

READING THE NEW TESTAMENT AS PACIFICIANS LIVING IN THE LAST DAYS

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This is the second of two papers on the theme of living in the Pacific. The first paper was published in issue 29-1 last year. Ma'afu is a senior lecturer in Biblical Studies at Sia'atoutai Theological College in Nafualu, Tonga, and a visiting lecturer at Talua Ministry Training Centre, and at the Christian Leaders' Training College in Papua New Guinea. He can be reached via email at maafu.palu@gmail.com.

In this essay, I shall attempt to outline an approach, in which those of us living in the Pacific and elsewhere, in the post-cross, resurrection-ascension era, may come to appreciate the New Testament more fully.

ESCHATOLOGY AT THE CENTRE

In most systematic theology textbooks, eschatology is the final topic to be treated. Theologians often construct their system of theology thematically. Thus, "creation" comes at the beginning, and all other significant theological themes would follow. Finally, at the end of their work, will be a section on "eschatology".¹ Peter F. Jensen has observed, however, that such systematic presentation of theology often results from adopting a philosophical framework.²

As serious bible believers, however, we must begin with the gospel message, and then seek to structure our theological reflection according to the conceptual framework provided therein. This implies that eschatology should become the governing principle in the construction of an evangelical

¹ This is still true in recent attempts at writing a systematic theology from an evangelical perspective. See, for example, Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, Grand Rapids MI: Baker Book House, 1983.

² See Peter F. Jensen, *At the Heart of the Universe: What Christians Believe*. Leicester UK: IVP, 1991. Also see his *The Revelation of God*, Contours of Christian Theology, Leicester UK: IVP, 2002.

systematic theology.³ Eschatology is, indeed, at the centre of the gospel message preached by Jesus and His apostles in the New Testament. Jensen explains that,

[t]he gospel, by which we first come to know, God involves knowing about the last things, and an exposition, which reserves its treatment of them to the end, does not adequately represent the Bible, or what the Bible has to say about the other topics, including revelation. In seeing what God is planning, we gain perspective on who He is, and what He is doing to fulfil His ends. The doctrine of God is not complete until we see the whole of what He is achieving.⁴

Hence, for those who profess the centrality of the gospel message in their theological thinking, a consideration of a variety of theological issues, including how we may read the Bible, must be accomplished from the vantage point of the gospel.

THE BIBLICAL GOSPEL AND ESCHATOLOGY⁵

The New Testament speaks about the gospel message in various terms. These include the “word of God”, “truth”, “our gospel” (2 Cor 4:1-6), and “gospel of the kingdom” (Matt 4:23). But what is the “gospel”? I wish to begin with the classical formulation of the gospel, as it was preached by Jesus.⁶ According to Mark:

Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news” (Mark 1:14-15).

³ Jurgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope: on the Ground and the Implications of a Christian Eschatology*, New York NY: Harper & Row, 1967, p. 16.

⁴ Jensen, *At the Heart of the Universe*, pp. 10-11.

⁵ For a thorough discussion of the gospel message, and its content, see Jensen, *The Revelation of God*, chapter 1.

⁶ See Barry G. Webb, “Biblical Theology and Biblical Interpretation”, in *Interpreting God’s Plan: Biblical Theology and the Pastor*, Explorations II, R. J. Gibson, ed., Carlisle UK: Paternoster Press, 1997, pp. 56-58. Webb argues that Mark 1:15 is the hermeneutical key for evangelical hermeneutics.

Several theological observations on the gospel can be made from this passage. Firstly, the gospel is the “good news of God”. That is, God is not only the “source” of the gospel of good news, but He is also the subject matter of the gospel message (Rom 1:3-4). To receive the gospel, therefore, is not a matter of human sophistication. Knowledge of the good news from God comes solely through the gracious revelation of God. Paul expresses this fact in the following way:

I want you to know, brothers, that the gospel I preached is not something that man made up. I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it; rather, I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ (Gal 1:12).⁷

Secondly, Jesus declared that “the time has been fulfilled”. That is tantamount to saying that the “end of time has come”. As Barry G. Webb puts it, “Jesus’ preaching of the gospel is, first of all, an announcement that a particularly significant time has arrived, the time when the shell of expectation is filled up (fulfilled) with historical content”.⁸ Moreover, the occurrence of the term *πεπλήρωται* (*peplērōtai*) in the passive form points to God as the one who is bringing “time” into its fulfilment.⁹ God’s promises, as they unfolded in the Old Testament, have now reached their fulfilment in the coming of Jesus. The first coming of Jesus is, therefore, the beginning of the end time – of “these last days”, according to the New Testament

⁷ This remark, of course, has to be squared with other passages, which mentioned that Paul “received” the gospel as “tradition” passed on to him from other apostolic agents (see 1 Cor 11:23; 15:1). It must be said that whether Paul received the gospel through his encounter on the Damascus Road [so Seyoon Kim, *The Origin of Paul’s Gospel*, Grand Rapids MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1981; and Martin Hengel and Anna Maria Schwemer, *Paul Between Damascus and Antioch: The Unknown Years*, John Bowden, tran., Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997], or from apostolic traditions passed on to him from the Twelve, through his acquaintance with Peter (see Gal 2:1-2), Paul is justified in claiming that the “source” of the gospel he received was from the Lord.

