

SECRET RAPTURE: AN EXEGETICAL STUDY OF MATTHEW 24:20

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Abstract

There seem to be a misunderstanding or misrepresentation of Matthew 24:20 on the manner of the second coming of Christ which has not only obscured the true meaning of this subject, but given a false understanding of the event the apostle Paul, while writing to Titus, referred to as "the blessed hope"(Titus 2:13). The paper sought to inquire on the concept of secret rapture, discover its right interpretation of the text. Historical exegetical Method of inquiry was used in this study. It was discovered that the secret rapture idea is foreign to the text when looked at in context,proved that the idea of the secrete rapture and its concomitant "left behind" theory is rather eisegesis.

Key Words: Secret Rapture, Second Coming.

Introduction

The subject of the Second Coming of Jesus to take His waiting people from the earth at the close of earth's history is what the text is dealing with. Even a casual reader of the Scriptures would quickly realize that the Scriptures are replete with texts that allude to the second coming of Jesus Christ. The Old as well as the New Testament made scores of references to the event. It has been estimated that one in every twenty-five verses in the New Testament mentions the Second coming of Jesus Christ.¹ It is referred to in every book of the New Testament except that of Philemon.(Matt 19:28; 23:39 ; 24:3—25:46 ; Mark 13:24-37; Luke 12:35-48; 17:22-37 ; 18:8 ; 21:25-28 ; Acts 1:10-11; 15:16-18 ; Rom 11:25-27; 1 Cor 11:26; 2 Thess 1:7-10; 2:8 ; 2 Pet 3:3-4; Jude 1:14-15 ; Rev 1:7-8; 2:25-28 ; 16:15 ; 19:11-21 ; 22:20). Putting all these Scriptures together (not taking them out of their context before doing that) provides the believer a clear picture of the manner of Christ's return to the earth to take His people out of this sin polluted world as He promised in John 14:2, 3: "The two men will be in the field: one will be taken and the other will be left (Matthew 24:40)". This text has been used by some preachers to preach the secret rapture theory which postulates that Jesus' Second Advent would be secret and silent and there would be those who are Christians at the moment the rapture takes place that will be "left" behind because of the worldliness still in their lives and be given another chance if they can prove faithful in the face persecution². "According to the secret rapture model, Jesus unexpectedly comes and snatches away His church, while everyone else who is left wonders what happened to the ones taken away"³.

Because a misrepresentation of this Scripture has not only obscured the true meaning of this subject, but given a false understanding of the event the apostle Paul, while writing to Titus, referred to as "the blessed hope." So the objectives of this study was to present a good interpretation of the text to show that the secret rapture idea is foreign to the text. when looked at in context.

The significance of this study cannot be overemphasized since the Second Advent of Christ is not only the climax and consummation of time. But if wrongly understood can inhibit the preparation for this grand event of the ages. One of Jesus' strongest warnings in Scripture has to do with the manner of His coming and the deception surrounding it (Matthew 24:23-26).

The scope of the study is mainly Matthew 24. But because the background or backdrop against which the text can be understood is the story of the Noachian flood in Genesis, the study will make some vital allusions and comparisons to this event since it is found in context.

Literary unit

The immediate context of the text is Matthew 24:36-44. This can be seen from the verse preceding verse 36. In verse 35 Jesus was concluding the meaning of a parable (of the fig tree, verse 32-35) by saying that these words of His will be fulfilled even if heaven and earth would pass away. And verse 45 begins another unit of thought that has to do with the faithful and unfaithful servants.

The larger context of the text is obviously the entire chapter of Matthew 24 that discusses apocalyptic events that will culminate in the Second Advent. The previous chapter, 23, deals with Jesus' rebuke and denunciations of the Pharisees who were hypocrites. And the following chapter mainly contains the parables that describe the character of Christians that will be living in the time of the end. Our larger context deals mainly with the political, economic, religious, medical, natural and spiritual signs that will precede the second advent of Christ.

GENRE

The genre of the text is prophetic or apocalyptic. Jesus was telling his disciples what will happen when he comes. It is apocalyptic since it centers on last things (last day's events). In this sense the futurists are correct in their use of this text to an event.

