

End-Time Fads & Defeatist Fantasies: Studies In Eschatology

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For want of a sound hermeneutic (i.e. principles of interpretation), the ‘Tribulation’ and the ‘Beast’ headline the comic-book theologies of today’s church, spawning all manner of “End Time” fads and, sadly, defeatist fantasies—of the church subjugated by the ‘Beast’ in the ‘Tribulation’, demanding its rapture and, hence, its extraction from the field of battle. If it were not for the dire consequences of these for the kingdom of God and the mission of the church, they would provide us some humour. To correct them, therefore, cannot be discarded as mere contrariness or academic pedantry. Despite being legitimized by evangelicalism over the last one-hundred-and-fifty years, it does not guarantee their historic orthodoxy and usefulness to the church. This article will, therefore, seek to weigh them against a sound hermeneutic and scholars of repute from Calvin down to the twentieth century.

THE TRIBULATION

Differing views of the ‘Tribulation’ are usually conditioned by the eschatology and the hermeneutic of the interpreter. As Baker points out, “Adherents of the major millennial views place the great Tribulation at different points in relation to the millennium. Both Postmillennialists and Amillennialists regard it as a brief, indefinite period of time at the end of the millennium, usually identifying it with the revolt of Gog and Magog of Rev 20:8, 9.”^[1] Although, Boettner, a Postmillennialist, has presented a variation on this, showing that Satan’s final attack on the saints is not at the end of history through a final apostasy but rather is the pattern throughout the church age, albeit one that is always doomed to fail as the kingdom of God and the church increase in spiritual power and cultural dominance.^[2] From this perspective, the Tribulation has already occurred in the first century through the apostasy of the Jews and the destruction of Jerusalem.

Postmillennialism, in contrast to dispensational Premillennialism, sees the gradual and inexorable increase of the kingdom of God in the world, despite periods of spiritual decline. In obedience to the great commission, the church as the divine agency for the discipling of nations, is increasingly effective in bringing down every lofty thought and speculation raised up against the knowledge of God and establishing Christianity as the predominant world culture. To entertain the prospect of an ultimately defeated faith, only rescued by the Rapture, and handing the world over to the ravages of the Antichrist, in the Tribulation, is absolutely opposed to this view. The Amillennialist, though, has a less optimistic view of history, and views the millennium as a present spiritual reality that has already spanned two-thousand years. This period culminates in the Great Tribulation and the Second Advent, prior to the eternal state. As an aside, most modern Postmillennialists, along with Amillennialists, view the millennium not as a literal one-thousand years but as a lengthy period of time coextensive with the church age, interpreting one-thousand as symbolic of magnitude. To the Premillennialist the millennium is future and the Great Tribulation toward which history is moving, is a period of intense evil when sin is personified in the Antichrist and his tyrannical rule. Depending on the premillennial ‘brand’, the church might escape the Tribulation through the Rapture (pre-tribulationism) or go through the Tribulation (‘historic Premillennialism’ and post-tribulationism).^[3]

Interpretation of certain prophetic passages provide the basis for these differing views. These are the Olivet discourse, Daniel’s 70 weeks prophecy, and various passages of Revelation. For the purpose of this article, the postmillennial view will be considered in more detail.

In regard to the Olivet discourse (Matt 24), Kik contends that verse 34 “gives the key to the entire chapter.” He continues,

If we accept the ordinary sense of that verse the chapter becomes understandable. Verse 34 reads, ‘Verily I say unto you, this generation shall not pass, till all these things be fulfilled.’ If we were to take the words ‘this generation’ in the ordinary sense we would think of them as indicating a contemporary race, people living at the same time, the generation then living. That is the only sense we will find in all other passages in Matthew where the word ‘generation’ occurs. ... Since, then, the obvious sense of the word ‘generation’ must be taken, then the obvious sense of the sentence in which it appears must also be taken, which is, that all the things which Christ mentioned previously occurred before the passing away of the generation living at the time when Jesus spoke. And this would mean that it has found fulfillment in the destruction of Jerusalem in the year AD 70.^[4]

Chilton, in his book “The Great Tribulation”, points out that,

It has become fashionable over the past 100 years or so to teach that He (Christ) was speaking about the ‘end of the world’ and the time of His Second Coming. But is this what He meant? We should note carefully that Jesus Himself gave the (approximate) date of the coming Tribulation, leaving no room for doubt after any careful examination of the Biblical text. (i.e. v 34) ... This means that ‘everything’ Jesus spoke of in this passage, at least up to v 34, ‘took place before the generation then living passed away.’” Explaining the implications of this he continues, “... the Great Tribulation was to take place, not at the ‘end’ of history, but in the ‘middle’, for nothing similar had occurred ‘from the beginning of the world until now, nor ever shall.’ Thus, the prophecy of the Tribulation refers to the destruction of the Temple in that generation (AD 70) ‘alone’. It cannot be made to fit into some ‘double-fulfilment’ scheme of interpretation; the Great Tribulation of AD 70 was an absolutely unique event, never to be repeated.[\[5\]](#)

