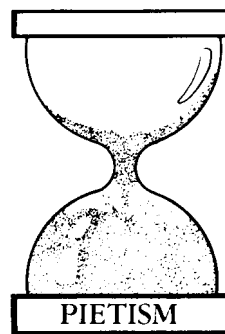


Dispensationalism in Transition

Challenging Traditional Dispensationalism's "Code of Silence"



Vol. V, No. 3

©ICE, 1992

March, 1992

THEN SHALL APPEAR THE SIGN (Part 11 of a Survey of Matthew 24:1-36)

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

Last month we noted how the Lord employed common cosmic-destruction terminology and applied it to the collapse of Israel and the world of Judaism (**Matt. 24:29**). We turn now to consider the meaning of Matthew **24:30**: "And then shall appear the sign of the Son of man in heaven: and then shall all the tribes of the earth mourn, and they shall see the Son of man coming in the clouds of heaven with power and great glory." This verse, along with all other verses leading up to it from Matthew 24:1, applies to the era of the destruction of the Temple in A.D. 70.

It is easy to see how dispensationalists jump to the conclusion that this is referring to the Second Advent – when we omit the historical episode designate (**Matt. 24:2**) and the time qualifier (**Matt. 24:34**). But these should not be omitted! Let us see how the several elements of this verse fit nicely into the preterist understanding of the passage.

The Son of Man in Heaven

Here I prefer the Authorized Version (KJV) to most other translations (including the New King James Version), because it follows the Greek word order so closely and translates the passage so accurately: "Then shall appear the sign of the Son of Man in heaven" (**Matt. 24:30a**) is the translation of: *kai tote phanetai to semeion tou huiou tou anthropou en ourano*.¹

Notice that this does not say: "Then shall appear the Son of Man in the sky." To understand this verse in such a manner is to import a meaning into the text that is not there.² What the verse literally says is: "Then will appear³ the sign." The word "sign" (*semeion*) is in the accusative case in the Greek: it is the direct object of *shall appear*. The Son of Man does not appear; the *sign* appears. Then He defines what the sign signifies: it is the sign "of the Son of Man in heaven."

This is extremely important to redemptive history. Christ is responding to the question of His disciples regarding the end of the age (Gk: *aion*, not *kosmos*) (**Matt. 24:3**). Christ's answer is: When the Temple has been laid waste (**24:6** and 15 anticipate this), Jerusalem has been picked apart by the Romans (**24:28**), the government of Israel has ut-

terly collapsed (**24:29**), then it will be evident that the One who prophesied this destruction is "in heaven."

Jerusalem's utter collapse and the Temple's final destruction, then, serve as *the sign* that the Son of Man is in heaven. It is His curse upon these that causes their woe; it is His curse as the Son of Man from heaven that sovereignly brings judgment: "Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for Me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. For indeed the days are coming in which they will say, 'Blessed are the barren, the wombs that never bore, and the breasts which never nursed!' Then they will begin to say to the mountains, 'Fall on us!' and to the hills, 'Cover us!' For if they do these things in the green wood, what will be done in the dry?" (Luke 23:28-31). He prophesied it; they would experience the fulfillment of His powerful word.

The idea of Matthew **24:30** is parallel in some respects to that of Acts **2:19**: "I will show wonders in heaven above and signs in the earth beneath: blood and fire and vapor of smoke." That which was left after the total collapse of Jerusalem – blood, fire, and smoke – served as the sign that the Son of Man was at God's right hand.

Smoke serves as a sign for Israel's armies in the Old Testament: "Now the appointed *signal* between the men of Israel and the men in ambush was that they would make a great cloud of *smoke rise up from the city*" (**Jdgs. 20:38**). In prophetic literature smoke indicates the destruction of a city: "And I will show wonders in the heavens and in the earth: blood and fire and pillars of smoke" (Joel **2:30**; quoted in Acts **2:19**). In Scripture the bellowing of smoke clouds from a scene of judgment often serve as evidence of that judgment (**Gen. 19:28**; Josh. **18:20; 20:40**; Ps. **37:20**; Isa. **14:31; 34:10**; Rev. **14:11; 18:9**).

In a different context and employing slightly different terminology, Christ told the Sanhedrin who condemned Him: "I say to you, hereafter you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Power, and coming on the clouds of heaven" (**Matt. 26:64**). In the smoky destruction of Jerusalem, these Jewish leaders should see the Son of Man's position of power in His cloud-judgment (see below).

The sign, then, is that the Son of Man is in heaven, where He came from (John **3:13, 31; 6:42; 17:5**) and ascended to (Mark **16:19**; Luke **24:51**; John **14:2, 4**). Despite the disbelief of the Jews (John **6:32-42**), who sought signs from heaven (**Matt. 16:1**; Mark **8:11**; Luke **11:16**), Christ was from heaven. No more will the era of racial focus (Jew) and topological ministry (Temple) be valid. The destruction of the Temple is the final, conclusive sign that the Son of Man has entered heaven so that He might be imparted to all nations (**Matt. 28:19-20**; Acts **2:21**) in spiritual

1. A word for word translation would be: *kai* = and *tote* = then *phanetai* = shall appear *to* = the *semeion* = sign *tou* = of the *huiou* = son *tou* = of the *anthropou* = man *en ourano* = in heaven.

2. I am particularly dissatisfied with the New American Standard Bible translation here: "And then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky." Although the NASB is my translation of choice, I am aware of its premillennial bias. Generally the bias does not affect translation. It usually is seen in cross references and headings.

3. *Phaino* ("appear") may indicate "perceive, recognize," and not just "personally appear." see: 2 Cor. **13:7**; Luke **24:11**.

worship (John 4:23; Phil. 3:3).

