



The Apocalyptic Discourse: Its Function in Mt 24:1-31

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Abstract: “Eschatology (belief on the last things) is the keystone of the edifice of the whole building together” (Polkinghorne, 2002, p. 140) In the Catholic faith, this belief is expressed in the Apostle’s Creed which proclaims that “Christ has died and was raised to life, will come again to judge the living and dead, and that there will be the resurrection of the dead and life everlasting” (Leal, 2019, p. 1) However, in traditional Catholic manuals, this doctrine only appears in the last section as if it was merely an appendix .

Over the years, however, eschatology moved to the heart of theological interest. Several factors contributed to this renewed interest. Among them is the occurrence of man-made or natural calamities and disasters such as, incessant armed conflicts, horrifying earthquakes and typhoons, severe inundations, and other ecological disasters in many parts of the world.

Since these disasters are also narrated in the First Gospel (Mt 24:1-31), the discourse is often construed as predictions on the occurrence of the “end times.” But did Matthew envision such interpretation, or was he prompted by other considerations? This paper holds that the eschatological motifs in the Gospel are not predictions on the “end times, but they were invoked to address peculiar problems which confronted the Matthean community during its time. Since there is a direct correlation between the situation of a particular community and its acceptance of the apocalyptic-eschatological perspective, this research guided by the historical-literary methods, would inquire as to the purpose or function of the eschatological discourse in Mt 24:1-31.

1. INTRODUCTION

As an apocalyptic text, the discourse was occasioned by Jesus’ prediction of the destruction of the temple (v. 2d), and the disciple’s double question, “Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?” (v.3c-d), which probably echoes Dan. 7:12. By appropriating this Danielic expression, Matthew suggests that the disciples are in a state of feverish apocalyptic expectation.

To address the disciples’ question: “Tell us when will this be? (v. 3c), Jesus assures them that although many will come in his name and mislead many (vv. 4-5), and although they will hear of wars and reports of wars, “the end is not yet” (v. 6).

Indeed, nation will arise against nations, and there will be famines and earthquakes, these things are but the beginning of the “birth pangs” (vv. 7-8). The disciples will be betrayed, killed, and hated by all nations (v. 9). Many will be scandalized and will betray and hate one another (v. 10). Many false prophets will arise and mislead many (v. 11). Because of the increase of lawlessness, the love of many will grow cold (v. 12). But the one who perseveres to the end will be saved (v. 13). The Gospel of the reign will be preached throughout the whole world as testimony to all the nations, and only then that the “end will come” (v. 14).

To address the disciples’ query “what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?” (v. 3-d), Jesus tells them that “when” they see the desolating sacrilege standing in the holy place (v. 15), then is the time for fleeing (vv. 16-20). For then



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will be the unparalleled, final and definitive great affliction (v. 21). But “those days” of great affliction prior to the end will be shortened for the sake of the elect (v. 22).

In the next section (vv. 23-28), Jesus still addresses the question of “when” interposed by the disciples in v. 3c. It begins with an announcement of place, “the Christ is here or there” (v. 23), and moves to an announcement that the Christ is in the desert or in the inner rooms (v. 26). However, they should not believe these claims. As they have been forewarned, deceivers will produce great signs. In v. 27, Matthew compares the coming of the Son of Man with the lighting. With the statement that “wherever the corpse is, there the vultures will gather” (v. 28), the review of the tribulation ends

Finally, in the next section (vv. 29-31), the disciples’ second query is addressed. It begins by describing the dissolution of the cosmos, including the stars falling from heaven and the powers of heaven being shaken (v. 29). Then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven and all the tribes of earth will mourn (v. 30). It concludes by referring again to the dissolution of the universe (v. 31).

The foregoing discussion on the discourse impresses upon the reader the conclusion that the Matthean community is in a crisis situation and it is in such context that the eschatological discourse was delivered by Jesus.

2. FUNCTION OF THE DISCOURSE

The direct correlation between the desperate situation of a particular community and its acceptance of the apocalyptic-eschatological perspective is widely accepted (Vanderkam, 1998, p. 307). Often in response to rejection, hostility and alienation, a minority community emphasizes the imminent reversal of the present situation, the vindication of the righteous, and the punishment of the wicked. Thus, the apocalyptic perspective serves to strengthen, offers comfort and hope to the group experiencing the crisis (Collins, 1976, p. 32). In this regard, Hanson claims that a particular community adopts an apocalyptic perspective in order to construct a “symbolic universe of the wider and oppressive society, but which makes sense of

its own situation of distress (Hanson, 1979, pp. 432-434).