France comments,

... that the time references of verses 29 and 34 (and therefore also the content of the intervening verses) refer not, as is generally assumed, to the parousia, but to the coming judgement on Jerusalem.[\[6\]](#)

Calvin, commenting on the same verse, says,

Christ uses a universal term, but does not apply His words in general to all the afflictions of the Church, but simply teaches that in one generation events would establish all He had said. Within fifty years the city was wiped out, the temple razed, the whole region reduced to appalling devastation ... The meaning is that the prophecy does not refer to distant evils which a later generation would see after many centuries, but those already imminent, all massed up, so that there is no part of it which the present generation will not experience. So the Lord heaps on one generation calamities of every description ...[\[7\]](#)

David Brown sets the scene for the Olivet discourse by harkening back to the previous chapter:

Jesus had uttered all His mind against the Jewish ecclesiastics, exposing their character with withering plainness, and denouncing, in language of awful severity, the judgements of God against them for that unfaithfulness to their trust which was bringing ruin upon the nation. He had closed His last public discourse (Matt 23) by a passionate Lamentation over Jerusalem, and a solemn farewell to the Temple. ‘And (says Matt 24:1) Jesus went out and departed from the temple’ – never more to re-enter its precincts or open His mouth in public teaching. With this act ended His public ministry. As He withdrew ... the gracious presence of God left the sanctuary; and the Temple with all its service, and the whole theocratic constitution, was given over to destruction.

And referring to the Great Tribulation he says,

... it is a matter of literal fact, that there was crowded into the period of the Jewish war, an amount and complication of suffering perhaps unparalleled; as the narrative of Josephus, examined closely ... would show.[\[8\]](#)

Thus, it is plain that the Great Tribulation of Matt 24:21 is not future but an historic fact, fulfilled in the first century generation of Jews in the fall of Jerusalem.

As mentioned, a reading of the historian, Josephus, will quickly confirm the extremity of Israel’s Tribulation under the judgement of God. The kingdom of God was now taken from Israel (Matt 21:43) and their house left desolate (Matt 23:38). Their cup of iniquity was full (23:31), for as Daniel had predicted, “Seventy weeks are determined upon thy people and upon thy holy city, to finish the transgression.” (Dan 9:24). Upon this generation would come all the righteous blood of the prophets (23:35, 36).

Chilton discusses the epochal significance of the destruction:

The disciples understood the significance of this. They knew that Christ's coming in judgement to destroy the Temple would mean the utter dissolution of Israel as the covenant nation. It would be the sign that God had divorced Israel, removing Himself from her midst, taking the kingdom from her and giving it to another nation (Matt 21:43). It would signal the end of the age and the coming of an entirely new era in world history—the 'the' New World Order.[\[9\]](#)

Mauro also makes the same point:

It is greatly to be regretted that those who, in our day, give themselves to the study and exposition of prophecy, seem not to be aware of the 'immense significance' of the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70, which was accompanied by the extinction of Jewish national existence and the dispersion of the Jewish people among all the nations. The failure to recognise the significance of that event, and the vast amount of prophecy which is fulfilled, has been the cause of great confusion, for the necessary consequence of missing the past fulfillment of predicted events is to leave on our hands, a mass of prophecies for which we must needs contrive fulfilments in the future.[\[10\]](#)

This predicament is created by the literal interpretation of figurative and symbolic language used in prophecy, causing already historically fulfilled events to be projected into the future. Much of the language of the Olivet prophecy falls into this category and must be interpreted accordingly. Kik quotes Dr Milton S. Terry in this regard:

We might fill columns ... showing how exegetes and writers on NT doctrine assume as a principle not to be questioned that such highly wrought language as Matt 24:29-31 ..., taken almost verbatim from OT prophecies of judgement on nations and kingdoms which long ago perished, must be literally understood. Too little study of OT ideas of judgement and apocalyptic language and style would seem to be the main reason for this one-sided exegesis. It will require more than assertion to convince thoughtful men that the figurative language of Isaiah and Daniel, admitted on all hands to be such in those ancient prophets, it to be literally interpreted when used by Jesus and Paul.[\[11\]](#)

This literal and futuristic interpretation of prophecy has, therefore, clouded the real theological significance of Jerusalem's destruction. France comments, "The fact that the destruction of the temple and the 'close of the age' can be dealt with together in this chapter indicates that there is a close 'theological connection' between them. Both are aspects of the consummation of the ministry of Jesus."[\[12\]](#) This significance can best be discovered in Peter's Pentecostal sermon in which the Holy Spirit's outpouring is explained in the context of Israel's judgement:

In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions your old men will dream dreams. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days and they will prophesy. I will show wonders in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood and fire and billows of smoke. The sun will be tuned to darkness and the moon to blood before the coming of the great and glorious day of the Lord. And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.

Acts 2:17-21

As already alluded to in reference to Matthew 24, this particular language is used in the prophets signifying divine judgement on the nation. On the one hand we have the outpouring of the Spirit, on the other signs of imminent judgement, which, as mentioned, fell in AD 70. Both of these (the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and the destruction of Jerusalem) were indicative of a new order. The day of Pentecost was the inauguration of Christ as King and its visible evidence in the church. It was the overflow of the coronation oil of King Jesus who now governs through the agency of the NT church. The OT economy of the theocratic state of Israel was being left desolate and superseded by the new spiritual Israel, the NT economy of the Kingdom and the Church.

