

Understanding the Days

Holy Scripture consistently confronts its readers with references to the last days and the end of the world. Such language is smattered throughout the first segments of the Bible (think Genesis 49:1), begins to come into focus with the Major Prophets, and develops into a major theme in the preaching of Christ and the Apostolic message.

Peter's Pentecost sermon in Acts 2 belies his assumption that his days are the last days. In verses 16-21 he applies the prophecy of Joel 2 to his own time and speaks of them as "the last days," "those days," and "the Day of the Lord." Typical of Paul are statements such as I Corinthians 10:11 which the NASB renders as,

Now these things happened to them as an example, and they were written for our instruction, upon whom the ends of the ages have come.

The Apostle John, in 1 John 2:18, informs his readers that "It is the last time," and he goes so far as to repeat himself in the same verse.

Such repeated emphasis on the same theme indicates that this was a preeminent subject in the earliest days of the New Testament age. A topic which undoubtedly colored the way in which the church of those days viewed the world around them. Therefore it is of no small importance for readers of Scripture in every age to properly grasp what is being set forth by such language as "the last days," "the end times," and "the end of the world." Did Christ and the Apostles believe that the end of the world was upon them? Were they mistaken if this was their belief? Could it be that it is we modern day readers who are mistaken?

Whenever a controversy arises regarding how to interpret any aspect or portion of the Bible it is important to keep front and center the fact that Scripture is the best interpreter of Scripture. The Apostles did not write in a vacuum. That their minds were steeped in the Spirit inspired writings of the prophets and priests which had come before them is readily evidenced by their frequent usage of Old Testament texts to buttress their arguments. So when the Apostles present an idea that appears hard to understand the reader's first instinct should be to dig into the Spirit inspired Old Testament which the Apostles so heavily rely upon.

Old Testament Introduction of the Last Days

Understanding the concept of "the days" as employed in the Hebrew segments of the Scriptures make necessary a few words regarding the Hebrew language. Semitic languages in the ancient near east (which would include the Hebrew language) commonly possessed no single word that adequately conveyed the idea of the entire earth and all that was upon it. This limited vocabulary is betrayed by such expressions as "heavens and earth" which appear regularly in the earliest books of the Bible. Similar phraseology includes "the heavens, the earth, and the waters under the earth" and "the earth and all that moves upon it." As the language developed single words began to appear which took the place of these lengthier phrases. Of interest is that the earliest word which began to convey the idea of "the world" was not a new word but rather an already existing word that was repurposed. This word was Ha-'Olām. Significantly, Ha-'Olām was a word which was in common use as a reference for time and periods of time. The root Olām appears most frequently in the book of Psalms where it occurs well over one hundred times with various prefixes. Its usage in these passages is generally to set forward a long

duration of time or eternity. Despite this prior meaning, it began to be applied in situations that connoted the entirety of creation. So that in place of lengthy phrases such as “the heavens, the earth, and the waters under the earth” Hebrew authors began to employ Ha-'Olām. That it began to carry this dual meaning is seen most clearly in Ecclesiastes 3:11 where the NASB renders “has set eternity in their hearts” but the KJV gives “hath set the world in their hearts.” With the Ha-'Olām carrying this double meaning it is understandable that it might be translated as either world or eternity as the word can be legitimately read both ways.

Technicalities aside, the takeaway is that Hebrew terms for “the world” frequently cross-pollinated with time references in such a way that the two could be interchangeable. To speak of “the world” was synonymous with “the days that are” or “the age that is.” That such mixed usages still hold a grasp on modern vocabulary is evidenced by phrases such as “the Roman world” being freely substituted with “the age of Rome.” To speak of an epoch in a way that is inclusive of all which is contained therein by way of a time reference such as “age” or spacial reference such as “world” becomes quite easy when applied in the vernacular.

The popular effect of the double usage of certain words to convey meanings of both time and space is that time references such as “those days” begin to be inclusive of all that is contained therein. Again, this is commonly done in contemporary settings when speaking about “the Victorian age” or “the Elizabethan age.” To speak of that age is also to speak of what is contained in that age. This is a regular practice on the part of the Hebrew prophets.

