

THE PROPHETIC TIME FRAME IN THE DAY OF THE LORD PROPHECIES

Eugene Kimble, Ph.D.

“The Day of the Lord” is a sweeping phrase Scripture uses to describe God’s intervention in human history. First, it may describe a divine visitation within history: In Joel 1:15, it consists of a locust plague, datable to about the eighth century B.C.¹ In Isaiah 13:6-13 that Day relates to the taking of Babylon by the Medes and Persians in 539 B.C. In Zephaniah 1:7 it concerns the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 B.C. Second, “the Day of the Lord” may be a final divine visitation that climaxes history in which God assembles all pagan nations to battle and ultimate destruction, delivers His people, and establishes His royal rule. Zechariah vividly describes such a time:

Behold, a day is coming for the LORD when the spoil taken from you will be divided among you. For I will gather all the nations against Jerusalem to battle, and the city will be captured, the houses plundered, the women ravished, and half of the city exiled, but the rest of the people will not be cut off from the city. Then the LORD will go forth and fight against those nations, as when He fights on a day of battle. And in that day His feet will stand on the Mount of Olives, which is in front of Jerusalem on the east; and the Mount of Olives will be split in its middle from east to west by a very large valley, so that half of the mountain will move toward the north and the other half toward the south. And you will flee by the valley of My mountains, for the valley of the mountains will reach to Azel; yes, you will flee just as you fled before the earthquake in the days of Uzziah king of Judah. Then the LORD, my God, will come, and all the holy ones with Him! And it will come about in that day that there will be no light; the luminaries will dwindle. For it will be a unique day which is known to the LORD, neither day nor night, but it will come about that at evening time there will be light. And it will come about in that day that living waters will flow out of Jerusalem, half of them toward the eastern sea and the other half toward the western sea; it will be in summer as well as in winter. And the LORD will be king over all the earth; in that day the LORD will be the only one, and His name the only one. 14:1-9 (See also Is. 66:18; Ezek. 38-39; Zech. 12; Rev. 16:14-16; 19:11-21).

That Day, also, may involve a blessing (Joel 2:28-29), a curse (Joel 2:1-17) or both: an eschatological and apocalyptic destruction of God’s enemies (Zeph. 3:6-13) and deliverance for His people (3:11-20). It may involve cataclysmic and cosmic upheavals (Joel 2:30-31) or come in a local and providential manner (Joel 1:1-2:28). It may both purify the saint (Jer. 46:28) and exterminate the sinner (Jer. 46:10).² Some have summed up “the Day of the Lord” as “the day monopolized by Jehovah as His day of victory.”³ Or, as O. Palmer Robertson says, “On this day, He establishes His sovereign lordship

¹ Roland Kenneth Harrison dates Joel in the fifth century B.C. *Introduction to the Old Testament* (Peabody, MA: Prince Press, 1969), 876-79.

² David W. Baker, *Obadiah*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1988), 94.

³ Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959), 313

over men. Either by instituting the covenant or by enforcing the provisions of the covenant, Yahweh manifests His lordship on that day.”⁴

Telescoping Events

In “the Day of the Lord” prophecies, chronologically separate events are often telescoped, “which refers to the joining together in one context events that are widely separated in their temporal accomplishments.”⁵ For example, “the Day of the Lord” prophecy in Joel involved: (1) a contemporary locust plague (1:1-2:27), (2) the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost (2:28-29; see Acts 2:17-21), and (3) the yet-to-come final salvation of Israel and the overthrow of all pagan nations (2:30-3:21). Joel placed these three prophecies in one context without any time differentiation, which is a characteristic feature of biblical prophecy whether the “Day of the Lord” phrase is used or not.⁶

Isaiah likewise prophesied without time indicators. He said that the contemporary Syrian/Israelite war against Judah (“to tear it apart and divide it among ourselves,” 7:6) would ultimately fail. And it soon did. Isaiah goes on to foretell that God would raise up a virgin-born child to deliver His people Israel (7:14) and that the child would be God in the flesh, whose shoulders would carry all government (9:6-7). The first prophecy was fulfilled about 735 B.C., the second began about 2 - 4 B.C., and the latter part of the third is still unfulfilled. Some of Isaiah’s other prophecies have also yet to be realized (cf. 11:1-16; 66:17-24).