Without a full-blooded appreciation of the importance of God's judgement on the nation of Israel in AD 70, it is difficult to appreciate the epochal changes from the Old to the New Covenant. If the Tribulation is interpreted futuristically, the cutting-

edge of the new order is dulled and its theological significance potentially diminished. Sound exegesis and a vital eschatology must interpret the Great Tribulation as fulfilled in AD 70 at the destruction of Jerusalem.

THE BEAST AND THE FALSE PROPHET

Likewise, principles of interpretation will determine understanding of the role of the 'Beast' and the 'False Prophet'. If the book of Revelation is interpreted futuristically, obviously a future fulfilment is looked for, if viewed preteristically, the meaning of Revelation is looked for in its relevance and application to John's first century audience. Chilton discusses sufficient reasons to cast serious doubt on the usual dating of Revelation (approx. AD 96).^[13] He comments, "... the Book of Revelation is primarily a prophecy of the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans. This fact alone places St John's authorship somewhere before AD 70. Further ... St John speaks of Nero Caesar as still on the throne – and Nero died in June 68."^[14]

This, among other reasons discussed by Chilton, dates Revelation as prior to Jerusalem's destruction, and is therefore a preparation of the church to deal with this significant event and the surrounding persecution from the Roman state. From this perspective the 'Beast' (first mentioned in 11:7) is best described as a Satanic incarnation of opposition to the church and the purpose of God. This incarnation is in the form of the power-state and in John's day the Emperor cult in which the Caesars were hailed as messianic saviours.

The Beast, though, is merely an agent animated by the Dragon (12:3).^[15] It is this Satanic dynamic that actuates the religious claims of the state to sovereignty and power which was the form of the Beast's (in this case a serpent) original seduction in the Garden—"And you will be like God". The Beast, then, cannot be understood as one particular person, but as various historical manifestations of religious/statist power. Therefore, as Chilton points out, "The persecution of the Covenant people is never a merely 'political' contest, regardless of how evil states attempt to colour their wicked actions. It always originates in the pit of hell."^[16] Mounce draws out the same principle and applies it to the process of history:

There is little doubt that for John the beast was the Roman Empire as persecutor of the church. It was the spirit of imperial power which claimed a religious sanction for its gross injustices. Yet the beast is more than the Roman Empire. John's vision grew out of the details of his own historical situation, but its complete fulfilment awaits the final denouement of human history. The beast has always been, and will be in a final intensified manifestation, the deification of secular authority.^[17]

The historic confrontation of the church is with the Beast—the godless state and its claims to saviourhood and sovereignty; and, in this sense, the state can be understood as a false (pseudo) Christ and, in reality, the Antichrist.^[18] The 'False Prophet' is mentioned in 19:20 and 20:10, but is understood to be the 'second beast' of 13:11-17 which gives the fullest description.^[19] If the 'first beast' is the Roman state, the 'second beast', the 'false prophet', must be apostate Judaism. Swete comments, "In the second beast we have a religious, as in the first, a civil power ...". This second beast, he says, "... claims a spiritual power which he does not possess and misinterprets the Divine will in the interests of the persecuting State. ... It is the business of the second beast to promote the worship of the first; for this end, the False Prophet has been entrusted with his power."^[20]

As the 'dragon' gave authority to the 'first beast', so the 'second beast' now exercises authority on behalf of the first. Chilton points out that, "The Jewish leaders, symbolized by this Beast from the Land, joined forces with the Beast of Rome in an attempt to destroy the Church (Acts 4:24-28; 12:1-3; 13:8; 14:5; 17:5-8; 18:12, 13; 21:11; 24:1-9; 25:2, 3, 9, 24)." To do this, he argues that, "Apostate Judaism became completely subservient to the Roman State."^[21] The leaders of Israel as a 'false prophet' stood in the 'presence' (v 12) of the 'first beast' (the Roman State), obeying its orders and becoming its oracle, just as a 'true prophet' would stand in the 'presence' of God and do His pleasure. Apostate Judaism, through its leaders, rejected the true God and saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ, in favour of Caesar and a perverse, syncretistic and idolatrous worship of the state.

CONCLUSION

Consequently, the Tribulation, the Beast and the False Prophet are rescued from the realm of fad and fantasy; they are, thus, grounded in their relevance to the first century believers, confronted by the diabolical onslaught of Israel's apostate religion in cahoots with the Roman state. This hermeneutic then makes the Revelation and the Olivet Discourse relevant for every generation that seeks apostolic authenticity. The faithful will always face the same Satanic attack as the first century church: from the unholy alliance of humanistic statism and apostate religion. Not-only-so, the Revelation and the Olivet Discourse

declare the overthrow of these enemies of Christ and his church, in history, as a result of his First Advent:

Then the seventh angel blew his trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven, saying, 'The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever.'

Revelation 11:15

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