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Eschatology

Holman Bible Dictionary

The teaching concerning the last things in world history. The Greek word *eschatos* means "last" or "final." Accordingly, eschatology is the study of the things expected to occur at the end of history. There are two basic ways of approaching eschatology. The first, which has been most common over the centuries, focuses on those final events or situations which have not yet occurred. These are, chiefly, Jesus' return, the millennium, the last judgment, the final resurrection, and heaven and hell. Over the last century, however, scholars have generally agreed that the New Testament was written in an atmosphere pervaded by eschatology. Early Christianity was rooted in the paradoxical conviction that the last things had "already" occurred, even though they were "not yet" fully completed. (Jesus' resurrection, for instance, was understood as the beginning of the final resurrection of the dead [[1 Corinthians 15:20](#)]). This conviction lay at the heart of the early church's joy and hope. It shaped its understanding of Jesus, salvation, mission, and all else. Accordingly, when scholars speak of eschatology today, they are often referring not simply to events which have "not yet" occurred, but chiefly to the way in which the last things are "already" present, and to the attitudes and expectations which this arouses.

Since eschatology, throughout much of church history and in much common speech today, often means the study of events still future, this article will first explore the traditional discussion of these things. Second, however, it will consider eschatology as the breaking of the future into the present and the meaning of this for Christian life.

The Millennium For the last century or so, different overall eschatological perspectives have usually been classified according to their viewpoint regarding the millennium. The "millennium" (from the Latin *mille*, meaning "a thousand") refers to the 1,000 year reign of Christ and His saints described in [Revelation 20:4-6](#). Not all proponents of the various millennial views, however, insist that this period must last exactly 1,000 years. There have been three basic millennial perspectives. Each has existed in a more general and a more specific form, although these have not been entirely consistent with each other.

1. Premillennialism Premillennialists hold that Jesus will return before ("pre-") He establishes a millennial kingdom on this earth. This return will be necessary because forces hostile to God will be governing the world, and Christ must conquer them before He can rule. Towards the end of the millennium evil will again arise, and it will have to be defeated once more before God's cosmic rule is perfected. Until the fourth century, the early church was generally premillennial. This perspective, which placed the church in sharp conflict with the Roman Empire, declined rapidly after Constantine made Christianity the Empire's favored religion. In subsequent centuries premillennialism was often held by radical groups at odds with state-supported religion. Those who hold the general expectation that Jesus will return before establishing an earthly millennium are called "historic premillennialists."

Premillennialism's more specific form is qualified by the adjective "dispensational." Dispensational premillennialism acquired its specific shape during the ministry of John Nelson Darby (1800-1882), founder of the Plymouth Brethren. It has remained popular among many American fundamentalists and conservative evangelicals. Dispensationalism contrasts God's way of working in at least two historical "dispensations": those of Israel and of the church. See Dispensation.

Under the Israelite dispensation, God sought to establish an earthly, national kingdom centered in Palestine and governed by social and cultic laws. When Jesus came, He presented Himself as the King of this kingdom. According to dispensationalists, however, the Israelite, or "kingdom," dispensation did not end when the Jewish nation rejected Him. Dispensationalists claim to interpret all biblical prophecy literally. They argue that many prophecies regarding Israel—such as the rebuilding of the Jerusalem Temple, the rule of a Davidic king over a universal, earthly realm of peace—have not yet been fulfilled. Therefore, these prophecies will be fulfilled, and the kingdom dispensation will be completed, in a time still future.

Ever since Israel's rejection of Jesus, however, God has worked through the dispensation of the church. Instead of being primarily concerned with one nation, God now calls all peoples. Instead of establishing a geographical kingdom, God gathers them into the church. Instead of being deeply concerned with the socio-political affairs, God's work in the Church Age focuses chiefly on spiritual matters. This dispensation, however, will cease at a particular point. When Jesus returns to gather His church ([1 Thessalonians 4:14-17](#)), He will rapture it out of the world, and the kingdom dispensation will be reactivated. It will climax when, after several years of tribulation, Jesus returns with the church to center His millennial rule in Palestine.

