

# The Distinction between “Last Days” and “The Time of the End”

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“The last days” or “latter days” are generally taken by Christian denominations, groups and individuals to refer to a specific time period leading up to the return of Christ, but with varying views concerning when these “last days” began or will begin. For example:

1. Some groups believe “the last days” began with the 2<sup>nd</sup> world war in 1939.
2. Other groups believe “the last days” began with the restoration of Israel to its land in 1948.
3. Many believe “the last days” began with the first coming of Jesus and so have continued for the past almost 2,000 years.

The following Study demonstrates that none of the above proposals can be biblically correct. This is because only 2 out of the 14 occurrences of the phrase “latter days” in the Hebrew Scriptures and none of the passages with the phrase “last days” in the New Testament actually refers to the days immediately prior to Jesus’ return. They apply to various particular events which begin and end at unspecified times. An examination of the various relevant texts and passages also demonstrates that the more important eschatological passages are those containing the phrases “the time of the end,” “end of the age,” “the end,” or “the last day.”

## Part 1 – Unspecified “Latter Days/Days to Come”

### TRANSLATION AND DEFINITION OF THE HEBREW PHRASE

In translating the 14 occurrences of the Hebrew phrase *acharyth hayyamin* the KJV uses the English phrases “the latter days,” and “the last days” as implying a specified time. The NASB also does the same, although occasionally it uses the phrase “the days to come.” However, although the Hebrew phrase is literally “at the end of the days,” it is now recognized by modern translators that *acharyth hayyamin* has the meaning of the unspecified future and should be translated as “**in the future days**” or “**the days to come.**” So this is the rendering in the NIV, the NEB, the REB, the NAB, the Holman Christian Standard Bible, and The God’s Word Translation. Nevertheless, several of these versions are inconsistent because they still translate the Hebrew phrase in Isaiah 2:2 and Micah 4:1 as “the last days” rather than “the days to come.” Versions that rectify this are the NEB, the REB and the NAB. The only version, that I am aware of, that is consistent in all 14 texts is *The Bible in Living English* by Steven Byington which renders the Hebrew as “**in future days.**” (However, there may be others). Also the paraphrased CEV variously expresses this phrase as “in the future,” “someday,” or “later.”

A good explanation of the meaning of the Hebrew phrase, also in its related languages, comes from Barnes’ Notes on the Bible in which he states that:

In the last days - Hebrew, Chaldee, Syriac, and Arabic, **after these things**, or afterward. The expression the last days, however, occurs frequently in the Old Testament: Genesis 49:1, Jacob called his sons, that he might tell them what should happen to them in the last days, that is, **in future times** - Heb. in after times; Micah 4:1, "In the last days (Hebrew: **in later times**) the mountain of the Lord's house," etc.; Isaiah 2:2, "in the last days the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established in the tops of the mountains," etc. The expression then properly denoted "**the future times**" in general.

In this study we will be examining **the time of fulfilment** of the prophecies in the NT which use the Greek phrase *eschatais hemerai*, always rendered “the last days” in its 5 occurrences, as well as noting the time of fulfilment of the related phrases. This examination reveals that the Greek word *eschatos* when used in reference to time and in its various contexts has the meaning of “**days/times of the fulfilment of prophecy.**” But first we will examine the time of fulfilment of the 14 prophecies in the Hebrew Scriptures which use the Hebrew phrase *acharyth hayyamin*, variously rendered: “latter days,” “last days,” “days to come,” “the future days,” “in the future” or “later” in the various Bible versions.

## The Unspecified “Latter Days/Days to Come” in the Hebrew Scriptures

In reading these 14 prophecies it becomes evident that they each had an unspecified time of fulfilment. All but two did not concern the time leading up to the return of Messiah.

*'THE LATTER DAYS' EVENTS IN EARLY HISTORY*

- ❖ “Then Jacob called his sons and said, ‘Gather around, and I will tell you what will happen to you **in the days to come.**’ ... <sup>9</sup> Judah is a young lion ... The scepter will not depart from Judah, or the staff from between his feet, until **He whose right it is** comes and the obedience of the peoples belongs to Him”  
(*Gen. 49:1, 9, 10 HCSB*).

With respect to the 12 tribes of Jacob the things that “will happen to [them] **in the days to come**” (*'Latter days' KJV*) were to be fulfilled at various **unspecified** times for each tribe according to the descriptions in verses 3-27. For Judah this fulfilment began when David became king over all the tribes of Israel, and with a complete fulfilment when all kings bow before the Messiah (Ps. 72:11).

*'LATTER DAYS' SHORTLY BEFORE JESUS RETURNS*

- ❖ “You [*Gog*] will attack my people Israel like a cloud that covers the land. **In the days to come,** I will let you **attack my land** so that nations will know me. I will use you for my holy purpose as they watch”  
(*Ezek. 38:16 GW*).

Many details in Ezekiel 38 and 39 indicate that 38:16 will be fulfilled **shortly before Messiah's return** when Jerusalem is under siege (*Zech 12 and 14*).

