

AN INTERPRETATION OF MATTHEW 24—25

Part XXVII
by Thomas Ice

“and then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky with power and great glory.”
—Matthew 24:30

In the previous installment I was providing reasons why the context argues in favor of the futurist interpretation that the sign is visible to the human eye in heaven, which is the sky. The following is the final reason for taking this view.

Fifth, I believe that “the sign” will likely be some form of the Shechinah Glory that has been manifested throughout history. After all, it was the sign of Christ’s first coming—the Shechinah Glory—that flashed upon a darkened sky announcing His birth to the shepherds. It was the Shechinah Glory star that led the Wise Men from the East. So it is that His sign, the sign of the Son of Man will once again be His trademark, the Shechinah Glory Cloud.

A SIGNLESS SIGN?

Preterist Kenneth Gentry argues that “they will see. . .” Christ’s “. . . coming on the clouds” is once again not visible sight (the eyes of faith) nor a physical coming.¹ He goes so far as to evidence “exegetical vertigo” when he says that Christ’s “coming on the clouds” “actually speaks of his ascension.”² At this point, preterists confuse coming with going. Gentry further explains that

the sign” of verse 30 is “when the Romans lay waste the temple (vv. 6 and 15 anticipate this) and pick apart Jerusalem (v. 28). That is, when the government of Israel utterly collapses (v. 29), then it will be evident that the one who prophesies her destruction is “in heaven.” The “sign” is not a visible token in the sky. Rather, the sign is that the “Son of Man” rejected by the first century Jews is in heaven. The destruction of Israel vindicates Christ.³

It is hard to believe that Gentry could put forth this view with a straight face, since, unlike many preterists, he understands Acts 1:11 as a second coming passage.⁴

And after He had said these things, He was lifted up while they were looking on, and a cloud received Him out of their sight. And as they were gazing intently into the sky while He was departing, behold, two men in white clothing stood beside them; and they also said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into the sky? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in just the same way as you have watched Him go into heaven.” (Acts 1:9–11)

The language in Acts 1 is clear that Christ is ascending upward to heaven in verse 9. It is equally clear that verse 11 speaks of His return as a coming down from heaven on a cloud. Further, the Greek word for “coming” in both Matthew 24:30 and Acts 1:11 is *erchomai*. Thus, once Christ has ascended into heaven, His next act of coming could not be up, but only down—down from heaven to earth. This is clearly the picture our Lord

pains, not only in the specific passage (verse 30), but throughout the overall context (verses 27–31). Dallas Seminary professor, Stanley Toussaint adds the following:

It will be conceded by all that the first part of Matthew 24:30 looks back to Zechariah 12:10. However, it is important to notice that in Zechariah the mourning of 12:10 is explained by the verses that follow. It is a repentant lamentation by Israel because it results in the purification of the nation (Zech. 13:1). The context of Zechariah 12:10 is most significant. Rather than prophesying the destruction of Jerusalem, it is predicting the opposite. “And it will come about in that day that I will set about to destroy all the nations that come against Jerusalem” (Zech. 12:9). This is the tenor of Zechariah 12:1–8. It looks ahead to God's future deliverance of Israel when Jerusalem will again be surrounded by enemies. “In that day” is prophetic of a time of deliverance of Israel, not judgment. (Note the constant repetition of “in that day” [12:3, 4, 6, 8 (2x), 9, 11; 13:1, 2, 4]). It is clear that the context of Zechariah is a mourning that results in cleansing and deliverance for Israel. Whatever the sign of the Son of Man is, it results in the national repentance of Israel. This parallels perfectly what Paul says in Romans 11:25–27. This explanation of Matthew 24:30a sets the stage for the understanding of the last half of the verse.

It is true that in the vision of Daniel 7:13 as it is translated in the NASB the Son of Man came up to the Ancient of Days to receive the dominion to rule. However, the Hebrew verb has no idea of direction; it simply means to arrive or to reach. This specific verb is only used in Daniel where it may refer to something reaching up as Nebuchadnezzar's greatness did in 4:22, or it may describe something going down as in 6:24 where the detractors of Daniel were thrown into the lion's den. It has no intrinsic sense of direction. Nor does the following preposition indicate direction in itself. The construction simply means the Son of Man approached the Ancient of Days. But even if it describes the Son of Man coming up to the Ancient of Days, it only looks at the bestowment of authority. The question is where is the authority expressed? Keil says it well when he writes:

In this very chapter before use there is no expression or any intimation whatever that the judgment is held in heaven. No place is named. It is only said that judgment was held over the power of the fourth beast, which came to a head in the horn speaking blasphemies, and that the beast was slain and his body burned. If he who appears as the son of man with the clouds of heaven comes before the Ancient of days executing the judgment on the earth, it is manifest that he could only come from heaven to earth. If the reverse is to be understood, then it ought to have been so expressed, since the coming with clouds of heaven in opposition to the rising up of the beast out of the sea very distinctly indicates a coming down from heaven. The clouds are the veil or the “chariot” on which God comes from heaven to execute judgment against His enemies; cf. Ps. xvii;10f., xcvi 2–4, civ. 3, Isa. xix 1, Nah. i. 3. This passage forms the foundation for the declaration of Christ regarding His future coming, which is described after Dan. vii. 13 as a coming of the Son of man with,

in, on the clouds of heaven; Matt. xxiv. 20, xxvi. 64; Mark xiii. 26; Rev. 1.7, xiv. 14.⁵

In summary, Matthew 24:30 describes a visible appearance of the sign of the Son of Man, the repentance of Israel and the triumphant return of Christ to reign on planet earth.⁶

The above information show us why the next time Jesus comes, it will not be some “signless sign” that did not actually exist in the form of the Roman army, but instead the visible, bodily, physical return of Christ that mirrors His ascension. Matthew 24 is not concerned with the destruction of Jerusalem, but with the coming of the Lord. No one in A.D. 70 recorded a second coming of Christ, not even Josephus. The New Testament predicts the destruction of Jerusalem, which was fulfilled in a.d. 70, not a second coming.

ALL THE TRIBES OF THE EARTH WILL MOURN

We have seen up to this point that God is preparing the cosmic stage to showcase the most spectacular event in all human history—the glorious return of Jesus Christ to planet earth to reign for a thousand years. First, this will occur after the events of the tribulation (24:29). Second, it will interrupt the campaign of Armageddon. Third, God will darken the sky by causing the sun, moon and stars to cease shining. Fourth, in the midst of this blackened background, the sign of the Son of Man will burst forth in brilliant light and glory. Finally, then, and only then, will the stage be set for Jesus to return to planet earth—to the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem. It is within this scenario of events that Jesus says, “then all the tribes of the earth will mourn.”

The next part of verse 30 says, “then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky with power and great glory.” Why will they mourn, because they will see the undeniable sign of the returning Christ. Dr. Gentry says, that this merely refers to the Jewish tribes of Israel in A.D. 70.⁷ NO! This is a universal term used of global unbelievers. Every time this plural phrase is used in the parallel Book of Revelation it clearly refers to Gentiles. For example in Revelation 13:7 it speaks of “every tribe and people and tongue and nation.” Every use in the Old Testament of “all the tribes of the earth” has a universal meaning in the Septuagint. The Old Testament uses the term “all the tribes of Israel” (about 25 times) when it wants to refer to the Jewish tribes.

Most importantly, the verse goes on to say, “they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky with power and great glory.” It says, “they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky.” The text says, “they will see the Son of Man.” This has to be a reference to the visible, bodily, physical return of Jesus Christ to planet earth! This did not happen in A.D. 70? Josephus does not record it. This cannot refer to a symbolic, naturalistic interpretation that somehow Jesus returned in conjunction with the Roman army in the first century. Jesus said, “they will see the Son of Man.”

CHRIST’S RETURN STILL FUTURE

If Jesus returned in A.D. 70, as preterists say, then, on what day did He return? Since this is a past event, we should be able to know the exact day our Lord supposedly returned and fulfilled this passage. I have never read in any preterist material, any of

them who can tell me the day and exact manner or event that supposedly was Christ's return in A.D. 70. In fact, this was such a non-event in terms of church history, that it was not until the seventeenth century that we have an extant record of anyone suggesting anything like a preterist view that refers Matthew 24:27 and 30 to A.D. 70.

Had Christ returned as described in that passage, surely Josephus would have observed it. But even the verbose Josephus does not record such an event, because it did not occur. When the second coming of Christ—as described prophetically in Matthew 24:27–31—occurs, we will all be able to note the day and the hour. The description of Christ's return in this passage is of a nature that it will be such a public event that will be observed by multitudes of people. The exact day and hour of this event will not be lost in human history. Maranatha!

(To Be Continued . . .)

ENDNOTES

¹ Gentry in Thomas Ice and Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr., *The Great Tribulation: Past or Future?* Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1999), p. 58.

² Gentry, *Great Tribulation*, pp. 57–59.

³ Gentry, *Great Tribulation*, p. 58.

⁴ Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr., *He Shall Have Dominion: A Postmillennial Eschatology* (Tyler, Texas: Institute for Christian Economics, 1992), p. 275.

⁵ C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament*, 10 vols, *Commentary on the Book of Daniel*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), pp. 235–36.

⁶ Stanley D. Toussaint, "A Critique Of The Preterist View Of The Olivet Discourse," an unpublished paper presented to the Pre-Trib Study Group, Dallas, Texas, 1996, n.p.

⁷ Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr., *Perilous Times: A Study in Eschatological Evil* (Texarkana, AR: Covenant Media Press, 1999), p. 83.