2. Postmillennialism Whereas premillennialists hold that Jesus will return before the millennium, postmillennialists maintain that He will return after ("post-") an earthly kingdom is established. This means, however, that the millennium will be simultaneous with an era of ordinary human history. This viewpoint was first comprehensively articulated by Augustine (354-430), who regarded the establishment of the church since about Constantine's time as the rule of Christ with His saints. Postmillennialism has often been the general perspective of Roman Catholic, Reformed, and other socially established churches. It became popular during the eighteenth and nineteenth century evangelical revivals, which emphasized social transformation. Today some socially-minded evangelicals are reviving it.

In a general sense, postmillennialism serves as a label for any eschatology which expects religious and social activity to play a large role in establishing God's kingdom. All such movements acknowledge that this kingdom is not yet fully established, for much evil still exists. They also grant that evil may sometimes gain the upper hand. Nevertheless, they hold that history and society in general have been and will be brought increasingly under Christ's rule and that the kingdom's advance is closely related to that of certain social and religious forces.

In the general sense, then, movements such as the early twentieth century "social gospel" and contemporary liberation theologies can be called postmillennial. Such theologies, however, seldom involve detailed theories as to how history will end. Many expect God to act entirely through the social forces presently at work. Accordingly, they interpret phenomena such as Jesus' return and the final resurrection as symbols rather than as historical occurrences.

In the more specific sense, postmillennialists are those, such as many reformed evangelicals of the last few centuries, who regard Jesus' return as an historical event and enter into discussion as to show how the final events will occur. They often anticipate a brief outbreak of evil before Christ comes and acknowledge that His rule after this time will be more pervasive than before. Although they insist that the church must significantly influence the socio-political sphere, they usually place evangelism at the heart of the kingdom's advance.

3. Amillennialism By adding the prefix "a-" (meaning "not"), amillennialists express their conviction that no historical period called the millennium does or will exist. In general sense, amillennialism can refer to everyone who interprets all language about a final, earthly realm of peace in a spiritual manner.

Paradoxically, it was during late antiquity, as many church leaders were adopting a postmillennial perspective, that much popular piety ceased hoping for any historical millennium and, focusing entirely on the afterlife, became amillennial. In this general sense, amillennialism tends to be individualistic, concentrating on the heavenly destiny of each person rather than on the future of this earth. It includes much medieval mysticism. Even modern existentialist theologians, such as Rudolf Bultmann, who regard futurist eschatology as mythological and emphasize encounter with God in the present, can be included under this general label.

During the nineteenth century, however, "amillennialism" was applied increasingly to a more specific eschatology. Like postmillennialists, these amillennialists believed that Christ was already reigning with His saints. They argued that He was doing so, however, in heaven with departed Christians, and not through specific ecclesiastical or social movements. Like premillennialists, these amillennialists expected Jesus to return, to conquer His enemies and to rule over a transformed earth. His perfected rule, however, would be established immediately, and not preceded by an interim called the millennium. This specific form of amillennialism, then, is far less individualistic than the general one, and views history before Jesus' return much as does the more general, or "historic," premillennialism.

The Order of the Final Events Proponents of both forms or premillennialism, and of the more specific forms of post- and amillennialism, have often minutely debated the order in which the final events will occur. While this emphasis has been criticized for obscuring eschatology's deeper theological meaning and its practical significance, it demands attention in a general treatment of the subject.

People claim the Bible describes five major final events: Jesus' return, defeat of evil, resurrection, judgment, and renewal of the cosmos. Postmillennialists and amillennialists expect them to occur more or less together and to be preceded by a troubled time called the Great Tribulation ([Mark 13:19](#)) during which the antichrist will rule. They also anticipate a large-scale conversion of Jews before the end.

Historic premillennialists also expect Israelite conversion and the Great Tribulation to occur before Christ's return. However, they divide each of the other four final events into two phases. (1) At Jesus' return: antichrist will be defeated, and Satan will be bound (though not wholly destroyed); then "the just" alone shall rise from their graves; they will be judged and rewarded for their good works; and the millennial kingdom will be established. (2) Then, after the millennium: Satan and all evil will be destroyed; then the "unjust" will rise; they will be judged for their evil works; and the new heavens and new earth will descend (compare [Revelation 21:1](#)).