The major and minor prophets of the Old Testament employ a wide variety of style and expressions but they nearly all convey a basic sense of expectation regarding the future. The author's current day is commonly depicted as a day of trouble and his time as one of backsliding and woe which is contrasted with a future day of salvation, deliverance, and restoration. The simple dichotomy is between the current age and the future age. The age in which the prophet lives is wicked, evil, and deserving of judgment; while the coming age will usher in peace and righteousness.

The prophet Micah is readily available as an illustration of this “age that is”/“age that is to come” contrast. Chapter 1 reads

Hear, all ye people; hearken, O earth, and all that therein is: and let the Lord GOD be witness against you, the Lord from his holy temple. For, behold, the LORD cometh forth out of his place, and will come down, and tread upon the high places of the earth. And the mountains shall be molten under him, and the valleys shall be cleft, as wax before the fire, and as the waters that are poured down a steep place. For the transgression of Jacob is all this, and for the sins of the house of Israel. What is the transgression of Jacob? is it not Samaria? and what are the high places of Judah? are they not Jerusalem? (Micah 1:2-5)

Chapter four then responds with the future hope:

But in the last days it shall come to pass, that the mountain of the house of the LORD shall be established in the top of the mountains, and it shall be exalted above the hills; and people shall flow unto it. And many nations shall come, and say, Come, and let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, and to the house of the God of Jacob; and he will teach us of his ways, and we will walk in his paths: for the law shall go forth of Zion, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.

And he shall judge among many people, and rebuke strong nations afar off; and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruninghooks: nation shall not lift up a sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more. But they shall sit every man under his vine and under his fig tree; and none shall make them afraid: for the mouth of the LORD of hosts hath spoken it. (Micah 4:1-4)

The contrast should be obvious. Micah's day is depicted as being one of great wickedness deserving judgment, whereas the future period, the "last days," is seen as a time of peace and righteousness. Micah is here employing "last days" both as a time of certain duration and as an all encompassing order of affairs. A double usage which has been shown to be perfectly acceptable in accordance with the development of his own language and the practices of the modern day.

Upon thorough examination the prophetic hope of the "the last days" becomes a regular motif for Old Testament expectation of the future. Hosea 3:5 reads,

Afterward shall the children of Israel return, and seek the LORD their God, and David their king; and shall fear the LORD and his goodness in the latter days.

Jeremiah 50:20 says,

In those days, and in that time, saith the LORD, the iniquity of Israel shall be sought for, and there shall be none; and the sins of Judah, and they shall not be found: for I will pardon them whom I reserve.

Amos 9:11-13 says,

In that day will I raise up the tabernacle of David that is fallen, and close up the breaches thereof; and I will raise up his ruins, and I will build it as in the days of old: That they may possess the remnant of Edom, and of all the heathen, which are called by my name, saith the LORD that doeth this. Behold, the days come, saith the LORD, that the plowman shall overtake the reaper, and the treader of grapes him that soweth seed; and the mountains shall drop sweet wine, and all the hills shall melt.

The idea of a simple contrast between the age that is and the age that is to come is again and again being impressed upon the reader. "In that day," "in those days," "in the latter days," "in the last days," etc... are regularly occurring phrases employed by the prophets to give expression to the messianic hope which all of these passages convey. Their consistent expectation is for a future day wherein righteousness shall dwell.

Apostolic Usage of the Last Days

Having examined the Old Testament background to the concept of the last days it would seem appropriate to now return to the original query: in what sense were the Apostles convinced that their days were the last days? Did they mistakenly believe that the world was going to come to an end at any moment or was their usage perhaps more in line with the message the Old Testament has been shown to convey? Could it be that the Apostles, sharing the Hebrew outlook of a contrast between two ages, believed themselves to now be living in that future blessed age?

Hebrews 1:1 employs the language of "the last days." It says,

God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets, Hath in these last days spoken unto us by his Son, whom he hath appointed heir of all things, by whom also he made the worlds.

Clearly the author's belief is that he is living in "the last days" and that the defining characteristics of this age are that God has spoken through Christ and that Christ is now heir of all things. Contemporary Bible readers often attempt to construe last days references such as Hebrews 1 to mean that the original audience understood Christ to be returning to end history at any moment. However in light of what was seen in the Old Testament usage of such terminologies, this is most likely incorrect. Much more likely is that the author of Hebrews is communicating that both he and his audience now live in that blessed messianic age which the prophets had long foretold. Christ, the promised deliver, had come. He had smashed the condemning power of sin on the cross, opened the way of salvation, and become the first-born of many brethren. The Apostolic message is consistently one of hope, of belief in the all-powerful work and person of Jesus Christ. It is not a pessimistic and gloomy expectation of imminent destruction but rather an optimistic rhapsody of the divine power and glory made plain unto men.

