kingdom* can be captured on Earth among the saints, but if God’s Kingdom is fully present on Earth, I am certainly not impressed, and I know many others are not, either. Sin is still present in the world. We cannot gloss over the end-times as though they do not exist.

The Messianic community has to begin to have a mature attitude regarding this subject matter. One way we can do this is shift our vocabulary away from using “end-time prophecy” to using “eschatology.” This is because the term “end-time prophecy” is frequently related to someone’s speculation about when the Messiah will return, with dates attached (be it a pre-trib or post-trib view). The study of end things, however, is to be a critical component of our overall theology. Eschatology gives focus and an end to what we are doing, as everything we perform individually or corporately is to work toward the ultimate restoration of God’s Kingdom. In the end, we are going to exist in a state of perfection similar to what Adam and Eve experienced in Eden where everything is in harmony.

Between now and then, certain events have to take place. It is very true that studying eschatology can be controversial, just as following the Torah is controversial for Messianic Believers. But the existence of the State of Israel is controversial. Believing that salvation is only available in Yeshua is controversial. For that same matter, the Bible is controversial. There is always going to be controversy, whether we like it or not.

I will admit that the more I see the amount of work that needs to be done in the Messianic community today, the further and further back I push the return of Yeshua. I do not know if the Lord will return in my lifetime. I believe He possibly will, but there is work to do in the meantime that cannot be overlooked. Likewise, as I perform that work I do not believe it is right for us to forget about His return and gloss over the study of eschatology as though it does not exist. Do you know that one of the reasons why many in the larger Messianic community do not

believe in the restoration of all Israel: Judah, scattered Israel/Ephraim, and the nations, is that they have no eschatology?

We believe in the end-time restoration of Israel because we believe the prophecies have yet to be fulfilled. It is high time that we started developing a coherent eschatology that deals with the diligent and realistic study of prophetic texts, yet still maintains the integrity of post-tribulational pre-millennialism. But that can only come when we have each crossed the line of knowing that only the Father knows when the Son will return, and we have a huge amount of work to do in many different areas of theology. Then, and only then, I believe, will we be put on the fast track to seeing God's Kingdom fully manifested in our midst.

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