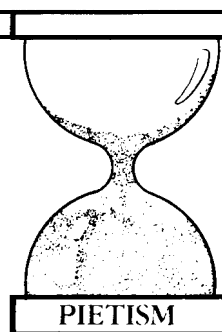


Dispensationalism in Transition

Challenging Traditional Dispensationalism's "Code of Silence"



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THE GOSPEL OF THE KINGDOM IN ALL THE WORLD (Part 5 of a Survey of Matthew 24:1-36)

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With this issue we open with a brief look at Matthew 24:9-13 before considering in detail verse 14.

Persecution, Apostasy, and False Prophecy

In verse 9 the Lord warns His disciples that they could expect *persecution*: "Then they will deliver you up to tribulation and kill you, and you will be hated by all nations for My name's sake." The fulfillment of this prophecy by Jewish opposition to the gospel is easily demonstrated from **Acts**.¹ This is a continuation and expansion of Matthew 23:34-36, which clearly applies to the first century. After the Jewish persecution of Christians came the Roman onslaught, just preceding the Temple's destruction (A.D. 64-68). The pagan Roman historian **Tacitus** speaks of Christians in the era of Nero as universally "hated for their crimes."²

In verses 10 and 12 we discover a consequence of the persecution: *apostasy*. "And then many will be offended, will betray one another, and will hate one another. . . And because **lawlessness**³ will abound, the love of many will grow cold." This, too, may be documented in the apostolic era. Paul lamented "that all those in Asia have turned away from me" (2 Tim. 1:15) and "**Demas** has forsaken me, having loved this present world" (2 Tim. 4:10). He commented that "at my first defense no one stood with me, but all forsook me" (2 Tim. 4:16).⁴

John writes of apostasy: "They *went out from us*, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us; but they went out that they might be made manifest, that none of them were of us" (1 John 2:19; cp. 2 and 3 John). The Epistle to the Hebrews indicates a sizeable apostasy from among Jewish converts to Christianity. Tacitus even alludes to apostasy under the **Neronian** persecution: "First, Nero had self-acknowledged Christians arrested. Then, *on their information*, large numbers of others were **condemned**."⁵

Fake prophets were a problem then, as well as false **Christs** (cp. Matt. 24:5). Peter, Paul, and John all warned about this **danger**.⁶ Even Josephus records false prophets

arising among the **Jews**.⁷ Because of all of this, Jesus urges His disciples to endurance through these troublesome times (**Matt.** 24:12). The chaos surrounding the Temple's destruction will eventually end.

The Gospel in the Whole World

But many will write off the evidence for the fulfillment of the general precursory signs as adaptable to any interpretive approach. It is with verse 14 that we are thought to be treading on thin ice: "And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all the world as a witness to all the nations, and then the end will come." **Walvoord** writes: "Jesus, having described the signs relating to the destruction of Jerusalem, which some of them would live to see, and the general signs of the progress of the present age, then reveals in detail the specific signs which will be **unmistakable evidence** that *the second coming of Christ* and the end of the age is **near**."⁸

Of Matthew 24:14, House and Ice write: "If we look closely at Matthew 24:14 we notice that there are two phrases which modify 'shall be preached' – 'in the whole world' and 'to all the nations.' In the first phrase, the adjective 'whole' indicates that it is the world in its totality that is in view." They then parallel the next phrase to that of Matthew 28:19, arguing for a universal proclamation of the gospel. They query: "So are the Reconstructionists saying that the gospel was preached before A.D. 70 in the Western hemisphere?"⁹

By keeping in mind the time indicator ("this generation"), the audience (the disciples who asked when the temple would be destroyed), and the harmony of the preceding signs with the first century experience (see this and the two preceding newsletters), we may note that House and Ice's observation is not well taken. Note:

(1) The word "world" here is the Greek word **oikumene**. It very often means the Roman Empire, as in Luke 2:1 and Acts 11:28.10 Acts 24:5 is a case in point: "For we have found this man [Paul] a plague, a creator of dissension among all the Jews *throughout the world*, and a ringleader of the sect of the Nazarene." The western hemisphere is not in view in either Acts 24:5 or Matthew 24:14.