Structure

A structure of the immediate context, Matthew 24:36-44 is as follows:

- A. The day and hour of the coming (36)
 - i. No man knows it.
 - ii. Not even the angels know it.
 - iii. Only the Father knows it.
- B. As the days of Noah were (37, 38)
 - i. In the days before the flood
 - a. They were eating
 - b. They were drinking
 - c. They were marrying and giving in marriage

- C. The unawareness of the coming of the flood and its apocalyptic implication (verses 39, 40)
 - i. They were unaware of the coming of the flood
 - ii. Two men will be in the field; one taken the other left
 - iii. Two women will be grinding at the mill; one will be taken, the other left
- D. Watching constantly (42)
 - i. because you do not know the day the Lord will come
- E. The parable/imagery of the house owner and of the thief
 - i. The house owner and the time of the arrival of the thief
 - ii. He would have watched if he knew the time the thief is coming
- F. You must be ready; because the son of Man will come when He is least expected.

Interpretation/ Theology

It is obvious from the structure that the immediate context is not discussing the manner of the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ but the timing. So the core idea of the text, as shall become more obvious, is the timing and not the manner of Christ's Second Advent. Elsewhere in the larger context (the entire chapter of Matthew 24) and in the other passages of Scripture the issue of the manner of Christ's coming is dealt with.

A comparison of Matthew 24 and Genesis 6 and 7

In Matthew 24:27 Jesus compared the days of Noah (the days before the flood and when the flood itself arrived) to His coming in the clouds of heaven. The table below shows some parallels that are obvious in both contexts:

Genesis 6 and 7	Matthew 24
Wickedness (iniquity) becoming rife (6:5, 11)	Wickedness (iniquity) becoming rife (24: 12).
Obsession with worldliness, materialism, pleasure, sex, etc. (6:2)	Obsession with worldliness, materialism, pleasure, sex, etc. (24:38)
A preaching to call people to righteousness. 2 Peter 2:5	A preaching to call people to righteousness (24:14)
Destruction took the wicked unawares	Destruction will take the wicked unawares (2:39a)

The obvious parallels leave the honest and careful exegete with nothing much to conjecture. Both contexts show that there the wickedness, worldliness, materialism, pleasure seeking ("lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God" as the Apostle Paul puts it in 2 Timothy 3:2), indifference and apathy towards spirituality (even in the church) calls for some faithful preaching of the unvarnished truth of the Word of God. Jesus is saying

in Matthew 24:39a that when the deluge came on the sinners in the days of Noah they least expected it. This is the meaning of the clause "and did not know until the flood came and took them all away" (NKJV). Now notice that Jesus immediately followed the above clause, which gives it the sense He was trying to make, with the following statement: "so also will the coming of the Son of Man be"(NKJV).

Based on the foregoing it is a serious mistake to conclude that the Greek word translated "left" means that when the "rapture" occurs those "left behind" would be left alive. The intertextual study shows that those taken away by the flood did not remain alive to have another chance to accept salvation. This would not only violate sound principles of interpretation but also misconstrue the words of Christ. Notice also that it is the unexpectedness that is here stressed and nothing else. This motif repeats itself in the immediate context.

The 'thief in the night' imagery explained

Evangelicals have popularized the error that the Jesus' use of the phrase "thief in the night" connotes that Christ's coming will be secret. This assumption is a major basis for believing that Christ will come secretly and silently to "steal" away the righteous to heaven⁴. But the context does not show that. Even the use of the phrase in other passages confirms that secrecy or silence is not what Christ meant. According to Matthew 24:43:

But know this that if the master of the house had known what *hour* the thief would come, he would have watched and not allowed his house to be broken into. (NKJV, emphasis mine).

Notice that what is obvious here is *not the manner* in which the thief would come *but the hour* or timing. And the verse says that the master of the house may not be watching when the thief breaks in. This connotes the unexpectedness of the coming of the thief *when* he arrives. The text did not say that when the thief arrives the house keeper would not know but that he would be taken unawares. The soundness of this interpretation is shown by the following words that Jesus uttered in the next verse: "Therefore you also be ready for the Son of Man is coming at an *hour* you do not expect" (Matthew 24:44, italics mine).

Other Scriptures that give the same sense to the "thief in the night" imagery are: 1 Thessalonians 5:1-8 and 2 Peter 3:10:

But concerning the times and the seasons, brethren, you have no need that I should write to you. ² For you yourselves know perfectly that *the day of the Lord so comes as a thief in the night*. ³ For when they say, "Peace and safety!" then *sudden destruction* comes upon them, *as labor pains* upon a pregnant woman. And they shall not escape. ⁴ But you, brethren, are not in darkness, so that this *Day* should overtake you as a thief. ⁵ You are all sons of light and sons of the day. We are not of the night nor of darkness. ⁶ Therefore *let us not sleep*, as others *do*, but let us *watch* and be *sober*, ⁷ For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those

who get drunk are drunk at night.⁸ But let us who are of the day be sober, putting on the breastplate of faith and love, and *as* a helmet the hope of salvation (NKJV, emphasis mine).

