

THE AGE TO COME

by Thomas Ice

An important issue that divides most preterists from futurists is the meaning of the biblical phrase “the age to come.” Also, one’s understanding of a related term “the present age,” is significant to a right understanding of the biblical view of prophecy. I believe that this present age refers to the current church age that began almost 2,000 years ago on the day of Pentecost when the church was founded. It will end with the rapture of the church. The age to come is a reference to the millennial kingdom that will commence with the second coming of Christ and last for one thousand years.

PRETERIST MISUNDERSTANDING

It will not surprise regular readers to learn that preterists usually believe that the phrase “current age” referred to the approximately 40-year period between the earthly ministry of Christ and the destruction of the Jerusalem in A.D. 70. Preterism teaches that most, if not all, of the Book of Revelation and the Olivet Discourse (Matt. 24–25; Mark 13; Luke 21) were fulfilled in conjunction with the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in A.D. 70. They also believe that “the age to come” refers to the current age in which we now live, which began after A.D. 70. Gary DeMar says the following:

The “end of the age” refers to the end of the Old Covenant redemption system with its attendant sacrifices and rituals. . . . The “end of the age” refers to the termination of the exclusive Jewish entitlement to the covenant promises and the inclusion of the Gentiles into the blessings of the covenant and the privileges of the gospel and kingdom (Matt. 21:41, 43; 22:10). “End of the age” is a covenantal phrase. With the temple destroyed, there would be no way and no need to carry out the rigorous demands of the sacrificial system, a system that was predestined to pass away with the incarnation, death, resurrection, ascension, and enthronement of Jesus.¹

Wow! DeMar produced a lot of speculative thought out of those four little words, “end of the age.”

Preterists tend to believe that the phrase “present age” or “this age” refers to the approximately 40-year period between the earthly ministry of Christ and the destruction of the Jerusalem in A.D. 70. Thus, as DeMar indicated, that means that after A.D. 70 we are in what the Bible refers to as “the age to come.” Full preterist (i.e., no future second coming) Don Preston says, “If we understand Jesus’ ‘this age’ to be the Mosaic Age in which he was living and the ‘age to come’ as the Christian Age, there is no difficulty.”² However, is that how the Bible really uses that phrase and related phrases? I do not think so!

JEWISH PERSPECTIVE OF BIBLE PROPHECY

The Jewish perspective of Bible prophecy viewed history as consisting of two ages. The first was this present age, the age in which Israel was waiting for the coming of the

Messiah. The second was the age to come, the age in which all promises and covenants would be fulfilled and Israel would enter into her promised blessings as a result of Messiah's coming. The present age would be terminated by the appearance of Messiah, and the coming age would be introduced by His advent. The present age, then, was to end in judgment, and the coming age must be preceded by this devastation.³

The disciples, who were questioning Jesus on the Mount of Olives, linked Christ's words of judgment about the destruction of the present Temple with the invasion of Jerusalem that was predicted by Zechariah. The disciples believed that it would precede the advent of the Messiah.

In Zechariah 14:4 the prophet describes the advent of Messiah to institute His kingdom as follows:

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.

This coming was to be preceded by an invasion and capture of Jerusalem (Zech. 12:1-3; 14:1-3). However, Jerusalem would be delivered by the coming of Messiah from the Mount of Olives (Zech. 14:4-5) and then the glory of the kingdom would be realized (Zech. 14:14-15). This is when the "age to come" would arrive.

CHRIST'S PERSPECTIVE OF BIBLE PROPHECY

Jesus uses the same vocabulary, in the same way when He says, in Matthew 12:32 "And whoever shall speak a word against the Son of Man, it shall be forgiven him; but whoever shall speak against the Holy Spirit, it shall not be forgiven him, either in this age, or in the age to come." Christ clearly distinguishes between the present age and the age to come. Meyer says of "this age," that it "is the period previous to the coming of the Messiah . . . as Jesus understood it: *the time before the second coming.*"⁴ He says of "the age to come," that it is "the period that succeeds the coming of the Messiah . . . as Jesus understood it: *the time that follows the second coming.*"⁵ Jesus says, in Matthew 13:49 "So it will be at the end of the age; the angels shall come forth, and take out the wicked from among the righteous," as He continues to speak within the contemporary Jewish framework.

The disciples concluded that the judgment Christ had predicted was the one that would terminate this present age. After this judgment Messiah would come to introduce the age to come. Thus they asked their questions that precipitates the Olivet Discourse in Matthew 24:3 "Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?" Later, after His resurrection but before His ascension, Jesus gave His disciples the Great Commission and said in Matthew 28:20 "Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age," continuing to speak within the framework of "this age" and "the age to come."

