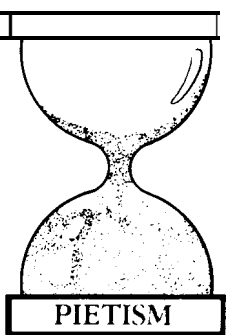


Dispensationalism in Transition

Challenging Traditional Dispensationalism's "Code of Silence"



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CONTEXT! CONTEXT! CONTEXT!

(Part 1 of a Survey of Matthew **24:1-36**)

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In my discussions with both dispensationalists at different times and with Jehovah's Witnesses stopping by my house on Saturday mornings, I have found that Matthew 24 seems to be one of the most familiar passages employed for futuristic eschatology. Consequently, a study of the passage in this and the next several newsletters should be of interest to our readers.¹

The dispensational approach to Matthew 24 is controlled by futurism for the most part. Futurists put all the events of Matthew 24:4ff off thousands of years from Jesus' day. But such is categorically wrong for various contextual reasons.

The fundamental problem with the dispensational approach to this passage is its addiction to its own peculiar theological system requirements. This produces blurred contextual vision.²

For instance, while establishing the setting for understanding the disciples' questions in Matthew 24:3, Pentecost writes: "Remember, as mentioned earlier, Jewish eschatology recognized two ages: The first was this present age. . . ; and the second was the age to come. . . . We must note that *Jesus was revealing the prophetic program for Jerusalem, the nation Israel, and the people of Israel.* He made *no* reference to the church or the prophetic program for the church. . . . Because of its Jewish context, therefore, this portion of Scripture *must* be interpreted with reference to Israel and not to the church."³

Pentecost is correct in noting that the passage is to be interpreted with reference to Israel – that is, inescapable. But only a compartmentalization of institutions (Israel/Church) and ages (Church Age/Tribulation) requires the fulfillment be delayed for some Jewish remnant living thousands of years after the ones who asked the question.

There is an important sense in which Matthew's Gospel sets forth in historical-theological fashion the failure of first century Israel in some detail. And despite Pentecost, *this very fact leads to the relevancy of Christ's discourse regarding her soon-coming judgment in response to the crucifixion of Christ.*⁴

The Far Context

After giving the account of Joseph and Mary and the

1. I would like to thank Michael H. Warren of Murfreesboro, Tennessee, for requesting a study of this passage.

2. See an earlier "Dispensationalism in Transition" newsletter for additional genetic ophtamological dysfunctions associated with dispensationalism: dispensational diplopia and dispensational dyslexia (DT 3:10, Oct., 1990).

3. J. Dwight Pentecost, *Thy Kingdom Come* (Wheaton, IL: Victory, 1990), pp. 248-249. Emphases his.

4. See my *The Greatness of the Great Commission: The Christian Enterprise in a Fallen World* (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1990), pp. 35-39.

birth of Jesus, Matthew's historical record passes by the positive Jewish response to His birth found in Luke. He chooses rather to mention the coming of the *gentile* Magi to Jesus and the resistance of Israel's government to Him (2:1ff). Then his attention turns to John the Baptist and his message of Israel's pending judgment (3:812). After Christ's Temptation (3:1-11), the story continues with reference to Jesus' ministry in "Galilee of the *Gentiles*" (3:12-17). A strong undercurrent of antipathy toward Israel flows here.

Matthew's first full record of a discourse by Christ treats Israel's corruption of the Law (5:17-48), the hypocrisy of Israel's leadership (6:1-18), and the contrast of His teaching to that of the Jewish scribes and Pharisees (7:13-29).

Then he sets before his reader the healing request by the gentile centurion (8:5-13), to which Jesus responds: "I have not found such great faith with anyone in Israel" (8:10). In that context he speaks of the "sons of the kingdom" (the Jews) being cast out (8:11-12). He warns of great judgment upon Israel (11:20-24), which eventually leads to the religious rulers' assertion that He is of Satan (12:24). Skipping ahead, he warns of the "kingdom of God being taken" from Israel and given to the gentiles (21:33-45).

Ultimately, He calls down a series of woes upon the spiritual leaders of Israel (23:1ff). He notes that they must "fill up then the measure of the guilt" of their fathers (23:32) for "all these things shall come upon this generation" (23:36). Then he weeps over Jerusalem and says her temple will be left desolate (23:37-38). Pentecost correctly notes of this section: "Christ was vividly Predicting the coming destruction of Jerusalem by Titus . . . in A.D. 70."⁵

Thus, as one motive in presenting his gospel, Matthew seems to have in mind the sketching of the dismal spiritual condition of Israel *and her consequent just punishment.* This suggestive data would fit well with an A.D. 70 judgment and would seem to expect some sort of detailed account of it. Who could deny that Matthew 23, which introduces Matthew 24, relates to a soon coming judgment upon first century Israel? But the advocates of the "plain interpretation" of Scripture simply will not allow such.

The Near Context

Having now traversed through Matthew in large strides, we shall enter straight into Matthew 24. Regarding Matthew 24 set in the light of Matthew 23, even Pentecost admits: "Thus the discourse is set against the background of the rejection of the Messiah and the imposition of judicial blindness upon that nation."⁶ But now the problems begin.

5. Pentecost, *Thy Kingdom Come*, p. 247.

6. J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1958), p. 276.

After Jesus leaves the temple, we read: "His disciples came to him for to shew him the buildings of the temple. And Jesus said unto them, See ye not all these things? verily I say unto you, There shall not be left here one stone upon another, that shall not be thrown down." Then his disciples asked: "When shall these things be? and what shall be the sign of thy coming, and of the end of the age?" (Matt. 24:1b-3).