(2) The phrase "all the nations," is epexegetical, referring to those nations in that particular "**oikumene**," i.e.,

1. See for example: Acts 4:3; 5:18-33; 6:12; 7:54-60; 8:1ff; 9:1-4, 13, 23; 11:19; 12:1-3; 13:45-50; 14:2-5, 19; 16:23; 17:5-13; 18:12; 20:3, 19; 21:11, 27; 22:30; 23:12, 20, 27, 30; 24:5-9; 25:2-15; 25:24; 26:21. See also: 2 Cor. 11:24; 2 Thess. 2:14-15; Heb. 10:32-34; Rev. 2:9; 3:9; etc., etc.

2. Tacitus, *Anna's* 15:44.

3. Around the era of the destruction of the Temple, Josephus says that the Jewish Zealots acted "as though they had covenanted to annul the laws of nature along with those of their country" and that "every human ordinance we trampled under foot" (*Wars* 4:6:3).

4. See also Gal. 3:1-4; 2 Thess. 3:1.

5. Tacitus, *Annals* 15.

6. Acts 13:6; 20:29; Rem. 16:17, 18; 2 Cor. 11:13, 28; 1 Tim. 4:1; 2 Pet. 2:1; 1 John 4:1. Cp. Gal. 2:4; 2 Pet. 2:1.

7. Josephus, *Wars* 6:5:2-3. In fact, the false prophets in Jerusalem helped aggravate the destruction of the city by buying up hopes.

8. Walvoord, *Prophecy Knowledge Handbook* (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1990), pp. 386-387. Emphasis mine.

9. H. Wayne House and Thomas D. Ice, *Dominion Theology: Blessing or Curse?* (Portland, OR: Multnomah, 1969), p. 296.

10. See: W. F. Arndt and F. W. Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1957), p. 564.

those nations that were subsumed *under the imperial authority of Rome*. The "world" to which the "gospel of the kingdom was preached" (the Roman Empire) was provided a "witness" to all of its particular "nations."

(3) It is important to remember the contextual setting, again. The whole discourse was generated by Christ's reference to the destruction of the Jewish temple and the disciple's concern with the end of the Jewish age (Matt. 24:2-3). The "witness" provided throughout "all the nations" of the "*oikumene*" was a witness or testimony especially *against the Jews*, regarding the coming of the *kingdom of Christ*, which had been presented to and rejected by the *Jews*.¹¹

We must remember that the Jews were scattered throughout the Roman Empire: "Now there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men, from every *nation under heaven*" (Acts 2:5). In fact, "the Jews, since the *Babylonish* captivity, had been scattered over all the world. They were as ubiquitous in the Roman empire in the first century as they are now throughout Christendom."¹² This was so much the case that pagan writers complained of the breadth and depth of the Jewish *influence*.¹³

We should remember that it was to the Jews that John the Baptist and Christ preached: "the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matt. 3:1 ff; Mark 1:15). Hence, the gospel of Christ's redemptive kingdom was "to the Jew first" (Matt. 10:5-6; Rem. 1:16; 2:9,10). Now here the King, Jesus Christ (cp. Acts 17:7; Rev. 1:5), promises a universal testimony of the "good news" ("gospel," Gk., *euaggelion*) of the kingdom to the "world"-wide Jewish presence. According to Acts, the disciples taught "all the Jews throughout the nations" (Acts 21:21)¹⁴ and caused dissension thereby "among all the Jews throughout the world (Gk: *oikumene*)" (Acts 24:5).

The Jews had continually sought signs of Him;¹⁵ finally this conclusive sign was given: His judgment on the Temple, Jerusalem, and Israel (cf. later exposition of Matt. 24:30). As the disciples spread out over the nations of the Roman Empire, they left a testimony to the Jews in all nations that Jesus was the Christ. They must turn and be **saved, or perish** (Acts 2:29-41). Their flaming Temple would demonstrate the validity of His prophetic word. Of this verse, Lightfoot comments that "Jerusalem was not to be destroyed before the gospel was spread over all the world. . . . [A]ll men, as many as ever heard the history of Christ, should understand that dreadful wrath and severe vengeance which was poured out upon that city and nation by which he was crucified."¹⁶ (This also seems to

be the **interpretation of the apostles sitting on twelve thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel [Matt.12:28].**)

