

## “A Perplexing Interlude: Investigating Matthew 24:29-35”

(MK 3.29.26)

### Matthew 24:29-35

**“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 heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken. <sup>30</sup>Then will appear in heaven the sign of the Son of Man, and 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. <sup>31</sup>And he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.**

**<sup>32</sup>“From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts out its leaves, you know that summer is near. <sup>33</sup>So also, when you see all these things, you know that he is near, at the very gates. <sup>34</sup>Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place. <sup>35</sup>Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.**

On Sunday, March 29, we covered the first part of the Olivet Discourse (Matt 24:1-44) in the morning sermon at City Reformed Church. In this passage, Jesus answers a question from the disciples. In response to comments Jesus made about the coming destruction of the temple, they ask, *“Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?”* We should notice that there are two issues that they have brought together. The first is the destruction of the temple. The second is the “end of the age.” It seems that the disciples drew a strong connection between the destruction of the temple and the end of the world. When this prophecy was first given, around 33 AD, both of those events were future. However, Jesus answered their question by showing the significant difference between those two things. The destruction of the temple was coming in the near future, and it is an event which would happen in 70 AD, within the lifetime of some people who listened to Jesus. But the destruction of the temple would not be linked to the end of the age. Nearly 2,000 years have expired since Jesus uttered this prophecy, but still the end of the age has not yet arrived. Pressing further, Jesus drew out a significant difference between these two events. The destruction of Jerusalem was an event which would be preceded by signs. Listeners could therefore anticipate this and take action. The parable about the lessons from the fig tree speaks to this dynamic. Listeners should have looked for signs of this coming destruction and taken the action of fleeing Jerusalem. Most pointedly, when there is an abomination in the temple, people in Judea should flee the land (v.24:15). By contrast, the end of the age is not something that will be anticipated, nor will it be preceded by signs. “But concerning that day and hour no one knows (v.24:36). Even Jesus, in his humanity, did not know the hour of the end of the world. As a result, the listeners are instructed to remain constantly ready. “Therefore, stay awake, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming (v.24:42).

In summary, the destruction of Jerusalem was a future event of catastrophic significance from the perspective of the disciples. However, this prophecy was already fulfilled in 70 AD, therefore it is no longer “future” for us. Furthermore, this event was preceded by definite signs. By contrast, the end of the age has not yet happened and remains “future” for us, and it will not be associated with particular signs. Therefore, Christians are called for constant vigilance. Much of the material in chapter 24 aligns clearly with either of those two goals. Either it describes the impending doom of Jerusalem and the warning to flee when this doom draws near (24:4-28), or it describes an unknown future event in which constant readiness is demanded

(24:36-51). However, there is one section, in the middle of this chapter, which does not fit neatly into either of those two scenarios. The verses listed at the beginning of this paper constitute what I am calling “a perplexing interlude.” They are perplexing because it is hard to assign them definitely to either the destruction of Jerusalem or the end of the age.

### **Why This Is Perplexing**

This interlude is perplexing because it has some features which would most easily be associated with end of the age, while its placement in the prophetic sequence would seem to associate it with the destruction of Jerusalem. On one hand, this interlude describes an event in which the Son of Man will be seen “coming on the clouds of heaven.” This would initially seem to refer to the return of Christ at the end of the age, an event well documented in the New Testament and affirmed by all Christian faith traditions. Furthermore, this section describes phenomena in the natural world which would seem to fit with the end of the age. Darkness of the sun and moon (v.34:29a), stars falling from heaven (v.34:29b), and the gathering of the elect at the sound of a trumpet (v.24:31) give the impression of cataclysmic events at the end of history.