Dispensational premillennialists further subdivide this scheme. They distinguish two phases in Jesus' return. In the first, He will rapture the church. The Tribulation and Israel's conversion will follow (although in some versions, the rapture will occur in the middle of or even after the Tribulation). Then Jesus will return to defeat antichrist, bind Satan, and establish a Judeo-centric millennial kingdom. From then on, events will proceed much like those of historic premillennialism. The resurrection, however, must now occur in the three phases: at the rapture, all who have died in Christ to that time will be raised; at Jesus' second return, those martyred during the Tribulation will rise; finally, after the millennium, the "unjust" will be resurrected. Judgment, too, will proceed somewhat differently: "the just" who join the rapture will be rewarded then, while those raised at Jesus' second return will be rewarded only after the millennium, when "the unjust" are raised and judged.

The Last Judgment While traditional eschatological discussion has been preoccupied with millennial issues for over a century, several other doctrines have received attention through much longer periods of history. Many ordinary Christians and theologians have been concerned not with exactly when the last judgment will occur, but with how many will be judged favorably, and with how the condemned will be punished.

1. Universalism Over the centuries, most Christians have believed that some people will finally be saved while others will be lost. They often assumed that the latter would outnumber the former. By the early third century, however, Origen (185–254) was teaching "universalism": the doctrine that everyone would finally be saved. (Origen even included the devil in that number, although this particular addition brought the church's official condemnation.) While universalism was revived from time to time, it was never widely accepted until the nineteenth century, when liberal Protestantism emphasized the goodness of human nature and often extolled God's love to the exclusion of final judgment. In this century, although talk of divine judgment has become more acceptable, even some fairly conservative theologians, such as Karl Barth, have apparently been universalists.

Numerically speaking, opponents of universalism have more biblical texts on their side. The Old Testament abounds with annihilating judgments ([Exodus 14:23-28](#); [Joshua 7:24-26](#); [Jeremiah 51:39-40](#)). Jesus proclaimed negative judgments in parables ([Matthew 13:1](#)) and many other sayings ([Matthew 5:29-30](#); [Matthew 11:21-24](#); [Matthew 23:33](#)). Paul often spoke of future condemnation ([Romans 2:5-9](#); [Romans 2:1](#) or [Romans 5:10](#); [1 Thessalonians 1:10](#)) as do other New Testament writings ([2 Peter 3:7](#); [Jude 1:14-15](#); [Revelation 20:11-15](#)).

Universalists, however, can cite passages emphasizing God's desire that everyone be saved ([1 Timothy 2:4](#); [2 Peter 3:9](#)). They also argue that the scope of salvation becomes continually wider as biblical history advances ([Romans 5:15](#)). Finally, certain texts seem to directly teach universalism: "For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive" ([1 Corinthians 15:22](#); "[Jesus'] act of righteousness leads to acquittal and life for all" ([Romans 5:18](#) RSV; compare [Ephesians 1:10](#); [Colossians 1:20](#); [1 Timothy 4:10](#); [1 John 2:2](#)).

Positions on universalism, however, are not influenced by specific biblical texts alone. One's views on the character of God and of humanity and of salvation play important roles—sometimes in emotional ways. Universalists find negative judgment incompatible with God's overwhelming love and the dignity of the human person. Opponents of universalism feel that it seriously undercuts the urgency of the call to repentance and the firmness of God's justice and ignores too many biblical texts.

2. The Nature of Hell Negative judgment results in consignment to hell. Most Christians have supposed that this will involve eternal conscious torment. This seems to be taught by texts which speak of hell as enduring forever ([Isaiah 66:24](#); [Mark 9:48](#); [Revelation 14:9-11](#)). Others, however, have argued that such texts should be taken figuratively since for them such a penalty is incompatible with God's mercy and also is disproportionate to all sins that a hell being could commit. Moreover, some find the eternal existence of hell inconsistent with the perfected rule of God over the cosmos. Accordingly, some have proposed that hell consists simply in the annihilation of "the unjust," involving their immediate loss of consciousness. Others have suggested that a gradual annihilation or deterioration of the wicked may be involved. Most evangelical Christians continue to expect a literal hell of torment. See Hell.

The Final Resurrection While the hope of resurrection has frequently been expressed in liturgy, hymns, and playful speculation, it has received far less theological discussion than have hell and judgment. Perhaps this is because most have regarded the affirmation of resurrection as far less problematic. In recent decades, however, some have questioned whether resurrection is compatible with another notion widely held since the first Christian centuries: the immortality of the soul.

