

2013

# Looking at the End from the Beginning

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## Recommended Citation

Klingbeil, Gerald A., "Looking at the End from the Beginning" (2013). *Faculty Publications*. 46.  
<http://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/old-testament-pubs/46>

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## Looking at the End From the Beginning

### *The Pentateuch provides significant comment on the Second Coming.*

Gerald A. Klingbeil

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Eschatology, the study of last things, has been approached mostly from two distinct viewpoints. Some provide a systematic study of the question—as can be seen in systematic theologies of all colors, which predominantly focus upon New Testament texts. Others concentrate on specific books relevant to eschatological teachings—chiefly the apocalyptic literature of the Old Testament (including the Book of Daniel) and the New Testament (as found in the Book of Revelation).

The Pentateuch—the first five books of the Bible—is a corpus of literature that has not been studied extensively with this objective. Yet it contains vocabulary of a distinctly eschatological nature.

#### **History, Eschatology, and the Macro-structure of the Pentateuch**

Looking at the nature of the Pentateuch—being primarily a body of narratives about the beginning, the first steps and missteps of humanity, the call and creation of a special nation, its liberation from slavery, and finally its experiences and wanderings in the desert prior to the conquest—the books actually contain some hint of eschatology in them.

William Shea<sup>1</sup> has pointed to the importance of the link between history and eschatology. Eschatology is not just a cold, systematic, and somehow mechanical focus upon the last things, but rather is always connected with real (future) history, real people, and a real God. Clearly this indicates a special understanding of history and one refreshingly different from the rationalistic, materialist version of history depicted by modern mass media, science, and certain quarters of religious studies. The biblical view of history depicts a clear linear (not cyclical, as in ancient religion) view of time that moves from the beginning (Creation) to the final restoration of this world. It is evidently a theocentric (as opposed to human-centered) view of history and depicts God's intervention in favor of His world and—more specifically—of His people.

Closely related to the history-oriented nature of the Pentateuch is its focus upon creation. The creation theme of the Pentateuch involves eschatology, since creation in the Old Testament “has a beginning, a history, and an end . . . [and] is part of a history characterized by figures and dates.”<sup>2</sup>

Thus it appears that the specific “history nature” of the Pentateuch in itself provides a clear indication of its “end-orientation,” an important concept in eschatological thought. Furthermore, the narrative and poetic seams of the Pentateuch are principally connected to the important phrase for “end,” which is usually connected to a temporal marker (like “days” or “time”). Three major poetic sections in the Pentateuch (Genesis 49; Numbers 24; Deuteronomy 31) are connected to the main narrative (or “story”) sections, thus displaying a clearly visible and coherent macro-structure.<sup>3</sup>

“A close look,” J. H. Sailmamer writes, “at the material lying between and connecting the narrative and poetic sections reveals the presence of a homogeneous compositional stratum. It is most noticeably marked

by the recurrence of the same terminology and narrative motifs. In each of the three segments, the central narrative figure (Jacob, Balaam, Moses) calls an audience together . . . and proclaims . . . what will happen . . . in the 'end of days.'"<sup>4</sup>

It appears that the author wants ancient and also modern readers to receive a cue to read the passage "eschatologically," that is, with a view toward the end.

In more generic terms, a sequence of narrative-poetry-epilogue is part of the literary technique used by Moses to unify the work. A good example can be found in the Creation account in Genesis 1–2, in which a short poetic discourse of Adam ("This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man" (2:23)<sup>5</sup> concludes the narrative of the Creation and is followed by the epilogue: "Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and they shall become one flesh" (vs. 24).

Both the narrative and historical form (and content) of the Pentateuch and its macro (and micro) structure point the reader toward a time beyond the present and thus invites a study of its eschatology.

### **The Lexicon of Eschatology in the Pentateuch**

Gerhard Pfandl has provided a helpful discussion of two important eschatological phrases in the Book of Daniel, one translated "end," "outcome," "after-part" and another translated "end." Other terms connected to eschatological concepts include a verb for "to come to an end," "cease," which does not occur in the Pentateuch.<sup>6</sup>

In the Book of Psalms the verb for "end," "come to an end," "complete" does seem to carry some eschatological overtones, as it can refer to God's act of judging—in itself an eschatological concept (Ps. 7:9)—or to His intervention in favor of His people "to make complete," "to perfect" (57:3; 138:8). The root, however, appears only in poetic contexts in the Book of Psalms, not in the Pentateuch.

