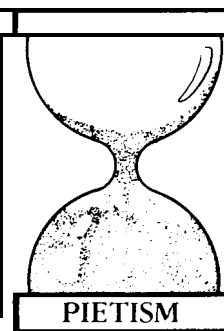


# Dispensationalism in Transition

Challenging Traditional Dispensationalism's "Code of Silence"



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## LIGHTNING, EAGLES, AND JERUSALEM

(Part 9 of a Survey of Matthew 24:1-36)

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In this issue we come upon another of the major sections of the Olivet Discourse that has caused great confusion among futurist interpreters, particularly **dispensationalists**: Matthew 24:27-31. Probably this is rivaled only by Matthew 24:21-22 as a definitive "proof" for the futurist viewpoint. It certainly is heavily leaned upon by dispensational expositors. Due to its importance, I will consider the passage in two newsletters. In this month's study, I will consider verses 27 and 28.

### Like Lightning

Quite emphatically the Lord warned His disciples that there would be no **visible, bodily** coming by Him in those days. He twice states that any report of His physical presence would be erroneous: "Then if anyone says to you, 'Look, here is the **Christ!**' or '**There!**' **do not believe it!**' (Matt. 24:23). "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. 24:26). By these statements it is clear that they were not to expect **any** visible return in that day, for He expressly declares that **any** command to look for Him in some limited particular location would be mistaken. If He were expected to appear visibly at some point in the narrative, then such universal prohibitions would have thwarted pointing to Him when He actually did come!

Yet there was to be a "coming" of Christ in that day: "For as the lightning comes from the east and flashes to the west, so also will the **coming** of the Son of Man be" (Matt. 24:27). This, however, is a spiritual **judgment-coming**, rather than a bodily coming.

Such a judgment-coming was to be witnessed by the Sanhedrin who abused Him during the ecclesiastical trials leading up to His crucifixion. Notice what Christ says to His abusers: "The high priest answered and said to Him, 'I adjure You by the living God that You tell us if You are the Christ, the Son of God.' Jesus said **to him**, 'It is as you said. Nevertheless, I say **to you**, hereafter **you will see** the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of Power, and **coming** on the clouds of heaven'" (Matt. 26:63-64).

Here the high priest and the other members of the Sanhedrin present were told that **they** would see His coming. The **coming** to be witnessed **by the Sanhedrin** is of the **sori** attributed to Jehovah in Isaiah's prophecy against Egypt: "The burden against Egypt. Behold, the LORD rides on a swift cloud, and will **come** into Egypt" (Isa. 19:1). The LORD did **not** physically ride on a cloud down into Egypt! Neither was the "coming of the Son of Man" that the Sanhedrin would see a physical coming. Nor is the "coming **as** lightning" mentioned in Matthew 24:27 a physical coming. It is manifestly a judgment-coming against those

who called for His blood to be upon them and their children (Matt. 27:25).

In Matthew 24:27 the Lord speaks of His **judgment-coming** against Jerusalem (cf. Matt. 23:37-24:2) as analogous to "the lightning [that] comes from the east and flashes to the west." This is generally taught by **dispensationalists** to speak of the Second Coming. Some see the analogy in the **visibility** of His Second Coming, the lightning suggesting "a splendid, visible **event**,"<sup>1</sup> a "very visible **event**."<sup>2</sup> Others see the analogy in the **speed** of His Coming, comparing it to the velocity of lightning: His coming will be "sudden and **interventionist**,"<sup>3</sup> "sudden, like a stroke of **lightning**."<sup>4</sup> Certainly lightning is a "splendid" event – and very fast. But is **that** the aspect of lightning Jesus had in mind here?

Two alternative interpretations are more likely, given the surrounding context, the full statement of Christ, and the total biblical context. Probably both of these are involved.

First, the local context demands that this coming occur in "this generation" (Matt. 24:34). It has to do with events associated with the destruction of the Temple (Matt. 24:2). There is no getting around this temporal delimitations. Unless we are prepared either to say Christ physically appeared at the destruction of the Temple, or that He erred, this must be taken as a spiritual judgment.

