

The End or a New Beginning?



Professor Świderkówna traces what was lost in the Bible's translation

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The view that New Testament predicts the end of the world arises largely due to the imprecise translation and interpretation of the original Greek words

The closing years of the 20th century saw a resurgence of interest in the "end of the world." Exact dates were even posited for when this end would allegedly arrive. All such predictions, however, proved false.

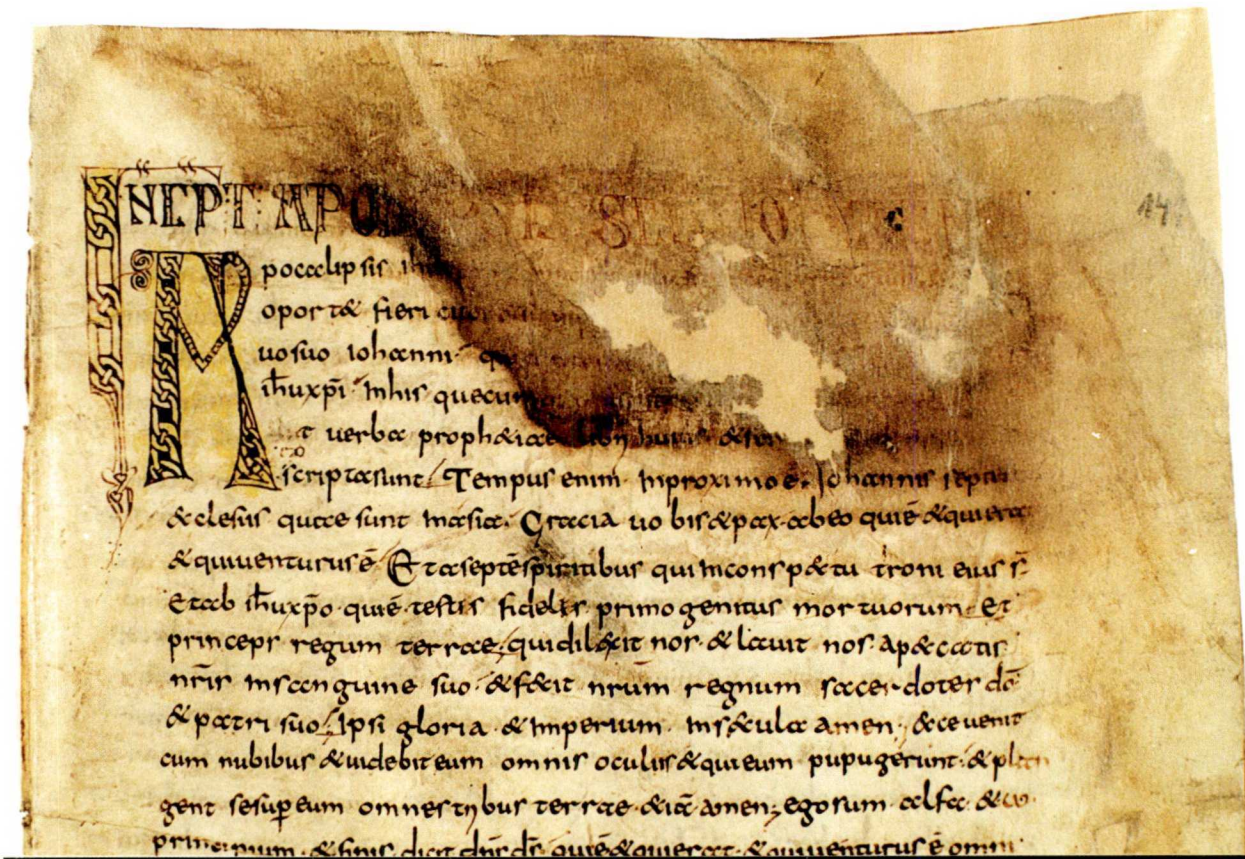
Nowadays we are more worried about whether our planet is in danger of colliding with some sort of stray celestial body. But one way or another, we do not feel entirely at ease on the Earth. And this is by no means a new phenomenon: the nation of Israel has long been living in anticipation the Day of the Lord, when Yahweh will make his triumphant entry into the course of history, rout all enemies and ensure victory to the children of the chosen people. But as far back as the mid-8th century BC, the prophet Amos warned that the unfaithful cannot just calmly expect their God to remain faithful to them. The impending Day of the Lord will bring calamity and mourning down upon them as well. In vain they deceive themselves that the Lord will smite their enemies, simply because they are their enemies. They have forgotten what it means to be chosen, what their obligations are under the Covenant. And so they will be like a man fleeing from a lion who came across a bear, and when, out of breath, he finally found what he thought was a safe house, he was there suddenly bitten by a poisonous snake. "Shall not the day of the Lord be darkness, and not light?" (Amos 5, 15-20). Amos has no doubt that God will deliver his justice all-powerfully, yet this justice will differ from what the chosen people expect; justice will be done to all sufferers and to all wrongdoers - including, or even mainly, to those among the children of Israel themselves.

