



A Structure for the End of the World: 4QFlorilegium and the “Latter Days” in Early Jewish Tradition¹

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Today, both survey and anecdotal data suggest that more and more people in the United States and throughout the Western world believe that we are living in the proverbial (or sometimes actual) last days. This is especially true for those of younger generations. It is not just climate change that has people talking about the end of the world, of course. Political turmoil, the decline of traditional institutions that once held cultural capital (e.g., many churches), widening wealth gaps, the persistence of white supremacy, and fears of unstoppable pandemics are also sources of anxiety—as well as frequent topics for commentary in popular and social media.² Scholars, scientists, politicians, and religious leaders may

¹ The opportunity to contribute to this volume honoring my teacher Mark Throntveit is a humbling gratification. Among the host of exegetical insights that I learned from Mark was this principle: There is theology in the very structure of Scripture. This essay is intended as further evidence of that hopeful truth.

² Several studies and stories could be cited here. Some representative examples include: Raj Chetty et al., “The Fading American Dream: Trends in Absolute Income Mobility Since 1940” (Cambridge: National Bureau of Economic Research, 2016); Susan Clayton et al., “Mental Health and Our Changing Climate: Impacts, Implications, and Guidance” (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association and EcoAmerica, 2017); and

Expectations of the imminent end of the world are a constant in Scripture and throughout Christian history. But what to do with these expectations? By means of a case study of one of the documents of the Dead Sea Scrolls, we see that such expectations can help modern Christians live vitally into the present and future, and not fear what may be coming.

disagree on the particulars of any one of these narratives of decline, but in this case—as with so many aspects of our common life—perception usually counts more than reality.

In this era filled with so many questions about the end of the world, one that I have often asked is this: What does the belief that one is living in the latter days *do* to a person, a community, and a society?

This is a different question from “What will happen at the end of the world?” For this essay, I am less interested in the how or when of the so-called apocalypse and more interested in considering the effects of *the belief* in apocalypse and, specifically, in the conviction that one will soon experience it. This distinction better reflects the interests of many of the primary texts, which are often more concerned with discerning how best to live, worship, and conduct mission in the time of the *latter days* than they are with mapping and predicting the precise chronology of the *last days*.

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It may come as a surprise to some that one of the best places to explore this question is in the Bible. For many Second Temple–era Jewish and early Christian writers, the imminent end of the world was not so much a topic of speculative fiction as it was an assumed fact. Thus, the apostle Paul, for example, could write frankly and certainly about how to behave in the time of the end (e.g., 1 Thess 5:1–11; 1 Cor 7:25–31). Peter in Acts could proclaim that the miracle of Pentecost was the fulfillment of a prophecy for the latter days (Acts 2:17, cf. Joel 2:28–31 [MT 3:1–4]). Further, several of Jesus’s parables and sayings have been interpreted as referencing the final arrival of God from the earliest periods in Christian tradition (esp. Mark 13; Matt 24–25; Luke 13). Perhaps most conspicuously, for almost two millennia the book of Revelation has been read as a map for the end of days.

These ideas are, of course, older than the New Testament. Prophetic discourse in the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament, for example, reflects broadly on the “day of the Lord” (e.g., Amos 5:18; Isa 13:6–9; Ezek 13:5; Joel 2:1; Obad 15; Zeph 1:14; Mal 4:15), a tradition that, by the time of the Second Temple period, had come to be interpreted by many as referencing God’s imminent arrival. Many Jews at the time of Jesus and earlier expected that a period of disaster and testing would precede the coming of Israel’s God, when martyrs would be resurrected and justice would at long last rule. Despite the harmonizing efforts of many interpreters throughout history, no single, systematic scheme for the latter days is presented in

Dwight Zscheile, “Will the ELCA Be Gone in 30 Years?,” *The Faith+Leader*, September 5, 2019, <https://faithlead.luthersem.edu/decline/>. Moreover, the long-term effects of the Covid-19 pandemic (still escalating at the time of this writing) are not yet apparent.

the Bible—indeed theories about the end of the world varied as much in antiquity as they do today. Nevertheless, a general expectation and some shared assumptions can still be detected.