⁸ Webb, “Biblical Theology”, p. 58.

⁹ Robert A. Guelich, *Mark 1-8:26*, Word Biblical Commentary vol 34A, Dallas TX: Word Books, 1989, p. 43. See also Ma’afu Palu, *Jesus and Time: An Interpretation of Mark 1:15*, Library of New Testament Studies 468, London UK: T. & T. Clark International, 2012.

(Heb 1:1-2; cf. Acts 2:17). All that God had planned, since the creation of the world, is now brought to its ultimate realisation in Jesus. In that sense, the content of the gospel is eschatological, since it speaks about the “end time”, the last things. The gospel tells us that the end has arrived.¹⁰

Thirdly, Jesus speaks about the “kingdom of God”, saying that it “has come near”. Throughout the Old Testament, Israel had been looking ahead for the “kingdom of God”. Although the phrase, “kingdom of God” is not prominent in the Old Testament, the concept is surely present. The significance of the notion of the “kingdom of God”, and its pervasive influence, in the shape of the Old Testament narrative, has been discussed by John Bright, who showed how the narrative of the Old Testament, from its beginning to its end, is structured according to the theme of the “kingdom of God”.¹¹ Jesus’ declaration that the kingdom of God has come near reveals, therefore, that this has been the central hope of Israel in the Old Testament.¹²

What is more important, is the recognition that, for Jesus, the kingdom of God was primarily a future event. But, while it remains in the future, there is a sense in which it has already arrived, since Jesus claims that the time has come for its fulfilment (see also Luke 11:20). Thus, C. H. Dodd’s

¹⁰ E. Fuchs, “Christus das Ende der Geschichte”, in *Zur Frage nach dem historischen Jesus*, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1960, pp. 83-86. See also the thesis of Wolfhart Pannenberg, who argues that the end has come *proleptically* in the resurrection of Jesus, which is the eschatological event *par excellence* in Wolfhart Pannenberg, ed., *Revelation as History*, New York NY: Macmillan, 1968, p. 134.

¹¹ John Bright, *The Kingdom of God: The Biblical Concept and Its Meaning for the Church*, Nashville TN: Abingdon Press, 1953. See also Graeme Goldsworthy, *According to Plan: The Unfolding Revelation of God in the Bible*. Leicester UK: IVP, 1991; and Graeme Goldsworthy, *Gospel and Kingdom: A Christian Interpretation of the Old Testament*, Exeter UK: Paternoster Press, 1981. See, further, Martin J. Selman, “The Kingdom of God in the Old Testament”, in *Tyndale Bulletin* 40-2 (1989), pp. 161-183; D. Patrick, “The Kingdom of God in the Old Testament”, in *The Kingdom of God in Twentieth Century Interpretation*, Wendell Willis, ed., Peabody MA: Hendrickson, 1987, pp. 67-89.

¹² George R. Beasley-Murray, *Jesus and the Kingdom of God*, Exeter UK: Paternoster Press, 1986, p. x; Bruce Chilton, ed., *The Kingdom of God in the Teaching of Jesus*, Philadelphia PA: Fortress Press, 1984, p. 1.

“realised” eschatology cannot be fully justified.¹³ He seems to have misinterpreted Jesus’ announcement that “time has reached its fulfilment”, now, in the present time. But, neither can Albert Schweitzer be justified in his conviction about the futuristic character of the kingdom of God.¹⁴

Relative to Dodd, Schweitzer is mistaken in overlooking the present component of the kingdom in Jesus’ teachings. Relative to Schweitzer, Dodd overlooked the future element of the kingdom in the teaching of Jesus. Jesus was warning His audience about the kingdom of God, as a coming crisis, encouraging them to prepare for it. This coming crisis was an enduring factor in the early church’s evangelism that followed Jesus’ death, resurrection, and ascension.¹⁵

Since Jesus spoke of the kingdom as neither totally futuristic or entirely in the present. It is, therefore, a sound biblical judgment to speak of the existence of an “eschatological now-and-not-yet” of the kingdom of God.¹⁶ In one sense, it can be seen as already here, but yet it is not here. Both dimensions are astonishingly present in the teachings of Jesus. The present is “marked by tension between what has come, and what is yet to come”.¹⁷ While the kingdom is expected to come, we still live in the continuation of the “old age”, experiencing its pain, and encountering evil in the world. We cannot responsibly deny this tension in the believer’s experience without misunderstanding both history and the present moment.¹⁸

¹³ C. H. Dodd, *The Apostolic Preaching and Its Developments*, London UK: Hodder & Stoughton, 1936. See also G. B. Caird, *The Apostolic Age*, London UK: Gerald Duckworth, 1955, pp. 37-38.