A cursory reading of Mt 24:1-31 impresses upon the reader the unmistakable conclusion that the community behind the Matthean Gospel is in distress. From both external and internal forces, the community is besieged with severe tribulations, deceptions, rumors of military conflicts, famines, natural calamities, persecutions, death, love grown cold (vv.4-12; 15-26). Such a trying situation which puts the patience and endurance of anyone to a crucible test, must have engendered a sense of hopelessness among the Christians of the Matthean community. Thus, like other communities similarly situated, the Matthean Christians have adopted an apocalyptic-eschatological perspective which “attempts at presenting a solution by placing this crisis in the broader perspective of salvation history” (Verheyden, 1992). This in general terms is the function of the apocalyptic discourse.

Specifically, however, the discourse serves other purposes. These functions can be classified into five (5) categories: (a) identification and legitimation; (b) explanation of current circumstances; (c) encouragement and hope for the future; (d) retribution and consolation; and, (e) group solidarity and social control.

a) As Identification and Legitimation

One of the distinctive characteristics of apocalyptic literature is its acceptance of the notion of dualism (Gabel, Wheeler & York, 2000, p. 150) which perceives the cosmic world as the arena of continuing conflict between good and evil. The eschatological discourse also exhibits this trait. In 24:22b, Matthew identifies his community as the *eklektoi* or the righteous “elect” (Conyers, 1988, p. 41). And since his community is associated with Jesus’ name (v.9b), his constituents will suffer deceptions, torture, death, lawlessness, love grown cold and persecutions (vv. 4-26). The identity of the righteous ones in v. 13, is further recognized by their steadfastness unto the “end”. Their persistence, however, will be rewarded. They will be delivered from their miseries (v. 13), and their sufferings will be shortened (v. 22b).



On one hand, Matthew also identifies who are *the ad extra*. They are the deceivers who will lead the *eklektoi* astray (vv. 4-5, 11, 23-26). They are the people who will subject the righteous ones to torture and death because of the latter's association with Jesus (v. 9). These outsiders will sow lawlessness or wickedness—so intense and widespread that it threatens to destroy the *eklektoi* (Davidson, 1985, p. 632). However, unlike the vindication of the righteous, these evildoers will be discredited. Thus, in v. 30b, Matthew states that when the Son of Man comes to render judgement, those who opposed Jesus and his followers will bewail their condemnation (Meier, 1980, p. 287).

b) As Explanation of Current Circumstances

The eschatological discourse does not only distinguish the righteous from the wicked; it also throws light on the difficult situation that besets Matthew and his community. They will suffer because of who they are—Christians (v. 9b). Their association with Jesus will bring upon them no insignificant discomfort, but trouble that crushes (Morris, 1995, p. 599, n. 18). Indeed, a terrible fate is in store for them. Yet, there is meaning to all these afflictions. They suffer because of their religious convictions.

Matthew also assures his followers that the debilitating current crisis is not the result of unexpected and meaningless accidents of history. These events against which the disciples are sufficiently forewarned (v. 25), are part of God's plan for humanity and cosmos (Gabel, et al, p. 149). Therefore, these events "must take place" (v. 6c). Indeed, Matthew exhibits such determinism in his discourse. However, unlike the determination which characterized the Hellenistic thought (for the Greeks, time is not an upward sloping line with beginning and end, but rather as a circle. Time moves about in the eternal circular course in which everything keeps recurring. Cf. Cullman, 1950, p. 52.), Matthew's view of history is not static (Conyers, p. 5), that is, he does not present the eschatological events as a grandiose cycle. Rather, he views these occurrences as progressively marching towards a divinely directed goal: the final consummation of the *parousia* (vv. 29-31).

These explanations which situate the sufferings of the Matthean community within the context of discipleship and God's mysterious scheme, not only clarify the current situation of the community; they also provide the distressed members the wellspring from which they can draw the waters of consolation and hope in the midst of their difficulties.

c) As Encouragement and Hope for the Future

The belief that the turbulent past was determined, and that the present crisis is taking place the way it was predicted, assure the alienated Matthean community that the future will also unfold according to the prophecies of an authoritative figure. Hence, to give credibility to his future expectations, the Matthew employs OT prophecies in his discourse (Beasley-Murray, 1993, p. 327). These prophecies which are reinterpreted in new perspective, are now presented in the discourse as prophecies of Jesus (Reddish, 1997, p. 110). Prominent among these prophecies is the *Parousia* of the Son of Man (vv.3d; 30a). Repeatedly, Matthew emphasized that the Son of Man will come to render judgement. His coming means the vindication of the *maskilim* (v. 13) and the suffering of the *massa perditionis* (v. 30b).

The thought that steadfastness merits salvation and brings unimaginable blessings (v. 13), clearly imparts encouragement and elicits hope for the disciples of Jesus. This conviction is further enhanced by the expectation that the vindication will unfold in the immediate future. This means that the disciples do not only live in the certainty that the present situation will be reversed, but they also have the assurance that it will take place soon.