In this essay, I explore these broad ideas through the analysis of a single case study. Inspired by the research and teaching of my seminary professor Mark Throntveit, I will demonstrate how Second Temple Jews found knowledge and wisdom concerning the latter days in the very structure of writings that would come to be canonized in the Bible. This essay looks specifically at a fragmentary Dead Sea Scroll document designated 4Q174 (first titled “4QFlorilegium,” from the Latin for “anthology”). This text utilized an intertextual form of commentary, which is commonly recognized as typical in the Dead Sea Scrolls and as having striking parallels in the New Testament. My goal for this essay is not to provide an in-depth explication of an esoteric Second Temple-era text—much of this work has already been done, and some of it is cited below. Rather, I wish to offer an investigation of a common belief in Jewish antiquity and reflect on its contemporary implications for the church. My guiding question is this: In a time when many feel fear and paralysis at the prospect of living in the latter days, might there be theological resources from early Jewish and Christian tradition for thinking theologically, faithfully, and hopefully about how God is active and how the people of God are equipped?

The remainder of this essay unfolds in two parts: First, I present a case study on 4QFlorilegium with reference to parallels in the New Testament, showing how the interpretation of Scripture as mapping the last days is the primary structuring device in these fragments. Second, I summarize three ways in which the church might allow the belief that we are living in the latter days (whether real or only expected) to affect us.

CASE STUDY: 4QFLORILEGIUM

4QFlorilegium (4Q174) is one of hundreds of biblical and other ancient Jewish documents discovered near Khirbet Qumran in the mid-twentieth century, a collection commonly called the Dead Sea or Qumran Scrolls.³ 4Q174 is usually classified as a “sectarian” document, meaning that it is not a copy of the Hebrew Bible, but a new composition written by the community that composed and preserved many of the scrolls. Although the dating of particular Dead Sea Scrolls is always uncertain, it is most likely that 4QFlorilegium was composed no later than the late first century BCE. Due to its fragmentary state, the original length of 4Q174 is unclear and only a single column is close to complete.⁴

³ The twenty-seven fragments that make up 4QFlorilegium were discovered in 1954 but not published in their entirety until John M. Allegro and Arnold A. Anderson, eds., *Qumrân Cave 4: 4Q158–4Q186* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1968), xix–xx, 53–57. An excellent introductory article is Jonathan G. Campbell, “4QFlorilegium (4Q174),” in *The Exegetical Texts, Companion to the Qumran Scrolls 4* (New York: T&T Clark, 2004), 33–44.

⁴ Photos of the fragments are available online from the Israel Antiquities Authority under the title “Eschatological Commentary,” <https://tinyurl.com/y99vdbg7>.

Still, much can be deduced from these fragments. As it is with many of the sectarian Dead Sea Scrolls, 4QFlorilegium reflects the interests of a community that believes itself to be living in the latter days and articulates these ideas primarily through commentary on Scripture.⁵ In this regard, 4Q174 is uncommonly dense with biblical content: when looking at just the fragments that survive, 4QFlorilegium quotes from Deuteronomy 33, 2 Samuel 7, Exodus 15, Amos 9, Psalm 1, Psalm 2, Isaiah 8, Ezekiel 37, Daniel 11, Daniel 12, Psalm 5, and Isaiah 65.⁶ While to a casual reader this constellation of texts may feel haphazard, in reality, sophisticated interpretive strategies are at work to shape a tight structure.⁷

One of the primary ways in which 4QFlorilegium is structured by its interpretation of Scripture is through a form of word play. In this strategy, interpretation of an obscure passage is revealed by means of referencing another passage where an identical word occurs.⁸ The process would later become more formalized in what Talmudic rabbis came to label *gezera shavah* (גזירה שווה) or "inference by analogy."⁹

The largest fragment of 4QFlorilegium presents one example in its interpretation of Nathan's oracle concerning God's promise to David in 2 Samuel 7. From what survives, it seems that the scroll follows 2 Samuel 7 in order, first citing the verse under consideration and then offering a comment of the type that usually includes the citation of another passage from somewhere else in the Bible:

[. . . damaged . . .] [*and no*] *evildoer [shall afflict him] as before and as from the time that I appointed judges over my people Israel* (≈MT 2 Sam 7:10b–11a). This is the house which [. . . damaged . . .] in the latter days as it is written in the book of [. . . damaged . . .] [*The sanctuary, O Lord, which*] *your hands have established. The Lord will rule forever and ever* (≈MT Exod 15:17b–18). This is the temple . . .¹⁰

In this excerpt, 4QFlorilegium interprets 2 Samuel 7:10–11 using another passage, Exodus 15:17–18. Note that it is not necessary for 4Q174 to cite the entire

⁵ Generally, "latter" days is a better translation for אחרית הימים than is "last" days. While both are technically correct, "latter" better renders the idea that the community is not yet at the end of days—that this is still in the future—but that the era near the end has been inaugurated. See discussion in George J. Brooke, *Exegesis at Qumran: 4QFlorilegium in Its Jewish Context*, JSOT 29 (Sheffield: JSOT, 1985), 176–77.