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- ❖ “Now I have come to explain to you what will happen to your people **in the future** (*latter days*), for the **vision concerns a time yet to come**” (*Dan. 10:14 NIV*).

According to Daniel 11 and 12 these ‘latter days/future days’ will occur when the Antichrist “King of the North” battles with “the King of the South” and the former comes to his end at the hands of Messiah, at which time the great tribulation will also have occurred.

*'LATTER DAYS' AFTER JESUS HAS RETURNED*

- ❖ “Look, the storm of Yahweh has gone forth *in* wrath, even a **whirling tempest**. It will **whirl upon the head of the wicked.** <sup>20</sup>The *anger* of Yahweh will not turn back until his doing and until his keeping the plans of his *mind*. **In latter days** you will look closely at it *with* understanding” (*Jer. 23:19, 20 LEB*).

Within the context of chapter 23, although having an initial fulfilment when Nebuchadnezzar deported the Judeans in the 6<sup>th</sup> century, these future “days to come” will occur, not as a lead up to Jesus’ return but after he has arrived to punish the ungodly and the wicked lying prophets who prophesied that Israel would “have peace” in contradiction of the true prophets.

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- ❖ “Look, the storm of Yahweh! Wrath has gone forth, a whirling tempest. It will whirl upon *the* head of *the* wicked. <sup>24</sup>*The burning anger of Yahweh* will not turn back until his doing, and until his accomplishing the plans of his *mind*. **In the last of the days** you will understand it”  
(*Jer. 30:23, 24 LEB*).

The context here is after Messiah returns as Israel’s “prince,” and brings relief from the great tribulation to them (vss. 8, 20) and God’s wrath on the wicked (vss. 21-23). Additionally all the tribes of Israel will then be restored and their city rebuilt (vs. 18). All of these events are within the future *achariyth hayyamin*

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- ❖ “But there is a God in heaven who reveals secrets. He will tell King Nebuchadnezzar what is going to happen **in the days to come.** This is your dream, the vision you had while you were asleep: ... <sup>34</sup> While you were watching, a stone was cut out, but not by humans. It **struck the statue's iron-and-clay feet** and smashed them...” (*Dan. 2:28, 34 GW*).

Within the vision detailed in Daniel 2 these ‘latter days’ will involve the future destruction of the world’s governments when Jesus as “the stone” smashes them. This is **not a picture of events leading up to the return of Jesus,** but at the time of his return.

- ❖ “Now I am going back to my people, but come, let me warn you of what this people will do to your people **in days to come.**” ... <sup>17</sup>“I see him, *but not now*; I behold him, *but not near*. **A star will come out of Jacob;** a scepter will rise out of Israel. He will **crush the foreheads of Moab,** the skulls of all the people of Sheth. <sup>18</sup> Edom will be conquered; Seir, his enemy, will be conquered, but Israel will grow strong. <sup>19</sup> A ruler will come out of Jacob and destroy the survivors of the city” (*Num. 24:14, 17-19 NIV*).

These ‘latter days’ for the judgment of Moab and Edom by the Messiah will be days *after Christ returns*, rather than days leading up to his return.

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- ❖ “And it shall happen **in the future of the days** the mountain of the house of Yahweh *shall* be established; it will be among the highest of the mountains, and it shall be raised from *the* hills. All *of* the nations shall travel to him; <sup>4</sup>He shall judge between the nations and he shall arbitrate for many peoples. They shall beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks. A nation shall not lift up a sword against a nation, and they shall not learn war again” (*Isa. 2:2, 4 LEB also see Micah. 4:1*).

These ‘latter days’ also will be days *after Christ returns*, rather than days leading up to his return.

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- ❖ “The children of Israel will remain for many days without a king and prince, without sacrifice and stone pillar, ephod and teraphim.<sup>5</sup>Afterward the children of Israel will return and **seek Yahweh their God** and David their king. They will come in fear to Yahweh and to his goodness **at the end of days**” (*Hos. 3:4, 5 LEB*).

It is generally considered by scholars that this national repentance of Israel occurs *after Christ has returned*.

#### *THE REMAINING PASSAGES WHICH ARE NOT OF EVENTS PRIOR TO JESUS’ RETURN*

The remaining passages which have the phrase “the latter days/the days to come” are **Deuteronomy 4:30** concerning Israel’s captivity by the Assyrians and Judah’s captivity by the Babylonians; **Deuteronomy 31:29** concerning the many disasters that befell **Israel** in punishment for the evil she committed; **Jeremiah 48:47** concerning the restoration of Moab—again after Messiah has returned; **Jeremiah 49:39** concerning the restoration of Elam (possibly Medo-Persia)—again after Messiah has returned.

So, in all of these 14 passages in the Hebrew Scriptures, the usage of the phrase “latter days/in days to come” is with reference to **various unspecified future times when particular prophecies would be fulfilled**, rather than meaning only the one specific “time of the end.” The phrase is not a catch-all for the time leading up to the return of Christ.