¹⁴ See Albert Schweitzer, *The Mystery of the Kingdom of God: the Secret of Jesus’ Messiahship and Passion*, W. Lowrie, tran., London UK: A. & C. Black, 1914.

¹⁵ On the eschatological dimensions of Jesus’ teaching on the kingdom of God, see my discussion in Palu, *Jesus and Time*, pp. 13-19.

¹⁶ W. G. Kummel, *Promise and Fulfilment: The Eschatological Message of Jesus*, Studies in Biblical Theology 23, London UK: SCM Press, 1957. See also Oscar Cullmann, *Christ and Time: The Primitive Christian Conception of Time and History*, London UK: SCM Press, 1951, p. 151. See, further, Palu, *Jesus and Time*, pp. 181-183.

¹⁷ Jensen, *At the Heart of the Universe*, p. 24.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

THE ESCHATOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK OF THE GOSPEL

On the basis of Jesus' proclamation of the gospel in Mark 1:15, a theological framework can be proposed, within which we may understand, not only the significance of Jesus' ministry, but also of the present time. We shall refer to this gospel theological framework as a "gospel eschatological framework", since it is a time frame derived from Jesus' proclamation that the end of time has arrived.

Mark apparently placed the ministry of Jesus in succession with John the Baptist (Mark 1:14). This may be a mere fact of history, but it is more than that. Mark is making a very important theological statement, in relation to the Old Testament. John the Baptist is presented in the Gospels as the forerunner of Jesus (Matt 3:1-12; Mark 1:1-8; Luke 1:11-17). In Mark's Gospel, John is presented in such a way that recalls the prophet Elijah.

This link with Elijah is suggested in the description of John's choice of clothing and diet. He "wore clothing made of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey" (Mark 1:6). In connection with the messianic expectation of the Old Testament, a number of important prophecies spring to the foreground. The outfit described therein was what Elijah himself had worn during his prophetic ministry in Israel (2 Kings 1:8).¹⁹

But why is this identification of John the Baptist with Elijah important? God had spoken through the prophet Malachi, at the return of the Babylonian exile, that He Himself would come to Israel in judgment in the near future. Israel would know when that great event was just about to happen, because He would send His "messenger" before Him to "prepare the way" (Mal 3:1, also quoted in Mark 1:2-3). God's "messenger" was to be Elijah the prophet:

See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes. He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their

¹⁹ John must have followed an old prophetic practice of embodying in his own life and activities the "word" of God for his own generation (see, e.g., Ezek 4, 5). On John the Baptist as Elijah coming first, see my discussion in Palu, *Jesus and Time*, pp. 180-181.

children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers; or else, I will come and strike the land with a curse (Mal 4:5-6 NIV).

Thus, in the 1st century, there seems to have been a genuine expectation among the Jews that the prophet Elijah would come in an extraordinary manner to “prepare the way” for the Lord. This is apparent from the inquiry made by the “Jews of Jerusalem” of John the Baptist, at the prime of his ministry. They asked him then whether he was “Elijah”, or the “prophet” (John 1:21).

Through these inquiries, we can see the Jewish messianic expectation, current at the time of Jesus. The expectation of a “prophet” recalls Moses’ prediction, while Israel was still in the wilderness, about God raising up a “prophet” like Him, through whom the word of God will be given to Israel (Deut 18:15-20). But the question about Elijah indicates that the coming of the “great and dreadful day of the Lord”, spoken through the prophet Malachi, also featured prominently in what the Jews of Jesus’ day would have regarded as the “signs of the time”.

John’s denial that he was the “Elijah to come” indicates that he might have underestimated the significance of his own ministry, with respect to the coming of Jesus (John 1:21). Even though he was absolutely certain that Jesus was the one “greater” than himself, who will be the Spirit baptiser, he was not certain whether Jesus was the Messiah (Matt 11:4-5). This must not be regarded as John’s fault, because he was imprisoned before the beginning of the ministry of Jesus (Matt 4:11; Mark 1:14). Thus, he failed to be an eyewitness of the fulfilment of what the scriptures said would be the prerogatives of the coming Messiah (Matt 11:4-5; cf. Is 35:3-7).

Jesus, however, pointed to John as the “Elijah to come” (Matt 11:14-15). In other words, Jesus’ identification of John with Elijah indicated that the “day of the Lord” has been inaugurated with His own coming. In accordance with Malachi’s prophecy, the day of the Lord is meant to be the day in which the Lord will intervene in the affairs of this world, to bring a purifying judgment upon His own people, in order to make them more pleasing to Him (Mal 3:1-5).