The Greek word for "heaven" here is *ouranos*, which may be translated either "heaven" (the abode of God) or "sky" (the cloudy atmosphere above the ground). It is best to translate it as "heaven," as we have seen. This fits better with the redemptive historical significance of the removal of the earthly Temple and the ascending to heaven of the True Temple (John 2:18-22).

If one were to dispute this translation, however, the preterist utility of the verse would still remain. Suppose we translate the verse: "Then shall appear the sign of the Son of Man in the sky." In this case we would have to apply the *sign in the sky* to the place of the smoke that ascended up at Jerusalem's destruction. That is, if the verse were not informing us of the ultimate reality that Jerusalem's destruction was proof that the Son of Man was in heaven, then it would be teaching that the smoke-sign in the sky was an indication that the Son of Man had visited Jerusalem in wrath. Either way, preterism sufficiently accounts for Matthew 24:30a.

Consider one of the options Dallas Seminary's *commentary* suggests, which is totally incredible: "Exactly what the *sign of the Son of Man* will be is unknown. . . Some believe the *sign* may involve the heavenly city, New Jerusalem, which may descend at this time and remain as a satellite city suspended over the earthly city Jerusalem throughout the Millennium (Rev. 21 :2-3)."⁴ Wooden literalism wreaks havoc upon Scripture!

The Mourning of the Tribes

In Matthew 24:30b we read: "Then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory."

A lexical insight should be made before we begin our brief exposition. As with the word *ouranos* (dealt with above), so the word *ge* (translated "earth") contains two basic ideas. The word may mean either *physically, the tangible ground or ethnically, a particular land area or nation*.

The Arndt-Gingrich *Lexicon* gives the following definitions of *ge*: 1. Soil, earth (see: Mark 4:5, 8, 20). 2. Ground (see: Matt. 10:29; 15:35). 3. Bottom of the sea (not in Scripture). 4. Land, region, country, native land (see: Matt. 10:15; 11 :24). 5. The earth, globe (Acts 10:12; 2 Pet. 3:5). (Of course, how to translate each appearance of *ge* and determining which category it should be placed in is a matter of contextual study.)

The Rabbis were particularly careful in their description of "the land" (*he ge*). Edersheim notes: "Palestine was to the Rabbis simply 'the land,' all other countries being summed up under the designation of 'outside the land.'"⁵

The context of Matthew 24 – involving the Temple (24:2), Judea (24:16), and "this generation" (24:34) – strongly suggests the proper translation of verse 30b as "the tribes of the land." This is reinforced by the reference to "the tribes," which is a common designate for the Twelve Tribes of Israel (Gen. 49:28; Exe. 24:4; Eze. 47:13; Matt. 19:28; Luke 22:30; Acts 26:7; Rev. 21:12). The Sep-

tuagint "with few exceptions . . . has *phule* [tribe], so that this becomes a fixed term for the tribal system of Israel."⁶

So then, the mourning will befall the Jewish tribes in Israel. They will receive the brunt of God's wrath and judgment for their rejection of Christ as Messiah. They will have to flee the area to preserve their lives (Matt. 24:16). After which they shall mourn for the loss of their beloved land, government, homes, friends, and Temple.

Here again, though, we may allow a less restrictive translation. Even if someone were to argue for the translation "earth, world" in Matthew 24:30b, no harm is done to the preterist view. Instead of locating the mourning in Israel, where the scene of judgment is focused, this translation would speak of the widespread Jewish mourning throughout the world upon hearing the news. Surely the Jews throughout the world of the day did mourn for Jerusalem's fall and the destruction of the Temple. Yet, the other translation is contextually preferable.

The Clouds of Heaven

The final phrase in Matthew 24:30c is: "They will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory." We dealt with this phrase in our January issue. I will just briefly rehearse the proper understanding of this phraseology.

We must recall what Christ says to His accusers at His ecclesiastical trial before His crucifixion: "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 the Power, and coming on the clouds of heaven'" (Matt. 26:63-64). Here the Sandhedrin were told that they would see His coming. This was not a physical, visible coming, but a judgment coming upon Jerusalem. They "saw" it in the sense we "see" how a math problem works: with the eye of understanding rather than the physical eye (see Footnote 3 above).

The coming to be witnessed by the Sandhedrin (Matt. 26:64) and Israel at large (Matt. 24:30) is like Jehovah's coming against Egypt in the Old Testament: "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! I agree with Dallas Seminary's *Bible Knowledge Commentary* that this passage speaks of "the impending Assyrian advance" under "God's judgment."⁷ Likewise, neither was the "coming of the Son of Man" that the Sandhedrin would see a physical coming.

Conclusion

The preterist interpretation of Matthew 24:30 is soundly biblical. Because Israel rejected her Messiah (Matt. 23:37; John 1:11; Acts 26:7), she will be given the smoky sign of judgment from the One who is in heaven. Her mourning shall be great.⁸

6. Christian Maurer, "phule," Gerhard Kittle and Gerhard Friedreich, eds, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, trans. by Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 9:246.

7. John A. Martin, "Isaiah," John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck, *Bible Knowledge Commentary* (Wheaton: Victor, 1983), Old Testament, p. 1065.

8. For a study of Dan. 9:24-7, send \$3.00 to me at 46 Main St., Conestee, SC 29636. For a study of 2 Thess. 2, send \$3.00. These are related to our present study.

4. Louis A. Barbieri, "Matthew," Walvoord and Zuck, *Bible Knowledge Commentary New Testament*, p. 78. J. Dwight Pentecost holds this strange conception of the New Jerusalem, see: Pentecost, *Things to Come* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1958), pp. 577-580.

5. Alfred Edersheim, *Sketches of Jewish Social Life* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972 [1878]), p. 14.