The following table provides an overview of the occurrences the word translated "end" in the context of the Pentateuch.

REFERENCE	CO-TEXT	CONTEXT
Genesis 49:1	Found together with the noun (plus article), "the days," which appears as well in Daniel 2:28, 29.	Blessings or testament of Jacob in terms of a prophecy of future events related to the tribes of Israel.
Numbers 23:10	Together with the preposition and suffix "like his," which occurs only in poetic contexts.	The first oracle of Balaam, in which he blesses the descendants of Jacob instead of cursing them. The context does not appear to be eschatological, but limited to the descendants of Israel.
Numbers 24:14	Utilized together with the noun (plus article) "the days," see above.	Functions as an introduction to the fourth (and unpaid) oracle of Balaam, explaining what will happen in the "latter days," "end of days."
Numbers 24:20	No direct connection. The form contains a suffix ("his") that refers to Amalek.	Part of the final miscellaneous oracles of Balaam, referring to the future of Amalek. Does not appear to include eschatological overtones.
Deuteronomy 4:30	Utilized together with the noun (plus article), "the days," see above.	Moses' address in Transjordan, before the beginning of the conquest (Deut. 1:1).
Deuteronomy 8:16	No specific direct time marker. Stands alone in this context.	Refers to the end of the desert wandering.
Deuteronomy 11:12	Used in connection with the noun year.	Refers to the year cycle, from its beginning to its end.
Deuteronomy 31:29	Utilized with the noun (plus article), "the days," see above.	Forms part of the seam to the poetic section known as the "song of Moses" (Deuteronomy 32), and as with the earlier seams, it projects the future events toward the "end of the days" or "latter days."
Deuteronomy 32:20	Includes the suffix "their end." No additional time marker included.	Possible reference to the earlier golden calf episode (Exodus 32) or future experience of idolatry.
Deuteronomy 32:29	Includes the suffix "their end." No additional time marker included. Same as in Deuteronomy 32:20.	See above.

Genesis 49:1 utilizes the exact same phrase as Daniel 2:28, 29; 10:14, which the New Jerusalem Bible translates as "in the final days." The NKJV translates it: "in the latter days." As has been observed above, the macro-structure of the narrative-poetry-epilogue sequence can also be seen in this context.

The reference to a future point in time prepares the reader for the surprising turn of history as described in Exodus 1, in which the Israelites (or the sons of Jacob), living in Egypt but without the protection of the governor Joseph, are facing slavery and oppression. The main tenor of the "in the last days" perspective is God's future deliverance of His chosen people.

There is hope and a future—even beyond the distress and oppression that the sons of Jacob are yet to experience. At the end of the discourse, there is the threefold use of the root translated "to bless," which the NKJV translates as "He blessed each one according to his own blessing" (Gen. 49:28). It seems that by connecting one of the major themes of Genesis to its penultimate chapter, the author consciously seeks to

relate this section to the first blessing found in Genesis 1:28, in which God blesses Adam and Eve on the sixth day of creation. Thus the beginning and a future point in time are connected in the text. Though the exact nature of this point in time is not clear, the possibility of a messianic fulfillment should not be dismissed.

In Numbers 23:10, the phrase translated “my end like his [i.e., Jacob’s descendants],” is part of the first oracle, which the seer from Aram produced for Balak, the king of Moab. Balak is unhappy with the outcome because instead of the promised curse, Balaam blesses the descendants of Jacob—and is being paid for this disservice! The final reference to “my end” appears to be a personal reflection of Balaam, in which he concludes “his vision of Israel by wishing that, at the end his own life, he could be as blessed as Israel was.”<sup>7</sup> In view of his end at the swords of an Israelite army unit (Num. 31:8), the “end” came rather suddenly upon Balaam and does not contain any eschatological connotations.

Numbers 24:14 contains the introduction to the final fourth oracle of Balaam. King Barak is furious, but Balaam defends himself by pointing out that he can speak only what he has been shown. It appears that the connection with “the star out of Jacob,” indicates a distant future fulfillment. This phrase has been interpreted in terms of a reference to David or to the Messiah Himself (connecting Revelation 22:16, the “Morning Star,” to Numbers 24:17).

The evidence of the Aramaic translations suggests that Judaism interpreted the reference to the star as an indication of the Messiah. The Jews living in Qumran from the second century B.C. to the first century A.D. interpreted this reference in terms of their messianic expectations in the context of the final universal war between the sons of light and the sons of darkness as found in the famous war scroll.<sup>8</sup> Looking at the history of interpretation of this verse and at its wider prophetic context, it seems appropriate to suggest an eschatological perspective focusing possibly first upon David and then—in a more inclusive perspective—upon the Messiah.

