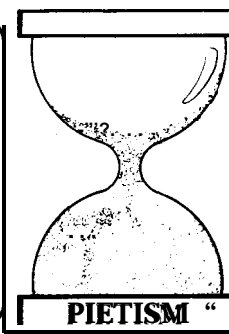


Dispensationalism in Transition

Challenging Traditional Dispensationalism's "Code of Silence"



vol. v, No. 2

©ICE, 1992

February, 1992

THE COLLAPSE OF THE UNIVERSE; OR THE COLLAPSE OF DISPENSATIONALISM?

(Part 10 of a Survey of Matthew 24:1-36)

by Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr., Th.D.

The name of our newsletter is "Dispensationalism in Transition." The amount of actual transition in **dispensationalism** is both incredible (it would have been considered liberal by pre-1970 monolithic dispensationalists) and encouraging (*any* exegetico-theological concessions away from dispensationalism are heartening).

As I continue the exposition of Matthew 24, I will note some remarkable concessions made to evangelical **hermeneutics** by recent dispensationalists. These concessions indicate the unwinding of dispensationalism's **literalistic hermeneutic** – and of dispensationalism.

Classic Dispensationalism and Matthew 24:29

Immediately after the tribulation of those days shall the sun be darkened, and the moon shall not give her light, and the stars shall fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens shall be shaken (Matt. 24:29).

Among classic dispensationalists these words are deemed conclusive of the **futurity** of the Great Tribulation, linking its conclusion with the Second Advent. If interpreted with a wooden **literalism**, this verse indicates astronomical phenomena too catastrophic to have occurred in A.D. 70. I will list some sample explanations of Matthew 24:29 by **literalistic** dispensationalists in this section of the study. Then I will consider both the proper interpretation of the passage and some recent dispensational concessions allowing the camel's nose of preterism under the tent.

Walvoord: "There will be other unusual phenomena occurring in connection with the second coming of Christ (. . . Matt. 24:29)." "The Second Coming will be preceded by many supernatural events in the skies. . . (Matt. 24:29)."¹

Wiersbe: "Those who have confused those two 'sign events' have ended up believing that Jesus Christ returned in A.D. 70! . . . The cosmic changes mentioned in Matthew 24:29 precede the return of Jesus Christ to the earth."²

Ice: "Matthew 24:29 says 'the sun will be darkened.' . . . The question must be raised: Did the sun literally not shine over the land of Egypt and at the same time shine in the land of Goshen during the ninth plague (Exodus 10:21-29)? Of course. . . The point is clear: If these events are to happen literally, in a manner corresponding to the Exodus events, then the whole preterist view is wrong. . . ."³

Hindson: "The reference to the events **Immediately after the tribulation**, such as the sun being darkened and the stars falling, etc., refer to the cataclysmic events that will accompany Christ's return at the end of the Tribulation to establish His Millennial Kingdom on earth."⁴

Barbieri: "immediately following the distress of that period, the Lord will return. His return will be accompanied by unusual displays in the heavens (v. 29.)."⁵

Clearly, dispensationalism views Matthew 24:29 as referring to a literal, astronomical catastrophe associated with the Second Advent. Just as clearly, such events did not occur in A.D. 70 – if interpreted literally. How is the passage to be interpreted?

Covenantal Hermeneutics and Matthew 24:29

Again, we briefly allude to the controlling exegetical factor of the passage – a factor which *absolutely precludes* the imposition of the *a priori* **literalism**. Just five verses after the verse before us, Jesus unambiguously asserts: "Assuredly, I say to you, this generation will by no means pass away till all these things are fulfilled" (Matt. 24:34).

How then shall we understand verse 29? Rather than interpreting it literally, we must interpret it **covenantally**! We should let Scripture interpret Scripture. By the very requirement of the context, *this passage speaks of the collapse of political Israel in A.D. 70*. And since the immediate context demands that these events occur in Christ's generation, we should see if there is biblical warrant for speaking of *national catastrophe* in terms of *cosmic destruction*.

Stellar Imagery and National Devastation

In Isaiah 13 regarding Babylon's judgment, we read of remarkably similar events accompanying Babylon's collapse in the Old Testament era. Indisputably, Isaiah has in view the fall of Babylon: "The burden *against Babylon* which Isaiah the son of Amoz saw" (Isa. 13:1). "Behold, I will stir up the Medes against them. . . And Babylon, the glory of kingdoms, the beauty of the **Chaldeans'** pride, will be as when God overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah" (Isa. 13:17, 19).

But how does Isaiah describe Babylon's fall? *With cosmic destruction!* "For the stars of heaven and their constellations will not give their light; the sun will be darkened in

1. John F. Walvoord, *Prophecy Knowledge Handbook* (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1990), pp. 333, 389.

2. Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary* (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1989), 1:88, 89.

3. H. Wayne House and Thomas D. Ice, *Dominion Theology: Blessing or Curse?* (Portland, OR: Multnomah, 1988), pp. 318, 319.

4. Edward E. Hindson, "Matthew," Hindson and Woodrow Michael Kroll, *Liberty Commentary on the New Testament* (Lynchburg, VA: Liberty Press, 1978), p. 79.

5. Louis A. Barbieri, Jr., "Matthew," in John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck, *Bible Knowledge Commentary: New Testament* (Wheaton: Victor, 1983), p. 78.

its going forth, and the moon will not cause its light to shine. . . . Therefore I will shake the heavens, and the earth will move out of her place" (Isa. 13:10, 13).