Writing of prophetic telescoping Ladd says,

Jesus spoke both of the fall of Jerusalem and of his own eschatological parousia. [C. E. B.] Cranfield has suggested that in Jesus’ overview the historical and the eschatological are mingled, and that the final eschatological event is seen through the “transparency” of the immediate historical. The present author has applied this thesis to the Old Testament prophets and found this foreshortening view of the future to be one of the essential elements in the prophetic perspective.⁷

Knowing that Old Testament prophecy often telescoped into one context events separated widely in their temporal fulfillment will enable us to better understand Matthew 24:1-25:46 where Jesus’ prophecy of the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 (Matt. 24:1-22; see also Luke 21:20) is compressed into one context with the yet-to-come Rapture and the Second Coming (Matt. 24:23-25:46). This telescoping could also apply to Paul’s prophecy in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:11 and 2 Thessalonians 1:5-10, where the Rapture and Second Coming prophecy may well be two chronologically separate events compressed into one context. In fact, I will argue later that such is exactly the case.

Foreshortening Time

Every system has principles and laws which are not necessarily applicable to other systems. This is true of biblical prophecy’s reference to time in which, not only are different chronological events telescoped into one context, but there is also a foreshortening of time. Both “telescoping” and “foreshortening” are time frames (with

⁴ O. Palmer Robertson, *The Books of Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah*, The New International Commentary of the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 268.

⁵ J. Barton Payne, *The Theology of the Older Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1962), 466.

⁶ O. Palmer Robertson, *op. cit.*, 267.

⁷ George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1974), 198.

both, at times, occurring in the same biblical passage) that make up the “prophetic perspective.” When prophesying of the coming destruction of Babylon, Isaiah said (c. 732 B.C.), “Wail for the **day of the LORD is near**...I will stir up against them the Medes...Babylon, the jewel of kingdoms...will be overthrown by God like Sodom and Gomorrah” (13:6, 17, 19), which calamity occurred in 539 B.C., roughly 163 years after Isaiah uttered, “the Day of the Lord is near.” Isaiah again said, “**In a very short time** will not Lebanon be turned into a fertile field” (29:17 NIV) referring to Israel’s return home from the Babylonian exile in 539-538 B.C. Moreover, the same prophecy in 29:18 (“On that day the deaf will hear words of a book, and out of their gloom and darkness the eyes of the blind will see”) and in 29:23 (“But when he sees his children, the work of My hands, in his midst, they will sanctify My name; indeed, they will sanctify the Holy One of Jacob and will stand in awe of the God of Israel”) probably refers to the Church era and was fulfilled about A.D. 30.⁸ Here we see not only a telescoping of several events into one context but also a foreshortening of time, with the phrase “In a very short time” often referring to events which could take centuries, or even millenniums, to happen.

For example, Zephaniah prophesied (c. 625 B.C.), “**The great day of the LORD is near—near and coming quickly**” (1:14 NIV), with the historical referent probably being the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 B.C.⁹ However, the same prophecy goes beyond Zephaniah’s historical proximity to God’s final judgment on the nations (“‘Therefore wait for Me,’ declares the LORD, ‘For the day when I rise up as a witness. Indeed, My decision is to gather nations, to assemble kingdoms, to pour out on them My indignations, all my burning anger; for all the earth will be devoured by the fire of My zeal,’” 3:8) and the redemption of His people (“Shout for joy, O daughter of Zion! Shout in triumph, O Israel!...The King of Israel, the LORD, is in your midst; you will fear disaster no more. In that day it will be said to Jerusalem: ‘Do not be afraid, O Zion; do not let your hands hang limp. The LORD your God is in your midst...Behold, I am going to deal at that time with all your oppressors...At that time I will bring you in...Indeed, I will give you renown and praise among all the people of the earth,’” 3:14-17, 19-20).¹⁰

This prophetic time frame is not an incidental, but a prominent, feature of biblical prophecy. Joel’s eighth century prophecy “**the day of the LORD is near** in the valley of decision” (3:14), is yet to happen. A few more examples are: “Hyenas will howl in her strongholds, jackals in her luxurious places. **Her [Babylon’s] time is at hand**, her days will not be prolonged” (Is. 13:22 NIV). “**My righteousness is near, my salvation has gone forth**, and My arms will judge the peoples” (51:5). Obadiah foretold, “**For the day of the LORD draws near** on all the nations. As you [nations] have done [to God’s people] it will be done to you,” (15), spoken about 585 B. C. and partially fulfilled about 500 B. C. when the Arabs expelled the Edomites from their ancestral homeland. The last verse of the prophecy (21) is best understood as referring to the establishment of the Millennial Kingdom, when God’s people will rule the earth under their Messianic King.¹¹ In like manner, Ezekiel said, “For the day is near, **the day of the LORD is near**...I will disperse the Egyptians among the nations and scatter them through the countries...Then they [all Egypt] will know that I am the LORD,” (Ezek. 30:3, 26 NIV). Verse three was

⁸ Edward J. Young, *The Book of Isaiah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969), II, 332.