At this point Pentecost pulls the old dispensational gap ploy⁷, by asserting there is an omission in Matthew's record: "The answer to the first question is not recorded by Matthew,⁸ but is given in Luke 21 :20-24"! Pentecost argues that it is in Luke 21:20-24 that we read the "portion of the discourse [that] had to do with the destruction of Jerusalem under Titus in 70 A. D." The next two questions (which are really one) are Matthew's concern, says he: "The entire passage in Matthew 24 and 25 was written to answer this question concerning the signs of Messiah's coming [i.e., the rapture], which would terminate the age."⁹

As in Daniel 9, this gap theory is imposed *deus ex machina* right in the middle of a harmonious context. Despite its surface absurdity, this is standard dispensational fare. Pentecost never gets over it, for his most recent book repeats it, as do the recent works of Wiersbe, Walvoord, Barbieri, and others.¹⁰

A few thinking dispensationalists, however, recognize the difficulty of the party line and are edging toward a more preterist understanding.¹¹ David L. Turner writes: "The manner in which dispensationalism has traditionally handled this section is thus weak on several fronts. . . . Contemporary dispensationalists should rethink this area of NT exegesis."¹² "It must be concluded that the futurist view, held by traditional dispensationalists, is unconvincing. It does not satisfactorily handle the contextual emphasis on the fall of Jerusalem. . . ."¹³ The problem is with *contextual exegesis*, which is overridden by antiquated dispensational theo-

logical requirements.¹⁴

With all the preparation for Israel's coming judgment in his long record, why would Matthew skip over the leading question of the disciples – the very ones who had just seen Him weep over Jerusalem (23:37), heard him declare the temple desolate (23:38), and had pointed out to him the beautiful temple buildings (24:1)? Especially since their questions are generated by Christ's own statement in 24:21! And since it is a matter of indisputable fact that those disciples would have to prepare believers to live through the A.D. 70 holocaust, which literally occurred.¹⁵

The gap ploy cannot credibly stand in such a context. Matthew 24 must deal at *some* length with the destruction of the temple. The proper understanding is, I believe, that *all* of Matthew 24:4-34 has to do with A.D. 70. But there is more.

The Parallel Context

A paralleling of the section of Luke 21:20-24 with Matthew 24:15-21 provides reasonably clear evidence contra futurism. The two are *not* distinct episodes separated by centuries; they refer to the same era, as a cursory glance will demonstrate.

Luke 21:20-24 reads: "When ye shall see Jerusalem compassed with armies, then know that the desolation thereof is nigh. Then let them which are in Judaea flee to the mountains; and let them which are in the midst of it depart out; and let not them that are in the countries enter there into. For these be the days of vengeance, that all things which are written may be fulfilled. But woe unto them that are with child, and to them that give suck, in those days! For there shall be great distress in the land, and wrath upon this people. And they shall fall by the edge of the sword, and shall be led away captive into all nations: and Jerusalem shall be trodden down of the Gentiles, until the times of the Gentiles be fulfilled."

Matthew 24:15-20 reads: "When ye therefore shall see the abomination of desolation, spoken of by Daniel the prophet, stand in the holy place, (who so readeth, let him understand:) Then let them which be in Judaea flee into the mountains: Let him which is on the housetop not come down to take any thing out of his house: Neither let him which is in the field return back to take his clothes. And woe unto them that are with child, and to them that give suck in those days! But pray ye that your flight be not in the winter, neither on the sabbath day."

Besides, where is the contextual cue in the Lucan passage that distinguishes the events of A.D. 70 (21 :20-24) from those of the future rapture era (21 :25ff)? Arbitrary assertion is the only divider. And, as we shall see in future newsletters, the prophecies easily fit the A.D. 70 era.

14. A former member of my church, George Gatgounis, who attended Dallas Seminary (1988-89), while a member of my church (that's another story!), has told me that in his hermeneutics classes at Dallas the students had the hermeneutic cheer: "Context! Context! Context!" (hence our We.) Apparently we are to interpret this cheer literally and employ it only three times in the 1189 chapters of the Bible!

15. Josephus, *Wara of the Jews*, 7:1:1, 7.

7. Apparently the prominent use of the "gap" by dispensationalists is an acronym codeword derived from their desperate call when they publicly run aground on Scripture: "Get A Ploy!"

8. With such an omission, Matthew should have fired his editor.

9. Pentecost, *Things to Come*, p. 276.

10. Pentecost, *Thy Kingdom Come*, p. 249. Warren W. Wiersbe, *Bible Exposition Commentary* (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1989), 2:86. John F. Walvoord, *Prophecy Knowledge Handbook* (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1990), p. 381. Louis A. Barbieri, Jr., "Matthew," in John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures by Dallas Seminary Faculty* (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1983) 2:76. (Looking over these entries, would you say that Victor Books is puffing out a concerted effort to shore up the diminishing fortunes of dispensationalism?) See also: James F. Rand, "A Survey of the Eschatology of the Olivet Discourse," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 113 (1956) 186. H. Wayne House and Thomas D. Ice, *Dominion Theology: Blessing or Curse?* (Portland, OR: Multnomah, 1989), p. 293.

11. Hence, as we say: dispensationalism is in transition.

12. David L. Turner, "The Structure and Sequence of Matthew 24:1-41: Interaction with Evangelical Treatments," *Grace Theological Journal* 10:1 (Spring, 1989) 7. Turner calls his position a "preterist-futurist" view, p. 26.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 10.