Although the eschatological discourse provides such consolation, Matthew is cautious not to indicate the precise time by which the *Parousia* can be known. Given the difficult situation of his community, such proposal is alluring. However, putting forward such expectation is clearly disastrous in the long term if the predicted date of the *Parousia* does not occur. As such, even as Matthew strongly affirms the imminence of the *Parousia*, he is just as forceful to emphasize his lack of knowledge of the precise timing of its occurrence.



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Therefore, in light of the nearness yet indeterminacy of the *telos*, the discourse exhorts the Matthean followers to remain faithful (Hare, 1967, pp. 178-9). Indeed, their current situation seems to be hopeless. However, all their sufferings “will be cut short” (v. 22b) with the coming of the Son of Man in v. 30 (Hare, 178-179). By speaking about the coming of the Son of Man to judge all the nations, Matthew introduces the central motif of the discourse—the theme of preparing for the end time judgement by using well the intervening time and by making it a time of deeds and particularly acts of charity towards one’s neighbor (Ellis, 1974, p. 91).

d) As Retribution and Consolation

Like most apocalyptic-eschatological schemes, Matthew’s discourse does not merely treat the eschatological fate of the righteous; it also deals with the ultimate fate of the wicked. It seems that one important function of this motif is to satisfy the longing for retributive justice of the alienated community (Stanton, 1992, p. 223). Thus, the discourse does not only offer the Matthean followers the hope of vindication after the judgement; it also assures them that on the day of the reckoning, those who cause their lives to be miserable will suffer for their evil deeds (Gabel et al, p. 155). They will be punished without mercy and excluded from the eschatological kingdom.

This motif which is a regular element of apocalyptic literature,¹ is also reflected in the concluding passage of the discourse. In clear unmistakable terms, Matthew portrays in v. 30b the fate that awaits the wicked. When the Son of man appears in heaven, all the tribes of the earth will mourn, i.e., the evildoers will tremble at the “fear of the imminent judgement” (Carter, 2000, p. 478).

¹ E.g., *Ethiopic Book of Enoch* 62:3-12: “On that day all the kings and the mighty and the exalted and those who possess the earth, will stand up; and they will recognize how he (the Son of man) sits on the throne of his glory...and they will set their hope upon that Son of man and will entreat him, and will petition mercy from him. But that the Lord of the Spirits will then so press them that they will hasten to go out before him...And the angels of punishment will take them, that they may repay them for the wrong which they did to his children and his chosen ones. And they will become spectacle to the righteous and to his chosen ones; they will rejoice over them.”

Matthew’s use of this unpleasant theme clearly betrays the depth of his community’s pain and suffering. Thus, it is completely understandable why the Matthean community is obsessed with the desire for punishment for those responsible for their distress.

In stressing this unpleasant theme, it is noteworthy that Matthew does not present this motif in general terms. On the contrary, Matthew expounds this theme in such a way that the expected perdition will only fall upon certain opponents of his community. But who are these wicked doers who are doomed to suffer the same fiery fate? The discourse indicates that Matthew is fighting several fronts. On one hand, he is acutely aware of the hostility of the Jewish and Gentile worlds at large. On the other hand, he is also cognizant of the dissension caused by certain members within the Church.

With regard to the former, Matthew devotes considerable material to the theme of controversy with Jewish leaders. His Gospel is peppered with polemics against Jewish authorities that this theme runs like a scarlet thread through all twenty-eight chapters. But nowhere else is Matthew’s scathing dispute with the Jewish leaders more evident than in chapter 23. Aside from his polemics with the Jewish authorities, Matthew is also perceptive of the threat that stems from the Gentile world (Montague, 1989, p. 264).² Like their Jewish counterpart, the Gentiles will also subject the disciples to torture, death and hatred (v. 9).

With regard to the latter, these external difficulties lead to serious repercussions to Matthew’s community. Under the crucible of persecutions, the faith of many of Matthew’s constituents will falter leading to an upsurge in *anomia* (lawlessness). Although Matthew does not specify the sins that

² Although the discourse shows that Christians will also be suffering from the hands of the Gentiles, there is no specific Matthean periscope that describes their fate. The Gentiles have persecuted Jesus’ followers in the past and will persecute them in the future. It is proposed, however, that at the time of the Gospel’s composition, the threat they posed to the Matthean community was not as imminent and as grave as the one experienced by the community from the Jewish leaders. Hence, the lack of specific references to their fate in the Gospel.



