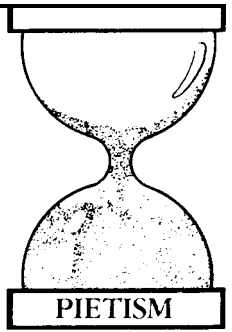


Dispensationalism in Transition

Challenging Traditional Dispensationalism's "Code of Silence"



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AN ENCORE TO MATTHEW 24

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From May, 1991, through May, 1992, I did an indepth study of the Matthew 24 Olivet Discourse passage (my longest single study since writing this newsletter). Given the nature of our newsletter, this study was done, quite naturally, against the backdrop of dispensationalism. Of course, given that I live in America, everything I do is against the backdrop of dispensationalism – this is due to the pervasive infection of American evangelicalism with this theological outlook [See my earlier "medical" analysis of dispensationalism: "IES: Itching Ears Syndrome," *Dispensationalism in Transition*, April, 1990.]

My interest in and treatment of the Olivet Discourse was limited to Matthew 24:1-36. This passage and the entire Book of Revelation are major biblical treatments of eschatological judgments. These passages are constantly resorted to by dispensationalists as they conduct themselves as "Chicken Littles," attempting to draw parallels between current events and Matthew 24 and Revelation. Even humiliating embarrassments such as the Lindsey 1984 hypothesis and the Whisenant 1988 debacle, do not seem to dissuade the average dispensationalist from his mindless tenacity in his date-setting forays. Many dispensationalists (such as Jerry Falwell and others) have now begun betting on the year 2000 as that glorious year beyond which we will not live before experiencing Christ's secret return.

I have had several inquiries seeking a fuller explanatory justification for my argument that Christ's attention turns from A.D. 70 to the future Second Advent in the transition verses, Matthew 24:34-36. I would like to offer a one issue treatment of this matter.

The "Problem" with the Transition Text

It is frequently noted that the "coming of Christ" is mentioned before and after the transition text of Matthew 24:34-36. It is further noted that these references are virtually identical. For instance Matthew 24:27 reads: "For as the lightning cometh out of the east, and shineth even unto the west; so shall also the coming of the Son of man be." Compare this with post-transitional Matthew 24:37: "But as the days of Noe were, so shall also the coming of the Son of man be." How are we justified in taking two identical statements in the space of a unified discourse and applying them to events separated by thousands (and I suspect, tens of thousands) of years?

I really cannot imagine that this could be a serious objection from dispensationalists. They are notorious for *illicitly* dividing up homogeneous passages. Are they not famous for giving us the Gap Theory of the Daniel 9:24-27 prophecy of Seventy Weeks? Did they not create *ex nihilo* the parenthesis notion of the Church, which, for example, separates by thousands of years Isaiah 9:6 from Isaiah 9:7?

Divide and conquer is the name of the dispensational game: two resurrections and two judgments are separated by a thousand years (at least there is a superficial warrant for this in

the symbolic passage of Revelation 20!), Dispensationalists are even prone to divide up the Person of Christ in terms of His redemptive office as Lord and Savior [See my *Lord of the Saved: Getting to the Heart of the Lordship Debate* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1992). Available for \$8.00 from me at 46 Main St., Conestee, SC 29636.]

But, of course, I do not hold that there is a blind necessity moving me to make a division in Matthew 24. I am not compelled by the sheer force of an in-place, contortion-oriented theological construct (such as dispensationalism) to make this separation. No ghost of Scofield-past haunts my exegesis. In fact, I would not be terribly disturbed with any preterist who would see all of Matthew 24 as related to A.D. 70, as my friend John L. Bray does. But I do believe there is an exegetically justified rationale for such a division as I propose at Matthew 24:34-36 [This transition passage is not my invention. It has been argued by others. See especially: J. Marcellus Kik, *An Eschatology of Victory* (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1971).]

Linguistic Sense and Historical Referent

Now, is it hermeneutically possible for identical terms or phrases to be applied to different events? As a matter of fact, it is not only possible, but quite common in human language and biblical revelation. For astute students of philosophy and theology it is not uncommon for there to be inter-contextual differences between identical terms regarding *sense* and *referent*. Let me explain what I mean.

The fundamental linguistic *sense* of "coming" has to do with a *visitation of divine judgment upon man*. This is the very *essence* of the notion of "the coming of the Son of Man," for instance. But the particular historical *referent* of a "coming" may be either the A.D. 70 coming, or the Second Advential coming to punctuate the end of history-or some other divine judgment visitation.

Beyond the introduction of this matter relative to the philosophy of language, it is important to realize that A.D. 70 is not unrelated to the Second Advent. As the ending of the era of sacrificial rituals and Israel-exalting redemptive history, A.D. 70 is a pre-consummational type of the Second Advent's history-ending, consummational conclusion. Hence, the similarity of language and the mixing of ideas is justified on the basis of the relationship of type (A.D. 70) to antitype (Second Advent) [This phenomenon of type/anti-type is very common in Davidic/Messianic passages. In such references, what is said of the historical King David often applies to the Messianic King Jesus.]

Examples of this sort of "problem" abound in Scripture. (1) The same sort of inter-contextual shift occurs in Revelation 20:4-6, where two resurrectional coming-to-life occurrences are spoken of one is spiritual, the other physical. John himself, the writer of Revelation, gives us warrant for making such an

interpretive maneuver; see John 5:25-29 [*He Shall Have Dominion: A Postmillennial Eschatology* (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1992), 415-417.] (2) Paul frequently shifts his meaning of "law" in Romans 3-8 between the Old Testament revelation as such, the Pharisaic idea of "law as meritorious principle," and "Law as God's revealed non-meritorious standard of righteousness" [See: John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959), 1:105ff; 2:49ff.] (3) When you compare John 2:13-17 with Matthew 21:12-13 you will find the references to the cleansing of the Temple almost identical. But, of course, they are separated by about three and one-half years.