⁶ Campbell, "4QFlorilegium (4Q174)," 39–40.

⁷ See George J. Brooke, "Thematic Commentaries on Prophetic Scriptures," in *Biblical Interpretation at Qumran*, ed. Matthias Henze (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 134–57, esp. 143–49.

⁸ Campbell, "4QFlorilegium (4Q174)," 40.

⁹ Hermann L. Strack and Günter Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash*, 2nd ed., trans. Markus Bockmuehl (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 18–19.

¹⁰ 4Q174 frag. 1 col. i lns. 1–3. Italicized text indicates a quotation from the Hebrew Bible, the reference for which I provide in parentheses. Conversely, non-italicized, regular text indicates new material (i.e., 4QFlorilegium's interpretation of the biblical passages). Finally, brackets indicate portions of the scroll that are too damaged to read. Note that when text does appear in brackets, it represents the educated guesswork of scholars based on the portions of the Bible being quoted. Translations in this article are the author's and based on Donald W. Parry and Emanuel Tov, eds., *The Dead Sea Scrolls Reader: Part 2 Exegetical Texts* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 3–8.

passage in order to make a point. As with experienced choristers discussing hymns, only a few telltale words are necessary for 4Q174 to evoke the pertinent reference for its inferred scribal audience. In this case, a popular passage concerning God's promise to David regarding the eternal rule of his descendants (the so-called "Davidic Covenant") is being read through the lens of another popular passage, the Israelite song of victory after the defeat of Pharaoh's army at the sea (Exod 15). To some, these two passages may seem unrelated, but a trained scribe would note the reoccurrence of a key word, "to plant" (נָטַע), which appears in both 2 Samuel 7:10 and Exodus 15:17. The link is made all the more difficult to identify (and thus all the more clever to recognize) because the word "plant" is not actually quoted, though other words around it are.

What does this subtle and somewhat playful connection accomplish? 4Q174 argues that the "house" that God will establish, referenced in 2 Samuel 7, does not refer (only) to Solomon's temple but to an eternal eschatological "sanctuary" (מִקְדָּשׁ cf. Exod 15:17) that is fulfilled and embodied within the sectarian community itself.¹¹

This compositional strategy allows 4QFlorilegium to make connections across several more points of scripture. For example, further down in this same fragment, 4Q174 cites and interprets 2 Samuel 7:12 using Amos 9:11, relating the two passages via the word "raise up" (קָרַם). The scribe suggests that the prophesied offspring of David that God will "raise up" (2 Sam 7:12) is, in fact, a messianic figure who will "raise up" the tabernacle of David (Amos 9:11) and "save all of Israel" (4Q174 frag. 1 col. i ln. 13). This same association between these two passages is also made in Acts 15:16.

A final example reveals still more of the community's self-understanding. In an interpretation of Psalm 1, 4Q174 indicates that those who turn from the "way" (דֶּרֶךְ) of sinners (Ps 1:1) are to be identified with the prophet whom God warned not to walk in the "way" of the people (Isa 8:11). As becomes clear, both passages are seen as referring to the scribe's own community, who must endure a time of testing in these latter days, a period referred to in 4Q174 as "the time of refining that is coming" (עַתָּה הַמְצַרְךָ הַבָּאָה)—itself an exegetically derived phrase (Dan 11:32, 35, cf. Ps 105:19).¹² The expectation of testing, especially in the last days, was a common feature of early Christian belief (e.g., Acts 14:22; 2 Tim 3:1; Rev 2:10).

To many readers trained in historical-critical methods of scriptural interpretation, these juxtapositions of scripture in 4QFlorilegium may seem tenuous—even if they are governed by an overarching structure. It should be noted, however, that the same strategies are at work in the New Testament. Paul, for example, in Galatians 3:10–14 quotes a version of Deuteronomy 27:26 and uses other texts to interpret it. He explains that the "curse" (ἐπικατάρατος) mentioned in

¹¹ Brooke, *Exegesis at Qumran*, 178–93.

