

# ESCHATOLOGY: DOCTRINE OF LAST THINGS

## HERMENEUTICS, PART 1

This is the division of Systematic Theology that is concerned with last things or, as Chafer put it “things to come.” The word eschatology is derived from the Greek word *ἐσχάτος* which means extreme, last, or least, hence, last things. “The Gk. language can use *ἐσχάτος* to designate the endpoint of a continuously conceived succession of circumstances. In Aristotle, the term denotes the conclusion of a logical path of thought and thus contributes to the systematization of the thought processes. The temporal dimension is expressed in occasional prospects of the end, but Gk. thought has no developed eschat[ological] understanding of time, i.e., one directed toward a future goal or end of the historical process” [*New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology and Exegesis*, s.v. “*ἐσχάτος*”]. Our concept of Eschatology is, in fact, a description of a divinely revealed train of thought which can be systematized into a coherent study. While the Greeks did not think in terms of a culmination of history, the Bible clearly reveals that history will indeed cease and our study of eschatology informs us of not only of that end but of the events that have transpired getting us to this point in history. What we see in terms of God’s plan for history is a succession of events all over the world that are continuously and relentlessly moving to a divinely ordained end point. Eschatology is concerned with examining that sequence of events.

Eschatology is not all about prophecy that has yet to be fulfilled. “...Systematic Theology is concerned with things to come and should not be limited to things which are future at some particular time in human history, but should contemplate all that was future in character at the time its revelation was given. The time word *now* is ever moving and things yet future at the present time will soon have passed into history. A worthy Eschatology must embrace all prediction whether fulfilled or unfulfilled at a given time. In other words, a true Eschatology attempts to account for all the prophecy set forth in the Bible.” [Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 4:255].

I want to suggest some issues that we might want to consider as presuppositions to our study of Eschatology. These are my own thoughts on the issue; you may agree with them or not. 1) The primary focus of Eschatology is the Messianic Kingdom. 2) While the church is the subject of some prophecy, Eschatology is primarily weighted towards Israel rather than the church. Replacement theologians are incapable of understanding this fact and it leads them into heretical doctrines. 3) World events have steadily progressed throughout history toward the establishment of a one world government, a one world business structure, and a one world religion. These events seem to be increasing their momentum over the last two centuries and in the last two decades they have really accelerated the pace. 4) Literal hermeneutics is the only

interpretive method that will allow us to determine biblical truth concerning prophetic events.

I also want to issue a warning. It is very dangerous to use current events as a gauge by which to attempt to determine the immediacy of prophetic events. There are entire ministries in existence today that do that and all it does is keep people on edge grasping at every new event for the prophetic significance it might hold. In order to stay in business, they have to keep producing materials that seemingly get wilder and more bizarre as time goes on. For example, when the European Union started, people were certain this was the genesis of the ten kings from whom the antichrist was going to arise. The Y2K situation back in 1999 was nothing but hysterical Henny Penny the sky is falling nonsense. When Israel was established in 1948 people misinterpreted "this generation" to mean the generation living at the time of the return of the state but that was not the correct interpretation. People immediately started date setting based on the supposed duration of a generation. Hal Lindsey fell into this trap and his reputation has suffered serious harm because of it.

Having said that, there is one current event that does have major significance concerning prophetic events and that is the nation of Israel. That the Jewish nation has been reestablished back in the land in unbelief is a significant prophetic event that is being fulfilled at this time. Some people say there is no prophecy being fulfilled at this time but I disagree with that. We will examine the issue of Israel back in the land later. One could say that the church is also fulfilling some prophecy to some degree today. When Jesus said "I will build my Church," fulfillment began at Pentecost and it is still an ongoing fulfillment of prophecy to this day. When Paul said lawlessness would be restrained until the restraint is removed, that is still an ongoing fulfillment of prophecy. The restrainer is still operating today. Paul told Timothy that there would be a falling away and a defection to false teachers in the last days and that is an ongoing fulfillment of prophecy today. The times of the Gentiles are a prophecy that is an ongoing fulfillment of prophecy today. Much of what is happening in the world today, however, is probably more properly characterized as stage setting for end times prophetic fulfillment. Perhaps, based on current events, much of what we think we know today will be proven wrong tomorrow. We won't know for certain until the prophecies come to pass.