On the other hand, the placement of this unit associates it more closely with the destruction of Jerusalem. The prior section (v.24:15-28) describes events leading up to the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of Jerusalem. This happened at the conclusion of a revolt against the Roman Empire (66-70 AD). A long siege preceded the fall of Jerusalem. Presumably, the events of this prior section describe the arrival of a besieging, but assume it is not yet so complete that the people in Judea and Jerusalem cannot flee. This interlude is introduced with words that indicate a time sequence: “Immediately after the tribulation of those days...(v.34:29). Furthermore, the end of this section all has a time marker. “This generation will not pass away until all these things take place.” Most naturally, the word “immediately” would not imply a time separation of at least 2,000 years, and the passing away of a generation would imply that the events described would occur within the lifetime of some people in the original audience. So, either this interlude is not meant to describe the end of the age, or we have to assign a different definition to the words “immediately” and “this generation.” Finally, the rhetorical break in the passage occurs in verse 36. Jesus says, “But concerning that day and hour no one knows.” Most naturally, we would assume that the events described up until that break (on the front side of “but”) are all associated with the first answer to the question - the destruction of Jerusalem. In this case, they are all prophecies which operate under the logic of the “fig tree” (v.24:32). That is, look for the leaves, predict the event, and then take action. This perplexing interlude seems to occupy a place in the prophecy that relates to the fulfilled prophecy regarding Jerusalem and 70 AD. In that case, we would have to rethink whether the cataclysmic imagery of sun, moon, and stars failing actually applies to the end of the world.

We will proceed with a word of perspective. I recognize that this is a very tricky matter of biblical interpretation, and faithful scholars disagree on the best way to proceed. In fact, I find myself somewhat divided in my own mind. After presenting what I think to be the best approach, I will also briefly describe the most compelling approach that associates this interlude with the end of the age.

### **Understanding this Interlude as a Description of the Destruction of the Temple in 70 AD**

#### Cataclysmic Language

The imagery of this perplexing interlude is stirring and evocative. Darkness of the sun and moon, stars falling from the skies, angels actively gathering God’s people from the earth... all of this sounds very

dramatic and seems to be associated with a future event which could only be the end of the world. However, there is sound reason to temper this approach. After all, the phrases used in this section are not brand new concepts pulled by Jesus out of thin air. Instead, it is apparent that there is significant Old Testament precedent for this sort of language. In fact, when those phrases are used by former prophets, they apply to historic events which are understood to have already transpired. The poetic language of the prophets often used large-sized descriptions to highlight the theological significance of an event. For example:

***Isaiah 31:10*** *For the stars of the heavens and their constellations will not give their light; the sun will be dark at its rising, and the moon will not shed its light.* However, this occurs in the midst of “An Oracle Concerning Babylon” (Is 13:1) and would seem to describe the fall of the Babylonian Empire, an event which we can date to 539 BC.

***Isaiah 34:4*** *All the host of heaven shall rot away, and the skies roll up like a scroll. All their host shall fall, as leaves fall from the vine, like leaves falling from the fig tree.* This context is described as judgment on the nations, and seems to initiate the return of exiles from Babylon (Is 35:10), which happened after the fall of Babylon.

***Amos 8:9*** *“And on that day,” declares the Lord God, “I will make the sun go down at noon and darken the earth in broad daylight.* This prophecy is directed at the Northern Kingdom of Israel. It seems to have been fulfilled in the destruction of the capital city, Samaria, in 722 BC. From that day, the Northern Kingdom of Israel ceased to exist as a distinct entity.

Furthermore, similar language in Ezekiel 32:7 relates to judgment on ancient Egypt, and in Joel 2:10 it is associated with a horde of locusts that swept across the land of the Southern Kingdom of Judah. This second reference is a little harder to nail down, but seems to describe an event of judgment that would have befallen an ancient audience. In summary, when these same phrases are used in the Old Testament by the prophets that preceded Jesus, they were not used to describe the end of the world, but the cataclysmic events associated with the destruction of a capital city and calamity that shifted the destiny of a nation. If these words are associated with the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple, it would certainly fit their common use to portray this disastrous event in strong prophetic language. Renowned scholar R.T. France wrote about Matthew 24:29-31:

*“This poetic language appropriately refers to the great changes which were to take place in the world, when Jerusalem and its temple were destroyed... the fall of the temple is thus presented in highly allusive language, as the end of an old order.” (R.T. France, New Bible Commentary)*

### The Coming of the Son of Man as the Vindication of Christ

The second feature of this passage which needs to be explained is the description of the Son of Man seen, “coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory” (v.24:30). Like before, the literal reading of these verses calls to mind the return of Christ at the end of history. This causes the reader to associate this entire passage with the return of Christ at the end of the age. However, the historic background of this phrase does not necessarily imply the coming of Christ at the end of history. To begin with, the phrase, “Son of Man” is one of the favorite ways in which Jesus would describe himself. Drawn from Daniel 7:13, it showed his unique identity, but did not carry the messianic baggage associated with other Old Testament prophecies about the long expected Christ. The full text of this prophecy is helpful to read.

**Daniel 7:13-14** *“I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed.”*

Notice that the phrase, “one like a son of man” is ambiguous enough that it could be used by Jesus and not automatically create a disturbance. Furthermore, this prophecy shows that the Son of Man would “come” with the clouds of heaven “to the Ancient of Days” and receive authority. Thus, the key feature of the Son of Man coming on the clouds, is not that he is *coming to earth*, rather he is *coming to the Father to receive authority*. Read on its own, this would most naturally be associated with theological concepts known as the “Session of Christ.” That is, after his resurrection and ascension, Jesus was seated at the right hand of God the Father and given the name that is above every name. This truth is attested throughout the NT and in the ancient creeds. Understood this way, the event being described in Matthew 24:30 is not the visible return of Christ to earth, but the recognition that he has been given authority and power. When the prophecy of Jesus was fulfilled in the destruction of the temple, some people of the generation he spoke this prophetic word to were still alive. The fulfillment of this prophecy would have been a testimony to these ancient people that Jesus had indeed come to the Ancient of Days (poetically described as “having come on the clouds”) and he had received power and great glory.

This interpretation fits with other ways Jesus spoke of the “coming of the Son of Man.” If we associate this phrase with the vindication of Christ’s resurrection authority, then it could be associated with any number of events in history. Later in Matthew 24, it would be associated with his return in judgment at the end of the age (v.37, 42, 44). However, other places in which Jesus uses these words don’t seem to describe the end of the age. For example:

**Matthew 10:23** *When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next, for truly, I say to you, you will not have gone through all the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes.* This verse is part of instruction that Jesus gave to the twelve apostles when he sent them on a mission to the “lost tribes of Israel” (v.10:6). This mission would be superseded by the great commission after the resurrection of Jesus, which would send them to “all nations” and not just Israel. Therefore, the coming of the Son of Man in this context seems to be associated with his death, resurrection, ascension, and *session*, as he is seated in power and authority.

**Matthew 16:28** *Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.*” Again, Jesus is talking to his disciples. This time, their understanding has advanced and Peter has properly identified him as the Christ. The context is Jesus talking about his death and resurrection. Clearly, Jesus believes that he will be seen “coming in his kingdom” by some of the disciples during their lifetime. This seems to be the same idea as described above.

**Matthew 26:63-65** *And the high priest said to him, “I adjure you by the living God, tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God.” Jesus said to him, “You have said so. But I tell you, from now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven.” Then the high priest tore his robes and said, “He has uttered blasphemy.”* This reference is probably the most similar to Matthew 24. It occurs late in the Gospel, at his trial before the Jewish council. Notice that Jesus believed that his opponents

would one day “see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power, and coming on the clouds of heaven.” That is, one day, his unique authority - given after the resurrection - would be revealed in a way that the Jewish leaders would see. We have no record of any of the council seeing Jesus after the resurrection as the disciples did. However, if we understand the destruction of Jerusalem as a fulfillment of prophecy and the end of the old religious order, then it could be said that the very leaders who conspired against Jesus here, would one day be confronted by a testimony to his authority.