Although Jesus acknowledges that the judgment of this world has arrived, when He was lifted up on the cross (John 12:30-33), He, however, associated His own earthly ministry with that of the suffering Servant (Is 53; cf. Mark 10:45; Luke 4:16-21). In that sense, His death was God's judgment upon this world for sins. However, Jesus also spoke of a future day of judgment, as a day of resurrection – the resurrection of the righteous, and the resurrection of the wicked (John 5:28-29) – which can be identified with the “resurrection on the last day”, according to Jewish belief (cf. John 11:24; Luke 14:14; John 6:39).²⁰

These foregoing observations are sufficient to provide the structure of the eschatological framework of the gospel. Even though the end has already arrived with Jesus, the end is also yet to come, since the consummation of the kingdom of God remains a future event. The present time, then, is to be seen as a time of double experience, in the life of those who have believed in Jesus – between knowing that they have, indeed, shared in the kingdom's blessings, through faith in Christ (see Col 1:12-14), and are still having to go through the difficulties of this earthly existence, where the evil one is having a final assault on the Lord of the universe, whom God has raised from the dead, and His people (see Rev 12:11-12).

The evil one, however, has been decisively defeated upon the cross (see Col 2:13-15, cf. John 12:30-32), and Jesus has been exalted as the Lord and Christ of the universe (Acts 2:33-36). He is now seated at the right hand of the Father, waiting for the Father's appointed time, in which the judgment of this world will come about concretely. On that day, His enemies will be made His “footstool” (Ps 110:1-2; Acts 2:36). We can represent all this in a diagram presentation like this:

²⁰ See also the discussion of the Jewish expectation of the last day in Palu, *Jesus and Time*, pp. 183-186.

Eschatological framework of the gospel of Jesus (Mark 1:14-15)

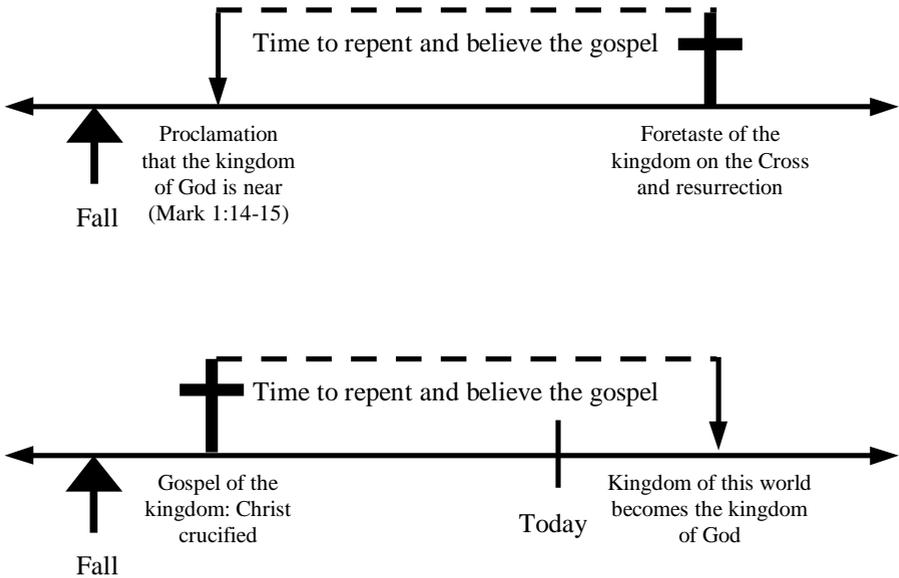


Figure 1. Eschatological framework of the gospel from (Mark 1:14-15).

In keeping with the eschatological framework, which we have outlined from the gospel message in Mark 1:15, we are now living in the period, to which the New Testament refers as the “last days” (Acts 2:17; Heb 1:1-2).²¹ This is the interim period between the first coming of Jesus and His return.

JESUS’ MISSION AND THE CROSS

Since Jesus came proclaiming the coming-near of the kingdom of God, it appears that the Old Testament was looking forward to its coming. In one sense, all the prophecies in the Old Testament may be classified as looking forward to the “day of the Lord”; the day in which God will intervene in the affairs of this world, to save His own people, and to restore Israel as the

²¹ Cf. Carl E. Braaten *The Future of God: The Revolutionary Dynamics of Hope*, New York NY: Harper & Row, 1969, pp. 18, 24. See also the discussion in Charles M. Horne, “Eschatology: The Controlling Thematic in Theology”, in *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 13-1 (Winter 1970), pp. 53-63, esp. pp. 56-58.

centre of the world (cf. Acts 1:6-7). The writers of the New Testament point unanimously in the direction that God has fulfilled all His promises in the first coming of Jesus. One important aspect of that fulfilment can be seen in Jesus, as the Good Shepherd of God's flock, Israel, to whom the prophets were looking forward (Ezek 34; Is 40:10-11). As the Good Shepherd, His earthly ministry was restricted only to the "lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matt 15:24). Gentiles were not excluded during the earthly ministry of Jesus, but, like the Syro-Phoenician woman, they could come to Jesus by their own initiative.

As the Good Shepherd of Israel, Jesus came to lay down His own life for the lost sheep of Israel (John 10:10). His mission was ultimately to die on the cross, in order to save His people from their sins (Matt 1:21). In fact, as D. A. Carson observes, an important contribution of the canonical Gospels to the biblical storyline is that "they unite in telling the story of Jesus, so that the rush of the narrative is towards the cross".²² As the Messiah of Israel, the salvation of His own people was His priority. But, on the cross, the full scope of Jesus' mission was revealed. On the cross, it was shown that, even though his earthly ministry was restricted to the lost sheep of Israel, the Gentiles were always in view. As Paul puts it:

For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the Jews on behalf of God's truth, to confirm the promises made to the patriarchs, so that the Gentiles may glorify God for His mercy, as it is written: "Therefore I will praise you among the Gentiles; I will sing hymns to your name" (Rom 15:8-9 NIV).