¹² Annette Steudel, "4QMidrEschat: «A Midrash on Eschatology» (4Q174 + 4Q177)," in J. Trebelle Barera and L. Vegas Montaner, eds., *The Madrid Congress. Proceedings of the International Congress on the Dead Sea Scrolls Madrid 18–21 March 1991*, Studies on the Texts of the Desert of Judah XI, 1992 (Leiden: Brill, 1992), 2:531–41, 537.

Deuteronomy 27:26 can be understood by means of the "curse" (κεκατηραμένος) of one who hangs on a tree in Deuteronomy 21:23. Another example of New Testament *gezera shava* occurs in Hebrews 4:3–5. It is explained that while the Israelites in the wilderness did not enter God's "rest" (κατάπαυσιν) in the Greek Psalm 94:11 (MT Ps 95:11), those who believe will enter it, since God's "rest" (κατέπαυσεν) has been available since creation (Gen 2:2).¹³ Such parallels reveal how rooted the early Jesus movement was in the exegetical strategies of early Judaism.

As more of these interpretive methods are unearthed in 4QFlorilegium, a foundational assumption begins to appear: 4Q174 presents the entire corpus of Jewish scriptural texts as being structured around the latter-days prophecies that have come to be embodied in the Dead Sea Scrolls community. In this regard, 4QFlorilegium presents a striking anticipation of how early Christian interpreters would read these and other biblical texts through the lens of Jesus.

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This argument is made even more convincing when attending to the likely macro structure of 4Q174, a perspective not available until more than forty years after the document first appeared in print.¹⁴ In particular, it was revealed that the fragments containing commentary on Deuteronomy 33 belonged closer to the beginning of the document.¹⁵ Among other consequences, this proposed reconstruction revealed a conspicuous progression: an interpretation of Deuteronomy 33, followed by 2 Samuel 7, and finally Psalms 1–2 (i.e., Law, Prophets, and Psalms).

This ordering is not without precedent in Second Temple Judaism.¹⁶ In the preface to Ben Sira, for example, we find "the Law and the Prophets and the other (books) that followed them." (NRSV) Among other Dead Sea Scrolls, a partially reconstructed section of 4QMMT reads, "We have [written] to you so that you may understand the book of Moses and the books of the Prophets and (those of)

¹³ José Adriano Filho, "Hebrew and the Scriptures: the use of Ps 95:7b-11 and Genesis 2:2b in Hebrews 3-4," *Reflexus* 12.19 (2018): 299–315.

¹⁴ In her critical edition, Annette Steudel reordered the fragments of 4Q174, attending not only to literary indicators but also to damage patterns on the artifacts themselves. *Der Midrasch zur Eschatologie aus der Qumrangemeinde (4QMidrEschat.^{a,b}): Materielle Rekonstruktion, Textbestand, Gattung und traditionsgeschichtliche Einordnung des durch 4Q174 ("Florilegium") und 4Q177 ("Catena A") repräsentierten Werkes aus den Qumranfunden*, STDJ 13 (Leiden: Brill, 1994).

¹⁵ In the initial publication, editors had numbered the fragments according to size from largest to smallest, thereby cataloguing the Deuteronomy sections as numbers 6–11 of the twenty-six total.

¹⁶ See Brooke, "Thematic Commentaries on Prophetic Scripture," 147–48.

David.”¹⁷ Further, in Luke 24:44, Jesus states, “Everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled” (NRSV).

While today such a progression might seem natural to Jewish and Christian readers who can read these ancient texts in a single bound volume, the formalization and common acceptance of these and other texts as a “canon” were still in flux in the Second Temple period.¹⁸ Thus, the relationships between these disparate documents were not a given; they had to be shown. In this regard, the very structure of 4QFlorilegium as a document is aimed at demonstrating the link. The organization of 4Q174 mirrors the presumed hidden structure in the Bible, which itself mirrors the structures that govern time in the latter days. Similar expectations about latter-days texts and their imminent fulfillment animated theological reflection in the early Jesus movement as well (e.g., Heb 1:2; James 5:3; 2 Pet 3:3). Thus, the very structure of Scripture, which was simultaneously both discovered and invented, became a comforting reassurance that all was yet in order, despite a time that felt like chaos.