More relevantly, various mentions of "the day of the Lord" are referred to in Scripture. The general sense in all places is "divine visitation in judgment"; the specific referent might be upon Babylon (cp. Isa. 13:1 with 1:6, 9), Egypt (cp. Jer. 46:8, with 46:10), Israel (cp. Joel 1:2 with 1:15; cp. Zeph. 1:1, 2, 4 with 1:7), or on the world at large (2 Pet. 3:10) [For a discussion of the 2 Peter 3 passage, see my *He Shall Have Dominion*, 301-305.]

The Transition Text Revisited

Now let me turn to the reasons *why* I hold there is a contextual shift *here* in Matthew 24:34-36, which reads: "[34] Verily I say unto you, This generation shall not pass, till all these things be fulfilled. [35] Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away. [36] But of that day and hour knoweth no man, no, not the angels of heaven, but my Father only."

First, by all appearance Matthew 24:34 seems to function as a concluding statement, having specific reference to the preceding events. If *all* of Matthew 24 were for the first century, why would not the Lord hold off on the concluding statement until the end of His discourse? The following events (Matt. 24:36-51) relate to some other event that was not to occur in "this generation." Thus, all events before verse 34 are to occur to "this generation,"

Second, there seems to be an intended contrast between that which is *near* (in verse 34) and that which is *far* (in verse 36): *this generation* vs. *that day*. It would seem more appropriate for Christ to have spoken of "this day" rather than "that day" if He had meant to refer to the time of "this generation." Of course, this argument is wholly contextual: by themselves the words "this"/"that" do not have to point to wholly different things. But in this context their juxtaposition strongly suggests such, especially when considered in light of the other indicators with which I am dealing.

Third, along these same lines, we should notice the pre-transition emphasis on plural "days" in contrast to the focus on the singular "day" afterwards. "This generation" involves many "days" for the full accomplishment of the protracted (Matt. 24:22) Great Tribulation. Indeed, were the Great Tribulation on one particular day, its horror would be greatly reduced. By the very nature of the case "that day" of the future Second Advent will come in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye (cp. 1 Cor. 15:52). The Second Advent does not span days, whereas the Great Tribulation does.

In Matthew 24:19, 22, and 29 the Lord makes reference to the plural "days" that are fraught with judgment and terror. These involve times consumed by war and famine (w. 6-7), which take time. He does, of course, mention that these people should pray that their flight not be on a singular "sabbath"

(Matt. 24:20). But this has reference to taking flight on any sabbath, not a particular one. The Great Tribulation era will cover a number of sabbath days as it develops.

It is true that Christ does speak of the future era of the Second Advent as being like the "days [plural] of Noah" (Matt. 24:37, 38). But it is clear that His focus is on "that" singular day, when Christ ("the Lord") comes to punctuate the end of history (w. 36, 50) and to bring final judgment upon men (v. 51).

Fourth, before verse 34 there are *signs* to the A.D. 70 coming; after it there are no signs. The time of Jerusalem's destruction is a sign-filled era that tailed for attentive watching through sign reading. There will be false Christs (v. 5), wars and rumors of wars (w. 6-7), famines and earthquakes (v. 7b), persecution and betrayal (w. 9-12), and false prophets (v. 11). His hearers will be witness to the abomination of desolation (v. 15) and urged to flee from the area when they see it (w. 16-21). There will be great signs and wonders (v. 24), of which He informs them, since He knows what is to come and when (v. 25). Thus, when all these things begin occurring, they serve as signs of the impending nearness of Christ's judgment coming on Jerusalem (w. 32-33). The time of its approach may be known,

After verse 34 such signs and objectively verifiable events vanish from the discourse, His statements become more generic: the days will be like the "days of Noah" (w. 37-39) in which people were eating and drinking and marrying, until the judgment falls on particular individuals (w. 40-41) on that particular "day" (v. 42). Thus, the Son of Man does not give concrete signs of that future, Second Advent coming. There appears in the discourse at this juncture generic encouragements to labor because of the lack of signs.

Fifth, even Christ Himself claims He does not know the time of the Second Advent (v. 36). Whereas in the early section He clearly knows the time of the events leading to the destruction of the Temple in A.D. 70 (w. 29-30). He tells His disciples that certain signs may come, but He knows full well that "the end is not yet" (v. 6). He dogmatically asserts that these things will happen to "this generation" (v. 34). Thus, He can positively assert "behold, I have told you in advance" (v. 25).

Sixth, in the early section of Matthew 24, the time frame is clearly specified: He asserts the nearness of events: "this generation" (v. 34). In the following section (and into chapter 25, which is not separated from chapter 24 in the original) the reference is to a long delay: "But and if that evil servant shall say in his heart, My lord delayeth his coming" (Matt. 24:48) "While the bridegroom tarried, they all slumbered and slept" (Matt. 25:5). "After a long time the lord of those servants cometh, and reckoneth with them" (Matt. 25:19).

Concison

The judgments feared as "approaching hoofbeats" (a la Billy Graham) are a distant thunder. Christians have a work to do, and that work is not to shake in their boots but to labor in the power of the glorious God of Scripture [For those interested in tapes related to these glorious themes of victory, I have the following sets available (order from Ken Gentry, 46 Main St., Conestee, SC 29636): "The Greatness of the Great Commission" (\$4). "Postmillennialism and Preterism" (4 tapes: \$12). "The Redemption of the World" (\$4), "The Cultural Mandate" (2 tapes: \$8). "The Westminster Confession on Scripture" (3 tapes \$12). "The WCF on Sovereignty" (6 tapes: \$22).]

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