

1308 Kingdom of God: Extra Notes – Coming with the Clouds of Heaven

Introduction

This is a well known apocalyptic image that is generally associated with the second coming of Jesus. That this theme appears in the New Testament is indisputable e.g. “And when he had said these things, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. 10 And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes, 11 and said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.”” (Acts 1:9- 11); For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. 17 Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord. (1 Thess 4:16 -17).

The meaning of other references, in the Gospels and Revelation, is however disputed. The below interacts mainly with the eschatological discourse in Matthew 24, already covered in the first part of this unit, and with Revelation 1:7.

Matthew 24 and the Olivet Discourse - Part III

<http://www.enjoyinggodministries.com/article/matthew-24-and-the-olivet-discourse-part-iii>

I argued in parts one and two of our study in Mt. 24 that the Olivet Discourse is concerned primarily with the prophesied destruction of Jerusalem and its temple, both of which occurred in 70 a.d.

The issue that must next be addressed is the problem posed by vv. 29-31. Here it appears that Jesus says his second coming will occur "immediately after" the tribulation just described in vv. 15-28. Mark renders it, "But in those days, after that tribulation" (13:24). The problem is this: if vv. 15-28 refer to the events of 70 a.d., why didn't Jesus return at that time? Several possible answers have been suggested:

6) Finally, a somewhat more moderate version of the *preterist* view, is that vv. 29-31 are not a literal description of the second coming but a symbolic description of the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple. It was a “coming” of Jesus in judgment. Unlike those who embrace 4) above, these preterists believe in a yet future “coming” of Christ to consummate the redemptive purpose of God. See the commentary on Matthew by R. T. France, as well as the writings of N. T. Wright, Peter Walker, David Chilton, Kenneth Gentry, and Gary DeMar. This is the view that I will now seek to explain and defend.

The “70 a.d.” Interpretation of Matthew 24:29-31

R. T. France represents a growing number of scholars (N. T. Wright, Peter Walker, Kenneth Gentry, among others) who insist that vv. 29-31 do not refer at all to the second coming of Christ at the end of age but rather to the fall of Jerusalem in 70 a.d. He and others make the following interpretive points:

1. Mt. 24:15-25 (Mark 13:14-23), as already shown, describe the events connected with the siege of Jerusalem but without describing the actual fall of the city. “This leads one to expect a further section which will complete the prophecy by stating that the city will actually be destroyed, and mentioning the significance and effects of this destruction. When one begins to read [Mark 13] verse 24 – ‘But in those days, after that tribulation, . . .’ – the impression is virtually irresistible that one is about to be introduced to the catastrophe to which [Mark 13] verses 14-22 have been leading up. The Matthean addition of ‘immediately’ only strengthens this impression, and lays a heavy burden of proof on those who suggest that [Mark 13] verses 24-27 refer to anything other than the fall of Jerusalem” (*Jesus and the Old Testament*, 232).

2. When one reads Mt. 24:29-30, and in particular v. 29, he/she may at first glance have difficulty seeing in it a reference to the destruction of Jerusalem. This is due, in part, to the fact that Matthew's language is compressed. It is also because his language sounds like what most people believe will occur at the second coming. Phenomenal events involving sun, moon, stars, and the powers of heaven don't sound to the 21st century mind like a description of what happened in 70 a.d. The reason for that is because we mistakenly seek to interpret and understand prophecy by reading the New York Times or Newsweek or watching the evening news rather than by reading the Bible. Remember:

Jesus was speaking to a people saturated by Old Testament language, concepts, and imagery. From the earliest days of their lives they memorized and were taught the OT. Thus, when Jesus spoke to them of things to come he used the prophetic vocabulary of the OT which they would instantly recognize.

Consequently, if we are to understand the meaning of Mt. 24:29-31 and its parallel in Luke 21:25-26 we must read and interpret them through a *biblical* (i.e., OT) lens.