Second, we should notice the fuller statement of Christ: here is the specific contextual addendum to the lightning reference. It is said to flash (Gk: **exerchetai**, "come forth") **from east to west**. Ekewhere when Christ says Satan falls from heaven like lightning (Luke 10:18), the **direction** is clearly in view (given the spatial imagery of Scripture: heaven being up and hell being down). This directional factor probably is involved here, in that the destroying armies sent by Christ came at Jerusalem from an easterly direction, according to Josephus' record of **Vespasian's** march through Israel.

Third, in the wider biblical context, we discover lightning being set forth as **that which is terrifying** (Eze. 19:16; 20:18) **because so violently destructive**: "He also gave up their cattle to the hail, And their flocks to fiery lightning.

1. Louis A. Barbieri, Jr., "Matthew," in John F. Walvoord and Roy Zuck, eds., *Bible Knowledge Commentary: New Testament* (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1983), p. 77.

2. John F. Walvoord, *Prophecy Knowledge Handbook* (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1990), p. 389.

3. H. Wayne House and Thomas D. Ice, *Dominion Theology: Blessing or Curse?* (Portland, OR: Multnomah, 1988), p. 295.

4. Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary* (Chicago: Moody, 1989), 1:89.

5. See: "The Interpretive Key to the Olivet Discourse," *Dispensationalism in Transition*, June, 1991.

He cast on them the fierceness of His anger, wrath, indignation, and trouble, By sending angels of destruction among them" (**Psa. 78:48-49**). Here the "fiery lightning" is equivalent to "angels of destruction." There are numerous examples of such an employment of lightning in Scripture (2 Sam. 22:15; Job 36:32; Psa. 18:14; 140:6; Eze. 21:10; Zech. 9:14; Rev. 11:19; 16:18). Lightning is a terrifying feature of a violent storm; frequently the Scripture speaks of destructive wars as storms (e.g., Isa. 28:2; 29:6; Eze. 38:9).

The idea of **terrifying** destruction is surely involved in Matthew 24. The Lord clearly speaks of destruction (v. 2), war (w. 6-7), sorrow (v. 8), desolation (v. 15), flight from danger (w. 16-20), great tribulation (v. 21), and death (v. 28). Obviously the destructive storm that fell upon Israel during the Jewish War was visible. Yet it was not the **Lord Himself who was corporally evident**, though He directed the Roman armies by His providence (cp. the reference to Cyrus as a bird of prey under His sovereign providence, Isa. 46:10-11). Jesus' parabolic description of the destruction of Jerusalem is found in Matthew 22:2-15, where we read: "But when the king heard about it, he was furious. And he sent out *his* armies, destroyed those murderers, and burned up their city" (**Matt. 22:7**).

But even if the visibility aspect of lightning were intended here (it seems but a side-effect of the lightning that allows the direction to be mentioned), that would not indicate that it spoke of the Second Advent. On this approach, the false **christ**s that the Jews vainly looked for in various **hidden localities** (**Matt. 24:26**) would be overshadowed by the awesome and **public Israel-wide** destruction of the very visible Roman armies, whom the true Christ sent to do His bidding. The coming of Christ on the clouds certainly indicates a spiritual coming in Matthew 24:29-30 (which will be studied next month) and 26:64, the **effects** of which would not be invisible. Nevertheless, the other interpretations mentioned above are much superior to this view.

### A Carcass for Eagles

In verse 28 we read of death and consumption by birds of prey: "For wherever the carcass is, there the eagles will be gathered together." This is undoubtedly speaking of the dreadful devastation to be wreaked upon Israel. National, political Israel will be horribly destroyed by the furious Roman soldiers who cruelly ravaged the **people**.<sup>6</sup> The imagery is familiar enough to an agrarian people: the ugly rotting corpse of an animal totally covered by bickering birds of prey.