But the *day* of the Lord will come *as* a thief in the night, in which the heavens will pass away with a *great noise*, and the elements will melt with fervent heat; both the earth and the works that are in it will be burned up (NKJV, emphasis mine).

In I Thessalonians 5 the context shows that Paul was writing about the second coming of Christ. Using the very imagery that Christ used, he likened the event to that of a pregnant woman who is suddenly taken by the pains of labor. Labor pains catch up with pregnant women: unexpectedly, suddenly, and almost without warnings. Paul, again, is not discussing the manner of Christ coming (he had discussed that in chapter 4 of 1st Thessalonians when he said "the Lord Himself will descend from heaven *with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God*").

Here (1 Thessalonians 5) is talking about getting ready. This was why the expressions like "watch," "be sober," and "do not sleep" was used. Then he underscores the fact that the day of the Lord shall *not* take those who are children of light unawares (verse 4). For those who will be indifferent to the salvation of their souls and getting ready for the Second Advent Paul says they will be deceived by the deceptive peace message and be lulled into spiritual stupor. While they will be shouting "peace and safety," it is "sudden destruction" that will overtake them. Just as it happened to the antediluvians.

Again, in 2 Peter 3 Peter was discussing the Second Coming of Christ. Peter wrote about scoffers who would jeer at the idea of Christ coming the second time (verses 3, 4). Then something quite pertinent was said: that these scoffers are "willingly ignorant" (verse 5, KJV). Now this is important because this was what happened to the antediluvians who were well acquainted with the creation story that the earth stood "out of water and, in water" "by the word of God" (verse 5, NKJV). It is this willful forgetfulness that Jesus may have in mind when he said in Matthew 24:39 that they "did not know until the flood came" (NKJV). Because they chose to forget the revelation given them and ignored the warnings of Noah, they lived like modern scoffers now live— "walking according to their own lusts" (verse 3, NKJV). Then in verse 10 Peter describes the *day* of the Lord (i.e. the *time* (when) the lord will come). Notice what he says will happen when the Lord will come as a thief: "the heavens will pass away with a *great noise*, and the elements will melt with fervent heat; both the earth and the works that are in it will be burned up" (NKJV, emphasis mine). The question is, does the content of this text related to anything secret and silent?

A cursory history of the recent unbiblical origin of the secret rapture theory

It is pertinent, therefore, to know that this unbiblical secret rapture, second chance theory has its origin in the Counter-Reformation. The sixteenth century Reformation spear-headed by Martin Luther identified the Roman Catholic system as the antichrist of Bible prophecy (actually one of the two main pillars of the Reformation; the

other being salvation by grace alone). This teaching was one reason Catholicism dwindled during this time. In an attempt to reverse this effect of the Reformation Louis de Alcazar and Francisco Ribera, both Jesuits, came up with alternative interpretations of apocalyptic literature. They propounded the theories of preterism and futurism, respectively. Then Manuel de Lacunza Dias (1731—1801), a Chilean Jesuit of Spanish descent whose book *The Coming of Messiah in Glory and Majesty* was published posthumously in 1812 presented the doctrine. He wrote this book under the pseudonym of Rabbi Juan Josafat Ben-Ezra. The book was later translated into English by the powerful Scottish preacher, Edward Irving, in 1827 (then Irving was a most powerful preacher in London). The secret rapture notion was given more acceptability by the claimed visions of one fifteen-year-old Scottish girl from Glasgow called Margaret McDonald. This idea that the antichrist is a future evil individual who would pursue a sinister agenda for three and a half years after the secret rapture was later popularized by Cyrus Schofield's notes within his Bible in the 19th century⁵ and the "left behind" series of books and movies by Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins.

Institutes like Dallas Theological Seminary, Chicago Moody Bible Institute, and an estimated two hundred Bible Institutes in the United States alone teach the dispensationalist pretribulation secret rapture theory. Highly influential theologians, preachers and writers like John F. Walvoord (Dallas Theological Seminary president), Hal Lindsay (author of *The Late Great Planet Earth*), J. Dwight Pentecost, Salem Kirban, Dwight Wilson, and Thomas S. McCall have through their writings and movies influenced millions to accept this concept. In short, it has become a worldwide teaching⁶.

Conclusion

This work, though not exhaustive, has shown beyond any reasonable doubt that Matthew 24:40 is not teaching the secret rapture theory. There is a real need to follow correct exegetical principles in handling the Word of God today to avoid twisting Scriptures. Surely, the secret rapture idea finds no place in Jesus' statement in Matthew 24:40 nor is it found elsewhere in Scripture⁷.

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End Note

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