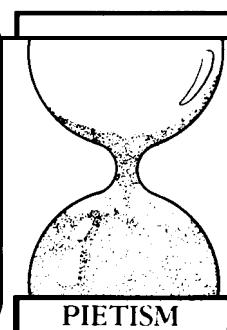


# Dispensationalism in Transition

Challenging Traditional Dispensationalism's "Code of Silence"



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## FALSE CHRISTS (Part 8 of a Survey of Matthew 24:1-36) by Kenneth L Gentry, Jr., Th.D.

As we continue our survey of Matthew 24:1-36, we return to a familiar theme. In verses 23-26 we hear again a warning regarding false prophets on the order of that already given in verse 11. The Lord repeats this warning before His hearers, many of whom will endure the events of Matthew 24 in their lifetimes (Matt. 24:34; cp. Mark 9:1). Added to this is a warning of false **Christs** to appear.

The Lord reiterates His warning against falling for false prophecies that provide a hope of escape from the coming A.D. 70 era tribulation: "Then if anyone says to you, 'Look, here is the **Christ!**' or '**There!**' do not believe it. For false christs and false prophets will arise and show great signs and wonders, so as to deceive, if possible, even the elect. See, I have told you beforehand. Therefore if they say to you, 'Look, He is in the **desert!**' do not go out; or 'Look, He is in the inner **rooms!**' do not believe it" (Matt. 24:23-26).

### False Expectations

it is the **natural** tendency of the mortal to seek to avoid **affliction** and **danger**.<sup>1</sup> Man has a God-created will to **live**, for "He has put eternity in their hearts" (Eccl. 3:11). With the onset of this great tribulation there undoubtedly would be many who **would** be in danger of being overcome by the anxiety generated in the turmoil. They might **easily** be tempted by **false messianic expectations**.<sup>2</sup>

As is evident from the Lord's High **Priestly Prayer**, however, His people should expect preservation *in* temptation, not deliverance *from* it: "I do not pray that You should take them out of the world, but that You **should** keep them from the evil one" (John 17:15). Thus, in essence, *the Lord is warning against the notion of an imminent return* (a position history has borne out for the past twenty **centuries**).<sup>3</sup> His people could expect only **fake Christs** during the first century.

in fact, the Lord's glorious, **bodily** return was to be in the **distant** future: "But while the bridegroom was **delayed**, they all **slumbered** and **slept**" (Matt. 25:5). "For the kingdom of heaven is like a man **traveling** to a **far** country, who **called** his own servants and delivered his goods to them. . . . After a **long** time the lord of those servants came and settled accounts with them" (Matt. 25:14, 19).

Just before His ascension, Christ had to deal with the problem of imminence among His often-confused **disciples**: "They asked Him, saying, 'Lord, wiii You at *this* time restore the kingdom to Israel?' And He said to them, 'it is not for you to know *times* [Gk: *chronos*] or seasons which the Father has put in His own authority" (Acts 1 :7). it is particularly the *time* factor that is at issue in their question, as is obvious from His answer. This is evident in that: (1) The time element "at this time" is placed **early** in the sentence for emphasis. (2) The disciples suspect it may be "at *this* time." (3) Christ's answer focuses only on the time element. The *chronos* time-reference in Christ's answer indicates a long period of time of uncertain duration. in fact, it is found in the plural, which indicates "of a rather long period of time composed of **several** shorter **ones**."<sup>4</sup>

in Matthew 28:20 the Great Commission **will** stretch through "all the days" (literal transition of the Greek). This indicates a great many days before the end.

### A Brief Digression

Allow me to digress a moment from the **actual** meaning of the text to consider a supposed implication. Few things excite the dispensationalist more today than "signs of the **end**."<sup>5</sup> Of course, Hal Lindsey's and Edgar **Whisenant's** false prophecies regarding 1988 are the **classic** examples. But apparently for John **Walvoord**, potential book sales are "tempting him above that which he is **able**." Even he, as a major dispensational theologian, has stepped into the date-setting arena, setting up Christians to expect, "Lo, here/Lo, there."

The earlier **Walvoord** was more consistent with the (erroneous) dispensational doctrine of imminence (which taught that the rapture has **always** been imminent since the ascension). He argued in 1979 that in the **Bible** "there is no teaching of any intervening event. The prospect of being taken to heaven at the coming of Christ is not **qualified** by description of any signs or prerequisite **events**."<sup>6</sup>

During the Gulf War in 1991, however, we read **Walvoord** saying: "Bible prophecy is being **fulfilled** every day." He **clearly** indicates the Gulf War's relation to "the final battle" of "the apocalypse": "it's a prelude to it."<sup>7</sup> **Playing** on the saying "All men are created equal, but some are

1. As Josephus says of the false prophecies during the Jewish War: "Now, a man that is in adversity does easily comply with such promises; for when such a seducer makes him believe that he shall be delivered from those miseries which oppress him, then it is that the patient is full of hopes of such deliverance." Josephus, Wars 6:5:2.