And again,

Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us – for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree" – so that, in Christ Jesus, the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith (Gal 3:13-14 ESV).

²² D. A. Carson, *The Gagging of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism*, Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan, 1996, p. 263.

As the Good Shepherd, Jesus also indicated that He has “other sheep that are not of this sheep pen”, but which He must gather (John 10:10, 14-15). These “other sheep”, that He must also bring in, were included upon the cross. According to Paul, upon the cross of Jesus, the Gentiles, who once were far away, were drawn near. Surprisingly, however, even the Jews, who were supposed to be “near”, were also drawn near, together with the Gentiles, to the sphere of God’s blessings, by means of the blood of Jesus Christ (Eph 2:11-21).

GOSPELS AND EPISTLES WITHIN THE ESCHATOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK OF THE BIBLE

The cross of Jesus indicates how the Gospels and the epistles are related, in the eschatological framework of the gospel message Jesus proclaimed in Mark 1:15. The Gospels narrate the earthly ministry of Jesus, prior to the cross. Since the ultimate purpose of Jesus’ mission is to die on the cross, the Gospels occupy a similar position to that of the Old Testament, in the sense that they describe events leading up to the cross. The Gospels’ narration of Jesus, as going ultimately to the cross, looks back to the Old Testament, in order to identify Jesus with Israel’s hope of restoration. In Jesus’ ministry, as we have seen in the previous section, God’s promises, in the Old Testament, find their literal fulfilment. The Old Testament, in a sense, indicates the path, which the Messiah is to follow, and upon which He could possibly be identified.

Diagrammatically, the place of the Gospels in the eschatological drama of the whole Bible may be represented as follows:

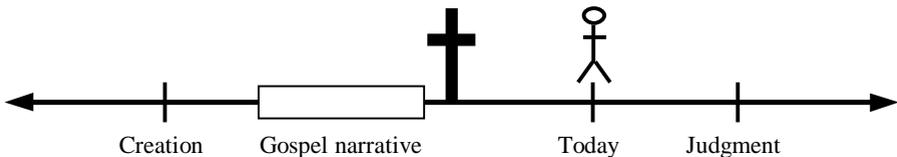


Figure 2. The Gospels in the eschatological framework of the gospel.

APPLICATION TO READING THE GOSPELS

In the light of the position of the Gospels in the overarching eschatological framework derived from Jesus' gospel proclamation in Mark 1:15, three steps can be determined, in which the Gospel narratives' relevance to our contemporary situation is to be discerned.

STEP 1: THE CONTENT OF THE PASSAGE

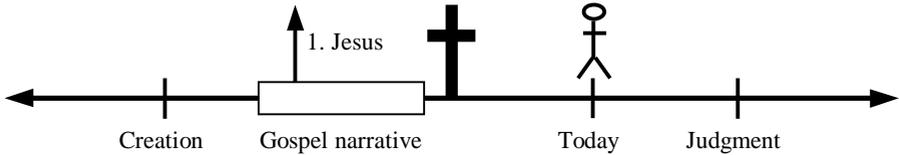


Figure 3. Question: What is Jesus saying or doing in this passage?

In this step, the reader's concern is to read and re-read the gospel, in order to understand what Jesus is saying or doing in a given passage. Here, textual criticism may be employed, in order to establish the original text. But, since the gospel is the story of Jesus, it is important to focus on what Jesus is saying or doing in the passage, with which one is dealing.

STEP 2: THE FULFILMENT OF THE OLD TESTAMENT IN THE GOSPEL PASSAGE

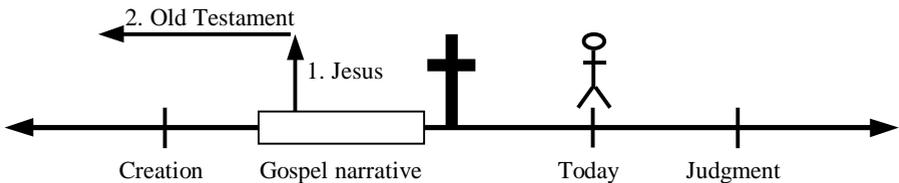


Figure 4. Question: What aspect(s) of the Old Testament is/are fulfilled in this passage?

As mentioned above, it is from the Old Testament that we can possibly "feel" the shape of the kind of Messiah that Jesus was going to be. Thus, we may never fully understand the ministry of Jesus in the Gospels without resorting to its Old Testament background. The gospel is the story of Jesus' ministry, climaxing in His death for our sins, and His resurrection, according

to the scriptures (1 Cor 15:3-4). He has been exalted to the highest heaven, to sit at the right hand of God, from whence He shall shortly return to judge the living and the dead (Acts 2:33-36).