Luke refers to "signs" in sun, moon, and stars. Matthew says "the sun will be darkened, the moon lose its light, and the stars will fall from the sky." Are these literal, physical, astronomical events that one might see with the naked eye? I don't think so.

In the OT, **such language was used to portray *not what is going on in the heavens but what is happening on the earth***. Natural disasters, political upheaval, turmoil among the nations, etc., are often described figuratively through the terminology of cosmic disturbances. The ongoing and unsettled, turbulent state of affairs among earthly world powers is portrayed symbolically by reference to incredible events in the heavens. In

other words, astronomical phenomena are used to describe the upheaval of earthly dynasties as well as great moral and spiritual changes. As one author has put it: "In prophetic language, great commotions upon earth are often represented under the notion of commotions and changes in the heavens" (Clarke). As we shall see, when the sun and moon are darkened or the stars fall from heaven, the reference is to the disasters and distresses befalling nations on the earth.

Some examples of how *cosmic events* are used as symbolic portrayals of earthly realities (whether blessing or cursing) include Isa. 60:20; Amos 8:2-9; Zeph. 1:4,15; Isa. 5:30; Jer. 4:23,28; 13:16; Joel 2:10.

In Isaiah 13:9-10 we read of the impending judgment of God on Babylon, which he describes in this way:

"The stars of heaven and their constellations will not flash forth their light; the sun will be dark when it rises, and the moon will not shed its light."

Former Dallas Seminary professor John Martin acknowledges that the language is figurative:

"The statements in 13:10 about the heavenly bodies (stars . . . sun . . . moon) no longer functioning may figuratively describe the total turnaround of the political structure of the Near East. The same would be true of *the heavens* trembling and *the earth* shaking (v. 13), figures of speech suggesting all-encompassing destruction" ("Isaiah," *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, 1059).

Concerning the destruction of Egypt, Ezekiel wrote,

"I will cover the heaven, and make the stars thereof dark; I will cover the sun with a cloud, and the moon shall not give her light. All the bright lights of heaven will I make dark over thee, and set darkness upon the land . . . I shall make the land of Egypt desolate" (Ezek. 32:7-15).

The destruction of Idumea (Edom) is described in this way:

"And all the host of heaven will wear away, and the sky will be rolled up like a scroll; all their hosts will also wither away as a leaf withers from the vine, or as one withers from the fig tree. For My sword is satiated in heaven, behold it shall descend for judgment upon Edom, and upon the people whom I have devoted to destruction" (Isa. 34:4-5).

William Kimball summarizes:

"When Israel was judged, or when Babylon was subdued by the Medes, or when Idumea and Egypt were destroyed, it was not the literal sun, moon, and stars that were darkened. The literal stars of heaven did not fall from the skies, and the

literal constellations were not dissolved or rolled up as a scroll. These figurative expressions were clearly presented in a purely symbolic manner to characterize the destruction befalling nations and earthly powers” (166).

In summary, “it is crass literalism,” notes Wright, “in view of the many prophetic passages in which this language denotes socio-political and military catastrophe, to insist that this time the words must refer to the physical collapse of the space-time world. This is simply the way regular Jewish imagery is able to refer to major socio-political events and bring out their full significance” (*Victory*, 361). Again, “the dramatic and (to us) bizarre language of much ‘apocalyptic’ writing is evidence, not of paranoia or a dualistic worldview, as is sometimes anachronistically suggested, but of a creative reuse of Israel’s scriptural, and particularly prophetic, heritage” (*Victory*, 513). In summary, Mt. 24:29 is stock-in-trade OT prophetic language for *national disaster*. “Jesus is not predicting that strange astronomical events will occur; he is predicting the judgment of God on the Jewish nation” (234).

