

## AN INTERPRETATION OF MATTHEW 24—25

Part XXIV

by Thomas Ice

*“But immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from the sky, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken.”*  
—Matthew 24:29

I have noted that this passage contains four descriptive phrases. First, the darkening of the sun; second, the moon not reflecting its light; third, stars falling from the sky; fourth, a shaking of heaven powers. Previously we dealt with the darkening of the sun and saw that both Jesus and Isaiah (Isa. 13:10) intended their readers to understand that these were physical events, not symbolism denoting a non-physical event.

### HEBREW POETRY

All too often opponents of literal interpretation will equate a biblical use of poetic structure with non-literal interpretation. This is an improper belief.

I recall that during my college days, I took a class in the Minor Prophets. When we got to the book of Jonah my liberal professor said because the style of chapter two was poetic it meant that the events depicted there should not be taken literally. Jonah 2 records the episode of Jonah and the great fish. Such nonsense is clearly wrong when compared with Scripture itself. There are many historical events, both past and future, that are recorded in the Bible using some kind of Hebrew poetic form. Many historical events are contained in the Psalms. Yet, every Psalm is written using Hebrew poetry. Even within American history some of our greatest literature uses poetic expression to communicate historical events. One need only think of literature such as *The Midnight Rides of Paul Revere*, or *Captain, My Captain*. The Hebrew poetic genre can often be more expressive or colorful than prose narrative, but this does not mean that it cannot be historical. Did not the Song of Deborah (Ex. 19) mention historical events that had just taken place in the Exodus, even though it is in a poetic form? Just because Isaiah 13 and many prophetic passages on the Day of the Lord are put found to be within a poetic form, does not mean that they do not speak of literal historical events.

### NO MOONLIGHT

Christ says in His discourse, that in conjunction with the sun not shining, “the moon will not give its light.” This makes good physical sense that if the sun has been darkened, that the moon will not shine, since the moon does not generate its own light, as does the sun, but it simply reflects the light of the sun. Since the sun has been darkened, then this would mean in a physical cause and effect that the moon would also be darkened. This fact argues for a literal intent by Jesus in Matthew 24:29. Robert Govett is on the mark when he says, “no proof is needed on the part of those who take them literally: reason must first be shown why we are to take them symbolically, before we need give any proof of the contrary.”<sup>1</sup> Another suggests that the description should be taken literally because, “Elsewhere in chapter 24 the dramatic events—wars, famines, earthquakes—are intended literally.”<sup>2</sup>

The basic approach and arguments that were used to demonstrate that Christ’s previous reference to the sun is of a physical nature are also applied to His use of moon in this context. Since sun and moon are linked together, as are all four of these descriptive phrases, if the sun is literal then so must be the moon. Leon Morris tells us:

There is to be no source of light here on earth in that day. It accords with what will happen to sun, moon, and stars that *the powers of the heavens will be shaken*. . . . Whatever functions they may be exercising at the time will be affected by the great fact that the Son of man is coming back to this earth to bring an end to the current system and to inaugurate the reign of God over all the earth.<sup>3</sup>

### STAR POWER

The third of four descriptions that will take place “immediately after the tribulation of those days” will be “the stars will fall from the sky.” These events are all in preparation for the second coming that is described in verse 30. A heavenly blackout that will provide a perfect background for the brilliant arrival of Jesus Christ back to planet earth to set up His thousand year rule.

Preterists, such as Gary DeMar, do not think that this passage describes the backdrop for Christ’s bodily return to Jerusalem. “When the tribulation of ‘those days’ is completed, the end of the temple and city is near,” claims DeMar. “As the time for Jerusalem’s judgment draws ever closer, certain other signs would appear. These later signs are descriptive of the fall of the nations and kingdoms.”<sup>4</sup> Concerning the stars in this passage, DeMar believes that they “represent people and nations. The people of Israel were represented as stars (Gen. 22:17; 26:4; Deut. 1:10).”<sup>5</sup> Once again, does Christ intend a literal or figurative event. Even if it a figure of speech, which I do not think it is, it would not necessarily follow that DeMar’s understanding would be correct. Theoretically, stars could be used figuratively and still relate to the second advent. Why should this descriptive phrase also be taken literally, as have the sun and moon?

### STARS FALLING TO THE EARTH

The text says, “the stars will fall from the sky.” It does not say in this passage that stars will fall to the earth. Yet, that is how DeMar attempts to finesse the passage by trying to connect it with Revelation 6:13, which says, “and the stars of the sky fell to the earth.” “How can *stars* fall to the Earth and the Earth survive,”<sup>6</sup> asks DeMar?

First, *aster*, the Greek word for star, can refer to physical stars in the sky (Mat. 2:2, 7, 9–10) or it can be used figuratively as a symbol, referring to people and angels (Jude 13, Rev. 8:10–11; 9:1). Second, stars literally do fall from heaven upon the earth. They are called “falling stars,” “shooting stars,” “comets,” or “meteors.” The Greek word for star can be used in this way.<sup>7</sup> “The word ‘star’ (Greek *aster*) refers to any luminous body in the sky other than sun and moon.”<sup>8</sup> Stars that fall to the earth often disintegrate and burn up as they enter the earth’s atmosphere. Robert Gundry has said, “The falling of the stars refers to a shower of meteorites.”<sup>9</sup>