Belief that the soul is inherently immortal implies, first, that every person passes immediately and automatically into God's presence at death. Yet this seems contrary to the biblical depiction of Death as an enemy barring the way to God and overcome only by Jesus' painful dying struggle and His resurrection. Second, since only the soul is immortal, this view implies only one part of the person comes directly into God's presence. This seems to contradict the biblical emphasis on resurrection of the body. Finally, if the soul passes immediately into God's full presence, eschatological hope would focus on the individual's death rather than on the return of Christ and the renewal of the cosmos. In other words, belief in inherent immortality of the soul tends to make one's eschatology spiritualistic and individualistic; belief in resurrection emphasizes eschatology's physical, historical, and corporate dimensions.

If a future resurrection be our ultimate hope, though, many will wonder: where are our departed loved ones, if they are not yet fully enjoying God's presence? Some, such as the Adventists, have long responded that souls simply sleep until the resurrection. Some talk of a distinction in eternity and historical time. Others think it best to simply affirm that the dead are somehow "in Christ." While the uncertainty involved may unsettle some who are bereaved, this approach can also help people deal realistically with the tragedy that is still involved in death.

Event and Meaning As judgment and resurrection have been discussed, it has become increasingly clear that eschatological discussions arise not merely from speculation about future events, but also from the hopes, fears, and perplexities which anticipation of these events arouses. Upon closer examination, this also proves to be true of millennial questions. For when people ask about the relationship between the millennium and the present, they often are seeking to determine what kind of actions and attitudes are appropriate in the present. For instance, postmillennialists will usually conclude that because the millennium is already here, vigorous involvement in certain social movements is imperative. Premillennialists may conclude that because the millennium is not yet here, social involvement is not appropriate; or perhaps that radical, counter-cultural criticism and involvement are called for.

In any case, the more one penetrates into the questions which underlie traditional eschatological discussions, the more one recognizes that eschatology has to do not only with the future, but also with the present. The last things, at least insofar as they arouse hope, fear, and perplexity, are already alive in the present. But this insight reminds us of the verdict of contemporary scholarship: that ever since Jesus, the final age is "already" present, even though it has "not yet" been fully consummated. Indeed, if modern scholars are correct, eschatology cannot be adequately understood unless the present as well as the future is discussed. Let us see, then, what eschatology looks like when the "already-not yet" dynamic of the New Testament is taken into account, when eschatology is viewed as the in breaking of the future.

New Testament Eschatology What features were essential to the eschatological atmosphere that pervaded the New Testament era—and therefore to a full understanding of eschatology in general? Jesus' contemporaries felt that they were living at the end of an "old Age" dominated by forces which opposed God. Pagan gods and pagan political rulers seemed to hold all things in their grip. They afflicted Yahweh's righteous remnant with suffering and death. Pious Israelites cried out for deliverance. They expected Yahweh to intervene radically in world affairs. More specifically, they expected God, first, to judge and defeat His enemies; second, to rescue His people and raise the righteous dead; and third, to inaugurate the "new Age" of life and peace through the Spirit.

The gospel story tells how God did these very things—though in an unforeseen and surprising way. Instead of coming as a warrior Messiah to destroy the pagan nations and their gods, God came as a humble Servant who was put to death, but then was unexpectedly resurrected. Yet as the early Christian community pondered these things, they began to acknowledge that they had rejected Jesus and by their rejection participated, whether actively or passively, in putting Him to death. However, this meant that not only pagans, but they, too, were God's enemies ([Romans 5:10](#)). And by crucifying Jesus, they, too, had come under God's judgment. In fact, the last, decisive judgment of the world had "already" occurred. They, along with all humans, had been pronounced guilty! As Jesus said in John's Gospel, "this is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil" ([John 3:19](#)).

The early church also discovered that the anticipated resurrection of the righteous dead had "already" occurred—although again in a surprising form. For instead of all the righteous being raised, Jesus alone had been, as the "firstfruits" of final harvest ([1 Corinthians 15:20](#), [1 Corinthians 15:23](#)). His resurrection had two astounding consequences. On one hand, since Jesus was alive and continuing to offer love and forgiveness, no one who had rejected Him need remain under God's judgment. Those who repented of their sin could receive new life in fellowship with Him. On the other hand, by overcoming death, Jesus had conquered the strongest of those evil forces which oppose God ([1 Corinthians 15:26](#), [1 Corinthians 15:54-57](#)). Since this power had been defeated, no other power in heaven and earth could separate those who participated in Jesus' resurrection from God ([Romans 8:37-39](#); [Ephesians 1:18-23](#); [1 Peter 3:21-22](#)).