(4) This interpretation is further strengthened by the parallel in Mark 13:8-10, which provides additional insight into Christ's meaning: "These are the beginnings of sorrows. But watch **out for yourselves, for they will deliver you up to councils, and you will be beaten** in the synagogues. And you will be brought before rulers and kings for My sake, for a testimony to them. And the gospel must first be preached to all the nations." Clearly, the Lord is referring to the Jewish opposition to the disciples by "councils" and "synagogues," which the Book of Acts demonstrates actually happened (see Note 1 above).

The Fulfillment of Matthew 24:14

Now let me point out the fulfillment of this prophecy in the first century. In Acts 2:5 we have a reference to the representation present at the Pentecostal sermon of Peter (one of the original hearers of Christ's Olivet Discourse): "Now there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men, from every nation under heaven." Using House and Ice's pedantic approach, we could dispute Luke's record: surely there were no representatives from the "western hemisphere," were there? (House and Ice would have a problem taking this approach to Acts 24:5, as well.) Yet Luke records that **men were there from every nation under heaven – and the western hemisphere is under heaven!** Here we have a gathering before the preaching of the gospel, a gathering that meets the requirements of Matthew 24:14, at least *representationally*.

In Romans 1:8 Paul wrote: "First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for you all, that your faith is spoken of throughout the whole world." Their faith was the Christian faith. And Paul says it was being spoken of throughout the "whole world." Turner attempts to reduce this to a proclamation "among other Christians."¹⁷ But even if this were so, the point remains that it was in fact being spoken of "throughout the whole world," where Christians would be a witness.

Later Paul speaks of gospel preachers: "Their sound has gone out to ail the earth, and their words to the ends of the world" (Rem. 10:18). He speaks of "the gospel which has come to you, as it has also in all the world. . . . [T]he gospel which you heard, which was preached to every creature under heaven" (Col 1:6, 23). Turner discounts these references on the basis that Paul still longed "to take the gospel to previously unreached regions (Spain)."¹⁸ But the point is: If Paul can state Romans 10:18 and Colossians 1:6 and 23 as fact in his lifetime, why can we not see these as fulfillments of Matthew 24:14?

Matthew 24:14 is no hindrance at all to the preteristic viewpoint. In fact, it harmonizes beautifully with many other Scriptures – much more easily than does dispensationalism's view that must run roughshod over the clear statement of Matthew 24:34.

set every preterist must have. Walt Hibbard has a good price on them (\$34.95) at Great Christian Books, P. O. Box 6000, Elkton, MD 21922. Lightfoot was an extremely learned Westminster divine. I would like to thank Mark Baker of Redding, CA, for urging my purchase of this set.

17. David L. Turner. "The Structure and Sequence of Matthew 24:14: An Interaction with Evangelical Treatments," *Grace Theological Journal* 10:1 (Spring, 1969) 6.

16. *Ibid.*

11. Cp. Mark 1:15 and Matt. 4:17 (where Jesus preaches the kingdom to the Jews) with John 19:12, 15, 21; Matt. 27:41-42; Mark 15:30-32; Luke 23:35-38 (where the Jews reject His kingship).

12. Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1950 [1910]), 1:85. See my *Before Jerusalem Fell* (Tyler, TX: I. C. E., 1969), pp. 211 ff for more evidence.

13. Tacitus, *Histories* 5:5; Juvenal, *Fourteenth Satire* 11:96ff. See also *Josephus Against Apion* 2:28ff; Wars 3:3; and *Antiquities* 14:7:2.

14. The Greek of Acts 21:21 is: *Tous kata ta ethne pantas loudaious*. The translation cited is from Alfred Marshall, *The Interlinear Greek English New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1956), p. 566.

15. Matt. 12:38; 16:1; Mark 8:11; Luke 11:16, 29-30; John 2:18; 6:30. Cp. 1 Cor. 1:22.

16. John Lightfoot, *Commentary on the New Testament from the Talmud and Hebraica* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1989 [1656]), 2:313. I hate to keep urging my readers to spend all their money, but here is a four volume