3. France points out that nowhere does Jesus use the term *parousia* in this passage (as he does in vv. 27, 37). The Greek word translated “coming” is *erchomenon*, which could mean either “coming” or “going”. Be it noted, however, that even if *parousia* were used, it need not point to the second coming. One cannot simply assume that the later, technical Pauline, use of that term is in view here. Says Wright:

“But why should we think – except for reasons of ecclesiastical and scholarly tradition – that *parousia* means ‘the second coming’, and/or the downward travel on a cloud of Jesus . . .’ *Parousia* means ‘presence’ as opposed to *apousia*, ‘absence’; hence it denotes the ‘arrival’ of someone not at the moment present; and it is especially used in relation to the visit ‘of a royal or official personage’” (*Victory*, 341).

For the ordinary sense of “arrival,” Wright points to 1 Cor. 16:17; 2 Cor. 7:6,7; 10:10; Phil. 1:26; 2:12. From this, he concludes, “the most natural meaning for the word as applied to Jesus would be something like ‘arrival on the scene’, in the sense of ‘enthronement’” (*Victory*, 341, n. 95).

Here the "coming" of the Son of Man in v. 30 is an allusion to Daniel 7:13-14 which speaks ***not of a "coming to earth" from heaven but of a "coming to God" in heaven to receive vindication and authority***. This "coming" refers to an event "whereby the authority of Jesus is vindicated over the Jewish establishment which has rejected him" (344).

See esp. Mt. 26:64. “Here the Lord informs the high priest and the other members of the Jewish Sanhedrin that *they* will ‘see’ His coming. Obviously, they are not still alive today! Jesus must be referring to an event in their first-century life spans” (Gentry, 53). Wright explains:

“Jesus is not . . . suggesting that Caiaphas will witness the end of the space-time order. Nor will he look out of the window one day and observe a human figure flying downwards on a cloud. It is absurd to imagine either Jesus, or Mark, or anyone in between, supposing the words to mean that. Caiaphas will witness the strange events that follow Jesus’ crucifixion: the rise of a group of disciples claiming that he has been raised from the dead, and the events which accelerate towards the final clash with Rome, in which . . . Jesus will be vindicated as a true prophet. In and through it all, Caiaphas will witness events which show that Jesus was not, after all, mistaken in his claim, hitherto implicit, now at last explicit: he is the Messiah, the anointed one, the true representative of the people of Israel, the one in and through whom the covenant God is acting to set up his kingdom” (*Victory*, 525).

Again, France writes:

“Jesus is using Daniel 7:13 as a prediction of that authority which he exercised when in AD 70 the Jewish nation and its leaders, who had condemned him, were overthrown, and Jesus was vindicated as the recipient of all power from the Ancient of Days. . . . Jesus, exalted after his death and resurrection to receive his everlasting dominion, will display it within the generation . . . by an act of judgment on the nation and capital of the authorities who presumed to judge him. Then they will see . . . for themselves that their time of power is finished, and it is to him that God has given all power in heaven and earth” (*JOT*, 236).

Here, notes G. B. Caird, “as in the book of Daniel . . ., the coming of the Son of Man on the clouds of heaven was never conceived as a primitive form of space travel, but as a symbol for a mighty reversal of fortunes within history and at the national level” (*Jesus and the Jewish Nation*, 20-22). Wright summarizes:

“The days of Jerusalem’s destruction would be looked upon as days of cosmic catastrophe. The known world would go into convulsions: power struggles and *coups d’etat* would be the order of the day; the *pax Romana* [peace of Rome], the presupposition of ‘civilized’ life throughout the then Mediterranean world, would collapse into chaos. In the midst of that chaos Jerusalem would fall. The ‘son of man’ would thereby be vindicated. That would be the sign that the followers of this ‘son of man’ would now spread throughout the world: his ‘angels’, that is, messengers, would summon people from north, south, east and west to come and sit down with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of YHWH” (*Victory*, 362-63).

4. I believe that a mistranslation of v. 30 has contributed to a misunderstanding of what Jesus said. Literally, v. 30 reads as follows:

"And then will appear the sign of the Son of Man in heaven, and then will mourn all the tribes of the land and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory."