A number of commentators see the falling stars as meteorites. Greek scholar, Kenneth Wuest translates Revelation 6:13 as follows: “the *meteors* of the heaven fell to the earth.”<sup>10</sup> Grant Osborne says, “The background is a huge meteor shower.”<sup>11</sup> In reference to the meaning of star, Robert Thomas says, “Its meaning is broad enough to include smaller objects that hurtle through space from time to time. . . . a very large meteor shower that invades the terrestrial atmosphere.”<sup>12</sup> Kendell Easley declares, “we speak of ‘falling stars’ or ‘shooting star’ emanating from a meteor shower.”<sup>13</sup> “The most likely identification of these particular falling stars is that of a great swarm of asteroids that pummel the earth,” says Henry Morris.<sup>14</sup>

Further, the description of the falling stars to the earth in Revelation 6:13 is not a

complete emptying of the heavens of all of their stellar components. It is a partial event as supported by the part of verse 13 that says, “as a fig tree casts its unripe figs when shaken by a great wind.” Robert Govett explains as follows:

Not all of them are cast down; as the comparison appears to prove. For their fall is like that of the untimely figs of a fig-tree, much shaken by a gale. The fruit intended is the winter-fig, that comes out too late in the summer to ripen, and loses its hold of the tree during the inclement skies of the end of the year; so as to be easily shaken off by any wind, which agitates to any considerable extent the branches of the tree.<sup>15</sup>

Falling stars are what cause the people of the earth to hide in caves in Revelation 6:12-17.

The six seal judgment, which is being described this passage, is not a parallel passage to Matthew 24:29, even though there are some similar phrases in both passages. The context is totally different. The six seal judgment describes a partial judgment, which does not include the second coming. Matthew 24:29 describes a complete blackout of the sun, moon, and stars, followed by the second coming. Even though DeMar tries to equate these passages,<sup>16</sup> there are too many differences to justify such an understanding. Revelation 6:13 is the only passage which teaches that stars will fall upon the earth. The other passages referencing literal stars, which includes Matthew 24:29 and Mark 13:24, simply say that the stars will fall from the sky, not to the earth. Thus, it is in this way that the sixth seal judgment will be fulfilled literally.

### REVELATION 12

DeMar also indicates that Revelation 12:4 is a passage that we believe refers to literal stars. It says of the great red dragon (Satan), “And his tail swept away a third of the stars of heaven.” “Again, ‘a third of the meteorites of heaven’ would have a devastating effect on our planet. Earth would cease to exist,” DeMar declares. “Scientists have speculated that a single meteorite threw up enough debris upon impact with Earth that it ‘ended the reign of the dinosaurs.’”<sup>17</sup>

It is not surprising that DeMar uses an evolutionary hypothesis to defend his naturalistic interpretation. Nevertheless, we literalists do not believe that physical stars are in view in verse 4. I have already noted above that the word star can be used to refer to the physical stars in the sky or as a symbol referring to a personality. DeMar hides from his readers what is said a few verses later: “And the great dragon was thrown down, the serpent of old who is called the devil and Satan, who deceives the whole world; he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him” (Rev. 12:9). Revelation 12:4 uses “stars” as a symbol for angels (as in Job 38:7), in this case fallen angels, because verse 9 repeats what is said in verse 4 using the non-symbolic term “angels.” Robert Thomas notes:

The stars must refer to angels who fell with Satan in history past. The similarity of this verse to Dan. 8:10, where “the host of heaven” is an apparent reference to angels, shows this. Already in Revelation a star has pictured an angel (9:1). That factor along with the reference to Satan’s angels in 12:8–9 adds credence to this explanation.<sup>18</sup>

Apparently DeMar must obfuscate and misrepresent the views of others in order to

make his own appear to have some merit. Maranatha!

**(To Be Continued . . .)**

#### ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Govett, *The Prophecy on Olivet* (Miami Springs, FL: Conley & Schoettle Publishing Co., [1881] 1985), p. 64.

<sup>2</sup> W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, Jr., *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on The Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, 3 vols. (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1997), vol. 3, p. 358, f.n. 200.

<sup>3</sup> Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), pp. 609–10.

<sup>4</sup> Gary DeMar, *Last Days Madness: Obsession of the Modern Church* (Powder Springs, GA: American Vision, 1999), p. 142.

<sup>5</sup> DeMar, *Last Days Madness*, p. 143.

<sup>6</sup> DeMar, *Last Days Madness*, p. 142.

<sup>7</sup> Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford England: Oxford Press, 1968), s.v. "aster", p. 261.

<sup>8</sup> Henry Me. Morris, *The Revelation Record* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983), p. 122.

<sup>9</sup> Robert H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Handbook for a Mixed Church under Persecution*, second edition, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), p. 487.

<sup>10</sup> Kenneth S. Wuest, *The New Testament: An Expanded Translation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961), p.597.

<sup>11</sup> Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), p. 292.

<sup>12</sup> Robert L. Thomas, *Revelation 1–7: An Exegetical Commentary* (Chicago: Moody, 1992), p.454.

<sup>13</sup> Kendell H. Easley, *Revelation* (Nashville: Holman Reference, 1998), p. 111.

<sup>14</sup> Morris, *Revelation Record*, p. 122.

<sup>15</sup> Robert Govett, *Govett on Revelation*, 2 vols. (Hayesville, NC: Schoettle Publishing, [1861] 1981), vol. I, p. 216.

<sup>16</sup> DeMar, *Last Days Madness*, pp. 142-43.

<sup>17</sup> DeMar, *Last Days Madness*, p. 143.

<sup>18</sup> Robert Thomas, *Revelation 8–22: An Exegetical Commentary* (Chicago: Moody, 1995), p. 124.