HOW MIGHT LIVING IN THE “LATTER DAYS” AFFECT US?

From a certain point of view, the church has been living in the latter days for almost two thousand years. Despite this prolonged Parousia, I believe that these traditions, which may have once terrified, embarrassed, or puzzled so many in the pews, are finding new resonances today—especially among young people. Just like other theological claims found in Scripture, the idea of the latter days as exemplified in 4QFlorilegium and other early Jewish and Christian literature has been received both generatively and harmfully. Below, I list three ways in which we might live into the former, amplifying these traditions to offer hope and direction in a time when so many are increasingly afraid that the end may be near.

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1. Inspiring Mission

It is not usually missed that belief in the imminent return of Christ contributed to the rapid growth of the early church. This is often framed in terms of numerical growth, but it is worth emphasizing that the latter-days mission ignited not

¹⁷ 4Q397 frag. 14, col. 21, lns. 10–11.

¹⁸ See Eva Mroczek, *The Literary Imagination in Jewish Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), esp. ch. 5.

just immediacy of action but also new ethics. Paul's proclamation that there was no longer "Jew or Greek," "slave or free," or "male and female" was due not only to his belief in Christ's unifying work but also to the practical reality that such distinctions would prove burdensome with time so short and yet so much left to accomplish.

Such ethics have occasionally taken hold in Christian traditions that embrace the idea of living in the latter days. Speaking biographically, in the Pentecostal church of my youth, the end of days was often spoken of in serious tones but also with a sense of comfort, if not vindication. My grandmother, for instance, believed that she would live to see the second coming, and she always said so with a smile. Indeed, for some of those charismatic Christian churches that trace their lineage back to Azusa Street, the imminent end of the world was taken as justification for the continued empowerment of women preachers as well as for the adoption of extreme stances of pacifism (this, in the early twentieth century). The motivating idea was simple: in these last days, the need for workers in the field is more significant than the need for soldiers or for a male-only clergy. In short, for Christians who believed themselves to be living in the last days, mission surpassed militarism, and Joel 2:28 took precedence over 1 Corinthians 14:34.¹⁹

2. Finding Oneself in the Biblical Story

Other Protestants, however—particularly in those churches often called "mainline"—are usually less vocal about the return of Christ, even if such beliefs are technically "on the books." Anecdotally, in the Episcopal and Lutheran congregations where I find myself more often these days, passages about Christ's imminent return and the Day of the Lord are often ignored or underemphasized, even if they are read out loud repeatedly for an entire season (Advent), confessed in creeds ("He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead"), and prayed at the liturgy of the table ("Christ will come again"). Perhaps some of us are a little embarrassed that such ideas survive from antiquity. We may also be uncertain of which side we will find ourselves on when Christ comes to raise up the lowly and to humble the comfortable.

Contemporary reticence in the church regarding the latter days may also be the result of a misunderstanding about what acknowledging these traditions would imply. While there is an abundance of voices, both historical and contemporary, that seek to map the future utilizing the latter-days texts of the Bible, the scriptural witness itself is, overall, more concerned with what is to be done in the present (e.g., practically, ethically, liturgically).

¹⁹ See, for example, Brian K. Pipkin and Jay Beaman, eds., *Early Pentecostals on Nonviolence and Social Justice: A Reader* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2017), and Estrela Alexander, *The Women of Azusa Street* (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 2005). I am especially grateful to Profs. Justin Doran, Chris Green, Pippa Koch, and others for our informative social media conversation on this point.

Thus, I suggest that there is a more faithful way to receive latter-days traditions: we must practice finding ourselves in the story of Scripture. This is not the same as sifting the text for clues that might reveal the secrets of the end. After all, the Bible is not a novel we read in order to predict the ending before we get there. Rather, we are invited to see ourselves as characters in the story of Scripture and to answer this question with our lives: What happens next?

3. *Remembering Our Mortality*

Even if humanity is not currently living in the latter days in a strict chronological sense, our own individual mortality reminds us that any day could be our last. The Ash Wednesday liturgies of many churches remind us of this (“Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”). In this sense, followers of Christ are called to live our lives as the people of the latter days, those who know that God’s kingdom is just around the corner. When one believes that one is living in the latter days, there is freedom to hold onto nonessentials more loosely. Yet there is also responsibility to do what one can with whatever time is left. That is, until God does the rest. ⊕

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