Israel was once before symbolized as a dead body: in the vision of the dry bones of Ezekiel 37.<sup>7</sup> Here she is again portrayed in terms of **death**.<sup>8</sup> She is morally, spiritually, and **covenantally** dead in the eyes of God. This is why Jesus wept over Jerusalem (**Matt. 23:37**). This is why

6. Josephus often mentions the rage of the Roman troops: "The army now having no victims either for slaughter or plunder, through lack of all objects on which to vent their rage." (Wars 7:1:1).

7. The mysterious reference to Michael and Satan contending for the body of Moses is probably to be understood in this manner (Jude 9), as many reformed commentators have noted. The **body** of Moses being the nation of Israel.

8. The contrast between the earlier failure of Israel and the more recent failure is the subject of Matthew 21:33-45.

her house is left desolate (**Matt. 23:38**). The Spirit of God, which is her life, has left her. Consequently, her capital city and Temple were to be totally destroyed.

In Scripture the body is deemed a wondrous creation of God inspiring awe among the saints (**Psa. 139:13-16; Eccl. 10:5**). Because the body was directly created by God (**Gen. 2:7**), the bodies of deceased saints in Scripture are treated with the utmost respect and given careful **preparation** for burial (John 19:40<sup>9</sup>). Only vile sinners are loathed enough to forgo their proper preparation for burial and to allow cremation of their corpses (**Gen. 23:19**; Lev. 21:9; 10:1 Sam. 31:12). The death-dealing judgment of God on culture-wide covenant breaking is often spoken of as a tragic loss of burial arrangements resulting in bodies being cruelly devoured by animals. This is quite evident in the great **covenantal** curse in Deuteronomy 28:26: "Your carcasses shall be food for all the birds of the air and the beasts of the earth, and no one shall frighten them **away**."<sup>11</sup>

Now what about the "eagles" here preying upon the carcass? The general reference is clear enough: Jerusalem will die and be devoured by conquering armies. Israel will, as it were, lie as a dead body exposed to the ravages of carnivores. It is interesting that the choice of "eagle" (Gk: **aetos**) is here made by our Lord. He could have chosen a more generic term such as **orneon** ("**fowl**"), which is used in Revelation 19:21. Instead he chose the term symbolic of the Roman Empire and descriptive of the **Roman ensigns** carried before the famous legions. Josephus mentions the Roman eagle (Gk: **aetos**) placed on the gate of the Temple by Herod to the chagrin of the Jews (**Antiquities 17:6:3**).

Josephus records the act that lies behind the imagery here: "The Romans, now that the rebels had fled to the city, and the sanctuary itself and all around it were in flames, carried their standards into the temple court and, setting them up opposite the eastern gate, there sacrificed to them, and with rousing acclamations hailed Titus as **imperator**" (Wars 6:6:1). The Roman ensigns bore the **eagle** as the symbol of Rome: "Next [came] the ensigns surrounding the eagle (Gk: **aetos**), which in the Roman army precedes every legion, because it is the king and the bravest of all the birds; it is regarded by them as the symbol of empire" (Wars 3:6:2). These were "sacred emblems" (*ibid*).

Thus, as Jerusalem collapses to its "death," the marauding armies of Rome flow into the city on that fateful day to "devour it." Interestingly, Jerusalem was so stripped of its valuables that Josephus writes: "So glutted with plunder were the troops, one and all, that throughout Syria the standard of gold was depreciated to half its former value" (Wars 6:6:1)! The soldiers, as bickering eagles, were all over the corpse, picking it apart.

Matthew 24:27 and 28 are easily explained by the **preterist** viewpoint over against dispensationalism. **The dispensational viewpoint has yet to be able to account for Matthew 24:34.**

9. See also: Gen. 23:19; 47:30; 49:29; 50:5; Jer. 16:4.

10. The burning of these adulteresses is *after* they have died by stoning or some other such means.

11. See also: Gen. 40:19; 1 Sam. 17:44; 1 Kgs. 14:11; 16:4; 21:24; Pea. 79:2; Jer. 7:33; 19:7; 15:3; 16:4; Eze. 39:17; Rev. 6:8; 19:21.