

Cutting Up Matthew 24

The celebrated Olivet Prophecy, which has been rightly called “the anchor of prophecy,” has been the subject of more controversy than perhaps any other passage in the teaching of Jesus. Journals and commentaries witness to a widely divergent range of opinions. The disagreement centers around one main issue — the all-important time element contained in Jesus’ discourse.

The problem presented to the exegete is that Jesus begins by addressing the issue of the destruction of Herod’s temple, but as his story unfolds, he actually describes a period of unprecedented tribulation, *in connection with the temple*, to be followed *immediately* by cosmic signs announcing his Parousia.

The crux, therefore, for the expositor is how to explain Jesus’ apparent reference to two separate episodes — one towards the end of the first century, and the other still lying in the future close to the Second Coming. On the assumption that Jesus foretells the invasion of the temple by the Romans in AD 70 and the destruction of Jerusalem at that time, exegetes must show how the transparently simple time connectors in the discourse can be reconciled with the patent fact that Jesus did not come back “immediately after” the “great tribulation” of AD 70.

Meyer, in his analysis of the problem, senses that expositors have played fast and loose with Jesus’ connecting time markers, under the pressure of having to demonstrate how it is that Jesus spoke of the events of AD 70 and in the same breath described his yet future arrival in glory to establish the Kingdom.

Meyer isolates the problem with the observation that:

It is exegetically certain that . . . Jesus . . . [spoke] of the destruction of Jerusalem . . . as an event that was to take place *immediately* before His second coming. . . . The attempts to twist this word [“immediately”] from its proper meaning . . . are inconsistent with the laws of purely objective exegesis . . . A whole host of strange and fanciful interpretations have been given . . . in consequence of

its having been assumed that Jesus could not possibly have intended to say that His second advent was to follow immediately upon the destruction of Jerusalem. This assumption, however, is contrary to all exegetical rule.¹

In Matthew 24:15ff. Jesus gave a specific program of the end. “When you see the Abomination of desolation spoken of through Daniel the prophet . . . let those who are in Judea flee . . .” There follow a number of remarks about the extreme distress to be experienced by pregnant women and women with infants in the ensuing trouble in Jerusalem. In verses 21 and 22 Jesus says, “For then there will be a great tribulation such as has never occurred nor ever will, and if those days had not been shortened no flesh would be saved alive.” Another set of warnings about conditions during the time of tribulation follow.

Then in verses 29 and 30, Jesus states: “Immediately after the tribulation of those days, the sun will be darkened. . . . And they will see the Son of Man coming in power and great glory.”

A bewildering variety of exegetical ploys have been tried in an effort to distinguish what part of the discourse applied to AD 70 and what part to the future Parousia. But the words of Jesus do not allow for any such division. The events of Matthew 24:15ff, beginning with the key feature which is the appearance of the Abomination, are tightly bound together with adverbs and conjunctions of time as well as links pointing to “those days.” This makes it impossible to think that Jesus envisaged a gap of centuries between the “great tribulation” and the end of the age.

So what is the exegete to do in view of Godet’s insight that “Matthew combines in the answer of Jesus the two subjects indicated in the question as Matthew has expressed it, and he unites them in so intimate a way that all attempts to separate them in the text from Chrysostom to Ebrard and Meyer have broken down.”²

The only solution consonant with the clear chronological connections given by Jesus leads us to two possibilities. The first is that the whole discourse came to fulfillment in the events of the first century with the fall of Jerusalem. This “ultra-preterism” is completely at variance with a realistic view of eschatology which expects the resurrection of the dead and the arrival of Jesus to be public events. The other option, the one

¹ H.A.W. Meyer, *Commentary on the New Testament: Matthew*, Winona Lake, IN: Alpha Publications, 1979, 430, 434, 420.

² Cited in Biederwolf, *The Millennium Bible*, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1964, 326.

generally adopted by the tradition of this journal, is to expect a rebuilt temple and a future Abomination of Desolation. “Immediately after” that (Matt. 24:29, cp. 15, 21) Jesus will reappear amidst cosmic signs heralding “the end of the age,” which had been the subject of the disciples’ inquiry (Matt. 24:3).

— Anthony F. Buzzard