In Numbers 24:20, the term refers to the end of the Amalekites—a tribe often mentioned during the early history of Israel in connection with the Edomites. The context does not indicate any eschatological connection and includes references to other tribes connected to the history of Israel.

Deuteronomy 4:30 contains the complete formula translated as “in the latter days” (KJV), which also appears “at the end of days” in Daniel 2:28; 10:14 (NRSV). Moses admonishes his people to stay clear of idolatry and describes the inevitable results of their actions—if they allow idolatry to take control of their hearts. In the form of a typical ancient Near Eastern vassal treaty, Moses depicts not only the results of idolatry—namely exile, destruction, and more idolatry—but also points toward the future redemption of Israel. “When you are in distress, and all these things come upon you in the latter days, when you turn to the Lord your God and obey His voice” (Deut. 4:30). Thus the future (and not specified) redemptive event will occur after the suffering and the change of heart necessary for a new beginning.

Christopher Wright comments here very poignantly: “Moses turns the dynamic of the covenant into a theology of history. No place would be too far and no time too distant for Israel to come back to God. Beyond sin and judgment there was always hope—as their recent past history had already proved.”<sup>9</sup>

The precise historical context of this future repentance cannot be inferred from the context of the passage and has been connected with the exile of the northern tribes and the final destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C. by the Babylonians. The temporal marker “at the end of days,” however, has also been inter-

preted as stretching all the way from Old Testament times to the end of the Age—especially in view of the fact that the sequence fall-judgment-repentance is part of a specific pattern, which will be operative until the final judgment.

In Deuteronomy 8:16 the “end” appears without any explicit temporal marker and refers in this specific context to the end of the wandering in the desert, emphasizing God’s goodness toward His people. Goodness, in this context, includes testing by hardship for the sake of a better future. The text does not seem to indicate eschatological connotations.

This also appears to be the case with Deuteronomy 11:12, in which the focus is upon the land. Moses distinguishes in his sermon between the land of Egypt with its fertility and the promised land, whose primary caregiver is YHWH. Year in and year out, God will be the one responsible for rain, growth, harvest, and well-being—a theme that is later perverted by the typical Canaanite fertility cults, in which Baal (or any other god, for that matter) usurps YHWH’s life-sustaining power. The reference to the term *end* is clearly connected to the year and cannot be understood eschatologically.

Deuteronomy 31:29 again is part of the introduction or seam to a major poetic section in the Pentateuch, namely the Song of Moses in Deuteronomy 32, including the leader’s farewell address. The immediate context suggests a period of apostasy after the death of Moses and does not include direct eschatological connotations. It appears that “the latter days” would indicate a time in the relatively near future; for example, during the time of the judges, when the prophetic description of Moses became a sad reality (Judges 2:11-16).

The final two references in Deuteronomy 32:20 and 32:39 to “their end,” refer most probably to the golden calf episode in Exodus 32 or future events involving idolatry and connect *end* with the people. Deuteronomy 32:21 reads: ““They have provoked Me to jealousy by what is not God; they have moved Me to anger by their foolish idols. But I will provoke them to jealousy by those who are not a nation; I will move them to anger by a foolish nation.”” *End* should be interpreted in terms of destiny or future and does not connote eschatological overtones, but connects directly to a past and possibly future experience of Israel.

## “End” in the Pentateuch

REFERENCE	CO-TEXT	CONTEXT
Genesis 4:3	"At the end of days," occurs together with preposition "from."	Describes the passing of time and the end of a specific encompassing the time after the fall, birth of the first sons of Adam and Eve, and their growing up. No eschatological connotations.
Genesis 6:13	No specific additional time marker is included. The noun appears without a preposition.	The introduction of the Flood story. God communicates with Noah that the "end of all the flesh" is imminent. The unusual nature of the event provides a typological equivalent for time events, but does not indicate specifically eschatological future realities.
Genesis 8:6	"At the end of forty days."	Indicates the time period before which the ark had settled on Mount Ararat and where Noah opened the window and released a raven. No eschatological connotations.
Genesis 16:3	"At the end of ten years."	After ten years in Canaan without any children, Sarai proposes the solution of giving her slave maid Hagar to Abram. No eschatological connotations.
Genesis 41:1	"At the end of two years."	Two-year period that Joseph spent in prison before he interpreted Pharaoh's dream. No eschatological connotations.
Exodus 12:41	"At the end of four hundred and thirty years."	Period of sojourn of Israel in Egypt. The time marker in an important event in salvation history, namely the beginning of the Exodus. No eschatological connotations.
Numbers 13:25	"At the end of forty days."	Period that the spies spent in Canaan. No eschatological connotations.
Deuteronomy 9:11	"At the end of forty days and forty nights."	Period that Moses spent upon Mount Sinai after having received the two stone tablets inscribed with the Ten Commandments. No eschatological connotations.
Deuteronomy 15:1	"At the end of every seven years."	Laws concerning the Sabbatical year, in which remission is granted. No clear eschatological connotations.
Deuteronomy 31:10, 11	"At the end of every seven years."	As part of Moses' final discourse, Israel is challenged by the reading of the law of God every seven years. No eschatological connotations.