### Conclusion

In summary, it is not necessary for the coming of Jesus on the clouds to be a visible event which we associate with the end of history. Rather, it could be used for any event which displays a public vindication of his unique identity and divine authority. Therefore, it could be used to describe:

- His resurrection appearances to the disciples. (Matt 10:23 & 16:28)
- The vindication of his authority at the destruction of Jerusalem. (Matt 24:30 & 26:64)
- His return at the end of the age. (Matt 24:37, 42, 44)

Understood this way, the perplexing interlude of Matthew 24:29-31 should be associated with the disciples’ first question and the destruction of the temple. In this sense, the coming of the Son of Man to his position of power and authority would be revealed to the world, including his opponents among the Jewish religious leaders. Furthermore, the trumpet that sounds (v.24:31a) is not the signal for the end of the world, but the expansion of the Gospel to the nations. The angels that “gather his elect from the four winds” (24:31b) are working in conjunction with human agents to make disciples of all nations as they fulfill the great commission (28:18-20) and the Church brings in people from every people group. While this admittedly takes some of these images in ways that push us beyond our first assumptions about the passage, this interpretation is in line with common usage of the various terms across the Scriptures.

Furthermore, this allows us to assume the most obvious interpretation of the words “immediately” (v.24:29) and “this generation” (v.24:34). Indeed, the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple did occur immediately after the signs recorded in Matthew 24:4-28, which describe the coming siege of the city and warn Christians to flee to the mountains. All of this did happen within 40 years of the prophecy, assuring that while some may have died (including nearly every disciple with the exception of John), the “generation” to which he spoke had not passed away. This allows the strong contrast language of verse 36 - “But concerning that day” - to assume its natural role of delineating a new topic in which Jesus then goes about to distinguish the end of the age from the warnings about the destruction of the temple. That means that everything before this contrast in verse 36 is describing events which would culminate in 70 AD. They are the part of the prophecy which is associated with the lesson of the fig tree (v.24:32) in which the hearers should look for signs as warnings of this coming destruction. By contrast, everything after verse 36 applies to the end of the age. This will also be a public vindication of the authority of Jesus and is therefore naturally described as the “coming of the Son of Man.” However, unlike the destruction of the temple, there are no signs to precede this event. Instead, the final coming of the Son of Man will be like a thief in the night (v.24:43). The hearers are admonished not to look for signs, but rather to “stay awake” (v.24:42) and “be ready” (v.24:44).

### **Minority Report: Understanding This Interlude as the End of the Age**

In calling this the minority report, I don’t mean that few people hold this position. Because the cataclysmic language carries weight, and because the phrase “coming of the Son of Man” are later used to

describe the end of the age, many scholars hold this view.<sup>1</sup> As I mentioned previously, I think that there are good arguments for this position, so it is only a minority in the sense that I am less convinced by the weightiness of these arguments. No doubt some of my readers will find this case to be more persuasive.

In order to allow this interlude to be associated with the end of the age, the word “immediately” has to be understood as referring to the theological order of time and not the way humans would have experienced these events. In other words, one might argue that the next event after the destruction of the temple would be the return of Christ. Some scholars quote Peter’s idea that for God a thousand years are like a day. Furthermore, the “generation” Jesus addresses is not the lifespan of his audience, but rather the whole Jewish people. However, it seems to me that both of these attempts dodge the plain meaning of those words. Nor do they account for the fact that the lesson of the fig tree (v.24:32) seems to apply to everything that came before it. Advocates of this position would say that the series of events which will one day culminate in the return of Christ were all initiated by the visible sign of the destruction of Jerusalem even if it was not completed until the end of the age. Ultimately, I did not find these arguments persuasive, but the reader may disagree with me.

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<sup>1</sup> Hendrikson, *Baker NTC* and Wilkens, *ESV Study Bible*, join historic interpreters John Calvin and Matthew Henry in holding this view. Though Matthew Henry outlines the position which I advocate before deciding against it. Essentially, he presents my view as the “minority report.” R.T. France, and Michael Green are examples of contemporary scholars who hold the position that I outline above. .