⁹ David W. Baker, *op. cit.*, 95.

¹⁰ O. Palmer Robertson, *op. cit.*, 253-347.

¹¹ David W. Baker, *op. cit.*, 43.

fulfilled in Ezekiel's time, but verse 26 is still future.¹² And finally, "Then all your people will be righteous; they will possess the land forever, the branch of My planting, the work of My hand, that I may be glorified. I the LORD will hasten it in its time," (Is. 60:21-22). Edward J. Young comments here, "although the work of God may seem slow to us, nevertheless, in His own time He hastens it (i.e. He suddenly acts when men are not expecting it)."¹³ Young's concluding comment may explain why God used foreshortening of time. In both the Old and New Testaments, it is one wonderful method by which God keeps His people in every generation faithful to Him, persevering in His cause, by setting up tension between imminence and delay in the believer's expectation of Christ's Return. The stress on imminence is needed in order to create a response of watchfulness in Christians' lives. The delay is needed for God to work His program, to train His people for the coming Kingdom of God, and to show mercy upon mankind. The prophets (both Old and New Testament) spoke to people in their historical situation and called upon them to serve God without reservation as they awaited His salvation. In doing this, prophecy took on a time-shortened perspective, allowing for both imminence and delay of future events. Ladd sets forth the grand result: "it is the nature of biblical prophecy to make it possible for every generation to live in expectancy of the end."¹⁴

Conclusion

Understanding God's telescoping of prophecy helps us to interpret New Testament passages such as Matthew 24:1-25:46, where the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, the Rapture of the Church and Christ's Second Coming to judge the nations follow the established "prophetic perspective." Many scholars recognize this telescoping feature in Matthew.¹⁵ What is seldom discussed, however, is that the Rapture and Second Coming in both 1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:11 and in 2 Thessalonians 1:3-2:12 may well be a case of events telescoped into one context that later revelation shows to be distinct and chronologically separate.¹⁶

Moreover, being aware of the prophetic perspective will help us to understand more accurately such utterances by Paul as "The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet" (Rom. 16:20) and "Let your gentle spirit be known unto all men. The Lord is near" (Phil. 4:5). Also, such awareness will enable us to understand why Christ has not

¹² John B. Taylor, *Ezekiel*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1969), 202, 205.

¹³ Young, *Isaiah*, III, 457

¹⁴ George Eldon Ladd, *A Commentary of the Revelation of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 22.

¹⁵ Robert H. Mounce, *Matthew*, New International Biblical Commentary (Peabody MA: Hendricksen Publishers, Inc, 1985, 1991), 228. See also George Eldon Ladd, *The Presence of the Future*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 64-70; J. Barton Payne, *The Theology of the Older Testament*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1962), 466; and David Hill, *The Gospel of Matthew*, The New Century Bible Commentary, (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1972), 323.

¹⁶ Michael J. Svigel, "The Apocalypse of John and the Rapture of the Church: A Reevaluation" (www.bible.org). A version of Svigel's paper was presented at the Southwest Regional Meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, Friday, April 7, 2000. Later a 50-page version was published in *TrinJ*, the Theological Journal of Trinity Seminary. Wilber B. Wallis, "The Coming of the Kingdom, A Survey of the Book of Revelation" (www.bsmi.org), 19-22, 36. This article appeared in *Presbuterion*, The Theological Journal of Covenant Seminary. Both Svigel and Wallis argue cogently that the rapture occurs in Revelation 12:5, and the Second Coming happens some time later in chapter 19. If these scholars are correct, and I believe they are, they provide significant reasons to believe that the Rapture and the Second Coming are telescoped in both the Gospels and the Epistles.

yet returned even though John wrote over 1900 years ago, “The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show His bondservants, the **things which must soon take place**...Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of the prophecy, and heed the things which are written in it, **for the time is near**” (Rev. 1:1, 3). And again, “These words are faithful and true”; and the Lord, the God of the spirits of the prophets, sent His angels to show to his bondservants the **things which must soon take place**...and he said to me, ‘Do not seal up the words of the prophecy of this book, **for the time is near**,’” (Rev. 22:6, 10).¹⁷ It should be expected that a biblical prophet would write and speak from the time frame references of his culture. This John does.