Third, the early Christian community discovered that the "new Age" of life and peace had "already" begun among them through the outpouring of God's Spirit. They began to understand that the Spirit, like Jesus, was the "firstfruits" of a new creation ([Romans 8:23](#)), while those who turned to Christ became the firstfruits of a new humanity ([Romans 16:5](#); [James 1:18](#); [Revelation 14:4](#)). Yet the "new Age," too, was present in an unexpected way. For although the powers which dominated the old Age had already been defeated, they were "not yet" wholly destroyed. Indeed, even as the Spirit impelled the early Christians to spread the good news among all nations, the experienced opposition much like that which Jesus had suffered.

The early church, then, continued to live in an atmosphere charged with eschatology. Like Jesus' contemporaries, they continued to struggle with forces which opposed God and to long eagerly for God's final triumph and deliverance. Yet they did so with a difference. For their conviction that the new Age had broken in imbued them with certainty of victory. Convinced that new ways of living were possible through the Spirit, they began to serve each other, to share their wealth, to bring people from all social groups into their fellowship.

General Implications for Eschatology Traditionally, the study of eschatology has suffered from two attitudes: neglect and overemphasis. Since eschatology has focused on events which have not yet occurred, many Christians have ignored it; and many theologians have treated it as an appendix at the end of their systems. Other Christians and theologians, however, have become so obsessed with these events that they have dealt with little else. Both attitudes have been encouraged by the separation of eschatology from the rest of Christian life and doctrine. If the "last things" have been occurring since Jesus' time, they must be far more relevant to the main themes of Christian activity and thought.

The preceding sketch of the New Testament perspective does not necessarily support any traditional eschatological scheme. Neither does it mandate any particular way of doing eschatology. Nonetheless, we can usefully draw from it several suggestions as to how eschatology as presently understood by biblical scholars might influence eschatology as traditionally discussed by theologians.

When the last judgment is regarded as a future event, it often arouses perplexity as to who will be rewarded or condemned and fear as to whether I might be condemned. It is more in line with biblical thinking to affirm that the last judgment, in the most decisive sense, has already occurred in Jesus' death and resurrection. Final judgment is not determined indirectly by how many good or evil deeds one will do, but by how one responds to the judgment which these events already make upon oneself and the world. This emphasis, indeed, may not relieve all discomfort. It speaks about judgment in relation to concrete historical events and not solely in reference to an unknown future. It speaks, moreover, of events through which God's love, forgiveness, and triumph as well as condemnation are revealed. If eschatology can deal with the last judgment in this light, it might appear more clearly not only as an exercise of God's wrath, but also as the manifestation of His love and the consummation of His triumph.

When resurrection is regarded as suddenly future, it often seems to stand in sharp contrast to one's present life. Earthly existence appears as a struggle which we must endure, largely on our own, until we are wholly translated into a totally different realm. If resurrection, in the most decisive sense, has already occurred in Jesus' triumph, then the strength which it unleashes is available to us now. Further, if all resurrection is rooted in Jesus' resurrection and if one's own resurrection is not totally a distant, isolated event, then the resurrection life already brings one into fellowship with Jesus and with all others who participate in it. If eschatology can deal with future resurrection in this light, it might appear more clearly as the joyous manifestation, perfection, and culmination of the life which all Christians now share in Him.

Finally, a deeper understanding of the "already-not yet" life on the new Age might help Christians relate more effectively to society at large. Postmillennialists, emphasizing that God's kingdom is already present, have usually been active in society, but have sometimes been unduly optimistic about possibilities for positive social change. Premillennialists, on the other hand, regarding God's kingdom as partially or wholly future, have often recognized the massive scope of evil in the world; but they have sometimes been unduly pessimistic about the value of social involvement. Perhaps a recognition that the new Age is both present and future and that neither side of this paradox dare be ignored could help the church maximize the strengths of different millennial perspectives without being overcome by the weaknesses of any. See Eschatology; Kingdom of God; Millennium; Revelation, Book of.

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Bibliography Information

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Lectionary Calendar

Tuesday, October 24th, 2023
 the Week of Proper 24 / Ordinary 29