Other prophets follow Amos in predicting the coming of the Day of the Lord, and with it the advent of the Divine Kingdom on earth. For them, this represents the consummation of the plans of God in the Highest, himself slowly and gradually bringing them to fruition in human history. But at the turn the 3rd



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Maiestas Domini, The Illumination from The Tynieć Sacramentary, one of the first liturgical manuscripts to have appeared in Poland (ca. 1060-1070 AD)



The first page of the Apocalypse from *Testamentum Novum*, the oldest manuscript in the Polish National Library (8th century)

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and 2nd centuries BC, a new literary genre appeared, continuing the work of the prophets: the Apocalypse.

The word Apocalypse comes from the Greek, where *apokalypsis* literally means “disclosure,” most frequently the disclosure of some sort of secret, and therefore also “revelation”.

Apocalyptic texts in the New Testament

Unlike the prophets, the authors of the Apocalyptic texts foresee a violent encroachment of Divine reality into our earthly reality. This is prophesied as a complete transformation, one that will disrupt the order of the universe, and even upset what we believe to be unwavering and invariable. This is what is meant by the words: “Immediately after the tribulation of those days shall the sun be darkened, and the moon shall not give her light, and the stars shall fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens shall be shaken.” (Matthew 24, 29). This refers to the disruption of the celestial order (since the Earth itself does indeed sometimes tremble beneath people’s feet in this region). The above citation from the Gospel of Matthew comprises a speech wherein Jesus predicts the destruction of Jerusalem, and what we customarily call the “end of the world” (compare Mark 13 and Luke 21).

And so it is not surprising that we no longer associate the world apocalypse, as it is nowadays used in colloquial speech, with

any sort of literary genre, but rather with some kind of catastrophe. This, to a significant extent, is the result of an improper understanding of the apocalyptic texts of the Gospel, as well as the Apocalypse of John (the Revelation).

Let’s therefore take a closer look at several verses from the 21st chapter of the Gospel of Luke, as this will certainly help us to better understand what is truly meant here. In this passage, Jesus tells his disciples: “And there shall be signs in the sun, and in the moon, and in the stars; and upon the earth distress of nations, with perplexity; the sea and the waves roaring; Men’s hearts failing them for fear, and for looking after those things which are coming on the earth: for the powers of heaven shall be shaken. And then shall they see the Son of man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. And when these things begin to come to pass [...]” What we expect to come next is some sort of call to repent, or to flee from what is impending. But instead, the passage continues as follows: “And when these things begin to come to pass, **then look up, and lift up your heads; for your redemption draweth nigh.**” And then comes another short, beautiful parable of comparison: “Behold the fig tree, and all the trees; When they now shoot forth, ye see and know of your own selves that summer is now nigh at hand. So likewise ye, when ye see these things come to pass,

Apocalyptic texts of the New Testament

know ye that the kingdom of God is nigh at hand." (Luke 21, 25-31)

But this is surely no way to predict an impending cataclysm! The coming of the Divine Kingdom is likened here to the advent of summer. The proper meaning of the texts in this literary genre might thus be summed up as follows: "Look up and lift up your heads," because God will certainly be victorious!