2. See my earlier discussion of Matt. 24:9-13 in "The Gospel of the Kingdom in All the World" (*Dispensationalism in Transition*, Sept., 1991).

3. The problem of the modern confusion caused by the imminence doctrine of **dispensationalism** was touched on in our April, 1990, **newsletter**.

4. William F. Arndt and F.W. Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1957), p. 896.

5. Gary DeMar, *Last Days Madness: The Folly of Trying to Predict When Christ Will Return* (Brentwood, TN: Wolgemuth and Hyatt, 1991).

6. John F. Walvoord, *The Rapture Question* (2d ad.: Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979), p. 73.

7. Barbara Reynolds, "Prophecy clock is ticking in Mideast," (interview with John F. Walvoord), U. S. A. *Today*, Inquiry section, January, 19, 1991.

created more equal than others," the dispensational doctrine is now: "The rapture has always been imminent, but now is more imminent than ever."

But as I have been arguing for the last several issues: the signs and the events signified in Matthew 24:1-34 *have to do with the era leading up to the destruction of the Temple in A.D. 70.*<sup>8</sup>

### False Messiahs

Any unfounded hope for escape from the looming troublesome times of the first century would be fertile ground for messianic expectations. Consequently, Christ expressly warns against such. In our September issue I indicated **biblical** evidence for false **Christs** arising during the apostolic era. Let me now just bring in some extra-biblical historical evidence. This prophetic data – as every other in Matthew 24:1-34 – has a direct historical relevance to the **pre-A.D. 70** era.

In John Lightfoot's encyclopedic research in the Jewish Talmudic literature, we find **rabbinic** interpretations that fueled false Messianic fervor in the first century. Isaiah 56:7 reads: "Before she travailed, she gave birth; before her pain came, she delivered a male child." Based on this, the rabbis argued "that the **Messias** should be manifested before the destruction of the city."<sup>9</sup> Christ's followers were not to fall for such, Jesus warned!

Micah 5:3 reads: "Therefore He shall give them up, until the time that she who is in labor has given birth; then the remnant of His brethren shall return to the children of Israel." From this, the rabbis deduced that "the Son of David will not come, till the wicked empire [of the Romans] shall have spread itself over all the world nine months." Clearly there was a Messianic hope in the air as the fateful events of the A. D. 60s unfolded on the scene of history.

Josephus records for us the following events prior to the outbreak of the Jewish War with Rome. "There was **also** another body of wicked men gotten together, not so impure in their actions, but more wicked in their intentions, who laid waste the happy state of the city [Jerusalem] no

less than did these murderers. These were such men as deceived and deluded the people under pretense of divine inspiration, but were for procuring innovations and changes of the government; and these prevailed with the multitude to act like madmen, and went before them into the wilderness, as pretending that God would there shew them the signal of liberty" (*Wars 2:13:4*).

Then Josephus mentions "there was an Egyptian false prophet that did the Jews more mischief than the former; for he was a cheat, and pretended to be a prophet also, and got together thirty thousand men that were deluded by him; these he led round about from the wilderness to the mount which was called the Mount of Olives, and was ready to break into Jerusalem by force from that place. . . ." (*Wars 2:13:5*).

During the Jewish War itself we read: "A false prophet was the occasion of these people's destruction, who had made a public proclamation in the city that very day, that God commanded them to get up upon the temple, and there should receive miraculous signs of their deliverance. Now, there was then a great number of false prophets suborned by the tyrants to impose upon the people, who denounced this to them, that they should wait for deliverance from God" (*Wars 6:5:2*).

Surely the **rabbinic** expectations of the sudden appearance of the Messiah accelerated the multiplication of and merged with deceptions by false prophets during the Jewish War. And this was precisely the **sort** of thing Jesus warned about. He did not want His followers to be deceived by such.

Interpreting the cause of the Jewish War, Josephus observes: "What did elevate them in undertaking this war was an ambiguous oracle that was also found in their sacred writings, how, 'about that time, one from their country should become governor of the habitable earth.' The Jews took this prediction to belong to themselves in particular; and many of the wise men were thereby deceived in their determination" (*Wars 6:5:4*).

### Conclusion

Thus, once again we can see how the prophecies of Matthew 24 find fulfillment in the history of the first century. In that these prophecies are supposed to have fulfillment then (**Matt. 24:34**), why should anyone opt for a dispensational approach to the matter?

S. Let me mention the proper use of A. O., when writing dates. It is the abbreviation of *anno Domini*, which means "year of our Lord." It is properly placed before the date, not after it; hence: A.D. 70, not 70 A.D. On the other hand, B. C. ("before Christ") is properly placed after the date.

9. Babylonian Joma, fol. 10.1. Cited in: John Lightfoot, *A Commentary on the New Testament from the Talmud and Hebraica* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, rep. 1969 [1666], 1:316-319).