## Unspecified “Last Days” in the New Testament

#### *TRANSLATION AND DEFINITION OF THE GREEK PHRASE*

The Septuagint translated the phrase *achariyth hayyamin* from the Hebrew Scriptures with the Greek phrase *eschaton ton hemeron* (“*in the last of the days/latter of the days/at the end of the days*”) and once as *eschatais hemerais* (“*the last days*”). These phrases were then used by the Greek Scripture writers so that *eschatais hemerais* is consistently translated as “the last days” in Acts 2:17; 2 Timothy 3:1; James 5:3; as is *eschaton ton hemeron* in 2 Peter 3:3. Additionally the phrase *eschatou ton hemeron* is rendered literally as “the last of the days” in Hebrews 1:2. So it appears that the Hebrew and Greek phrases are synonymous.

However, a problem arises because, as shown above, the Hebrew Scriptures and the LXX used these phrases in the context of prophecies with **various unspecified times of future fulfilment**, rather than meaning only “the last days” in the sense of **one specified time of future fulfilment**. The cause of this anomaly may be the inadequacy of the Greek to express the meaning of the Hebrew. The Greek adjective *eschatos* has both a spatial and a temporal usage, and yet:

The temporal dimension is the least developed sense of *eschatos*. Gk. thought for example, has no developed eschatological understanding of time, i.e., one directed toward a future goal or end of the historical process.

*NIV Theological Dictionary of New Testament Words*, p. 479.

So it seems that the fault in this instance lies with the definition of the Greek term *eschatos* as being too limited, and until this becomes recognized all Greek-English Lexicons of the NT must continue to explain *eschatais hemerais* as meaning “*the last days*”—a superlative and so with reference to a specific time in contrast to the Hebrew original which lacked specificity. This then leads commentators to explain all occurrences of the phrase “last days” incorrectly as only a reference to the time (even if 2,000 years long) ending immediately prior to Jesus’ return.

In resolving this problem it is essential to understand the prophetic events in the New Testament which use the phrase *eschatais hemerais* **in the light of fulfilment of events that have occurred or will occur in “the days to come” of the Hebrew Scriptures**. These “days to come” are “**in future times**” from when the prophecy was **written** and so have the meaning: “**days or times of the fulfilment of a particular prophecy.**”

It is also essential to closely examine **the context** of the 5 New Testament passages which use the phrase “last days,” along with the passages which contain related phrases, so as to discover when and to whom they applied. The result is that the word *eschatos* refers to **the fulfilment of each particular prophecy in view.**

**Acts 2:17-21** Quoted from Joel 2:28-32:

- ❖ “And **in the last days** it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall **prophesy**, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams; even on my male servants and female servants in those days I will pour out my Spirit, and they shall prophesy. And I will show **wonders in the heavens** above and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and vapour of smoke; the sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, before the day of the Lord comes, the great and magnificent day.”

Instead of using the phrase “*last days*,” in Joel 2:28, the LXX translators used the Greek phrase rendered as: “**it shall come to pass, afterward**” which means ‘in the future when the prophecy will be fulfilled, so that Peter is actually saying: “**And in the days of prophecy fulfilment, it shall be, God declares...**” However, Peter was only showing that what was in evidence at that particular time, i.e. the disciples’ **prophesying** that the crowd could hear on that particular day at Pentecost, **was a fulfilment** of Joel’s prophecy on that occasion. Peter was obviously not saying that the entire passage of Joel 2 was being fulfilled then because “*those wonders in the heavens...signs on the earth*” etc. were not then happening. Peter was simply filling in the scenario as painted by Joel, but not stretching the “last days” – those particular “**days of prophecy fulfilment**” into an almost 2,000 years long period.

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**Hebrews 1:1, 2:**

- ❖ “Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but **in these last days** (Lit. “in the last of the days”) he has **spoken to us by his Son**, whom he appointed the heir of all things...”

Clearly this was fulfilled **when Jesus began his ministry** as the final one speaking for God. So, in harmony with the above information, we might better render **Hebrews 1:2** as: “...**but in these days of prophecy fulfilment he has spoken to us by his Son...**” and so bringing the era of the Hebrew Scripture prophets to an end.

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**2 Timothy 3:1-5; 13:**

- ❖ “**But understand this that in the last days** there **will come** times of difficulty. For people **will be** lovers of self, lovers of money, *proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, heartless, unappeasable, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not loving good, treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power. Avoid such people ...*<sup>13</sup> while evil people and impostors will **go on from bad to worse**, deceiving and being deceived.”

In the *Word Biblical Commentary—Pastoral Epistles*, William Mounce explains with reference to 1 Timothy 3 that:

At first glance it appears that these “last days” are in Timothy’s future. However, context requires that the vices of vv 2-5 and hence the “last days” of v1 be in the present time for Timothy. (1) The imperative “avoid” (v 5), is present tense as are most of the verbal forms. Being non-indicative in mood, it has no time significance, and yet the context requires that this linear imperative refer to avoiding these people in the present. The use of the present-tense verb in v 6 assures that this is the case. “The people who will be be lovers of self” v2 are the same as those who are (eisin, v 6) currently entertaining Ephesian households. (2) In the parallel passage, 1 Tim 4:1-5, there is the same implication regarding time. The prophecy of apostasy in the last times originally referred to a future event, but the context shows that this prophecy is now in the present time for Timothy.

