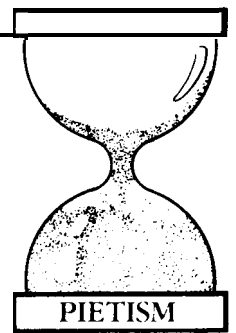


# Dispensationalism in Transition

Challenging Traditional Dispensationalism's "Code of Silence"



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## WHEN I SURVEY THE WONDROUS DISCOURSE

(Part 3 of a Survey of Matthew 24:1-36)

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I have sought to demonstrate in the preceding two issues of our newsletter that the events of Matthew 24:4-31 are specifically prophesied by Christ as coming *in the first century*. In this and the following newsletters I will turn to offer a verse-by-verse exposition of the passage. But before we begin, it might be helpful for some of our readers to know something of the ancient writer, Flavius Josephus. His historical works are extremely helpful to our interpretation of the passage.

### Introducing Josephus

Flavius Josephus was a non-Christian, Palestinian Jewish historian of priestly descent. He lived from A.D. 37 to 101, overlapping virtually the entire apostolic era. When the Jewish War against Rome broke out in full in A.D. 67, he initially served as a general in the Jewish forces. During the War, he was defeated by the Romans at Jotapata, surrendering to the Roman general Flavius Vespasian. He befriended Vespasian by interpreting a prophetic oracle to mean that Vespasian would one day be emperor of Rome. He then worked with Vespasian to try to get the Jews to surrender and to cease with their hopeless cause.

Vespasian, who became emperor of Rome in A.D. 69, sponsored his writing of his famous book *The Wars of the Jews*. This work was written about A.D. 75, just five years after the fall of Jerusalem. Josephus changed his name from the very Jewish Joseph Ben Matthias to a more Roman Flavius Josephus, taking on his benefactor's name. In this work, Josephus writes as an eyewitness historian who happened to be in the action on both sides of the conflict.

### Let God's Word Be God's Word

Generally liberal commentators, such as W. G. Kümmel and J. Schniewind, take Jesus' express declaration that the events would occur in His "generation" (Matt. 24:34) at face value. But then they hold that Jesus was mistaken. This is consistent humanistic rationalism.

On the other hand, dispensationalists are prone to re-interpret the plain interpretation of 24:34 *under the pressure of their theological system*. House and Ice write: "Since the phrase 'all these things' governs the timing of 'this generation' . . . , one has to determine what 'all these things' are and when they will be fulfilled. Then we will know whether 'this generation' referred to those in Christ's day or to a future generation."<sup>1</sup>

This is incredible. By every objective measure the statement "this generation" should govern the timing of the phrase "all these things," rather than the other way around. But according to dispensationalists, *something other than*

the clear statement of Matthew 24:34, which was given for the express purpose of providing chronological information, has to inform us when the time will be!

In fact, according to House, Ice, Walvoord, Pentecost and others, Matthew 24:15, which speaks of "the abomination of desolation" and which says *nothing* about timing, is determinative of the meaning of 24:34. But the meaning of this ambiguous and controversial apocalyptic phrase in 24:15 is predetermined by the dispensational system.<sup>2</sup> In the dispensational system "the abomination of desolation" could not have been fulfilled in A.D. 70.<sup>3</sup>

The preterist steadfastly resists such a conclusion and responds that the question of the interpretation and fulfillment of the difficult "abomination of desolation" should be determined by sound exegesis performed in the light of the clear statement of 24:34. So let us see how the prophecies did occur in Jesus' generation.

### "Take Heed That No Man Deceive You"

Jesus begins His answer with a warning to His disciples: "Take heed that no man deceive you. For many shall come in my name, saying, I am Christ; and shall deceive many" (Matt. 24:4-5). Many dispensationalists take these verses to refer to the first half of a future tribulation week (e.g., Pentecost, Barbieri, English, and Wiersbe).<sup>4</sup> This is the view that we will be countering, even though Pentecost outlines four distinct dispensational views that 'rightly chop' the passage and assign it piecemeal to different times.<sup>5</sup> The word "mislead" indicates Christ's concern that his disciples not allow themselves to be led away by some false Messiah. The Jews were fervently anticipating a conquering Messiah in the first century era<sup>6</sup>; Jesus warned His

2. Strangely, House and Ice state of this alleged future event, that it "will occur three and a half years before the second coming of Christ" (ibid., p. 288). This is strange because two verses later in 24:36 Jesus conclusively says, "No man knows the day nor the hour" of His Second Coming! A predestined three and a half year period, however, would precisely quantify the amount of time that would elapse between the moment of the abomination of desolation and the moment of the Second Coming. Unless they import one of their famous gaps, that is! Such as the gap that can make a prophetic time frame of 490 years (from Dan. 9:24-27) stretch out for over 2000 years. Even more strangely, House and Ice cite Nathaniel West's deriding of interpreters who have "numbers that don't count" (ibid., p. 325)! This despite Daniel's 490 years not counting properly, though Daniel's prophecy is used as an illustration of "literal" prophecy of great "precision" (ibid., p. 321).

3. Ibid., p. 287.

4. See last month's newsletter for source information on the preceding names. It is funny that one of the main reasons Pentecost takes this position is because of the parallel of these verses with Revelation 6 - which is in the very book which claims to speak of events near at hand (Rev. 1:1, 3)!