Very few pastors, theologians, and laymen correctly understand prophecy and this is all due to hermeneutics. This lack of understanding has two facets too it. One is the use of less than literal hermeneutics and the other is related and that is the imposition of one's particular brand of theology into the prophetic Scriptures. It is very common for prophetic Scriptures to be interpreted according to an allegorical hermeneutic. Concerning theology, for example, replacement theologians must interpret prophecy

to reflect the church and totally ignore Israel because their theology demands that the church has replaced Israel in God's prophetic plan. Another hermeneutical method they use to avoid the literal truth of Scripture is to employ genre hermeneutics. In other words, Revelation is interpreted according to an apocalyptic genre which uses symbols and imagery to make its point; therefore, they claim there is no appropriate literal understanding of the book. Even beyond that, they will make the claim that apocalyptic literature is impossible to literally interpret. The problem for them is the symbolic language used in Revelation is often interpreted in the book itself with a literal meaning and symbolic, figurative language always has a literal meaning it is representing. There is nothing wrong with taking the genre of a book into consideration when conducting the exegesis of that book, but it doesn't control meaning.

Dr. Zuck provided a balanced view of apocalyptic literature and literal hermeneutics.

“A large portion of the prophetic literature of the Bible records what the prophets saw in visions. These portions are often referred to as ‘apocalyptic.’ Portions of Ezekiel, Daniel, Zechariah, and much of Revelation are apocalyptic. (*Apocalyptic* comes from the Greek word *apokalypsis* translated ‘revelation’ in Revelation 1:1. An apocalypse then is a disclosure from God.) ...

Besides being given in times of exile or Gentile oppression, apocalyptic literature has four other characteristics: (1) It consists of prophecies given in elaborate visions, (2) it includes many symbols, (3) an angel was often seen in the visions and frequently gave interpretations, and (4) it includes messages regarding the distant future.

The heavy symbolic content of much of prophetic literature makes interpreting prophecy difficult. It also has caused many Bible students to assume that because some things in prophecy are symbolic, everything in prophetic passages is to be taken symbolically. This, however, is an error. If we follow the basic hermeneutical principle of normal, grammatical interpretation, then we should understand prophetic literature, as well as other forms of biblical literature, in their normal, ordinary-literal sense, unless there is reason for taking the material figuratively or symbolically.” [Roy B. Zuck, *Basic Bible Interpretation: A Practical Guide to Discovering Biblical Truth*, p. 243].

The use of figurative speech in the Scriptures is also used as an excuse to criticize literal hermeneutics. A figure of speech “is simply a word or a sentence thrown into a peculiar form, different from its original or simplest meaning or use. ...we take a word which has a certain, definite meaning, and apply the name, or the quality, or the act, to some other thing with which it is associated, by time or place, cause or effect, relation or resemblance.” [E. W. Bullinger, *Figures of Speech Used in the Bible*, p. xv]. Literal hermeneutics accounts for figures of speech and they always have a literal meaning. We can say, “It's raining hard” or we can say “It's raining cats and dogs” and everyone who is a native English speaker knows these mean the same thing. When John the

Baptist exclaimed, "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" the Jewish people understood perfectly well the sacrificial picture of a lamb and when interpreting the Scriptures, we understand it as well. Criticizing literal hermeneutics on the basis of figurative language is using a straw man argument by accusing us of a failure to understand figurative language. For example, Hanegraaff calls our hermeneutic "wooden literalism" as though we can't tell Jesus from a lamb or a door or a light. In Hanegraaff's case, this is actually an *ad hominem* attack on our exegetical expertise and by inference it is an attack on our intelligence. He is attacking the character and the motives of the literal exegete without discussing the merits of the Scripture under consideration. Apocalyptic literature uses many figures of speech so this is an easy argument to use to divert attention away from the real exegetical issues. The point is that figurative speech "is a picturesque, out-of-the-ordinary way of presenting literal facts that might otherwise be stated in a normal, plain, ordinary way. ...behind every figure of speech is a literal meaning, and by means of the historical-grammatical exegesis of the text, these literal meanings are to be sought out." [Roy B. Zuck, *Basic Bible Interpretation: A Practical Guide to Discovering Biblical Truth*, p. 147].