This observation is especially important for serious Bible believers, because,

in affirming that Jesus is the Messiah, the New Testament affirmed that all that the Old Testament faith had longed for, and pointed to, has been realised in Him. He is the fulfilment of all that the law community had tried to do, and all that prophetic hope had envisioned.²³

Hence, a responsible reading of the Gospels must hark back to the Old Testament, to find the terms and categories, within which we may correctly understand the ministry of Jesus, as described in the New Testament. This step can be easily accomplished, with the assistance of computerised cross-reference Bibles, or an available study Bible.

STEP 3: APPLYING THE PASSAGE

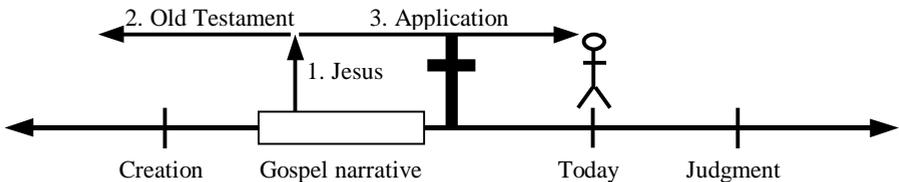


Figure 5. Question: How can this passage be applied to us in the light of the cross of Christ?

As aforementioned, the ministry of Jesus, as foreshadowed in the Old Testament, and described in the Gospels, is ultimately fulfilled on the cross. Historically speaking then, the events, narrated in the Gospels, must be read with the view that they find their meaning ultimately on the cross of Jesus. Even Jesus' healing miracles point to His taking upon Himself our "infirmities, and bore our diseases" upon the cross (Matt 8:17). His exorcisms, moreover, foreshadow the ultimate defeat of the "ruler of this

²³ Bright, *Kingdom of God*, pp. 190-191.

world” on the cross (John 12:31). Further, His miracles demonstrate the power that defeats sin and death upon the cross. It is this message of the cross, which has given us believers the hope of eternal life (1 Cor 1:18; 15:1-4). Moreover, it is this message that must be proclaimed, whenever the Gospels are preached from the pulpit.

APPLICATION TO THE EPISTLES

According to the eschatological framework, delineated on the basis of Jesus’ gospel proclamation in Mark 1:15, the New Testament letters, or the epistles, find their rightful place at the post-cross, post-resurrection ministry of the New Testament church. Even though, historically, they were written before the Gospels, the letters reflect how the cross of Christ becomes God’s gracious invitation to Jews and Gentiles to join His family, and enjoy the blessings promised to Israel through Abraham.

As a body of literature, the epistles demonstrate how the post-resurrection great commission of Jesus to his disciples has been fulfilled (Matt 28:19-20). In that sense, the epistles consistently presuppose the cross and the resurrection of Jesus as their point of reference. They are written to exhort believers who have accepted the gospel message, through the evangelism that resulted from Jesus’ death and resurrection. The believer’s acceptance of the gospel proclamation is the appropriation of the forgiveness of sins, as well as the seal of the Holy Spirit, “who is a deposit, guaranteeing our inheritance, until the redemption of those who are God’s possession – to the praise of His glory” (Eph 1:14).

The role of the Spirit affirms the future dimension of salvation, namely, “the redemption of our bodies” (Rom 8:23), or the reception of “heavenly bodies”, in the general resurrection (1 Cor 15:40). This hope for the resurrection of our bodies coincides with the coming of the kingdom of God publicly (1 Cor 15:20-28). When believers see Christ in His return, they “will appear with Him in glory” (Col 3:4). The Christian hope is captured in the conviction that “we shall be like Him” (1 John 3:2), which, indeed, is the fulfilment of the desire of humanity that results in the entrance of sin. Adam and Even disobeyed God, because the serpent promised that they will be like God (Gen 3:5).

Since believers have been justified freely, through the blood of Jesus Christ, there is confidence and assurance that they will be saved from the judgment that is to come (Rom 5:8-9). For believers, there is only the glorious hope of a redeemed body, a spiritual, resurrected body (1 Cor 15:51-54). This is not so for unbelievers. For them, there is no true hope for the future. Rather, there is only the fearful expectation of “judgment, and of raging fire, that will consume the enemies of God” (Heb 10:27; 2 Thess 1:6-10).

Thus, the underlying rationale for writing the epistles is the near expectation of the day of judgment (cf. 1 Thess 5:1; 2 Cor 5:10; Heb 10:24-25). The epistles are the apostolic means of exhorting, by their preaching, those, who have accepted the gospel of the Lord Jesus, to remain faithful, and to stand firm in the gospel, which they have received, for it is only through that gospel that they may be saved (1 Cor 15:2).