Although this was a **present tense statement** it still implied the future, **but to include Timothy’s lifetime** because he was to “*understand this*” concerning how morally bad people would become in his near future. He was also told by Paul to “*avoid such people*” and so they must exist **within his own life-time**, even though they become progressively worse (vs. 13). So **2 Timothy 3:1** might be better rephrased as: “**But understand this that in the days of prophecy fulfilment there will come times of difficulty...**”

Furthermore, in Romans 1:29-32, Paul had earlier described, as happening in his own time, five of those same bad traits, attitudes and conduct of people that he later describes in *2 Timothy 3:1-5; 13*. i.e. “*self-assuming, haughty, disobedient to parents, false to agreements and having no natural affection*”?

As bad as that was Paul shows in *2 Timothy 3* that it will get worse and that he, Timothy, must be cautious. Naturally this does not mean that the character of men was to suddenly improve after Timothy had died. Paul was simply warning Timothy of what to expect in regard to the deteriorating standards among people.

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**James 5:3-6:**

❖ “Come now, you rich, weep and howl for the miseries that are coming upon you. Your riches have rotted and your garments are moth-eaten. Your gold and silver have corroded, and their corrosion will be evidence against you and will eat your flesh like fire. **You have laid up treasure in the last days.** Behold, the wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, are crying out against you, and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts. You have lived on the earth in luxury and in self-indulgence. You have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter. You have condemned and murdered the righteous person. He does not resist you” (*ESV*).

*A TRANSLATION ISSUE IN JAMES 5:3*

Most translations render this passage as in the *ESV* above and so showing these “last days” as having occurred in the 1<sup>st</sup> century. However, there are variations from this rendering in a few translations such as the *NRSV* which renders verse 3 as: “you have laid up treasure for the last days” yet the Greek word *en* means “in” and not “for.” Also the following 3 versions have changed the syntax to read:

- “It is like fire which you have stored up for the final days” (*NJB*).
- “for you have stored up fire for the last days.” (*Smith & Goodspeed*).

These renderings fly in the face of the Greek text and seem to be a way of avoiding the meaning here by a change in the syntax recognized by all other translations. So, because the majority of translations do convey the original meaning, James must have viewed these **condemned wealthy people as then already living in “the last days”**—“in the days to come” from the perspective of fulfilment of prophecy. Evidently this laying up of treasures by these rich people was happening in their own present time and not in their future. So *James 5:3* might be better rephrased as: “*Your gold and silver have corroded, and their corrosion will be evidence against you and will eat your flesh like fire. You have laid up treasure in the days of prophecy fulfilment...*”

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**2 Peter 3:3-7:**

❖ “I am stirring up your sincere mind by way of reminder,<sup>2</sup> that you should remember the *predictions of the holy prophets* and the *commandment of the Lord* and Savior through your apostles, knowing this first of all, that **scoffers will come in the last days** with scoffing, following their own sinful desires. They will say, “**Where is the promise of his coming?** For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all things are continuing as they were from the beginning of creation.” For **they deliberately overlook** this fact, that the heavens existed long ago, and the earth was formed out of water and through water by the word of God, and that by means of these the world that then existed was deluged with water and perished. But by the same word the heavens and earth that now exist are stored up for fire, being kept until the day of judgment and destruction of the ungodly” (*ESV*).

Again, because of the present tense grammar to this passage it is evident that the “last days/days to come” were in progress as Peter is writing. **The scoffers were those in existence in Peter’s time.** As Richard Bauckham in the *Word Biblical Commentary* on *2 Peter 3* states that:

The prophetic form of vv 3–4 enables the writer to portray **his contemporaries**, the false teachers, as a **phenomenon of the last days**, which the apostles predicted. The readers need not be disturbed by them. On the contrary, the false teachers, who reject eschatological prophecy, should in fact be a confirmation of the readers’ faith in eschatological prophecy, since they themselves are a fulfillment of prophecy! The quotation from the scoffers in v 4 is the author’s own formulation of the **objection his opponents were making** to the expectation of the Parousia.

Therefore, these scoffers were not people who would appear some short while before Christ returns but rather **were then, in the 1<sup>st</sup> century, engaged in their scoffing** at those with faith in the future return of Christ. So **2 Peter 3:2** might be better rephrased as: “...*knowing this first of all, that scoffers will come in the days of prophecy fulfilment.*”

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**Jude 18-21:**

❖ “They [*the apostles*] said to you, ‘**In the last time** there will be **scoffers**, following their own ungodly passions.’ It is **these who cause divisions**, worldly people, devoid of the Spirit. But you, beloved, building yourselves up in your most holy faith and praying in the Holy Spirit, keep yourselves in the love of God, waiting for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ that leads to eternal life.”