"No question facing the student of Eschatology is more important than the question of the method to be employed in the interpretation of the prophetic Scriptures. The adoption of different methods of interpretation has produced the variant eschatological positions and accounts for the divergent views within a system that confront the student of prophecy. The basic differences between the premillennial and amillennial schools and between the pretribulation and posttribulation rapturists are hermeneutical, arising from the adoption of divergent and irreconcilable methods of interpretation" [J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come: A Study in Biblical Eschatology*, 1].

Allegory has been the enemy of literal hermeneutics and prophecy since very early in church history. Actually, the allegorical interpretation of the Scriptures began with the Jews and falling in love with Greek philosophy was the culprit. "The dubious credit for being the first to use allegorization on the Old Testament Scriptures belongs to the Alexandrian Jews. This was about two hundred years before Christ. In the Egyptian city of Alexandria, Jewish religion and Greek philosophy were in daily and constant contact. The Jews began to notice the ease with which the Greeks allegorized away the uglier portions of their religious heritage, such as the exploits and escapades of the Greek gods, explaining these as ethical and moral struggles. Soon the Alexandrian Jews got the idea. 'In the face of such Old Testament problems such as Lot's incest, the drunkenness of Noah, Jacob's wives and concubines, Judah's seduction of Tamar, minute distinction between what was clean and not clean in the animal kingdom, prohibitions against eating vultures, anthropomorphic descriptions of God, etc., the Alexandrians...resorted to allegorizing.' In addition to the desire to explain away the 'oddities' in the Old Testament, the Jews of Alexandria were also moved by the charm

of Greek literature and philosophy. To them, the Greek philosophy was inspiring, noble and irresistible. And yet, they could not leave their own Mosaic Law, for it was sacred, binding, and eternal. There should be a way whereby the two might be united. Allegorism went to the rescue. Allegorism enabled the Alexandrian Jews to make Moses speak the beautiful philosophy of Plato and other Greek sages. The pinnacle of Alexandrian allegorization rests on one person, Philo of Alexandria. A philosophical Jew who possessed both reverence for the Mosaic revelation and fondness for Grecian metaphysics, Philo aimed to explore the mystical depths of significance allegedly concealed beneath the Old Testament and Scripture. To Philo, the literal sense was 'milk and the allegorical was 'meat.' Only the simple-minded does not aspire to reach the meaty, hidden, and inner levels of Scripture....The allegorical method introduced by the Alexandrian Jews left deep and lasting scars on the study of Scriptures. It lingered for more than fifteen hundred years on up to the time of Reformation, vestiges of it continuing to the present" [Paul Lee Tan, *A Pictorial Guide to Bible Prophecy*, 347].

While Dr. Tan's historical account is correct, his conclusion is extremely inadequate. The inclusion of Greek philosophy into the hermeneutical process is not just a vestige in the present, it is normative and it came down to us through Augustine and his love of Plato's philosophy. Ultimately, Greek philosophy destroyed any semblance of literal hermeneutics Augustine originally possessed, if any, and it led him to amillennialism. Through Augustine's influence, these things are still with us today in many of the various facets of churchianity.

Augustine was converted to Christianity out of the Manichean cult through the influence of Greek philosophy as Plato and Plotinus taught it. Without getting into the weeds of Platonic thought, Plato taught a dualism of the ultimate Good which was the perfect Form or Ideal of what were only shadows in the material world. By the Neo-Platonism and the mysticism of Plotinus, Augustine became convinced he was writing about the biblical God (which he wasn't) and he applied that to Christianity and converted. Augustine then took Greek philosophy and massaged it into what became his "Christian" theology" (which it isn't—Christian, that is).

"According to Plotinus, the Supreme Being is the source of all life, and is therefore absolute causality. This Supreme Being is moreover, the Good, insofar as all finite things have their purpose in it, and ought to flow back to it. The human souls which have descended into corporeality [meaning people; humanity] are those which have allowed themselves to be ensnared by sensuality and overpowered by lust. They must turn back from this; and since they have not lost their freedom, a conversion is still possible.

Here, then, we enter upon the practical aspect of his philosophy. Along the same road by which it descended the soul must retrace its steps back to the Supreme

Good. It must first of all return to itself. This is accomplished by the practice of virtue, which aims at likeness to God, and leads up to God. In the ethics of Plotinus all the older schemes of virtue are taken over and arranged in a graduated series. The lowest stage is that of the civil virtues; then follow the purifying; and last of all the divine virtues. The civil virtues merely adorn the life, without elevating the soul. This is the purpose of the purifying virtues, by which the soul is freed from sensuality and led back to itself, and thence to the Supreme Being. By means of ascetic observances the man becomes once more a spiritual and enduring being, free from all sin.