In other words, Jesus was not telling his disciples that *He* would appear in the sky. Rather, "He told them that they would see a *sign* that proved He was in heaven, sitting at His Father's right hand (Acts 2:30-36). Those who would witness Jerusalem's destruction would see the sign of Jesus' enthronement when they saw Jerusalem's destruction" (Demar, 159). In other words, ***the "sign" of the Son of Man being enthroned and vindicated in "heaven" is the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple "on earth"***. It is the *sign* that appears, not the Son of Man. What does the sign signify? It signifies that the Son of Man is in heaven, exalted, vindicated, and enthroned at God's right hand.

5. This "coming" of Christ to God the Father (in heaven) by which he is vindicated and his authority established, will be greeted by the "mourning" predicted in Zech. 12:10-14. France explains:

"*All the tribes of the earth* is better translated 'all the tribes (families) of the land', for in Zechariah 12:10-14 the mourning is explicitly restricted to the families of Israel. What is in view here, then, is not so much a world-wide lamentation, but the response of Israel when they see the vindication of 'him whom they pierced'" (345).

Two important interpretive points need to be made:

- The word translated "tribes" (*phule*) has Israel in view. France points out "that the reference in Zechariah 12:10-14 is explicitly to a mourning of the tribes of *Israel*, the tribes of David, Nathan, Levi and Shimei being specified, and a final 'all the families that are left' extending the scope to the whole *nation*" (237).
- The Greek noun translated "earth" (*ge*) can refer generally to the tangible ground, the earth, or more specifically to a particular land area. Often in the NT *ge* refers particularly to the "land" of Israel, i.e., Palestine (see Mt. 2:6,20; 27:45; Mark 15:33; Luke 4:25; 21:23; John 3:22; Acts 7:3).

This "coming" is not a visible, physical appearance by which Jesus returns to earth (although that will most assuredly occur at the end of history). Rather, they will "see" him in the sense that they will "understand", i.e., spiritually *perceive* that he is the vindicated and enthroned King. For "seeing" = "understanding", see John 12:40 (Isa. 6:10); Acts 26:18; cf. 1 Kings 8:29,52; 2 Kings 2:16; 6:20; 19:16; Isa. 35:5; 42:7,16; see also Luke 24:31; also note Mark 1:44; Luke 17:22; John 3:3,36; Rom. 15:21. "This actually refers to Jesus' ascension [not his second advent]. In the destruction of the

temple, the rejected Christ is vindicated as the ascended Lord and shown to possess great power and glory” (Gentry, 61).

6. The word "angels" (v. 31) literally means "messengers" and refers to *human preaching of the gospel* throughout the world. In the Greek version of the OT (the Septuagint), the Greek word *angelos* is often translated as "messenger" (cf. 2 Chron. 26:15,16; Haggai 1:13; Mal. 2:7; see also Mt. 11:10; Mark 1:2; Luke 7:24,27; 9:52; James 2:25). Gentry contends that "even if we apply this to angels . . . it would then refer 'to the supernatural power which lies behind such preaching.' Then it would teach that the angels of God attend our faithful proclamation of God's Word" (63).

8. The "gathering together" (v. 31) of God's elect is not a reference to the end-time harvest but "to the world-wide growth of the church" (France, 345) that is on-going throughout this present age. It includes both the gathering of the saints into local assemblies or churches (Heb. 10:25; James 2:2) and the universal assembling of the saints into the body of Christ, the universal church (see Mt. 22:7-13). Gentry explains:

“Through Christ-commissioned gospel preaching by faithful messengers, God gathers the elect into His kingdom from the four corners of the world (Matt. 28:19; Luke 24:47; Acts 1:8; 13:47; 17:30). The phrase ‘from one end of the sky to the other’ does not indicate that the place of the action is in the sky (or heaven) above. The phraseology often signifies nothing more than ‘horizon to horizon’ (Deut. 30:4; Neh. 1:9; compare Matt. 8:11; Luke 13:28-29). Thus, it speaks about evangelistic activity spreading throughout the earth. In fact, it parallels ‘from the four winds,’ that is, the four points of the compass. This, of course, Jesus promises in His ministry, despite the failure of His own people: ‘And I say to you that many will come from east and west, and sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. But the sons of the kingdom will be cast out into outer darkness (Matt. 8:11-12; Luke 13:29 speaks about all four points of the compass)’ (64).