Although the phrase “in the last time” in Jude is singular and therefore specific as compared with the plural “in the last days” of Peter’s statement, the context is of that which is in the present tense e.g. “*these who cause divisions.*” Furthermore the connection with Peter’s statement referring to “*scoffers*” is very strong. So **Jude 18** might be better rephrased as: “*They [the apostles] said to you, ‘In the time of prophecy fulfilment there will be scoffers, following their own ungodly passions.’ It is these who cause division.*” So although an initial reading of 2 Peter 3:3 and Jude 18 may make one inclined to think that a particular period leading to the return of Jesus had actually begun in the 1<sup>st</sup> century. However, both Peter and Jude were simply stating that the Christians then were living in a period of the fulfilment of certain prophecies by Jesus and the apostles concerning destructive elements that would appear within the congregation and also showing how to deal with them.

### “Later Times,” “Last Times.” and “a Last Hour” all Fulfilled in the 1<sup>st</sup> Century

The following Scriptures contain phrases which concern situations or events which occurred in the 1<sup>st</sup> century and so are similar to the passages using the phrase “*the last days.*”

**1 Timothy 4:1-3:**

❖ “Now the Spirit expressly says that **in later times** (Gk *husterois kairos*) some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons, through the insincerity of liars whose consciences are seared, who **forbid** marriage and **require** abstinence from foods that God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth.”

This prophecy may seem to be fulfilled only at an unspecified time in the future. However, William Mounce makes some interesting points about its time of fulfilment:

At first glance it appears that the phrase “in the last times” refers to some time in the future, especially since the verb is future tense (will apostatize) and the phrase can be translated “in the future times.” However, a closer examination shows that Paul sees Timothy and himself as being present in the last times. (1) This is required by the context. The purpose of 1 Tim 4:4-5 is to show that the problems Timothy is currently experiencing are not unexpected. (2) The actual phrase *en husterois kairos* does not occur again in the P[astoral] E[pistles], but there is a similar phrase that employs a future verb although it refers to present time: 2 Tim 3:1... (4) “will apostatize,” is future because Paul is probably looking at the prophecy from the perspective of the time it was originally given, a future that has now become present.

*Word Biblical Commentary – Pastoral Epistles*, p. 234.

So from Paul’s perspective in 62-64 A.D. when he wrote those words “the spirit” had earlier prophesied that there would be **a departure from the faith** of those who listened to the teaching of demons through liars, and this was **now currently happening in the 1<sup>st</sup> century.**

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**1 Peter 1:20:**

❖ “He [*Jesus*] was foreknown before the foundation of the world but was made manifest in **the last times** (Gk *eschatou tou chronou*) for the sake of you.”

Here Peter simply refers to the time **when Jesus began his ministry** i.e. appeared on the scene. As J. R. Michaels shows in the *Word Biblical Commentary, Volume 49* on 1 Peter 1:20 it is not a reference to the last days of this age. So **1 Peter 1:20** might be better rephrased as: “*He [Jesus]...was made manifest in the times of prophecy fulfilment.*”

*1 John 2:18:*

- ❖ "...it is *a last hour*, and just as you have heard that antichrist is coming even now there **have come to be many antichrists**; from which fact we gain the knowledge that it is a last hour."

*The Expositor's Bible Commentary* Volume 12 says:

Westcott (p.68) translates the Greek literally – "it is **a last hour**" – and observes that since no definite article is used with "last hour," the term describes "the general character of the period" rather than its temporal nature. Stott (pp. 108-9) agrees that it refers to the last hours of the last days," which the author could say on theological grounds "had struck." He understands, however, that the words **involve no chronological or temporal assertions**," p. 324.

*The New International Bible Commentary* on 1 John 2 says:

John and his readers were living in **an eschatological hour**, electric with movements of the unseen principalities which might burst into sight at any time. Jerusalem had fallen and antichristian Rome was already closing in a mortal combat with the church...There are periods when the End obviously draws near, though in course of time the crisis subsides and recedes...**In one such last hour** the End will suddenly break into its irreversible course: this realization braces Christians to special preparedness at such times. If it be asked if John had all this in view, the answer must be 'not at all likely'. Prophets speak better than they know (1 Pet. 1:10ff), and John had good reason to think about his day, as we do of ours, that it is the last hour; though his word here is literally '**a last hour**'.

