

Luke's Portrait of the Early Church

- First Christians believed the Age to Come had Arrived
- The “Two Ages”
- The “Day of the LORD” had Dawned
- Time to get Ready: Repentance
- Baptism: Sign of Repentance
- John the Baptist: Eschatological Prophet

The Age to Come. The first Christians, Jews all, believed themselves to be an eschatological community of the New Age of the kingdom of God long-prophesied by Israel's prophets to appear “in the last days.” The holy hope, promised to Israel to be fulfilled at the Day of the LORD, has now been fulfilled, they believed, but not to the nation, but to the community gathered at Pentecost believing that Jesus was not just Israel's Messiah, but God's own son.

Nowhere is that characterization clearer than in Luke's portrait of the early Church in the Acts of the Apostles. As did most Jews of the first century world, the first Christians believed in the concept of “The Two Ages,” the present evil age (given over to the power of Satan), and the age of the kingdom of God, when God will overthrow Satan and once again establish God's unchallenged power over His world and everyone in it. The first Christians believed that they lived on the cusp of the New Age of the kingdom, and that as a prelude to this imminent breakthrough of God's power, God's people needed to get ready. This they would do by repenting of their idolatry to the powers of this world, and by re-committing themselves to be God's very own people. The sign of this repentance was baptism, a symbol that one had washed away old allegiances so as to live under God's power (which is what the Bible means when it says “kingdom of God;” not so much a *place* as a *power*).

John the Baptist. This is the key to understanding the ministry of John the Baptist, so important in the Gospels.

The context makes it clear that Luke believed that Jesus' prophecy was fulfilled at Pentecost: he follows Jesus' words with his own telling of the Pentecost story. And Luke makes it clear by the way he tells the story of Pentecost, that he understood the event in terms of the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies and hopes about the Day of the LORD.

Luke's Understanding of Pentecost

- Peter's Pentecost Sermon
- The Day of the LORD had dawned
- Fulfillment of Joel's prophecy

- “I will pour out my Spirit, and they shall prophesy...before the Day of the LORD comes”
- NT people were an Eschatological People

Peter’s Pentecost Sermon. To be sure, Luke describes that Pentecost celebration of the early Jewish Christians as something of a “sound and light show.” But when it comes to the question of “What does it all *mean*?, Luke answers via the interpretive speech of Simon Peter. For Luke, Peter's sermon at Pentecost, in which Peter explains what just happened, is his own interpretation of the Pentecost event, since he is writing the narrative and explaining Pentecost through the character of Peter in the story.

And what the events of Pentecost mean, says Luke, is that the Day of the LORD has dawned. Notice what Peter says. “It is not, as some suggest, merely a debauched, drunken spectacle. After all, it is only 9 in the morning! What you have witnessed here is nothing less than the fulfillment of the prophecy of Joel about the advent of the Day of the LORD! And then he quotes the relevant passage from the prophecy to cinch the matter: “And in the last days it shall be, says God, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh, and your sons and daughters will prophesy, and your young men will see visions, and your old men will dream dreams...indeed, both on my menservants and maidservants in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy... before the day of the LORD comes, that great and terrible day” (Acts 2:16ff.). And Peter says, “That Day is *today!*”

Take notice that Peter’s quotation of Joel 2 makes one very significant change – Luke has Peter quote Joel 2 from the LXX rather than the Hebrew text. The Hebrew text of Joel 2:28 says: And it shall come to pass *afterwards*.” But the *LXX of Joel 2:28 says: “**But in the last days,**” thus indicating that he sees what has just happened *as the fulfillment of the prophecy of Joel 2 regarding the Day of the Lord*. That is to say, Peter is explaining the original meaning of the prophecy in Joel 2 to say that what has just happened at Pentecost signifies that “the last days” had dawned. Joel, like many, many other OT prophets, talks about the Day of the LORD (or the Day of YHWH) which was the eschatological “Day” when YHWH would come to vindicate the faithful and vanquish the wicked, and supremely to establish YHWH's power over the earth, that is, “the kingdom of God.” And the Pentecost story in Acts indicates that Luke believed that that “Day” had arrived.

NT People were an Eschatological People. New Testament people believed that the Day of the LORD had broken in and broken through in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. And so, Luke sets the Pentecost event firmly in the context of OT hopes and prophecies about the Day of the LORD; that is, he is saying that the “End” has begun (which is, of course, precisely what “eschatological” means).

The Beginning of the End

- Issue: How could the Day of the LORD have arrived if history did not end?
- NT Eschatology contains both an “already” and a “not yet”

- There is a *beginning* of the end and an *end* of the end
- Inaugurated Eschatology

Day of the LORD. Now, it was not the *end* of the End. There is an argument among the scholars over the issue of how the Day of the LORD could have arrived at Pentecost (as Luke appears to be saying in his Pentecost story) without also bringing an end to history itself. And so, some scholars, such as George Eldon Ladd, in his *New Testament Theology* (p. 381), *separate* the “last days” from the Day of the LORD which, Ladd argues, remains future. The argument flies in the face of Luke’s story in that Peter clearly points to the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost as *evidence* that the last days had come and that the long-awaited Day of the LORD had dawned!

Already and Not Yet. Moreover, the argument is unnecessary if one keeps in mind that Jesus himself taught that the *eschaton* (the End) had *both* a present and a future aspect, an “already” and a “not yet.” There is a “beginning” of the end, and an “end” of the end. Nothing Peter says at Pentecost suggests that he thinks that the *end* of the End had arrived, just the *beginning* of the End. Jesus’ life, so the first Christians believed, marked the *beginning* of the End, not the *end* of the End. The Day of the LORD broke into history in the events surrounding the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus, *but it still awaits its final fulfillment in the future.*

Inaugurated Eschatology. This is sometimes called “inaugurated eschatology;” that is, we live in the tension between the “already” and the “not yet” of the *eschaton*.

An Illustration

- Do you rent or own?
- Truth be told, *neither*
- Same with kingdom of God
- Already, not yet; still in, but no longer of

Think of it this way. If someone asks you, “Do you rent or own your home?” Even so-called “home owners,” if they are honest, have to say, “neither.” We don’t rent, but neither do we *yet* own the home since the bank still “owns” most of it. Yet, here and now we live in it and *already* enjoy the benefits of home ownership. In the same way, the Day of the LORD (and the kingdom of God which it brings) is *already here*, but still awaits its final and full fulfillment.

And so keep this eschatological setting of the early Church in mind as you read Luke’s account in Acts. Luke pictures the first Christians as a community of the New Age of the kingdom of God, *already* enjoying its benefits, but *not yet* fully so; still *in* the world, but no longer *of* it.

* The Greek Old Testament, or Septuagint (from the Latin: *septuāgintā* literally "seventy"; often abbreviated as 70 in Roman numerals, i.e., LXX), is the earliest extant Koine Greek translation of books from the Jewish Bible in Hebrew, various biblical apocrypha and deuterocanonical

books. 'The Translation of the Seventy', derives from the story recorded in the Letter of Aristeas that the Hebrew Torah was translated into Greek at the request of Ptolemy II Philadelphus (285–247 BCE) by 70 Jewish scholars or, according to later tradition, 72, with six scholars from each of the Twelve Tribes of Israel, who independently produced identical translations.

Eschatology – Eschatology is a part of theology concerned with the final events of history, or the ultimate destiny of humanity. This concept is commonly referred to as the "end of the world" or "end times".