But there is still a higher attainment; it is not enough to be sinless, one must become 'God.' This is reached through contemplation of the Supreme Being, the One—in other words, through an ecstatic approach, the soul may become one with God, the fountain of life, the source of being, the origin of all good, the root of the soul. In that moment, it enjoys the highest indescribable bliss; it is as it were swallowed up of divinity, bathed in the light of eternity.

As Porphyry set out to popularize the teachings of Plotinus, he emphasized the religious side of New-Platonism. The object of philosophy, according to Porphyry, is the salvation of the soul. The origin and the cause of evil are not in the body, but in the desires of the soul. Hence, the strictest asceticism (abstinence from meat, wine, and sexual relations) is demanded, as well as the knowledge of God" [David R. Anderson, *Free Grace Soteriology*, 348].

In Augustine's pre-Christian days he lived a life that was apparently full of debauchery. He then got involved in the Manichean cult which also demanded an ascetic life and like Plato taught dualism. Plotinus's asceticism played right into Augustine's mindset. He also adopted Plato's dualism in which all that is of the spiritual realm is good and all that is of this life on earth is not good. Obviously, Augustine massaged some of this Greek philosophy to more nearly conform to the Bible, but his theology was largely developed out of Manichean paganism and Greek philosophy.

"Manichaeism is essentially dualistic. Its adherents believed that the human body is the product of the Kingdom of Darkness (evil) and that the soul springs from the Kingdom of Light (good). As Manichaeism developed, its devotees insisted that the historical Jesus was evil but the spiritual Jesus was the good deliverer. With its pervasive dualism running through praxes [practice] as well as theology, the system demanded rigorous asceticism in the life of every 'true' member." [David Beale, *Historical Theology: In-Depth*, p. 1:432]. It is easy to see how Augustine could move from debauchery to Manichean theology to Platonic Greek philosophy to developing his own version of Christian theology. Dualism and asceticism are foundational to both pagan systems of thought and Augustine brought that thinking into his hermeneutic. To be fair, Augustine vigorously opposed the Manicheans after he converted to Christianity, but he never divested himself of the concepts of dualism and asceticism.

The Manichean cult thought the Old Testament's anthropomorphisms of God were absurd and Augustine couldn't let go of that line of thinking. When he heard Ambrose preach on 2 Corinthians 3:6 which states in part, "...for the letter kills but the Spirit gives life" he decided that allegory was the solution to correcting any literal understanding of the Old Testament because the letter kills. The way to solve exegetical problems was to look to the teaching of the church in addition to the Scriptures and allegory was the primary hermeneutic by that time in North Africa. Those who today look to history for confirmation of their allegorical interpretations of Scripture are simply following Augustine's lead. Another way he determined whether or not to allegorize a Scripture was on the basis of love. If a literal interpretation of Scripture caused dissension among the people, then the passage needed to be allegorized so that it was acceptable to everyone. He claimed to understand that the role of the interpreter was to determine the meaning of the Scriptures and not to import a meaning into them but he routinely did that very thing; in fact, that was his normal method of operation. He believed Scripture had more than one meaning and in his mind that justified an allegorical hermeneutic. "In his allegorizing Augustine taught that the four rivers in Genesis 2:10-14 are four cardinal virtues [the four cardinal virtues are temperance, courage, wisdom, and justice and they are the philosophical concoctions of Plato], and that in the Fall the fig leaves represent hypocrisy and the skin covering is mortality (3:7, 21). Noah's drunkenness (Gen. 9:20-23) represents Christ in His suffering and death. The teeth of the Shulamite in Song of Songs 4:2 speak of the church 'tearing men away from heresy.'" [Roy B. Zuck, *Basic Bible Interpretation: A Practical Guide to Discovering Biblical Truth*, pp. 38-40]. In no way are any of these interpretations in concert with the context and a literal meaning within that context. Those who follow Augustine use the same procedures today. They may not be this blatantly fanciful and useless, but the end result is to lead people away from the truth. It is important to note the import of Platonic Greek philosophy into his hermeneutic. None of these Scriptures were divisive so why allegorize them? He seemingly routinely violated his own rules for allegorizing the Scriptures whenever he felt like it.