There is no denying, however, that we interpret Jesus' words in these three chapters of Mark, Matthew, and Luke as predicting an end - the end of both Jerusalem and the entire world. Jerusalem was destroyed together with its Temple in 70 AD, and for many people this undoubtedly meant the end of their own personal worlds. But this is not yet sufficient; Jesus meant more than this.

Translation troubles

The New Testament, of course, was written in Greek, and we have to read it in translation. The words of our translation do not always correspond exactly to the Greek original. While at times this is not so important,

in this case we are dealing with a significant difficulty. The Greek verb *telein* does indeed mean "to end" or "to finish" (for example: "When Jesus had **ended** these sayings..." Matthew 7, 28), but the sense it nevertheless more frequently takes on in the New Testament is "perform," "accomplish," "fulfill," or "perfect" (for example: "And when they had **performed** all things according to the law of the Lord..." Luke 2, 39; "After this, Jesus knowing that all things were now **accomplished**, that the scripture might be **fulfilled**, saith, I thirst." John 19, 28). Special note should be made of the words the Lord addressed to St. Paul when he asked to be free of the mysterious "thorn in the flesh" tormenting him. God told him: "My grace is sufficient for thee: for strength is **made perfect** in weakness." (2 Corinthians 12, 9), and here we again have the very same verb we elsewhere translated as "to finish." But this sentence does not speak of the end of this "strength," but rather of its perfection, fullness.

Although it is not at all immediately apparent, the beginning of the 13 chapter of



Krzysztof Kalifski

"[...] many great teachings have been given to us through the law and prophets and the others that followed them" (Sirah, Prologue)

the Gospel of John is very helpful in this regard: "Now before the feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that his hour was come that he should depart out of this world unto the Father, having loved his own which were in the world, he loved them **unto the end.**" (J 13, 1). This "end" is the neuter Greek noun *telos*, related to the verb *telein* and with the same range of meanings. It can be translated as "end," but also as "fullness" or "fulfillment." We generally translate this verse as it stands above: "he loved them unto the end." And only later do we consider what "unto the end" means in this context. Until the end of Jesus' human life? Until the end of his strength? Somehow this does not feel appropriate. Probably because what is meant here is not any end, but rather the fullness of Jesus' love! There is no way, however, to convey this well in translation. We have to resort to explaining the difference between our word "end" and the Greek *telos*.

The latter word does indeed appear quite frequently with this very meaning, for example: "He that endureth to the end shall be saved" (Matthew 10, 22; 24, 13), "but the end is not yet" (Matthew 24, 6), etc. Nowhere, however, does the Greek text mention the "end of the world." Indeed, the Gospel of Matthew does finish with Jesus' solemn words: "And, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world" (Matthew 28, 20), but the original here does not use the word "end," but rather the Greek *synteleia*, meaning "performance" or "fulfillment" (Latin *consummatio*), and does not include the word "world," but rather "age" (Greek *aion*), a word that is sometimes translated as "time" or "times." And so, we have the "fulfillment of time," the "fulfillment of the ages." The same expression can also twice be found translated in the same way in 13 and 24 chapter of Matthew. I have nothing against translators choosing a word that is easier for uninitiated readers to understand, but I nevertheless believe that just such readers are in need of an explanation that what is being referred to here is not an end, but rather the fulfillment of everything, and – who knows? – perhaps a new beginning.

The Apocalypse of John

If we wish to gain a somewhat better understanding of the secret of this "end" that is

really "fulfillment" or "fullness," it is worth turning our attention to the Apocalypse of John. It is without doubt a book about battle, and in so being it is simultaneously, and even mainly, a victory hymn. This hymn's ultimate culmination comes with the majestic vision of the two final chapters, 21 and 22, in the form of the complete fulfillment of all God's promises.