Moreover, the epistles are the apostolic means of guaranteeing that, in their absence (either through geographical distance or death), the church of God will remain faithful to the apostolic gospel message they had preached, until the day of judgment, when the glorious hope, presented in the gospel, will be realised in them. In that sense, the epistles are the proper “apostolic succession” of the church of God. For, through them, the apostles continue to speak the living word of God to believers, even today.²⁴

As a matter of fact, the epistles give us the confirmation of the apostolic conviction that we do not start the Christian life with the gospel, and then progress to something more spiritually advanced. This is the error of the Galatians, and the Colossian believers, in the early church. The Galatian believers thought that we could supplement the gospel message with “works of the law”. For Paul and the apostles, however, to add something like the Law to the gospel is to render the gospel insufficient as God’s gracious means of saving us from this evil age (Gal 1:1-9).

The Colossians, on the other hand, not only resorted to religious laws and rituals to supplement their faith in Christ Jesus as Lord, but also to a higher

²⁴ The same remark can, of course, be made about the Gospels. See John 20:30-31 and Luke 1:1-4.

form of mystical experience, which seems to have involved visions and dreams, and probably asceticism, in order to be fully Christians (cf. Col 2:23). Again, Paul reminded them that, as believers, they have been given “fullness in Christ” (Col 2:9). Believers do not begin as Christians with receiving Christ Jesus as Lord, and then advance to something more spiritual, even to a baptism in the Spirit as a second blessing.

The gospel message is sufficient, on its own terms, for the salvation of believers. There is no need for it to be supplemented, or complemented, by anything, however useful it may be to the experience of the believer. In fact, to supplement or complement the gospel message with something else is to preach “another Jesus” (2 Cor 11:4); or “another gospel” (Gal 1:9), which, in effect, will destine the preacher to condemnation on the day of judgment. In the light of the coming day of judgment, Paul’s exhortation to the Colossian believers may also apply for us:

So then, just as you have received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in Him, rooted and built up in Him, strengthened in the faith *as you were taught*, and overflowing with thankfulness (Col 2:6-7, italics added).

This implies that the New Testament epistles are firmly grounded on the cross, and the resurrection of Jesus, as their point of reference. They look back to the cross, as the fundamental guiding ethical principle for Christian living, in the interim period between the first coming and Jesus’ return.

Although the epistles were specifically written to address certain pastoral situations, with which the early church was confronted, it seemed that the underlying conviction of the apostles was that these situations appear to emerge from a fundamental misunderstanding of the gospel message. Thus, it was almost always the case that Paul would begin an epistle with an exposition of the gospel message, which he has preached, and which believers had received (e.g., Eph 1-3), prior to addressing the specific pastoral problems, with which the respective churches were struggling (e.g., Eph 4-6). In that sense, the majority of Paul’s letters could be structured

under two headings: the “gospel message”, and “how to live in the light of the gospel message”.

There are exceptions, of course,²⁵ but this is the most basic way in which Paul addresses the problems that the New Testament churches encountered in their historical setting in the 1st century AD. Not surprisingly, even in the present situation, it is still the case that church problems are, all too often, the result of a fundamental misunderstanding of the gospel message of Christ crucified.

We can represent the position of the New Testament epistles in the eschatological framework derived from Jesus’ gospel proclamation in Mark 1:15 as follows:

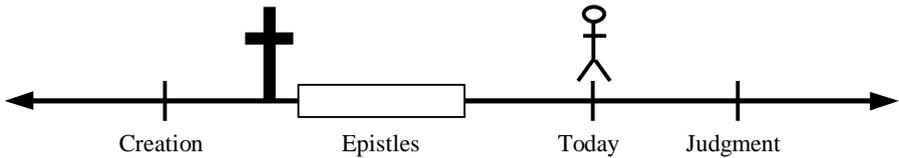


Figure 6. The Epistles in the eschatological framework of the gospel.

APPLICATION TO THE INTERPRETATION OF THE EPISTLES

The position of the New Testament epistles, in relation to the eschatological framework of Jesus’ gospel proclamation, points to three steps for reading the epistles.

²⁵ The letter to the Galatians begins, for example, with the strong rebuke of the believers for abandoning the true gospel in place of another gospel, which, according to Paul, is no gospel at all (Gal 1:6-7).

FIRST STEP: THE EPISTLE'S ENCOURAGEMENT TO BELIEVERS IN THE PRESENT TIME

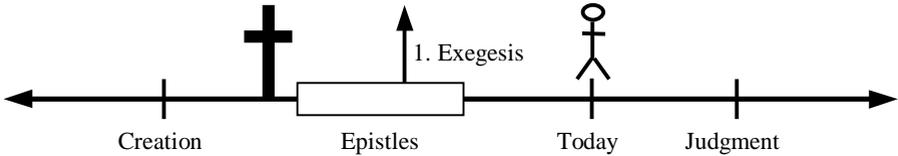


Figure 7. How does this passage encourage believers to godly living today?