So the phrase "*a last hour*" refers to a particular period in John's time in the 1<sup>st</sup> century so as to highlight the general character of that period when various antichrists appear. So *1 John 2:18:* might be better rephrased as: "*...it is an hour of prophecy fulfilment.*"

## The "Last Days" Cannot Be a Period of One Hundred and Twenty Years

A very few commentators have proposed that the 120 years mentioned in Genesis 6:3 refers to a period of time between God's statement that he planned to destroy mankind and that actual destruction in the Flood. Some have then taken this as a pattern for the duration of "the last days" as being 120 years. However, this view of the Genesis 6:3 statement does not fit the context or the context of the various genealogies in Genesis which all concern the longevity and vitality of humans at different periods. So **Genesis 6:3 simply shows that the longevity of mankind was to be drastically reduced after the Flood**. On Genesis 6:3 the *Word Biblical Commentary* says:

"His days shall be one hundred and twenty years." In the immediate context of Gen 6:1-4 the meaning of this remark appears quite obvious: **from now on nobody shall live to more than 120 years of age**. However, within the wider setting of Genesis this interpretation is problematic, for Noah and many of his descendants live hundreds of years (Gen 11). Even Abraham lived to 175; Isaac, to 180; and Jacob, to 147 years. On the other hand, according to 5:32, Noah was 500 years old when he fathered Ham, Shem, and Japhet, and 600 years old when the flood began (7:6), so some commentators (e.g., Keil, König, Kidner) have suggested that 120 years represents a period of grace before the flood. It may be, however, that the author thought of the 120 years as a maximum life-span that was **only gradually implemented**; cf. the slow-acting curses of Eden 3:16-19. In the post-flood period, the recorded ages steadily decline (chap. 11), and **later figures very rarely exceed 120**. After the time of Jacob, the longest-lived include Joseph (110, Gen 50:26), Moses (120, Deut 34:7), and Joshua (110, Josh 24:29). Only Aaron (123, Num 33:39) exceeds 120.

Furthermore, there is no connection with any 120 year so-called 'period of grace before the flood' by the statement that Noah's sons were born when he was 500 years old (Gen. 5:32) and the time of the flood was when he was 600 years old (Gen. 7:6). So for the above reasons there is no basis for imagining that "the last days" will be any specific period of 120 years.

## Summary of what the Phrase “Last Days” Does and Does Not Refer to

Because the Hebrew phrase *achariyth hayyamin* means “*the days to come*” or “*in future times*” and the Septuagint translators rendered it in Greek as *eschatais hemeraiis* meaning “*the last days*” which was then copied by the New Testament writers, then this phrase must be understood, in the light of the Hebrew Scriptures, as associated with “*the days to come*” or “*in future times.*” *So once the prophecy is being fulfilled the phrases eschatais hemeraiis and eschatou tou chronou in the relevant texts in the New Testament mean “the days or times of the fulfilment of prophecy”* and which occur at various unspecified times. This means that it cannot be taken as a technical phrase and applied specifically and only to the times leading up to the return of Christ, and therefore, it cannot consistently be given any particular calculated starting point such as 1914, 1939, or 1948. Although there are two passages in the Hebrew Scriptures which do concern events immediately prior to Jesus’ return, it is evident from the context that none of the passages in the New Testament containing the phrase “last days” actually refers to those days or times immediately prior to Jesus’ return, but they apply to various particular situations and events in the first century.

Furthermore, although it may at first appear that “the last days” began with the first coming of Jesus as Messiah and so have continued for the past almost 2,000 years, yet this cannot be the case because the only times the phrase is used in reference to time leading up to the return of Jesus concerns the 2 descriptions of events described in the Hebrew Scriptures. None of the relevant passages in the New Testament can legitimately be stretched out until Jesus’ return.

However, this does not mean that the Christian is left with no time markers at all. These come in the form of the phrases “the last day” as the time for the first resurrection, “the time of the end,” and “the end of the age,” all of which will be examined next.

### *Part 2 – “The Last Day”=“The Time of the End” When Christ Returns*

The Greek for **the very specific term** “the last day” is *eschate hemera*. Jesus used this phrase when he said:

- ❖ “The one who rejects me and does not receive my words has a judge; the word that I have spoken **will judge him on the last day**” (*John 12:48*).
- ❖ “...that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but **raise it up on the last day**” (*John 6:39*).
- ❖ “Martha answered, “I know he will rise again in the **resurrection at the last day**” (*John 11:24*).

These passages describe the future time of **judgment** of unbelievers and the **resurrection** of believers **as Jesus is returning** and as the 1,000 years begin (Rev. 20:4, 5). Hence, it likely refers to the very last day of “the present age,” “the day of Yahweh”/“the day of the Lord” and therefore immediately after the great tribulation. And so it will be a **specific day** indicating that John 12:48 might be better rephrased as: “*the word that I have spoken will judge him on the day of prophecy fulfilment.*” Please see also John 6:40, 44, 54.

### “In the Last Time” = “The Time of the End” When Christ Returns

The Greek for the very specific term “the last time” is *eschatos kairos*. Peter used this phrase when he said:

- ❖ “...who by God’s power are being guarded through faith for a **salvation** ready to be revealed **in the last time**” (*1 Pet. 1:5*).

J. R. Michaels in the *Word Biblical Commentary, Volume 49* on 1 Peter states:

This salvation is “about to be revealed at the last day.” Peter is **not speaking of the “times” or the “ages” in a generalized sense (as, e.g., in v 20)**, but of one decisive moment when God will bring to an end the world as it has always been (cf. 4:7), and make a new beginning. This moment of the revealing of salvation can also be designated in personal terms as the moment “when Jesus Christ is revealed” (vv 7, 13), i.e., as the event elsewhere in the NT called the “coming” or parousia (a word not found in 1 Peter) of the Lord.

