

Exegetical Brief: Is Matthew 24:29-31 Interpreted Figuratively or Literally?

Paul E. Zell

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“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 heavenly powers will be shaken. The sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and all the tribes of the earth will mourn and will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky with power and great glory. With a mighty trumpet blast he will send forth his angels, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of the sky to the other.”
(Matthew 24:29-31)

A masterful communicator, Jesus used figures of speech. Those who study the Gospels are accustomed to his metaphors, similes, and parables and appreciate how they bring the truth to life. Yet might some readers impose figurative meaning where the Lord had no such intention? That appears to have occurred with a passage recorded midway through the 24th chapter of St. Matthew. Over the centuries a handful of exegetes have taken Mt 24:29-31 in a figurative sense, but with Bible commentaries of recent vintage this interpretation is on the rise.¹ It is time to give the passage a closer look.

Going back to chapter 21 St. Matthew has been recalling the events of Holy Tuesday. It was a contentious day, to say the least, what with the scribes and Pharisees challenging Jesus’ authority again and again. He deflected their every attack. When they could no longer say a thing in reply or ask him any more questions, Jesus pronounced seven woes against these hypocrites, and he lamented Jerusalem’s refusal to repent.

As the Lord was walking away from the temple complex, his disciples drew his attention to the impressive structures. We hear this exchange:

He answered them, “You see all these, don’t you? Truly I say to you, in this place there will not remain one stone upon another, (not one stone) which will not be thrown down.” When Jesus was sitting on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately and said, “Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the consummation of the age (τὸ σημεῖον τῆς σῆς παρουσίας καὶ συντελείας τοῦ αἰῶνος)?” (Mt 24:2-3)

The disciples’ two questions would prompt a distinctly two part answer. At least, that is what several recent interpreters maintain. As they see it, Jesus’ statements in Mt 24:4-35 focus exclusively on the warnings and signs preceding his second coming, while what he says afterward (starting at v 36) spotlights the second coming itself. To put that another way, verses 4-35 comprise Jesus’ answer to the disciples’ second question (“What will be the sign ...?”). Then in Mt 24:36 – 25:46 he answers their first question (“When will these things be?”).

This approach to Jesus’ words is appealing if for no other reason than that it appears to be straightforward. It makes outlining these two chapters of St. Matthew a much simpler task, yet it stumbles badly at vv

¹ For three notable examples, see:

R.T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007. pp 919-929.

John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005. pp 981-987.

Jeffrey A. Gibbs, *Jerusalem and Parousia*. St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 2000. pp 187-204.

29-31. Since this entire section describes events prior to Jesus' second coming, they deduce, then at vv 29-31 Jesus must still be speaking about the destruction of the temple. And if that is the case, then there is no other way to take these three verses except as figurative language predicting that terrible act in history that would vindicate his authority as the Son of Man. Consider the following details, they write:

v 29 εὐθέως, “immediately”: The events of this passage must follow directly upon the abomination bringing desolation to the Jerusalem temple (v 15).

“The sun will be darkened, etc”: In the writings of David and the prophets such vivid descriptions of disturbances in nature and the cosmos were always to be understood figuratively. See Ps 18:7-15; Jer 4:23-28; Ezek 32:7-8; Amos 8:9; Joel 2:10,30-31; 3:15; and especially Is 13:6-13. Likewise here. With dramatic pronouncements about the sun, moon, stars, and heavenly powers, Jesus portrays God's judgment upon his enemies.

v 30 The “Son of Man in heaven,” as some translate, will give the sign (τὸ σημεῖον) that he is now exalted to the right hand of the Father. How will he do this? By bringing about the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple. When they see his powerful judgment over against apostate Israel, “all the tribes of the land” will mourn.

v 31 Having punished hardened Jerusalem—Her children were unwilling to be gathered!—the Son of Man will send forth his messengers to the Gentiles. They will preach the Gospel to all nations and gather his elect from heaven and earth's remotest reaches.