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will be committed during this period of moral anarchy, it seems that it consists in the failure to love God and neighbor as exemplified and taught by Jesus (Kingsbury, 1988, p. 143). But as can be gleaned from Mt 7:15; 24:11, the greater danger within the community comes from the antinomian Christians of the “Hellenistic Libertines” (Conzelmann, 1969, p. 147). These false prophets assert in support of their Libertinism that Christ has already abolished the law and the prophets. Thus, they rely more on their *charismata* or spiritual gifts rather than on their *pistis* (“faithfulness”) to Christ’s teachings (Bauer, Arndt, Gingrich, & Danker, 1979, p. 663). As opposed to such claim, Matthew insists on the abiding validity of the law (24:11ff.). For Matthew, “the law and the prophets continue to be authoritative for Christians – with the proviso that they are interpreted in the light of the teachings of Jesus, especially the love commandment” (Stanton, 1992).

Indeed, the discourse indicates that Matthew and his community have to contend with several threats. These malefactors may be causing severe havoc in the church. However, for their evil deeds, the Jewish leaders, the Gentiles as well as the unfaithful Christians are all earmarked for a dreadful punishment comes the judgement day (Gabel).

e) As Group Solidarity and Control

Social analysis has repeatedly shown that minority groups situated in a dominant and hostile environment cannot tolerate dissensions within their own ranks. For these communities group solidarity is all-important and must be maintained at all cost (Gabel et al.) In light of the possible divisions that may be caused by the dangers facing his community, Matthew exerts considerable pressure on those waverers who might be tempted to leave the community. Through his apocalyptic-eschatological discourse which spells out the terrible eschatological fate that awaits those outside “the elect,” Matthew sends a strong message to the less steadfast Christians to reconsider their position and remain within the community, thereby preserving its solidarity.

To further strengthen cohesion in his community, the discourse also underscores the eschatological fate of certain Christians who while not tempted to

desert the community act irresponsibly. To compel these lukewarm Christians to live a responsible life, Matthew utilizes the judgement motif (Jurgen, 1983, p. 102). If they do not shape up and adhere to the moral code of the community, they will be meted out the same retribution as the Jewish authorities and the Gentiles (Sim, 1996, p. 238). Matthew definitely envisioned that explicit threats of this sort are effective control and regulate the behavior of certain members in his community (The threat of judgement as a device to encourage adherence to a common standard of behavior as well as discourage deviance is not only salient in Matthew’s last discourse; it is a common theme in his Gospel, e.g., 5:27-30; 10:28).

The use of such devices, however, raise several questions: Does the Evangelist intentionally employ “scare tactics” to elicit proper conduct among his constituents? If so, how is this strategy to be reconciled with the Evangelist’s image as a caring pastor (France, 1989, p. 251).

No matter how unappealing is the theme of judgement for most people, the discourse clearly shows that Matthew has indeed used the fear-provoking scenario of reckoning to foster cohesion and instill proper behavior in his community. R. Morhlang (1984, p. 49) also holds a similar conclusion. He claims that “in general, it is the threat of judgement and loss of the kingdom which is the dominant motivating force for ethics throughout the Gospel.”

However, far from negating Matthew’s image as a “caring pastor,” his use of the so-called “scare tactics” even heightens such a portrait. It is precisely because he is a “caring pastor” that he has to employ all necessary means, including the unsavory theme of judgement, to insure his group’s survival. This literary devise may not be appealing to most people. However, given the crisis situation that confronts his community, its survival hinges on the unity and solidarity among its members. This probably convinced Matthew to resort to the time-tested solution of many apocalyptic-eschatological groups: the threat of eschatological punishment for those who are negligent in their allotted duty (Sparks, 1985, pp. 943-951).



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3. CONCLUSION

To recapitulate, the apocalyptic-eschatological perspective of the discourse is shaped by the alienation experienced by the Matthean community. As employed by Matthew in the discourse, this outlook was made to serve certain functions. It validates the existence of the Matthean community as well as voids the symbolic universe of its adversaries. Thus, the righteous elect are allied with God while those who oppose it (Jews, Gentiles and unfaithful Christians) are considered evildoers.

Moreover, using apocalyptic symbolism, Matthew throws light on the present situation of the elect. Their sufferings are in accord with God's plan. God allows the sufferings of the righteous as history draws to its end. In the midst of their tribulations the elect, however, are given the assurance that the evils they suffer will not have the final say. When the Son of man comes to render judgement, the righteous will be vindicated and the wicked consigned to terrible punishment. While Matthew offers such consolation to his community in distress, he also issues a stern warning to his Christian followers. Since the present crisis threatens their very existence, survival requires solidarity among the members of the community. Thus, he enjoins the members of his community to remain steadfast in their moral duty lest they suffer the same horrible fate that awaits the Gentiles and the Jewish authorities.

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