So this “one decisive moment” will occur when Christ returns “*on the last day*” at the end of the age to effect the resurrection of Christians and therefore their “*salvation.*” **So 1 Peter 1:5** might be better rephrased as: “*being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the time of prophecy fulfilment.*”

*WHY JUDE 18 DOES NOT APPLY TO THE “TIME OF THE END”?*

Both 1 Peter 1:5 and Jude 18 contain the same temporal phrase of “*in the last time*,” and yet the context of each means that Jude 18 was fulfilled in the 1<sup>st</sup> century and 1 Peter 1:5 has yet to be fulfilled. So why do both have the same phrase as seeming to indicate a common timing of fulfilment? The answer can be found in the differences in the Greek phrases. So *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, Vol. 4 (revised), p. 854, states:

The expression “the last time” occurs twice, with different meanings. In Jude 18 it designates the NT era: “In the last time [*ep eschatou tou chronou*] there will be scoffers.” In 1Pet. 1:5, however, it describes the time of final glorification of believers in the resurrection: “a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time [*en kairo eschato*].”

So the different Greek phrases give somewhat different applications so that 1Peter 1:5 is more specific to the “time of the end.”

### “The Time of the End” and “The End of the Age”

Although Jesus never personally used the phrase “the last days,” he and his disciples did speak of “the end of the age,” and “the end,” as well as “the last day,” all of which do refer to the time when Jesus returns. These phrases are associated with Daniel’s phrase “the time of the end.”

*“THE TIME OF THE END”*

- ❖ “And when he [*the angel*] had spoken to me [*Daniel*], I fell into a deep sleep with my face to the ground. But he touched me and made me stand up. He said, ‘Behold, I will make known to you what shall be **at the latter end of the indignation**, for it refers to **the appointed time of the end**. ... a king of bold face, one who understands riddles, shall arise. His power shall be great — but not by his own power; and he shall cause fearful destruction and shall succeed in what he does, and destroy mighty men and the people who are the saints. ... By his cunning he shall make deceit prosper under his hand, and in his own mind he shall become great. Without warning he shall destroy many. And he shall even *rise up against the Prince of princes*, and **he** [*Antichrist*] **shall be broken**—but by no human hand. The vision of the evenings and the mornings that has been told is true, but seal up **the vision, for it refers to many days from now**” (*Dan. 8:18-26*).
- ❖ “With a large army he [*the King of the North*] will summon his power and courage against the southern king, who will prepare for war with a large, strong army. But the southern king won’t be able to withstand him because of the schemes devised against him. People who eat the king’s rich food will ruin him. His army will be overwhelmed, and many will die in battle. The two kings will both plan to do evil. They will sit at the same table and tell lies. But they will not succeed, **because the end must wait until the appointed time**” (*Dan. 11:25-27 GW*).

These two passages and the surrounding material give many details of what Christians should expect to see happening militarily close to “the end of the age” as Jesus later called it. Additionally, God’s people are to be refined by persecution up to “the time of the end”: “And some of the wise will fall victim to *persecution*. In this way, they will be refined and cleansed and made pure until the **time of the end**, for the appointed time is still to come” (*Dan. 11:35 NLT*).

- ❖ “But you, Daniel, keep this prophecy a secret; seal up the book until **the time of the end**, when many will rush here and there, and knowledge will increase” ... ‘How long will it be until these shocking events are over?’ ... ‘It will go on for a time, times, and half a time. When the shattering of the holy people has finally come to an end, all these things will have happened.’ ... <sup>9</sup> But he said, ‘Go now, Daniel, for what I have said is kept secret and sealed until **the time of the end**. ... <sup>11</sup> ‘From the time the daily sacrifice is stopped and the sacrilegious object that causes desecration is set up to be worshiped, there will be 1,290 days. And blessed are those who wait and remain until the end of the 1,335 days! ‘As for you, go your way until the end. You will rest, and then at the end of the days, you will **rise again** to receive the inheritance set aside for you”’ (*Dan. 12:4-12 NLT*).

*“THE END OF THE AGE”*

On 4 occasions Jesus used this phrase:

- In Matthew 13:39, 40, 49 he variously points out the angelic reaping work and destruction of the wicked at the end of the age;
- In Matthew 28:20 Jesus tells his disciples that he will be with them to the end of the age (obviously by spirit);

There was only a single occurrence of the use of this phrase by the disciples. It is in Matthew 24:3 concerning their request for the sign to know when the end of the age will occur: "...the disciples approached [*Jesus*] privately and said, 'Tell us, when will these things happen? And what is *the sign of Your coming* and of **the end of the age?**'" (*Matt. 24:3*). In *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* D.A. Carson states that:

If we make the reasonable assumption that in the disciples' mind their question as to the temple's destruction and the signs that will presage it are linked to the end of the age and Jesus' return (cf. 16:27-28; 23:39; Luke 19:11-27), there is little problem. Matthew makes explicit what was implicit in their question and what Jesus recognized as implicit in their question. Volume 8, p. 497.