Likewise, Wright points to Deut. 30:2-5, which speaks of God's regathering his children “from all the people among whom YHWH your God has scattered you. Even if your exile is *from the extremity of the heaven unto the extremity of the heaven*, from there YHWH your God will gather you . . .” Wright contends that the language of this text, echoed in the Olivet Discourse, “suggests strongly that the . . . passage refers, not to a ‘supernatural’ or ‘heavenly’ event, but to this-worldly [evangelistic] activity” (*Victory*, 363).

Thus, according to this view, Jesus does not address the issue of his second coming at the end of history until v. 36. Therefore, “all these things” (v. 34) which must take place

before “this generation” (v. 34) passes away refers to everything described in vv. 4-31, i.e., events leading up to and including the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 a.d.

The Coming of Jesus in Revelation

“Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him. Even so. Amen.” (Rev 1:7).

G.K. Beale (*Revelation* 1999:196 -199) argues:

This verse is composed of two OT citations. The first is from Dan 7.13, which in its context refers to the enthronement of the Son of man over all the nations (cf. Dan. 7:14) after God’s judgment of evil empires (Dan. 7:9-12). The application of this text to Jesus shows that he is its fulfillment and emphasizes his eschatological kingship, a theme already introduced in v 5. The second citation is from Zech. 12:10ff., which in Zechariah pertains to the end-time period when God will defeat the enemy nations around Israel and the Israelites will be redeemed after repenting of their sinful rejection of God and his messenger (i.e., “the one they have pierced”).

The use of Daniel 7 and Zechariah 12 in Matt. 24:30 may have influenced John to use the same combination here (Matt. 24:30 may also refer to repentance in the light of 24:31). John discerned that both passages concerned the common theme of God’s end-time defeat of Israel enemies and, therefore, these were attractive texts to supplement those OT allusions he had already used to refer to the inaugurated end-time kingdom. That the mourning of Zech. 12:10 is “as for a firstborn son” may also have been a factor, since the same word is used to describe the king in Psalm 89 and Jesus in Rev. 1:5. The Zechariah text has been altered in two significant ways: the phrases “every eye” and “of the earth” have been added to universalize its original meaning. The rejection of God’s messenger and the consequent repentant mourning are not limited to Israelites but affirmed of all nations. Those who mourn are not those who literally crucified Jesus but all those who are guilty of rejecting him. This is probably not a reference to every person without exception but to all among the nations who believe as indicated clearly 5:9 and 7:9 (cf. the plural of “tribe”[as a universal reference to unbelievers in 11:9; 13:7; 14:6). “earth, land” cannot be a limited reference to the land of Israel but has a universal denotation, since the latter is the meaning that “all the tribes of the earth,” the phrase here, has in the OT. The repeated occurrences of “all the tribes of Israel” in the OT (about 25 times) also highlights the different wording of 1:7b, which thus implies an extension of the OT concept of “Israel,” what applied to that nation in Zechariah 12 is now transferred to all the peoples of the earth, who assume the role of repentant Israel. The addition of “of the earth” to “all the . . . tribes” from Zech 12:14 was likely motivated by “all the tribes t earth”) in Zech. 14:17 and perhaps “all . . . tribes” in Dan. 7:14 (Theod.), where universal designations are intended (even if “earth” in Zech. 12:12 stands partially behind the wording of 1:7b). This continues the same sort of application seen with the use of Exod. 19:6 in Rev 1:6.