THE APOSTLE'S PERSPECTIVE OF BIBLE PROPHECY

The Apostle Paul continues use of the same language when he says in Ephesians 1:21 that New Testament believers have been given a position in Christ “far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age, but also in the one to come.” Paul tells us in Galatians 1:4 that Christ “gave Himself for our sins, that He might deliver us out of this present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father.” Paul also tells Christians in Titus 2:12 that God’s grace instructs “us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and godly in the present age.”

Paul’s continues to use the phrases “this age” and “the age to come” in the way that Christ used it. Even though Jesus had come, Paul still views the current church age as the time leading up to the coming of the Messiah, thus, we are still in “the present age.” This means that the “age to come” has not yet arrived and will come at the second coming, a time which is still in our own day a future event.

Even after a post-resurrection, 40-day period of instruction by Christ to the disciples “of the things concerning the kingdom of God” they ask Jesus in Acts 1:6 “Lord, is it at this time You are restoring the kingdom to Israel?” Jesus did not rebuke or correct the nature of their question as illegitimate, instead He said, “It is not for you to know times or epochs which the Father has fixed by His own authority.” This clearly implies that there will be a future kingdom, as they thought, . . . but not yet. The kingdom is a reference to the age to come. Our Lord tells His disciples to go preach the gospel throughout the world.

In Acts 3, Peter is preaching the gospel to Israel and says in 3:17 that his Jewish brethren and their rulers “acted in ignorance.” The he says the following:

But the things which God announced beforehand by the mouth of all the prophets, that His Christ should suffer, He has thus fulfilled. Repent therefore and return, that your sins may be wiped away, in order that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord; and that He may send Jesus, the Christ appointed for you, whom heaven must receive until the period of restoration of all things about which God spoke by the mouth of His holy prophets from ancient time.

In a similar vein, we see in Acts 15 that James says to the Jerusalem Council:

And after they had stopped speaking, James answered, saying, “Brethren, listen to me. Simeon has related how God first concerned Himself about taking from among the Gentiles a people for His name. And with this the words of the Prophets agree, just as it is written, “after these things I will return, and I will rebuild the tabernacle of David which has fallen, and I will rebuild its ruins, and I will restore it, in order that the rest of mankind may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who are called by My name.”

James did not believe that “the age to come” or the kingdom had arrived, or he would not have made the above statement. It is clear that the New Testament writers of the Epistles continue to use the phrase “this age” to refer to the time before the arrival of the Messiah, who will at that time bring with Him the kingdom, which is also still future to our own day.

IMPLICATIONS

Since the second coming of Christ has been postponed until after the current church age and tribulation, the current church age is presented by the writers of the New Testament Epistles as the last period of history until this present age is terminated, which will give rise to “the age to come.” Three New Testament passages (Rom. 16:25–27; Eph. 3:1–13; Col. 2:4–3:3) teach that the church age is a temporary mystery in the overall plan of God. Thus, the church age is a continuation of “this present age” from the time of Christ. Yet because of further New Testament revelation about the church age, we know that when it ends at the rapture, there will not be anymore stretching out of the time frame what will lead to “the age to come”—the time of Messiah’s kingdom.

There is an urgency concerning the entire church age in which we now live. For example, Paul, speaking of the entire church age, calls it “the present distress” (1 Cor. 7:26). Because Christ could return at any moment at the rapture, church age believers are always to be ready and always waiting for His return. Notice the following list of New Testament passages that teach this doctrine: 1 Corinthians 1:7; 16:22; Philippians 3:20; 4:5; 1 Thessalonians 1:10; Titus 2:13; Hebrews 9:28; James 5:7–9; 1 Peter 1:13; Jude 21; Revelation 3:11; 22:7, 12, 17, 20.

Preterists see the end of the age occurring by A.D. 70. Since the New Testament Epistles were written to instruct Believers in how to live until this present evil age comes to an end, it follows that all the doctrine and instruction applies only during the 40-year period that ended in A.D. 70. Logically, which they rarely realize, it means that they are wrong to apply the teaching and instruction of the Epistles to their lives, since they believe that they are living in “the age to come.” This explains why some preterists believe that they are in the New Heavens and New Earth, yet they have no specific revelation, which tells them how to please God. NO! We are not living in the eternal state. We are still awaiting the any-moment return of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Maranatha!

ENDNOTES

¹ Gary DeMar, *Last Days Madness: Obsession of the Modern Church* (Powder Springs, GA: American Vision, 1999), pp. 69–70.

² Don Preston, *Into All The World: Then Come The End* (Ardmore, OK: no publisher, 1996), p. 31.

³ J. Dwight Pentecost, *Thy Kingdom Come: Tracing God's Kingdom Program and Covenant Promises Throughout History* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1990), p. 248.

⁴ H. A. W. Meyer, “The Gospel of Matthew,” 2 vols, in *Critical and Exegetical Commentary on The New Testament* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1878), vol. 1, p. 342.

⁵ Meyer, “Matthew,” vol. 1, p. 342.