So in this composite question the three events are locked together in the same timeframe: (1) The destruction of the temple, (2) Jesus' return, and (3) the end of the age. Because Jesus and the disciples were instructed about the prophecies in Daniel they would have been knowledgeable about Daniel's phrases "**the time of the end**" and "**the appointed time of the end**" and so used them as the basis for their discussion. In his answer Jesus gave many details including:

- ❖ "You will hear of wars and rumors of wars, but see to it that you are not alarmed. Such things must happen, but **the end is still to come**. ... <sup>13</sup> but the one who **stands firm to the end** will be saved. And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and **then the end will come**" (*Matt. 24:6, 13, 14 NIV*).
- ❖ "But everyone who endures **to the end** will be saved. <sup>23</sup> When you are persecuted in one town, flee to the next. I tell you the truth, **the Son of Man will return before** you have reached all the towns of Israel" (*Matt. 10:22, 23 NLT*).

This passage further links Jesus' return to the end of the age and that Christians must endure right up to that point in time so that they might gain their salvation. The following passages give encouragement to Christians to endure right to the end – which, for living Christians who are close to that time, can only refer to "the end of the age" i.e. Daniel's "appointed time of the end":

- ❖ "For we have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm **to the end**" (*Heb. 3:14*).
- ❖ "And we desire each one of you to show the same earnestness to have the full assurance of hope **until the end...**" (*Heb. 6:11*).
- ❖ "**The end of everything is near**. Therefore, practice self-control, and keep your minds clear so that you can pray. <sup>8</sup>Above all, love each other warmly, because love covers many sins" (*1 Pet. 4:7 GW*).
- ❖ "I have received authority from my Father. I will give authority over the nations to everyone who wins the victory and continues to do what I want **until the end**" (*Rev. 2:26 GW*).

NOTE 1: Hebrews 9:26 uses the phrase "end of the ages" when Jesus "put sin away by the sacrifice of himself" but "will appear a second time...to save those...waiting for him."

NOTE 2: The only time the term "the end" does not refer to the time of Jesus' return is in 1 Corinthians 15:24 which concerns the end of the millennium as being the end in the broader picture.

## Living as Though One Is Close to "The Time of the End"

Although Jesus gave several indications that it would be a long time before his return, Christians were to live in expectation of his soon return:

- ❖ "For the vision is yet for **the appointed time**; It hastens toward the goal and it will not fail; Though it tarries, wait for it; For it will certainly come, it will not delay" (*Hab. 2:3 NASB*).
- ❖ "Therefore be on the alert, for you do not know which day your Lord is coming. 'But be sure of this, that if the head of the house had known at what time of the night the thief was coming, he would have been on the alert and would not have allowed his house to be broken into. 'For this reason **you also must be ready**; for the Son of Man is coming at an hour when you do not think He will'" (*Matt. 24:42-44 NASB*).

So first century Christians obediently lived in anticipation of Jesus' soon return, and perhaps, quite early on, they had begun to feel that the "man of noble birth"—Jesus—was soon to return. Yet evidently, as it turned out,

the 1<sup>st</sup> century was not the time for his return or for the wars and deceptions of the antichrist (Gog), the great tribulation, the judgment of the wicked by the Messiah or for “the end of the age.” Neither was the kingdom established at that time, nor Israel and many nations turned back to God. These things must occur at the time of the end and after Jesus has returned.

### “The Days of Prophecy Fulfilment” which Do Refer to the Time Immediately Prior to the Return of Jesus

It seems evident that there are only two passages in the Hebrew Scripture containing the phrase *achariyth hayyamin* (the future days) which do describe events yet to occur immediately prior to Jesus’ return. These are:

- Gog’s attack on Israel and her land (**Ezek. 38 and 39**).
- Daniel’s vision concerning the Kings of the North/South” battles, and the great tribulation after which Messiah resurrects the faithful and brings antichrist to his end

*(Dan. 10:14 and chapters 11 and 12).*

Therefore, this “future days” event in these two descriptions leads to “the time of the end”/ “the end of the age,”/“the end,” when Jesus returns.

### Conclusion

The reality is that there are no “last days” extending over 2,000 years, nor any “last days” for which Christians can presently calculate a starting point until it becomes biblically evident that we are approaching “the time of the end.” However, this does not mean that it is incorrect for Christians to use the phrase “the last days” in reference to the future point in time when the fulfilment of prophecies concerning “the time of the end” actually begin.

Jesus and the New Testament writers gave many details about events leading up to “the time of the end”/“end of the age” so that Christians will not live with false expectations. He and his emissaries recognized the need for Christians to be living in the right spiritual condition and to be alert all of the time prior to Jesus’ return so that “*when you see the desolating abomination standing where he should not (let the reader understand), then ... those times will have tribulation such as has not been since the beginning of God’s creation until now, nor ever will be*” (Mark 13:14, 19 NAB) and “*when these things begin to take place, straighten up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near*” (Luke 21:28).

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