As mentioned above, the epistles are the apostolic means for making sure that the church of God is encouraged towards godly living, even in their absence (whether through geographical distance or death). Thus, the words of the apostle to those, who were living there and then, are also the words for us believers living today. We live in the same eschatological time frame, in which they lived with the cross, as the basis of their salvation, and the impending judgment, as the consummation of their hope of glory. God's word is a living word. We may be separated culturally and historically from the Ephesian believers, but, since we belong to the same eschatological frame of time, the word of God, that encouraged them towards godly living in the present, is also the word of God to us (cf. 1 Cor 10:11; Rom 15:4).

SECOND STEP: CROSS-BASIS OF THE EPISTLES' EXHORTATIONS

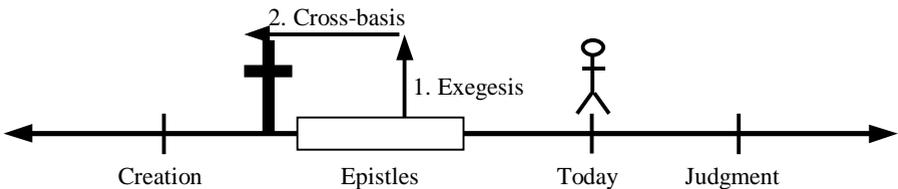


Figure 8. In what sense is the encouragement, given in this passage, based on the cross of Christ?

The cross may not be explicitly mentioned in the passage one is dealing with. But, as we have mentioned above, throughout the epistles, the cross is constantly presupposed, because the epistles are written to those who have received Christ Jesus as Lord, through accepting the gospel (Col 2:6-7; Eph 1:13-14). The intention is for them to hold fast to the gospel of Christ

crucified, which they have received, and upon which they are being saved (1 Cor 15:3-4).

THIRD STEP: LOOKING FORWARD TO THE COMING JUDGMENT DAY

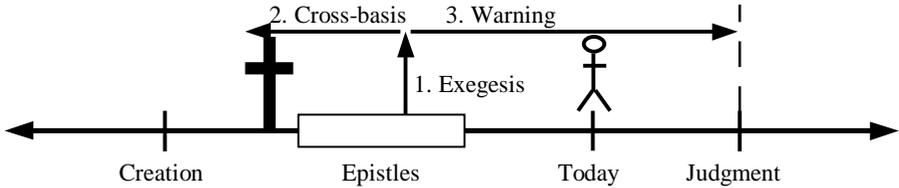


Figure 9. How important is this encouragement, as we look forward to the judgment day.

Again, the judgment, and the future hope, of the believer may not be explicitly mentioned in the passage, but, as we have argued, the epistles seek to exhort believers towards godly living in the present time, in view of the judgment to come (e.g., Heb 10:24-25; 2 Tim 4:1). Once judgment is abolished from one's personal theological system, we may try, as hard as we may, to give a proper justification for moral living in the present time, but we will find none that is logically appealing.

CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

In this paper, we have outlined an eschatological time frame, on the basis of Jesus' gospel proclamation in Mark 1:15, within which the Gospels and the epistles of the New Testament are to be read as God's word for the contemporary situation. We have argued that the Gospels should be read in the light of the observation that Jesus' earthly ministry finds its ultimate meaning and fulfilment upon the cross. As those living after the cross and resurrection of the Lord Jesus, we must learn to appreciate the Gospels as the re-telling of the power of Jesus' death and resurrection in the form of a story. Hence, the ministry of Jesus does not primarily give us examples to imitate. Rather, the earthly ministry of Jesus indicates the extent of His power, which is at work in those of us who have truly received the gospel message about Him.

Within the gospel eschatological framework, we have also seen that the epistles, even though written before the Gospels, are addressing the situation of believers after the cross and resurrection of Jesus, by reminding believers of the gospel they had received, and upon which they should continue to stand until the day of judgment. In that sense, the epistles consistently presuppose the cross, and encourage believers to live their lives in the light of the cross, looking forward to being rescued from God's wrath when Jesus returns (cf. 1 Thess 1:9-10; Phil 3:20-21).

In relation to the Gospels, the epistles can be more immediately applied to us today, since they address people like us, living in the "last days", just as we are. Even though they were written to address specific situations in the early church, the general principles of godly living, in view of the wrath to come, conveyed therein, are undoubtedly applicable to us in the contemporary situation still waiting for the day of judgment.

The implications for theological contextualisation of the approaches for reading the Gospels and the epistles, set forth in this paper are significant. As Pacifician believers, we must never be discouraged from applying the New Testament writings to our lives today, by the insistence that biblical truths ought to be clothed in cultural outfits first. As people living in the "last days", we belong to similar situations as those which the Gospels and the epistles were addressing. True, they were written to address a particular historical time and place, catering for different pastoral needs that might have emerged from the earliest community of believers.

However, since they were addressing believers, living in the aftermath of the cross and resurrection of Jesus, and who were looking forward to His return to rescue them from God's wrath, just as we are today, the words to them can also become God's word to us today, in our present situation here in the Pacific. The eschatological framework of the gospel, within which we live, therefore, transcends our cultural, historical, and even theological differences with believers in the 1st century, since we, too, were saved by receiving Christ Jesus as Lord, and are awaiting His glorious return, for the transformation of our lowly bodies into the likeness of His glory.

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