Several observations can be made while considering the data of the usage of "end" in the Pentateuch.

First, with the exception of only one reference (Gen. 6:13), all references connect the preposition *from*, *at* to the noun *end*. This usage seems to go hand in hand with possible eschatological (or at least typological) connotations of the term. With the exception of Genesis 6:13, all references utilizing the preposition indicate a specific and limited time period.

Second, it appears that *end* is often utilized in crucial moments in salvation history. In Genesis 4:3, the description of the first homicide on the planet and the repercussions of the Fall are described. The time marker in Genesis 8:6 indicates a period prior to the opening of the ark, and, with that, the new beginning of

humanity. Genesis 16:3 describes the crucial manmade solution to the problem of Sarai's barrenness, following the customs of its day. The point of reference in the mind of the author is clearly Genesis 12:1-3 and God's promise of a future, descendants, and a name. Exodus 12:31 marks the end of an era (i.e., the time in Egypt of the people of Israel) and the beginning of a new one, because now Israel is a people (and not just a bigger clan) on its way to the Promised Land. Deuteronomy 9:11 refers back to the time Moses spent on Mount Sinai, receiving the law of God—clearly an important event in salvation history. Taking into account all the mentioned references, it appears that the allusion to the "end" of a specific period/era always supposes the beginning of something new—a principle also often found in eschatological literature, although it is not explicitly eschatological in itself.

Third, a closer look at Genesis 6:13 indicates a distinct usage of the term—without the preposition *from* or *at*. God speaks to Noah and provides a rationale for the destruction, or, better, "the end of all flesh," which is an indication of all living beings (including both humankind and animals). Gordon Wenham has correctly recognized a similar terminology in the description of the destruction of Jerusalem as found in Ezekiel 7, including key words such as "end," "violence," "coming," "is full"<sup>10</sup>—an event with similar repercussions in salvation history. Inasmuch as judgment is always part and parcel of "final things," Genesis 6:13 definitely carries eschatological overtones—even more so in view of the fact that it utilizes a distinct grammatical construction compared to the other occurrences of *end* in the Pentateuch (i.e., without the preposition *from* or *at*). However, it is clear that the eschatological overtones concern typology and have no distinct eschatological program or route.

### **Eschatology in the Pentateuch**

Eschatological thinking is not a late development in Old Testament theology, but an integral part of theological thought that can be traced from the first to the last book of the Old Testament canon. This stands in clear contrast to modern evolutionary concepts of theology and religion—especially regarding its eschatology.

Although eschatology does not have "banner quality" in the Pentateuch, but rather "footnote quality," it nevertheless is present. The eschatological lexicon provides specific terms and contexts that indicate eschatological thought.

As has been suggested by John Sailhamer, the Pentateuch as a whole (and not as the result of four or more distinct sources, as interpreted by traditional historical criticism) is a work built on prophetic hope and eschatological perspective, a fact that can be seen in the literary macro-structure of the Pentateuch, which is always introduced by verses including the phrase "at the end of the days." Though it is often difficult to pinpoint the exact nature and time of this "end of the days," it is nevertheless a clear indication of the inclusion of this important theological concept in early books.

In a world of confusing voices about the things to come, God's sure Word provides assurance. The Seventh-day Adventist Church has studied eschatological concepts for 150 years, but still there is much more to discover in the riches of God's Word. Future studies should focus not only on the eschatological lexicon, but also develop a sound methodology to understand eschatological concepts and eschatological typology. The interpretive road stretches ahead, lined with precious truths and surrounded by refreshing vistas. It is well worthwhile to walk in that way.

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[▶Back to top](#)