J. Stuart Russell exhibits a weak understanding of the prophetic time frame when he writes,

If there be one thing which more than any other is explicitly and repeatedly affirmed in the apocalypse, it is the *nearness* of the events which it predicts. This is stated, and reiterated again and again, in the beginning, the middle, and the end. We are warned that “the time is *at hand*”; “These things must *shortly* come to pass”; “Behold, I come *quickly*”; “Surely I come *quickly*.” Yet, in the face of these express and oft-repeated declarations, most interpreters have felt at liberty to ignore the limitations of time altogether, and to roam at will over ages and centuries, regarding the book as a syllabus of church history, as almanac of politico-ecclesiastical events for all Christendom to the end of time. This has been a fatal and inexcusable blunder.¹⁸

George Eldon Ladd has a more accurate view of the biblical data:

These events are “soon” to “take place” (*cf.* 11:18; 22:10). These words have troubled the commentators...The problem is raised by the fact that the prophets were little interested in chronology, and the future was always viewed as imminent. We pointed out in the introduction that the Old and New Testament prophets blended the near and the distant perspectives so as to form a single canvas. Biblical prophecy is not primarily three-dimensional but two; it has height and breadth but is little concerned about depth, i.e. the chronology of future events. There is in chronology a tension between the immediate and the distant future; the distant is viewed through the transparency of the immediate. It is true that the early church lived in expectancy of the return of the Lord, and it is the nature of biblical prophecy to make it possible for every generation to live in expectancy of the end. To relax and say, “where is the promise of his coming?” is to become a scoffer of divine truth. The “biblical” attitude is “take heed, watch, for you do not know when the time will come” (Mark 13:33).¹⁹

C. H. Dodd agrees with Ladd, saying, “When the profound realities underlying a situation are depicted in the dramatic forms of historical prediction, the certainty and inevitability of the spiritual processes involved are expressed in terms of the immediate imminence of the event.”²⁰

¹⁷ R. C. Sproul has a list of verses that speak of the “nearness of the last days to the Apostles” and “References to the last times.” *The Last Days According to Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 86-88.

¹⁸ J. Stuart Russell, *The Parousia: A Critical Inquiry into the New Testament Doctrine of Our Lord's Second Coming*, new ed. (1887; reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983), 366.

¹⁹ George Eldon Ladd, *A Commentary on the Revelation of John*, 22-23.

²⁰ C. H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom* (London, 1936), 71. See also Louis Berkhof, *Principles of Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1950), 150.

Henry Alford also concurs with Ladd: “He told them the *attendant circumstances* of His coming; He gave them enough to guard them from error in supposing the day to be close at hand, and from carelessness in not expecting it as near.”²¹

One of the soundest rules of biblical interpretation is “The Analogy of Scripture,” based on the principle that the Bible is its own best interpreter. Since the Old Testament undoubtedly had a “prophetic perspective,” which included telescoping of events and time foreshortening, those New Testament passages with a prophetic time frame similar to the Old Testament passages should be similarly interpreted, which is to say, the New Testament futuristic phrases including such expressions as “the things which must shortly take place,” (Rev. 1:1), and “Behold, I am coming quickly,” (22:12) are by the Analogy of Scripture principle to receive the same time frame interpretation as “the Day of the Lord is near” utterances in the Old Testament. Furthermore, since time foreshortening is a specific characteristic of prophecy, John’s description of events in The Revelation as “things which must soon take place” (22:6) does not mean either that he was wrong or that all The Revelation occurred in the very early history of the church. John was simply being a first-century Jewish /Christian prophet who, like his Old Testament counterparts, prophesied of “the Day of the Lord” (“to gather them together for the war of the great day of God, the Almighty,” Rev. 16:14), and like them he too used foreshortening of time in his futuristic utterances. This kind of thinking may be difficult for the modern, occidental man, but it is consistent with the biblical material. *Even so, Lord Jesus, come quickly.*

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²¹ Henry Alford, “Matthew”, *The Greek New Testament* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1958), 235.