The difficulties in this approach to Matthew 24 begin with an untenable division of subject matter. Granted, at v 3 the disciples asked a two-fold question, but they had one objective in mind: They wanted to know when the temple would be destroyed. Like so many Israelites they figured that could happen only when the Messiah appeared with power and great glory to bring about the consummation of this age. The one could not happen without the other, they reasoned. Jesus, in turn, answered with one objective in mind, but not so much having to do with the temple as with the unknowable timing of the consummation of the age. “About that day and hour,” he would say, “no one knows... So keep watch!” (vv 36,42). The temple and its priestly system were to become obsolete. Our great High Priest would soon offer the once-for-all sacrifice and laid down his own life. “At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom” (Mt 27:51, NIV). The Holy Place had served its purpose. Instead the Lord would take up his temple in the hearts of believers and prepare them for the day of his return in glory. “So you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him” (Mt 24:44).

As to the actual σημεῖον of his arrival, Jesus said, “see that no one deceives you” (Mt 24:4). False Christs and false prophets would appear, but they would not be the sign. There would be wars, famines, and earthquakes. Persecutions and hatred would come. “The love of many will grow cold,” he said. Yet these too would not be the sign of his appearance. Jesus foretold “the abomination bringing desolation, that which was spoken by the prophet Daniel, standing in the Holy Place” (24:15). Indeed, that would be a time of unsurpassed distress for the Christians residing in Judea, and it would foreshadow the trials endured by all who enter the kingdom of God. Still those would not be the sign that the Messiah has come for the completion of all things. That portion of the disciples' two-fold question received a direct answer at vv 29-31, as follows:

v 29 The events of this passage follow directly upon those Jesus described from vv 4-25. Nevertheless we recognize that Jesus did not say how long the temple would be left desolate. According to St. Luke he foretold that “Jerusalem will be trampled on by the Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled” (Lk 21:24). Meanwhile the voices of false Christs and false prophets will be heard, and there will be wars, famines, earthquakes and persecutions for an unspecified period of time. Then “immediately”

(εὐθέως) after the distress of those days the Creator will suspend the laws of nature, and his created order will dissolve.

As noted above, what Jesus said on Holy Tuesday is very similar to expressions used by David and the prophets. Yet their figurative expressions for those terrible times in history when mighty God would visit destruction upon the impenitent also point to what Jesus is saying will happen quite literally at his return. By his vivid prediction of the Day of the Lord the ungodly are warned of the eternal implications of their impenitence. At the same time the penitent find great comfort in words that fulfill Dan 7:13-14 and that Jesus would repeat at Mt 25:31.

Jesus' statements as recorded by St. Luke are most convincing. They give the reader of vv 29-31 no choice but to understand this passage literally:

“There will be signs in the sun, moon and stars. On the earth, nations will be in anguish and perplexity at the roaring and tossing of the sea. Men will faint from terror, apprehensive of what is coming on the world, for the heavenly bodies will be shaken... When these things begin to take place, stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near” (Lk 21:25-26,28, NIV).

v 30 The prepositional phrase ἐν οὐρανῷ (“in the sky”) is to be translated adverbially, as prepositional phrases almost always are. Modifying the verb φανήσεται, Jesus is telling his disciples where “the sign of his coming” will appear. The genitive τοῦ υἱοῦ τοῦ ἀνθρώπου is exegetical (or appositional) to τὸ σημεῖον, indicating that the sign his disciples will see is the Son of Man himself. The second half of this verse makes this abundantly clear. What the two angels uttered to his disciples after his ascension confirms it (Acts 1:11), as do St. John's words at Rev 1:7.

You won't miss it, Jesus is saying. The Son of Man himself will appear in the sky. What a sight that will be! It will bring immense delight to the faithful, while “all the tribes of the earth will mourn” at the arrival of the One they rejected.

v 31 The noun ἄγγελος is used about twenty times in St. Matthew. All but one is a reference to those holy angels whom God created to serve him and his elect. Here the noun is once again taken according to its usual sense. With a mighty trumpet blast at the resurrection of all the dead (1 Cor 15:52; 1 Th 4:16), his angels will be sent forth to gather the elect from “all nations” (Mt 28:18).

Since Jesus used it so frequently, figurative language abounds in the Gospel according to St. Matthew. Yet certainly not at Mt 24:29-31. Here his words are to be taken literally, much to the joy and edification of those who are watching for his coming on the clouds of the sky with power and great glory.