The last days as made mention of by the Apostles should not be interpreted as a short period near the end of the world but rather as the final epoch in a grand and sweeping two age dichotomy. The Hebrew mind had for a millennium viewed history as a dichotomy between the age that was and the age that was to come. All of the prophetic expectation was geared toward the blessed age which was to come. These would be "the last days." The last days is in this schematic the title for an entire world order. An order that was delivered in power through the work of Jesus Christ and the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. The last days are the days of Christ and His kingdom, however long that time may extend. They exist in contrast to all of the world before Christ. For the Apostles, they had been translated from "the age that was" and into "the age that was to come." Christ had shown Himself in power, He had assumed all dominion unto Himself, and the glorious "last days" spoken of by Micah, Hosea, Jeremiah, Isaiah, etc... had come!

Worlds in Conflict

The language of the last days refers to the final and most perfect epoch of human history; the time of the glorious reign of Christ. It was the realization of what the Hebrew prophets had long foretold and it was the opening of the way of salvation for which the people had long expected.

Be this as it may, it is undoubtedly not lost upon the reader that much of the New Testament language of the last days conveys warnings and threats. How could these "last days" be the time of universal blessedness if passages such as 2 Timothy 3 warn that in the last days there will come perilous times and false teachers? John warns that the last days mark the introduction of the spirit of Antichrist and tells his audience that this spirit is already at work. How can the wonderful hope of the Old Testament opinion of the last days be reconciled with the apparent reality that this "new order," these "last days," will face so much adversity?

The answer is that the two great epochs of human history overlap. The "age that was" did not cease to exist when the last days began to be. Christ ushered in the last days, He broke the power of the former days, but those days are not yet completely removed. The two worlds, the world of Christ entitled "the last days" and the world of rebellion, the former days, would now coincide upon the earth; locked in mortal combat. The last days, while antithetical to the former days, would not occupy a completely

distinct time frame. They would now be contemporaries upon the earth. Contemporaries they have been and will continue to be until the final vestiges of sin and death are destroyed.

Rivals but not Equals

The complete and all consuming conflict between these two ages, two worlds, two kingdoms, was a primary focus in the preaching of John the Baptist and Jesus Christ. John the Baptist came preaching,

And saying, Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand (Matthew 3:2).

In Mark 1:14-15 we are told that,

Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God, And saying, The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand: repent ye, and believe the gospel.

Preaching that the kingdom was at hand was equivalent to saying that the last days were at hand. The arrival of John Baptist meant that the Spirit of God had come to make straight the way of the blessed Messiah and introduce the great messianic age. The work of preparation was the preaching of repentance. The new age, the blessed kingdom, was to exist in antithesis to the former age and repentance and newness of life was demanded of those who would partake. These two kingdoms, the kingdom of darkness and the kingdom of light; these two ages, the former age and the last days were to exist simultaneously upon the earth but they were to have no common characteristics.

This is the true meaning of Christ's words in John 18:36:

Jesus answered, My kingdom is not of this world: if my kingdom were of this world, then would my servants fight, that I should not be delivered to the Jews: but now is my kingdom not from hence.

Christ's kingdom, the age to come, the last days, is not of this world (i.e. the age that is), it is fundamentally distinct. Christ is not here saying that He does not have a kingdom, He is not implying that His kingdom is powerless, or that it manifests its power somewhere other than on plant earth; rather He is making plain the distinction that unlike the Roman officers and the Jewish priesthood He drew His authority from the kingdom of light. The apostate Jewish people and the wicked Roman order stood firmly within the former age, the world of darkness; Christ had come to introduce the world of light, the kingdom of righteousness, the last days, and to open the way there unto. He did not draw His kingship from the fallen world, and the citizens of His world did not use the same tactics as those who remained in the darkness. Of course both the Jewish nation and the Roman Empire were very soon to discover exactly how present and how powerful Christ's "last days" kingdom really was.