The historical fall of Edom is also described in celestial imagery: "Their slain shall be thrown out; their stench shall rise from their corpses, and the mountains shall be melted with their blood. All the host of heaven shall be dissolved, and the heavens shall be rolled up like a scroll; all their host shall fall down as the leaf falls from the vine. . . For My sword shall be bathed in heaven; indeed it shall come down on **Edom**" (Isa. 34:3-5).

Elsewhere, Ezekiel describes the fall of Egypt in history: "Son of man, take up a lamentation for Pharaoh king of Egypt, and say to him. When I put out your light, I will cover the heavens, and make its stars dark; I will cover the sun with a cloud, and the moon shall not give her light. All the bright lights of the heavens I will make dark over you" (Eze. 32:2, 7-8).

Such imagery, then, indicates that the God of the heavens (the Creator of the sun, moon, and stars) is moving in judgment against a nation (blotting out their light). When a national government collapses in war and upheaval, it is often poetically portrayed as a *cosmic catastrophe* – an *undoing of Creation*.⁶

Stellar Imagery and Old Testament Israel

In fact, such vivid poetic language is applied to Israel's historical judgment in the Old Testament! The destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians is portrayed thus: "At that time it will be said to this people and to Jerusalem, 'A dry wind of the desolate heights blows in the wilderness toward the daughter of My people. . . ' I beheld the earth, and indeed it was without form, and void; and the heavens, they had no light. I beheld the mountains, and indeed they trembled, and all the hills moved back and forth For this shall the earth mourn, and the heavens above be black, because I have spoken" (Jer. 4:11, 23-24, 29).

The prophet Joel threatened Israel's Old Testament judgment in like terms: "Blow the trumpet in Zion, and sound an alarm in My holy mountain. . . ! The earth quakes before them, the heavens tremble; the sun and moon grow dark, and the stars diminish their brightness" (Joel 2:1, 10).

Consequently, we may see how easy it is to apply Matthew 24:29 to the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. The **imagery** that Christ employed in His prophecy (which limits itself to His generation, **Matt. 24:34**) is drawn from Old Testament judgment passages. These prophesied Old Testament era judgments sound as if they were world-ending judgments, because, in a sense, it was "the end of the world" for those nations judged.

Dispensational Hermeneutic Concessions

Today there is no hermeneutic reason why dispensa-

6. See Footnote 7 below.

tionists may dismiss out of hand the preterist interpretation of Matthew 24:29. Even the Dallas Seminary **commentary**, *Bible Knowledge Commentary*, admits that such stellar catastrophic language is applicable to historical judgments! In fact, without using quotation marks, one of my statements given above in explanation of the symbolic-figurative use of cosmic imagery is lifted right out of that **commentary**!⁷ Let me cite some dispensational explanations of a few Old Testament cosmic destruction passages from this **commentary**. (I will parenthetically list the author and page number from the commentary.) The statements below undermine the **literalistic** hermeneutic of dispensationalism and cripple the **anti-preterist** view of Matthew 24.

On Jeremiah 4:23-28: "Jeremiah pictured God's coming judgment as a cosmic catastrophe – an undoing of Creation. Using imagery from the Creation account (Gen. 1), Jeremiah indicated that no aspect of life would remain untouched. God would make Judah **formless and empty**

God's **imagery** was so awesome that some might have thought He would totally destroy the land of Israel" (Charles Dyer, p. 1136).

On Isaiah 13:10: "The statements in 13:10 about the heavenly bodies (**stars**. . . **sun** . . . **moon**) no longer functioning may figuratively describe the total turnaround of the political structure of the Near East. The same would be true of **the heavens** trembling **and the earth** shaking (v. 13), figures of speech suggesting all-encompassing destruction" (John A. Martin, p. 1059).

On Ezekiel 32:11-16 (cp. w. 3-8): "This third section of Ezekiel's lament drops the figurative description of Egypt's destruction (w. 3-8) and portrays Egypt's fall to Babylon literally" (Charles H. Dyer, p. 1291).

On Joel 2:10-11: "The army's approach is accompanied by cosmic disorder. The entire world, from **earth** below to **sky** above, quivers (cf. **shakes** and **trembles**) before the thunderous battle cry of the divine Commander. This cosmic response is a typical poetic description of the Lord's theophany as Warrior. . . If the army in Joel 2:1-11 was in Joel's **day**, it may foreshadow the army in **chapter 3**" (Robert B. Chisolm, Jr., p. 1417).

Strangely, in the same commentary set, but in the New Testament volume at Matthew 24:29, Isaiah 13:10 is mentioned as evidence "His return will be accompanied by unusual displays in the heavens (v. 29; cf. Isa. 13:10; 34:4. . .)" (Louis A. Barbieri, Jr., p. 78).

Dispensationalism is dying slowly. The dispensational commentators are stumbling over themselves while trying to make sense of the **covenantal** prophecies of Scripture. Perhaps a few will stumble into our camp!

7. Yep, this is the note you were looking for. Good work! The italicized portion of the statement preceding Footnote 6 was taken from Charles H. Dyer, "Jeremiah," in Walvoord and Zuck, *Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament*, (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1985), p. 1135. You may now return to Footnote 6, if that is where you came from. If not, you may pass GO and collect \$200. In any case, I wish I had never gotten involved with this footnote.