Some believe that the Zechariah quotation is utilized contrary to its original intention to denote the grief of the nations over their impending judgment. John typically adheres to and consistently develops the contextual ideas of OT references, and proposed exceptions to this rule must bear the burden of proof. Indeed, the nations in 1:7b do not mourn over themselves but Jesus, which better fits an understanding of repentance than judgement. And the extended application of the mourning from the nation of Israel to the believing nations is not an inconsistent development, since the nations are now understood as the true Israel (note also the emphasis on the salvation of the nations in Rev 21:24-22:3)

Therefore, repentant Gentiles are viewed as fulfilling the Zechariah prophecy at the second coming of Christ. However, the Daniel 7 reference may include the whole course of the church age, during which Christ guides the events of history in judgment and blessing, since the Son of man allusion Rev. 1:13 has present application (although cf. 14:14), as do the OT references in 1:5-6 and 1:14-20 (see below); the same citation from Dan. 7:13 in Mark 13:26 and 14:62 refers not to the final coming of Christ, but to the Son of man's coming in judgment of Jerusalem in A.D. and the identical combination of Dan. 7:13 with Zech. 12:10 in Matt. 24:30 is susceptible of the same meaning, although the final parousia could be in mind. Of course, there are also clear Synoptic references to the Son of man coming to conclude history (e.g., Matt. 19:28; 25:31). These references in the Synoptics could have prepared John's readers for another application of the Son of man prophecy to a time preceding, as well as including, his final coming at the climax of history.

Furthermore, Christ's "coming" in the letters in chs. 2 and 3 appears to be his conditional visitation in judgment of the churches, though an allusion to the second coming could be included (cf. 2:5, 16; 3:11; see likewise 16:15) "I come quickly" is used both of Jesus' conditional comings (2:16; 3:11; cf. 2:5) and of the certainty of Jesus' final coming (so apparently 22:7, 12, 20). This points to a close conceptual link between the comings in the letters and in the conclusion to the book. Therefore, Christ's "coming" in 1:7 and elsewhere in the Apocalypse is understood better as a process occurring throughout history; the so-called "second coming" is actually a final coming concluding the whole process of comings. In Dan. 7:13 the "coming" of the Son of man indicates primarily his reception of authority to exercise end-time kingship over the world. This is understood in Rev. 1:7 and in the other "comings" in Revelation to have the beginning of its fulfillment at Christ's resurrection and to continue fulfillment until the Son of man's last coming at the end of history.

Consequently his "comings" in blessing and judgment throughout the course of time are but manifestations of his exercise of this latter-day authority. The Zechariah quotation perhaps connotes the climax of the historical process expressed in the Daniel 7 allusion. But John 19:37 quotes Zech. 12:10 in reference to the Gentile soldier near the cross who "pierced" Jesus and then apparently repented (cf. John 19:34-37; Mark 15:39).⁷⁵ A strikingly similar application of Zech. 12:10 is found in Rev. 1:7. Consequently, the Zechariah 12 quotation could also include application to a period preceding the final parousia when Gentiles believe in the Messiah. If so, "see" would have to be taken more figuratively and perceived as future only from John's standpoint. Some commentators have rightly suggested that 1:7 serves as the key note of the book, but this keynote must

be understood in the light of John's already – and – not- yet view of the combined OT quotation.

Conclusion and Application

The conclusion must be that “the return of Jesus” imagery used in the New Testament is much more dynamic and immediate than generally recognised. This is especially true in opposition to futurist readings of eschatology.

Given that the complex of metaphors that include “the clouds of heaven”, enthronement, power, “coming”, angels, gospel etc. has a present as well as future reference we should expect the presence of these realities as an ongoing feature of the life of the church. This would create a spiritual atmosphere that maintains a heightened expectancy of Jesus return. *Theories* about the soon return of Jesus must have a negative impact on the actual life of the church, as they partake of the realm of fantasy and myth.

These findings confirm our foundational understanding that eschatology is realised Christology. We participate in the enthroned, glorious, powerful, angel commanding, nation discipling etc. Lord NOW.