The fact that the two ages, the two kingdoms, exist as rivals is also set forth in 2 Corinthians 4. The KJV translates 4:3-4,

But if our gospel be hid, it is hid to them that are lost: In whom the god of this world hath blinded the minds of them which believe not, lest the light of the glorious gospel of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine unto them.

Satan is here titled "the god of this world." But the world here spoken of is not the physical earth but rather the "world" of the former age, the kingdom of darkness. Young's Literal Translation makes this more plain, rendering 2 Corinthians 4:3-4 thus,

and if also our good news is veiled, in those perishing it is veiled, in whom the god of this age did blind the minds of the unbelieving, that there doth not shine forth to them the enlightening of the good news of the glory of the Christ, who is the image of God.

Notice that here Satan is "the god of this age." The reason that "world" and "age" can be substituted for one another is due to the previously explained principle of inter correlation between time references and spacial terms. Satan is the god of "his days" and those who dwell in darkness (i.e. obey not the gospel) are citizens of the days of Satan; whereas Christ is the God of "His Days" and those who do obey the gospel (i.e. believe on Christ) are His citizens.

Ephesians 5:15-16 makes a similar point when it says,

See then that ye walk circumspectly, not as fools, but as wise, Redeeming the time, because the days are evil.

How are "the days" evil? Paul has been drawing a contrast between the kingdom of darkness and the kingdom of light in Ephesians 5 and here he falls back on the common expression of "the days" as a way to remind his listeners that the sinful things of this world belong to Satan. "The days" of verse 16 exist in contrast with the work of the Holy Spirit mentioned in verses 1,2 and 9.

Having seen that Satan does remain as the "god of this world" (i.e. his world, the world of darkness as opposed to Christ's kingdom of righteousness) and head over "his days," it must be realized that Christ's Last Days Kingdom is infinitely more powerful. The "two days" are rivals, but they are not equals. Christ guarantees as much when He declares

And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it (Matthew 16:18).

Christ's church, the point break of "the last days," would wage an offensive war which would batter down the very gates of Satan's dominions.

It is the inspired expectation of Christ and His Apostles that His kingdom would grow as a mighty tree and that Satan's kingdom would pass away. Paul says as much in 1 Corinthians 7:31, which the NASB gives as

the form of this world is passing away.

For Paul, the things of "this world" (i.e. the things of Satan's kingdom) are worthless because they are fleeting and "passing away."

Peter's Pentecost sermon assumes the all powerful nature of Christ's dominion. He preaches in Acts 2:17

And it shall come to pass in the last days, saith God, I will pour out of my Spirit upon all flesh: and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams.

And in verses 29-33 he says,

Men and brethren, let me freely speak unto you of the patriarch David, that he is both dead and buried, and his sepulchre is with us unto this day. Therefore being a prophet, and knowing that

God had sworn with an oath to him, that of the fruit of his loins, according to the flesh, he would raise up Christ to sit on his throne; He seeing this before spake of the resurrection of Christ, that his soul was not left in hell, neither his flesh did see corruption. This Jesus hath God raised up, whereof we all are witnesses. Therefore being by the right hand of God exalted, and having received of the Father the promise of the Holy Ghost, he hath shed forth this, which ye now see and hear.

For Peter the last days had come and they were the days of Christ's glorious power. Satan's day of darkness had not been totally driven from the field but it was no match for the power of Christ.

It is Paul who tells us how long the two orders will exist simultaneously. In 1 Corinthians 15:24-28 he explains,

Then cometh the end, when he shall have delivered up the kingdom to God, even the Father; when he shall have put down all rule and all authority and power. For he must reign, till he hath put all enemies under his feet. The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death. For he hath put all things under his feet. But when he saith, all things are put under him, it is manifest that he is excepted, which did put all things under him. And when all things shall be subdued unto him, then shall the Son also himself be subject unto him that put all things under him, that God may be all in all.

The kingdom of Satan remains to some limited degree as long as death is still present. Death, Paul tells us, is the last enemy to be defeated, at "the end." The "former ages" will pass away and the gates of hell will be smashed down, but it is not an immediate all-at-once event. The "last days" have arrived with power, the power of the "former age" has been broken, Christ and His Church are about the work of progressively vanquishing the foe!