5. J. D. Pentecost, *Things to Come* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1958), p. 278.

6. Man. 2:1-18; Luke 24:21; John 1:20, 41; 4:29; 6:15; 7:27, 31; 11:47-48; 12:34.

1. H. Wayne House and Thomas D. Ice, *Dominion Theology: Blessing or Curse?* (Portland, OR: Multnomah, 1966), p. 286.

disciples not to be caught up in such a Zionistic frenzy.

There are a number of examples of great pretenders who almost certainly made Messianic claims. Simon in Acts 8:9, 10 may be an example of such, for he "bewitched the people of Samaria, giving out that himself was some great one: To whom they all gave heed, from the least to the greatest, saying, This man is the great power of God." Justin Martyr mentions Simon, and others who "after Christ's ascension into heaven the devils put forward certain men who said that they themselves were gods."

Such false Christs are mentioned in John's first epistle, where John calls them "antichrists." As Robertson notes of 1 John 2:18 and the reference to the arising of "many antichrists" in his day: "So Jesus taught (Mark 13:6, 22; Matt. 24:5, 15, 24) and so Paul taught (Acts 20:30; 2 Thess. 2:3). These false Christs. . . are necessarily antichrists, for there can be only one. *Anti* can mean substitution or opposition, but both ideas are identical in the word *antichrists*."<sup>8</sup> These are the many (*polloi*) false christs mentioned in Matthew 24:5, which indicate "it is the last hour" (1 John 2:18).

Interestingly, such characters would play an important role in the religious and cultural foment that led to the A.D. 67-70 Jewish War with Rome. As Schaff comments: Israel of that era "rose to the most insolent political and religious fanaticism, and was continually inflamed by false prophets and Messiahs, one of whom, for example, according to Josephus, drew after him thirty thousand men."<sup>9</sup>

Josephus mentions the "deceivers and imposters, under the pretence of divine inspiration fostering revolutionary changes" in the A.D. 50s, along with "the Egyptian false prophet," who even operated at the Mount of Olives (Wars 2:13:5; cp. Acts. 21 :38). It is poetic justice that those who rejected the true Christ were frequently and devastatingly duped by false Christs.

#### Wars and Rumors of War

Dispensationalist Wiersbe comments of Matt. 24:6, 7: "Note that wars are not a sign of the end. There have always been wars in the world, and will be until the very end. Wars of themselves do not announce the end of the age nor the coming of the Lord."<sup>10</sup> It is true, of course, that "wars of themselves" do not announce the end.

The preterist approach to this passage, however, is quite relevant to the situation of Jesus' hearers, His disciples (24:2, 3) of "this generation" (24:34). Not only so, but

it exposes the error of Walvoord when he states of Matthew 24: "Postmillenarians have a different problem in that they want to support their view that the world is going to get better and better as the Gospel gradually triumphs; but this passage of Scripture does not support this and, in fact, predicts increasing evil with the climax at the Second Coming."<sup>11</sup> And he says this despite admitting in the preceding sentence that there are some evangelical who "attempt — to relate most of the prophecies to the time when Jerusalem was destroyed." In that case the prophecies pose absolutely zero problem for postmillennialists!

As usual, a little familiarity with the cultural and political situation existing in that era is most helpful. "Wars and rumors of wars" do serve as significant harbingers of the end of the temple (which is the major issue being discussed, Matt. 23:38-24:3). This is because of the dramatically successful *Pax Romana*, the "peace of Rome."

The *Pax Romana* began with Augustus' establishment of the "Age of Peace" in 17 B.C. Origen (A.D. 185-254) speaks of the "abundance of peace that began at the birth of Christ" (*Remans* 1 :3). It was, indeed, a time of an "abundance of peace" that by the providence of God, allowed for the rapid dissemination of the Christian faith.

Scholars observe that "in the Roman Empire proper, this period of peace remained comparatively undisturbed until the time of Nero."<sup>12</sup> This is the era of the Jewish War, which resulted in the destruction of the temple stone by stone, and the Roman Civil Wars of the infamous "Year of Four Emperors" (A. D. 68-69), when Rome almost collapsed.<sup>13</sup> Consequently, as the events began unfolding up to the Jewish War, the Christians were to be forewarned of the coming devastation of Jerusalem, which would be the Great Tribulation. Thus, the "wars and rumors of wars" were truly significant to that "generation."

The Jewish War was with the Roman Imperial army, including contributions of troops and horsemen from Rome's client kings and allies.<sup>14</sup> During the Roman Civil Wars, several nations revolted in an attempt to leave the Empire.<sup>15</sup> It literally was "nation against nation." It is significant that Josephus entitled his most famous work of the era, *The Wars of the Jews*.

11. Walvoord, *Prophecy Knowledge Handbook*, p. 381.

12. Bo Reicke, *The New Testament Era: The World of the Bible from 500 B.C. to A.D. 100* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1968), p. 110.

13. Josephus notes of the Roman Civil War of this era: "I have omitted to give an exact account of them, because they are well known by all, and they are described by a great number of Greek and Roman authors" (*Wars* 4:9:2). For more information see my *Before Jerusalem Fell* (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1989), pp. 311-314.

14. Josephus mentions soldiers from Caesarea, Syria, Arabia, and other cities and nations. Josephus, *Wars* 3:1:3; 3:4:4.

15. Tacitus, *Histories* 1:2-3. He mentions the Gallic provinces, Britain, Sarmatae, and Suebi.

7. Martyr, *First Apology* 26.

8. A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament* (Nashville: Broadman, 1933), 6:215.

9. Philip Schaff, *A History of the Christian Church* (3rd. ed.: Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1910), 1:394.

10. Warren W. Wiersbe, *Bible Exposition Commentary* (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1989) 2:87.