A new Jerusalem, a new Church descends from heaven, from God. Here we find the following words of the Visionary: "And I saw a new heaven and a new earth: for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away; and there was no more sea" (for most of the Middle Eastern peoples, the sea represents a symbol and source of all evil). So there will be a new heaven and a new earth – thus this is not an end, but rather a new beginning! "And I John saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a great voice out of heaven saying, Behold, the tabernacle of God with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God. And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away. And he that sits upon the throne says, Behold, I make all things new!" This is the joy of God himself, who is now making everything new.

John is in fact speaking here about a city coming down from heaven – Jerusalem is a city, after all. But this city is immediately likened to a young bride. And the following verses reveal to us an surprising relation between God and all of humanity, his living presence for all people and for each individual. Running through the entire Hebrew Bible, beginning with the Prophets and the Book of Leviticus, we find a royal statement of the formula of the covenant, expressed in the Book of Leviticus as such: "I will be your God, and ye shall be my people." The relationship between God and the Chosen People is presented in this way, in different variations. Here, however, this relationship encompasses all of mankind: "Behold, the tabernacle of God with men [...] and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God."



Maciej Bednarski

St. John
the Evangelist.
Illumination from
the manuscript
*Catalogus
archiepiscoporum
Gnesnensium
(1531-1535)*.
Polish National
Library

This is simply the same formula of the covenant, albeit repeated and realized according to John. This new world that God is preparing with such joy is not, therefore, some sort of beautiful palace built for him alone. This is a "world of communion," of unending happiness for all of mankind - because there, finally, the happiness of each (including of God himself) will be the happiness of all, and the happiness of all (including of God himself) will be the happiness of each.

It is to this communion that Christ came to invite us. He could not reveal the secret of God's inner life to us in any other way than by inviting us to take part in it. The vision expands. Jerusalem glitters with all the colors of precious stones, but, as John says: "I saw no temple therein: for the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are the temple of it. [...] And there shall be no more curse: but the throne of God and of the Lamb shall be in it; and his servants shall serve him: And they shall see his face; and his name shall be in their foreheads. And there shall be no night there; and they need no candle, neither light of the sun; for the Lord God giveth them light: and they shall reign for ever and ever (Rev. 21, 22; 22, 3-5)." And as we read in the Book of Zechariah: "And the Lord shall be king over all the earth: in that day shall there be one Lord, and his name one." (Zechariah 14, 8-9).

This is not an end, but rather a transformation, a complete transformation that may instill a certain fear and trepidation in us. This applies to what we mistakenly call the end of the world, as well as to our own mortal death.

We should bear in mind, therefore, that God calls himself the Alpha and the Omega

(the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet), the Beginning and the End - except that this "end" is our familiar Greek word *telos*, thus meaning "fullness," "fulfillment," the fulfillment of all God's promises.

I would like to close these deliberations by mentioning a scene from *Perelandra* by C. S. Lewis. *Perelandra* is the central part of an extraordinary trilogy, a work not of science fiction, but rather of theological fiction. The story takes place on Venus, but not the Venus known to astronomers. Entirely set in fantasy, the book is nevertheless full of insight about people's lives - or rather, about the lives of human beings, of *human-like* beings, that live in a world without original sin. The primordial ancestors of these beings successfully passed the test that had been set before them. Their descendents will also leave this world, until everyone will finally be transformed (but yet not *completely* transformed), and everyone will be like angels (but yet not *completely* like angels). And then the human character present on Venus, speaking with Perelandra's "Adam" asks: "So this means the end of this world?" In response, Adam says: "The end? This is just the beginning, or just the beginning of the beginning..." ■

The paper was originally a lecture delivered at a meeting of the Warsaw Scientific Society on March 26, 2003.

Further reading:

Świderkówna A. (1994, 1996, 2003). *Rozmowy o Biblii. Nowy Testament*. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, Vol. 1, 2, 3.

Świderkówna A. (2002). *Prawie wszystko o Biblii*. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Stentor.